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ALESSANDRO DE LAURENTIIS

La pulsione di morte di Pier della Vigna Un'analisi queer del canto XIII dell'*Inferno* di Dante

ABSTRACT: This paper aims to analyse canto XIII of Dante's *Inferno*, on the basis of Lee Edelman's queer theory, outlined in his book *No Future*. In the first part, I draw inspiration from the metaphor used by Pier della Vigna to describe his relationship with Frederick II of Swabia, on the background of the courtly cultural horizon. In this relationship lies a short circuit between the love field and the political field, which is the direct cause of Piero's suicide and of the articulation of the *contrappasso* in the wood of suicides. In the second part, I analyse the stigmatisation that the text addresses against the homo-social relationship between Piero and Federico. This relationship appears to be an anomaly for the teleological horizon of the *Commedia*. On the basis of what Edelman stated in *No Future*, one can look at Pier della Vigna as a queer character, marked by the affirmation of *jouissance* in the present and the rejection of a meaning based on procreative futurism.

KEYWORDS: Italian literature; Dante, queer reading of; Pier della Vigna; erotic metaphor; vassallaggio; sado-masochism; heteronormative model; Lee Edelman; *jouissance*.

1. INTRODUZIONE

Il XIII canto dell'*Inferno* di Dante ruota attorno alla figura di Pier della Vigna: ministro della corte imperiale di Federico II di Svevia, protonotaro e logoteta del regno di Sicilia. Al culmine del suo potere, egli divenne il più fidato collaboratore dell'imperatore, ma, nel 1249, Piero fu improvvisamente arrestato a Cremona. L'accusa di tradimento a lui rivolta fu forse alimentata dai cortigiani invidiosi del suo rapporto privilegiato col sovrano (BOSCO e REGGIO 1979: 196). Abbinando l'analisi testuale e la teoria di Lee Edelman, in quest'articolo proverò a spiegare in che misura il peccato di Piero, punito nel secondo girone del settimo cerchio, non sia solo il suicidio, ma anche la creazione di un rapporto omosociale con il sovrano, al quale è direttamente collegato il gesto estremo che egli compie. Questo rapporto risulta disfunzionale rispetto al sistema etico del poema dantesco e viene stigmatizzato all'interno del canto.

In primo luogo, sulla base di una specifica analisi della metafora utilizzata da Piero per descrivere il suo rapporto con Federico II, metterò a fuoco

il collegamento tra vassallaggio e relazione amorosa nella cultura feudale. Esso viene tematizzato poi nella poesia trobadorica e rappresenta un elemento perturbante all'interno del canto. In secondo luogo, il protagonista dell'episodio verrà reinterpretedo come un soggetto queer, in virtù della sua pulsione di morte e del suo rifiuto del futuro ultraterreno decretato dalla volontà divina. Infine, metterò in evidenza le implicazioni tematiche che si celano dietro le strategie retoriche del testo.

2. UNA METAFORA EROTICA

In questo saggio proverò a interpretare Pier della Vigna, protagonista del canto XIII dell'*Inferno* di Dante, come un personaggio con un'essenza queer. La mia principale fonte di ispirazione è il capitolo del volume miscelaneo *Dante's Plurilingualism: Authority, Knowledge, Subjectivity* realizzato da Gary Cestaro, in cui lo studioso ha analizzato Ulisse e Brunetto Latini, all'interno della *Commedia*, parlando di loro come *queer cousins*. Cestaro ha collegato le due figure, indagando, da un lato, il tema del rapporto pedagogico omoerotico e, dall'altro, quello della "uncomfortable centrality of pederasty in the patriarchal humanism from Plato to Dante" (CESTARO 2010: 179-192). Come cercherò di mostrare, nel canto dedicato a Pier della Vigna si incontra un diverso retroterra culturale, ma gli strumenti di analisi della teoria queer possono essere utili per reinterpretedo alcuni nuclei tematici del testo. In particolare, penso che per questo studio sia importante la nozione di *queerness* proposta da Lee Edelman in *No future: Queer Theory and The Death Drive*. Nelle prime pagine, l'autore prende spunto da un episodio controverso avvenuto negli Stati Uniti: la partecipazione di Bill Clinton a una campagna di annunci televisivi di servizio pubblico sponsorizzata dalla Ad Council. In quel frangente, Clinton si era presentato con la figura del padre premuroso, impegnato in una lotta costante per il futuro dei bambini della patria. Lo slogan degli annunci era eloquente: "We're fighting for the children. Whose side are you on?" (EDELMAN 2004: 2). Evidentemente, la domanda non propone una vera alternativa per una scelta di campo. Come ci si potrebbe dichiarare oppositori di chi lotta per i bambini? Ebbene, quella casella dello schieramento politico può essere occupata. Secondo Edelman, infatti, "queerness names the side of those «not fighting for the children», the side outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism" (*ivi*: 4). L'essenza del queer, nella sua visione, risiederebbe nel rifiuto di aderire al

futurismo procreativo e sarebbe portatrice di una pulsione di morte sociale. Il primo concetto indica un costante stratagemma, attraverso il quale, prospettando l'immagine di un futuro altamente desiderabile, la cultura delle società basate sul modello eteronormativo lavora per affermare e autenticare un determinato ordine sociale, da trasmettere in blocco al futuro, nella forma del suo *inner Child* (ivi: 3). Di conseguenza, la *queerness* si qualifica come un rifiuto sistematico e, in particolare,

a refusal – the appropriately perverse refusal that characterizes queer theory – of every substantialization of identity, which is always oppositionally defined, and, by extension, of history as linear narrative (the poor man's teleology) in which meaning succeeds in revealing itself – *as itself* – through time. Far from partaking of this narrative movement toward a viable political future, far from perpetuating the fantasy of meaning's eventual realization, the queer comes to figure the bar to every realization of futurity, the resistance, internal to the social, to every social structure or form. (ivi: 4)

Questa forza normalizzante e teleologica compare in vari contesti, tra i quali, come ha già mostrato Cestaro per mezzo di Edelman, anche la *Divina Commedia*. Nel caso che vorrei analizzare – quello di Pier della Vigna – il rapporto omosociale con Federico II, l'atto del suicidio e la sua stigmatizzazione attraverso il contrappasso del cerchio sono tutti elementi collegati alla *queerness* del personaggio: l'identità di Piero, infatti, sfugge a una precisa categorizzazione, secondo il sistema della *Commedia*. È doveroso anticipare una possibile critica alla mia interpretazione. Se Pier della Vigna è un personaggio queer, nel senso desunto dal libro di Edelman, allora anche gli altri suicidi dovrebbero esserlo, poiché sono condannati allo stesso tormento infernale. Ovviamente, le cose non stanno così: Pier della Vigna è un personaggio unico, con una sua specificità, ma se Dante sceglie lui per illustrare il secondo girone del settimo cerchio, ciò avviene, a mio avviso, poiché la sua storia risulta emblematica, come affronto al sistema teleologico che regola l'universo ultraterreno descritto da Dante. Per quello che riguarda gli strumenti ermeneutici presi in considerazione, Lacan è il punto di riferimento sia della teoria sul queer di Edelman, sia delle riflessioni di Žižek sulla configurazione sadomasochistica dell'amor cortese, sia della teoria di Segwick sul desiderio omosociale. Edelman è, probabilmente, l'autore che presenta lo sviluppo del pensiero lacaniano più originale, come proverò a mostrare in seguito.

Nel XIII canto dell'*Inferno*, Dante e Virgilio fanno il loro ingresso nel II girone del VII cerchio: una foresta dove sono puniti i suicidi e gli scialacquatori (violenti contro la propria persona e il proprio patrimonio). Qui, in un'atmosfera spettrale, Dante viene invitato dalla sua guida a strappare il ramoscello di un cespuglio e, dopo aver eseguito l'azione, avverte con sua grande sorpresa delle parole che fuoriescono dalla pianta insieme al sangue. L'arbusto è, in realtà, Pier della Vigna: un dannato che sta scontando la sua pena all'*Inferno*. Come di consueto, Virgilio, in virtù del fatto che Dante potrà riabilitare la fama del dannato nel mondo, chiede a Piero di raccontare chi è. Egli risponde:

Sì col dolce dir m'adeschi
 ch'i' non posso tacere; e voi non gravi
 per ch'io un poco a ragionar m'inveschi.
 Io son colui che tenni ambo le chiavi
 del cor di Federigo, e che le volsi,
 serrando e diserrando, sì soavi,
 che dal secreto suo quasi ogn'uom tolsi:
 fede portai al glorioso offizio,
 tanto ch'i' ne perdei li sonni e' polsi.
 La meretrice che mai da l'ospizio
 di Cesare non torse li occhi putti,
 morte comune e de le corti vizio,
 infiammò contra me gli animi tutti;
 e li'nfiammati infiammar sì Augusto,
 che lieti onor tornarò in tristi lutti.
 L'animo mio per disdegnoso gusto,
 credendo col morir fuggir disdegno,
 ingiusto fece me contra me giusto.
 Per le nove radici d'esto legno
 vi giuro che già mai non ruppi fede
 al mio signor, che fu d'onor sì degno.
 E se di voi alcun nel mondo riede
 conforti la memoria mia, che giace
 ancor del colpo che'nvidia le diede.
 (*Inferno*, XIII. 55-78)

Il peccatore racconta di essere stato il più intimo collaboratore di Federico II di Svevia, nella sua corte imperiale, e di aver svolto il suo magistero tanto bene da allontanare dalla confidenza dell'imperatore ogni altro

uomo. A causa di questo rapporto privilegiato, l'invidia ha spinto gli altri cortigiani a calunniare Piero per allontanarlo dalle grazie di Federico. Così, per sfuggire allo sdegno dell'imperatore e all'astio dei rivali, l'anima ha costretto Piero al suicidio. Le notizie sul presunto tradimento non sono certe: secondo una cronaca di Reims della seconda metà del XIII secolo, egli avrebbe segretamente cospirato col papa contro l'imperatore; secondo un'altra versione, dopo il concilio di Lione, Innocenzo IV avrebbe offerto la pace a Federico II, che avrebbe deciso di togliere di mezzo Piero, poiché egli si opponeva nettamente a quella pace (DE STEFANO 1924: 189).

Nessuna delle testimonianze storiche, tuttavia, permette di ricostruire con certezza le cause che portarono alla tragica morte di Piero. Incrociando i dati desumibili da alcune cronache e dal suo epistolario, De Stefano ribadisce la natura tutta umana del dissidio tra i due uomini e indica, come cause probabili, quelle emerse attraverso la mediazione dantesca della storia: l'invidia dei cortigiani e il carattere difficile di Federico II (*ivi*: 192). Ad oggi modo, un particolare che suscita interesse è la metafora utilizzata dal personaggio per descrivere il rapporto esclusivo tra lui e il sovrano. Per presentarsi, Piero dice: "Io son colui che tenni ambo le chiavi/ del cor di Federigo [...]" (*Inferno*, XIII. 58-59). Natalino Sapegno – al pari di tutti i principali commenti al poema dantesco – collegò la frase artificiosa del personaggio "a quella che si legge, riferita proprio a Pier della Vigna, in un'epistola di Nicola della Rocca: «Tamquam imperii claviger, claudit, et nemo aperit, aperit et nemo claudit» (HUILLARD-BRÉHOLLES 1966 [1865]: 371); e questa, a sua volta, è variazione di un testo biblico (*Isaia* XXII, 22)" (SAPEGNO 1985 [1955]: 150). Il riferimento è il seguente:

Et erit in die illa / vocabo servum meum Eliachim filium Helciae / et induam illum tunicam tuam et / cingulo tuo confortabo eum / et potestatem tuam dabo in manu eius / et erit quasi patrem habitantibus Ierusalem et domui Iuda / et dabo clavem domus David super umerum eius; / et aperiet et non erit qui claudat et claudet et non erit qui aperiat. (*Isaia*, XXII. 20-22)¹

Come fa notare Angelo Mecca, in queste immagini manca sia l'elemento del cuore-serratura, sia l'accento alle due chiavi. Dall'altro lato, la critica

¹ E sarà in quel giorno / chiamerò il mio servo Eliachim figlio di Elcia / e lo farò vestire con la tua tunica e / lo munirò della tua cintura / e darò il tuo potere nelle sue mani / e sarà come un padre per gli abitanti di Gerusalemme e per la casa di Giuda / e darò la chiave della casa di David sopra la sua spalla; / e aprirà e non ci sarà chi chiuda e non ci sarà chi apra.

pare aver ignorato il fatto che la metafora sia probabilmente un'invenzione di Chrétien de Troyes, e che si trovi, ad esempio, nell'*Yvain* (MECCA 2004: 73). In una delle scene centrali dell'opera, Ivano vuole dire alla sua dama che ella, ignara di essere la causa delle sue sofferenze, è padrona del suo cuore. Per farlo, pronuncia queste frasi: "Dame, vos en portez la clef, | Et la serre et l'escrin avez | Ou ma joie est, si nel savez!" (*Yvain*, 4627-4634). Come fa notare Mecca, all'origine dell'immagine del canto ci sarebbe un'altra immagine simile del *Roman de la Rose*, con la mediazione tra i due testi rappresentata dal *Fiore*. La configurazione dei rapporti che è alla base di questa metafora, proveniente da un filone tematico della tradizione del cosiddetto amor cortese, verrà analizzata in seguito. Quello che mi interessa notare, per il momento, è il fatto che il discorso del ministro della corte imperiale assume inaspettatamente una sfumatura erotica. Infatti, la serie di immagini che aprono il suo discorso appartiene alla stessa tradizione ("Sì col dolce dir m'adeschi [...]", "perch'io un poco a ragionar m'inveschi.") (*Inferno*, XIII. 55-57). Tali immagini derivano dal linguaggio venatorio, il quale viene spesso impiegato nella poesia erotica medievale. Mecca riporta, come esempio, *Amor fa come'l fino uccellatore* (MECCA 2004: 77-78). In questo componimento dell'Anonimo Siciliano, si leggono i versi: "Amor fa come'l fino uc[c]ellatore,/ che gl[i] auselli sguarderi/ si mostra più ingegneri/ di 'nvescare" (PANVINI 1962-1964: 75). In quest'articolo non voglio sostenere la tesi – impossibile da dimostrare – che esistesse un rapporto di natura amorosa tra Federico II e Pier delle Vigne. Rimanendo sul piano storico, esistono solo testimonianze incerte sulla sessualità dell'imperatore. Cesare Brandi, in *Pellegrino di Puglia*, cita gli *Annales Ecclesiastici*, nei quali lo storico della Chiesa Abraham Bzowski raccontava di Federico II (BRANDI 1960: 193):

In hortis et vinetis inter pellacarum et exoletorum greges versabatur, postera et praeopostera lascivia se oblectans, satis vel a vino incaluisset, vel a laniena nondum regriguisset. (*Annales Ecclesiastici*, t. XIII, ad annum 1248)²

Ad ogni modo, il fenomeno che intendo evidenziare è di natura prettamente testuale e letteraria: il rapporto tra i due uomini, a tendenza omosociale,

² Si aggirava per orti e vigneti fra branchi di prostitute e di giovanetti prostituti, dilettrandosi con lascivia dietro e davanti, sia che si fosse infiammato per il vino o non si fosse ancora raffreddato dopo una carneficina.

provocando un corto circuito tra piano amoroso e piano politico, prefigura il peccato del suicidio di Piero e viene preso di mira dal contrappasso del cerchio. Uso il termine “omosociale” facendo riferimento alle riflessioni di Segdwick esposte in *Between Men*, in cui esso sta a indicare rapporti tra persone dello stesso sesso finalizzati a promuovere gli interessi della categoria. Entro tali rapporti, può circolare un desiderio omoerotico, che assume diverse configurazioni, a seconda dei diversi contesti storici (SEG-DWICK 1985: 4).

Per comprendere in che modo lo sfondo erotico del rapporto tra Federico II e Piero potesse essere evidente a un lettore medievale, è utile ricordare quello che Iser sostiene sul concetto di repertorio, il quale

consiste di tutto il territorio familiare all'interno del testo. Esso può avere la forma di riferimenti alle opere precedenti o a norme storiche e sociali, o a tutta la cultura dalla quale il testo è emerso – in breve a ciò che gli strutturalisti di Praga avevano chiamato realtà «extratestuale». Il fatto che a questa realtà il testo fa riferimento ha un'implicazione con due conseguenze: 1) che la realtà evocata non è confinata alla pagina stampata, 2) che quegli elementi selezionati per riferimento non vanno intesi come una mera replica. Al contrario, la loro presenza nel testo di solito significa che essi sottostanno a qualche tipo di trasformazione, e in effetti questa è una configurazione integrale di tutto il processo di comunicazione. (ISER 1987: 119)

Questi sono gli elementi che contribuiscono a posizionare l'opera in un contesto di referenzialità, che deve essere attualizzato attraverso la lettura. Le implicazioni di significato che io ravviso nel testo di Dante non corrispondono semplicemente a ciò che il testo denota: ossia, un rapporto di profonda confidenza tra due uomini appartenenti a due diversi gradi gerarchici. A un secondo livello di comprensione, si possono trovare le istruzioni aiutano la lettrice/il lettore a costruire un ulteriore significato: un sentimento affine a quello amoroso che prende la forma di un cerimoniale cortese iper-codificato. Inoltre, ritengo che si debba riflettere sul fatto che queste stratificazioni di significato risultino più facilmente intuibili per un lettore medievale/una lettrice medievale, piuttosto che per un lettore moderno/una lettrice moderna. Infatti, a quest* ultim* risultano maggiormente familiari le costanti rappresentative di autori come Chrétien de Troyes o Bertand de Born. La confusione tra piano amoroso e piano politico si determina a causa di tensioni già presenti nella cultura europea del XIV secolo. Innanzitutto, bisogna considerare la configurazione dei

rapporti di potere nella società feudale. Come nota Lewis, nel periodo in cui compare la *Chanson de Roland*, il sentimento considerato più autentico è l'amore dell'uomo per l'uomo, sia nella forma della vicinanza tra compagni guerrieri, sia nella forma della devozione del vassallo verso il suo signore. Per capire questo orizzonte, non si deve pensare a un sistema regolato dall'obbedienza impersonale a un sovrano. Al contrario, bisogna considerare la presenza di un vero e proprio elemento amoroso nel rapporto, che il vassallo dirige verso il signore con un'intensità che i moderni riserverebbero solo per l'amore sessuale (LEWIS 1969 [1936]: 11-12). Non è un caso, quindi, che si verifichi progressivamente una sovrapposizione tra l'elemento feudale e quello amoroso, col risultato che il primo assume le modalità del secondo. Lewis cita, ad esempio, *Beowulf*, in cui l'antico vassallo, separato dal suo signore, “PynceÐ him on mode Ðæt he his mon-dryhten/ Clyppe and cysse and on cneo lecge/ Honda ond heafod, swa he hwilum ær/ On geardagum giefstoles breac...”³ (*Chanson de Roland*. 39-42). Risulta evidente, quindi, come ha mostrato anche Rachel Moss per i romanzi inglesi medievali, che i testi letterari tendono a rispecchiare una società che si determina attraverso pratiche di *male bonding*, nella specifica accezione descritta da Segdwick. I legami omosociali, in questo contesto, non sono meramente rapporti sociali tra persone dello stesso sesso, ma anche una “cultural framework based on networks of socially codified relationships that support hegemonic norms and in so doing maintain mainstream power structures” (MOSS 2016: 103).

Il luogo prescelto per lo svolgimento di questo rituale sociale è la corte: luogo isolato e protetto dalla barbarie esterna, dove è possibile non solo sopravvivere, ma anche concedersi delle raffinatezze. Così come a livello politico il sistema ruota attorno al signore, il quale è attorniato da fedeli che si affannano per meritare il suo favore, allo stesso modo ci si aspetta dalla donna che ella conceda doni e attenzioni in misura uguale a ogni pretendente (MANCINI 1993: 172). Da parte sua, il servo-amatore, per sperare negli omaggi della donna-padrone, deve dimostrare un'assoluta fedeltà. Alla luce di quanto detto, un grande rilievo acquisisce l'elemento della fede nel XIII canto. Piero ribadisce la sua correttezza verso il sovrano in due occasioni: all'inizio del suo discorso (“fede portai al glorioso officio,

³ “S'immagina nella sua fantasia di abbracciare e baciare il suo signore e di porre sul suo grembo il capo e le mani, come quando una volta nei giorni andati possedeva il suo trono...”, trad. it. di Aldo Ricci, in *L'elegia pagana anglo-sassone*, Firenze, Sansoni, 1921.

| tanto ch'i ne perde' li sonni e' polsi") (*Inferno*, XIII. 62) e alla fine ("vi giuro che già mai non ruppi fede | al mio signor [...]") (*Inferno*, XIII. 74-75). Il discorso del personaggio, com'è prevedibile, ha l'obiettivo di rimarcare i suoi meriti in vita e la sua innocenza. Dalla devozione al sovrano, ma anche dal completo rispetto del codice dell'amore cortese, derivano tutte le disgrazie di Piero, poiché dalla sua posizione di privilegio nascono l'invidia degli altri cortigiani e le successive calunnie a lui rivolte. Infatti, come nota Mancini, il fatto che un vassallo si trovi affiancato da altri suoi omologhi nell'omaggiare il signore è accettabile nel contesto feudale (1993: 172), ma la situazione diventa più problematica se alla sfera politica si sovrappone la sfera amorosa, come avviene nel testo dantesco. In questo caso, si crea un contesto in cui domina la competizione e si perdono i vincoli di solidarietà tra gli uomini, a causa dell'invidia. Piero esprime chiaramente l'esclusività del rapporto: "[...] dal secreto suo quasi ogn'uom tolsi;" (*Inferno*, XIII. 61).

Il discorso di Piero prosegue, mettendo in gioco un altro elemento tipico della poesia cortese: i cosiddetti *lauzengiers*, i calunniatori che minacciano costantemente di danneggiare gli amanti attraverso le loro malizie. Piero dice: "La meretrice che mai da l'ospizi/ di Cesare non torse gli occhi putti,/ morte comune e delle corti vizio,/ infiammò contra me li animi tutti;" (*Inferno*, XIII. 64-67). Quello dei *lauzengiers* non è solo un *topos* della poesia amorosa medievale, ma è esplicitamente teorizzato nel *De amore* di Cappelano. In particolare, nel capitolo XVI, dedicato alle istruzioni sul modo in cui il nobile deve parlare a una plebea, si legge:

Nam, ut bene novistis, reproborum est hoc propositum semper et cunctis intentio manifesta, ubi libet, facta impediens bonorum et amantium solatiis adversari. Vestra igitur discat serenitas malorum turpiloquia dolosa contemnere et eorum declinare insidias, ne malorum facta bonis inveniantur esse nociva. Maius enim pravis hominibus non posset praemium exhiberi, quam si suas persenserint fraudes vias impedire bonorum. (*Andreae Capellani regii Francorum De Amore libri tres*, ed. a cura di E. Trojel (1892) 1972, München)⁴

⁴ Infatti, come sapete bene, questo è sempre l'obiettivo dei malvagi e la loro intenzione palese a tutti quanti, cioè quando piace impedire le azioni dei buoni e ostacolarle con le lusinghe degli amanti. La vostra imperturbabilità dunque impari a disprezzare le parole brutte e ingannatrici dei malvagi e a respingere le loro trappole, perché le azioni dei malvagi non si scoprono essere dannose per i buoni. Infatti non potrebbe presentarsi un premio maggiore per gli uomini cattivi che se si rendessero conto che i loro inganni possono impedire il cammino dei buoni.

Tradizionalmente, si è interpretato questo episodio come uno dei casi nei quali Dante-personaggio simpatizzerebbe con Piero, poiché lo stesso Dante-autore si rivedrebbe parzialmente in lui per le seguenti caratteristiche: da un lato, la battaglia a favore dell'Impero e contro il potere temporale dei papi e dei prelati, dall'altro, le calunnie ricevute per le scelte di campo (BOSCO 1966: 265). Tuttavia, ponendo l'accento sugli elementi appartenenti al sostrato culturale cortese, si può evitare una lettura che appiattisca eccessivamente l'autore sul personaggio. Innanzitutto, bisogna interpretare per intero la metafora: il fatto che le chiavi del cuore di Federico siano possedute da Piero è un elemento marcato. Il rapporto amoroso sovverte la gerarchia politica, poiché il servitore Piero ricopre il ruolo della donna crudele che può disporre a piacimento del cuore dell'amante. Di conseguenza, Dante potrebbe alludere al fatto che Piero avesse una tale importanza affettiva per il sovrano, da essere in grado di influenzarne le decisioni. È, forse, questa posizione di forza nella gerarchia amorosa ad aver provocato il disdegno dei membri della corte imperiale. Estendendo l'analisi al piano terminologico, si può notare che il termine 'disdegno', per via della sua ampiezza semantica, può riferirsi sia alla rabbia dell'imperatore che crede alle calunnie, sia all'imbarazzo e all'invidia dei cortigiani nei confronti di Piero. Di conseguenza, emergerebbero le responsabilità implicite di del giurista: il cortocircuito tra amore e politica, causato dal suo rapporto anomalo col sovrano, è la causa della nascita della discordia nella comunità. Non si può arrivare ad accusare Piero di una forma di *cupiditas*, ma ci si trova sicuramente di fronte a un personaggio divisivo.

In secondo luogo, è necessario collegare tutte queste considerazioni allo sviluppo finale della storia. Dante è molto preciso quando dice che è la fedeltà all'imperatore a privare Piero, prima, della pace, e poi, della vita. Il patetismo e la solennità che sorreggono il discorso del personaggio distolgono l'attenzione dalla sua strategia difensiva, attraverso la quale egli esalta la presunta purezza del rapporto col sovrano. Tuttavia, l'ampiezza semantica dei termini contribuisce nuovamente ad aumentare l'ambiguità del testo. La parola 'fede' nel testo sembrerebbe alludere alla fedeltà del servitore al signore, ma 'fede', nell'epoca di Dante, indica anche la fede religiosa (SESTIO). Perciò, un sottotesto inconfessabile sembrerebbe nascondersi sotto le parole di Piero: a dominare i gesti del personaggio, già prima dell'idea del suicidio, c'è la perversione della fede in Dio, trasformata in fede-amore per Federico II. In virtù di essa, egli sarà disposto a sacrificare

la sua vita. Non si devono dimenticare le parole che Dante vorrebbe fossero riferite dalla sua ballata a Beatrice, nella *Vita nova*: “Dille: «Madonna, lo suo core è stato/ con sì fermata fede,/ che ’n voi servir l’ha ’mpronto onne pensiero:/ tosto fu vostro, e mai non s’è smagato»” (*Vita nova*, XII, 25-28). La fedeltà alla donna rientra in un sistema che prendeva le forme del culto, all’interno del quale gli interlocutori privilegiati erano i “fedeli d’Amore” (*Vita Nova*, III. [III]. XXXIV). Nel canto è, quindi, evidente la riemersione di idee abbandonate da Dante stesso, le quali riguardano la problematica conciliazione tra religione erotica e religione ufficiale. La medesima questione si era già presentata ai trovatori provenzali (LEWIS 1969: 19-21). Dagli sviluppi della vicenda di Piero, si comprende quanto le due dimensioni risultino inconciliabili: il personaggio sacrifica tutto per il suo complesso sentimento per il sovrano, attribuendogli maggior valore rispetto che alla vita stessa. Questa costellazione tematica è legata direttamente al suicidio più di quanto non sembri. Tradizionalmente, i commentatori tendono a interpretare l’atto di Piero come il netto rifiuto di umiliarsi per giustificare cattive azioni non commesse (BOSCO 1966). Tuttavia, sottolineando la componente omoerotica del rapporto tra Federico II e Piero, si otterrebbe una spiegazione diversa di espressioni controverse. Per esempio, “il disdegnoso gusto” (*Inferno*, XIII. 70), che spinge il personaggio al suicidio, potrebbe essere visto come il soddisfacimento del desiderio di scandalizzare e sfidare apertamente i suoi accusatori, mettendoli davanti alla potenza del suo sentimento per l’imperatore. Allo stesso tempo, egli fuggirebbe dal ‘disdegno’ di Federico II, dimostrando, attraverso il sacrificio totale, che le accuse verso di lui erano infondate e che la sua fedeltà era intatta. Per questo sentimento, Piero disgrega il sistema dei valori che regge la *Divina Commedia*, negando l’importanza della vita terrena e spezzando l’unione voluta da Dio di corpo e anima (SPITZER 1964: 225). D’altronde, un altro tipo di unione aveva subito la stessa scissione: quella tra lui e il suo sovrano. Un dettaglio a mio avviso interessante riguarda, appunto, la fraseologia. Il modo di dire che avrebbe descritto in maniera soddisfacente il loro rapporto sarebbe probabilmente “essere due corpi e un’anima”. Esso, arrivato fino ai nostri giorni, deriva da un passo degli *Atti degli apostoli*, in cui si parla del senso di coesione della comunità cristiana a Gerusalemme durante la sua prima fase di sviluppo (LURATI 2001: 42): “Multitudinis autem credentium erat cor et anima una nec quisquam eorum quae possidebant aliquid suum esse dicebat sed erant illis omnia communa” (“La moltitudine di coloro che eran venuti alla fede

aveva un cuore solo e un'anima sola e nessuno diceva sua proprietà quello che gli apparteneva, ma ogni cosa era fra loro comune”) (*Atti degli Apostoli*, IV. 32). Nuovamente, la solidità del gruppo sociale deriva dalla fede nella resurrezione di Cristo, tanto che il sostentamento degli individui si realizza grazie alla condivisione dei beni. È possibile che Dante avesse ben presente il passo biblico. Soprattutto nella fonte originale, risulta preponderante il tema del rifiuto dell'individualismo. Questo valore è il fondamento di una comunità che, ai consumi e ai piaceri superflui della vita terrena, preferisce la beatitudine nell'aldilà. In compenso, l'atteggiamento di Pier della Vigna è diametralmente opposto: il suicidio è un atto di affermazione egoistica del sé, nel disinteresse delle conseguenze sulla condizione ultraterrena.

3. IL RIFIUTO DEL SIGNIFICATO DIVINO

Non bisogna dimenticare che il suicidio è uno dei temi principali del repertorio cortese (utilizzo questo termine sapendo di unificare sotto di esso un panorama che presenta notevoli differenze interne). Vorrei ricordare, a questo proposito, due autori importanti per la formazione di Dante (BARSOTTI, di prossima pubblicazione⁵). Il primo è, di nuovo, Chrétien de Troyes, che, nel *Lancelot*, racconta il tentativo di suicidio del protagonista, conseguente alla scoperta della falsa notizia sulla morte di Ginevra (*Le roman du chevalier de la charrette*, 4013-4406). Il secondo è Guittone d'Arezzo, che, nella canzone IX, ad esempio, esprime lo stato di dolore causato dall'allontanamento dalla *midons*: “e ch'entra gente croia / ed en selvaggia terra / mi trovo; ciò m'è guerra, – onde morria / de mie man, s'altri osasse / a ragion darsi morte” (*Le Rime*, IX. 7-11). Ad ogni modo, il suicidio, concepito come separazione tra corpo e anima, compare soprattutto in una poesia dello stesso Pier della Vigna *Amando con fin core e con speranza*. In questo testo, il poeta richiama alla memoria l'amore passato per una donna morta prematuramente. Il sentimento viene concepito come servitù che ha rafforzato la virtù dell'uomo. Piero vorrebbe morire per il dolore, e, quindi, separare il corpo dall'anima, ma questo gesto equivarrebbe a una vittoria per la Morte, contro la quale si staglia l'Amore. Così, il conflitto è risolto sciogliendo la vita, anche a patto di soffrire. Per giunta, il poeta si consacra alla servitù all'Amore, la quale è una sineddoche rovesciata della servitù alla donna.

⁵ Ringrazio per i riferimenti la Dott.ssa Susanna Barsotti, dottoranda della classe di Lettere e filosofia della Scuola Normale Superiore, che si occupa di Filologia romanza e ha approfondito anche l'opera di Guittone d'Arezzo per un lavoro di futura pubblicazione.

Leggiamo una parte della poesia:

Per tale termin mi compiango e doglio,
perdo gioia e mi svoglio,
quando s'ua contezza mi rimembra
di quella ch'io amai e servir soglio:
di ciò viver non voglio,
ma dipartire l'alma da le membra;
e faria ciò ch'eo dico
se no ch'a lo nemico,
che m'è tolta madonna, plageria,
cioè la morte fera,
che non guarda cui fera:
per lei podire aucire io moriria.
(in CONTINI 1960: 126)

In realtà, un altro modo di considerare la storia di Pier della Vigna potrebbe essere quello di focalizzarsi sull'economia psicologica delle relazioni descritte attraverso questa serie di espedienti letterari codificati. Ciò permetterebbe, innanzitutto, di comprendere meglio le caratteristiche di un personaggio dai tratti sfuggenti e contraddittori. Piero, infatti, da un lato è servo dell'imperatore sul piano politico ma, dall'altro, è suo padrone sul piano affettivo, in quanto detentore delle chiavi del cuore. Inoltre, sebbene io abbia schematicamente proiettato su di lui anche il ruolo della donna-padrone, non si può ignorare il fatto che egli è un uomo, investito da una pulsione omoerotica. Una tale descrizione aiuterebbe a visualizzare l'essenza del personaggio: il suo progressivo affrancamento come soggetto di desiderio. Come illustrato da Žižek, l'economia libidinale della relazione tra uomo-servitore e donna-padrone, nella rappresentazione letteraria dell'amore cortese, può essere compresa focalizzandosi sull'emersione storica dello scenario masochistico. Basandosi sulle osservazioni di Deleuze sull'idea di soggetto, il filosofo illustra la struttura reale dei rapporti di forza, nascosta dietro la facciata convenzionale:

Gilles Deleuze demonstrates that masochism is not to be conceived of as a simple symmetrical inversion of sadism. The sadist and his victim never form a complementary 'sado-masochist' couple. Among those features evoked by Deleuze to prove the asymmetry between sadism and masochism, the crucial one is the opposition of the modalities of negation. In sadism we encounter direct negation,

violent destruction and tormenting, whereas in masochism negation assumes the form of disavowal – that is, of feigning, of an ‘as if’ which suspends reality.

Closely depending on this first opposition is the opposition of institution and contract. Sadism follows the logic of institution, of institutional power tormenting its victim and taking pleasure in the victim’s helpless resistance. More precisely, sadism is at work in the obscene, superego underside that necessarily redoubles and accompanies, as its shadow, the ‘public’ Law.

Masochism, on the contrary, is made to the measure of the victim: it is the victim (the servant in the masochistic relationship) who initiates a contract with the Master (woman), authorizing her to humiliate him in any way she considers appropriate (within the terms defined by the contract) and binding himself to act ‘according to the whims of the sovereign lady’, as Sacher-Masoch put it. It is the servant, therefore, who writes the screenplay – that is, who actually pulls the strings and dictates the activity of the woman (dominatrix): he stages his own servitude. (ŽIŽEK 1994: 153)

Ciò che mi interessa maggiormente è il posizionamento reciproco degli attori sociali. Contrariamente a ciò che si potrebbe pensare, è l’amante-servitore a rivestire il ruolo del soggetto di desiderio, mentre la donna-Cosa – in termini lacaniani – rappresenta un oggetto. Essa è una sorta di buco nero, attorno al quale il desiderio dell’altro è strutturato, poiché dal servitore proviene la richiesta dei tormenti inflitti dalla donna. Di conseguenza, lo schiavo rappresenta in realtà il polo attivo. Questa dinamica funziona come un complesso gioco di specchi, architettato per dare al soggetto l’illusione di poter penetrare con lo sguardo la Cosa, in maniera indiretta. In realtà, gli ostacoli posti nascondono l’impossibilità intrinseca di raggiungere l’oggetto (*ivi*: 4). Esso non ha alcun attributo umano, ma – al contrario – si configura come un significante vuoto (LACAN 1994: 272). Dobbiamo quindi chiederci: in che misura la posizione della Cosa è accettabile per un essere umano? O meglio, in che misura lo è per un uomo, in un sistema eteronormativo?

Alla luce di quanto detto, ritengo che sia utile confrontare il canto XIII con *Amando con fin core e con speranza*. In questo testo, l’io poetico si trova in quella che ora sappiamo essere una posizione di forza: la posizione del servitore-soggetto, il quale non è direttamente tormentato dalla donna, ma dall’opposizione tra Amore e Morte. Cionondimeno, tutto ruota attorno all’uomo. La morte, infatti, è crudele soprattutto perché – dice il poeta – “[...] l’amore mutòmi in amare” (CONTINI 1960: 126). Inoltre, il soggetto è così potente da poter dirigere la messinscena ed eliminare la

possibilità del suicidio da essa. Sostenendo che tale gesto equivarrebbe a una vittoria della Morte, egli può scegliere di rimanere in vita e basare il suo lamento sulla posizione paradossale nella quale si trova. Diversamente, nel poema dantesco, Piero sperimenta un'oscillazione problematica tra i due ruoli alternativi di oggetto e soggetto. È oggetto, in quanto detentore delle chiavi del cuore del sovrano: sul piano affettivo, quindi, Federico è totalmente sottomesso a lui. Ciò mette Piero sul piano della donna-*domina*, e lo rende una Cosa. Allo stesso tempo, Piero è un soggetto di desiderio, in quanto servitore e bersaglio della persecuzione ingiustificata da parte dell'imperatore. In questo senso, egli è già una figura ibrida, e la sua natura verrà confermata dalle sembianze che è destinato ad assumere a causa del contrappasso. In modo opposto a quello che avviene nella lirica di Piero-poeta, su quale azione ricade la scelta del personaggio questa volta? Sul suicidio: una violenza auto-inflitta che lo rimuove dall'*impasse*, rendendolo un soggetto a pieno titolo, il quale è in grado di affermare i bisogni dell'io, all'interno di rituale sociale codificato. Difatti, la soluzione è scelta precisamente all'interno dell'orizzonte cortese, in modo da riconfermare la sua persistenza culturale. Solo attraverso l'aderenza completa a quel sistema di valori, il soggetto può affermarsi in maniera definitiva, auto-distruggendosi. Allo stesso tempo, similmente a quanto fatto da Francesca da Polenta, la responsabilità individuale viene nascosta dal personaggio. Piero, nei suoi discorsi, si rappresenta come individuo come in balia di forze contrapposte: "L'animo mio [...]" (*Inferno*, XIII. 69) – dice – "ingiusto fece me contra me giusto" (*Inferno*, XIII. 72). L'abnegazione al "glorioso officio" (*Inferno*, XIII. 62) è l'unica fede del personaggio. Lo scioglimento della storia terrena di Piero, ad ogni modo, mette in mostra la differente configurazione tra la sua pulsione omoerotica e il rapporto servo-padrone raffigurato in *Amando con fin core e con speranza*. Il desiderio rappresentato in *Inferno* tende, da un lato, verso il polo dell'omosocialità, proprio perché inserito in una struttura gerarchica. In questo contesto, rimanere bloccato nel ruolo generalmente attribuito alla donna nella cultura cortese si rivela troppo pericoloso per Piero. Vale, in parte, ciò che Segdwick annota sul sistema di rapporti tra i personaggi di *The Country Wife*: la femminilità viene avvertita come qualcosa che minaccia l'uomo, in quanto contagiosa (SEGDWICK 1985: 50). Nel caso della commedia di *Wycherley*, per esempio, "to misunderstand the kind of property women are or the kind of transaction in which alone their value is realizable means, for a man, to endanger his own position as

a subject in the relationship of exchange: to be permanently feminized or objectified in relation to other men” (*ivi*: 51). Essere femminilizzati significherebbe perdere il controllo del sistema simbolico che presiede sullo scambio sessuale. Per Piero, quindi, è meglio tornare pienamente nei panni dell’amante uomo, attraverso un gesto classicamente attribuito a tale funzione dal repertorio cortese: il suicidio per l’amata.

Come ho già detto, Piero è un personaggio contraddittorio e non può essere ridotto a un solo ordine di spiegazioni. La mia ipotesi centrale, infatti, è che il personaggio sia contraddistinto da una *queerness* individuabile quasi in negativo rispetto all’orizzonte teleologico divino contro il quale egli si oppone nel testo. Attraverso il suicidio, in maniera paradossale, egli non si riafferma soltanto come soggetto a pieno titolo, ma raggiunge anche una forma di *jouissance* (o godimento): essa, secondo Lacan, è forse inaccessibile al soggetto “per il fatto che il godimento si presenta non puramente e semplicemente come la soddisfazione di un bisogno, ma come la soddisfazione di una pulsione [...]» (LACAN 1994: 266). Nel caso che sto analizzando, mi riferisco alla pulsione di morte, che si manifesta come distruzione di tutte le cose, ma anche come il desiderio di creare da zero (*ivi*: 269). Nell’*Etica della psicoanalisi*, Lacan sviluppa l’aspetto creativo della pulsione di morte, accostando il concetto elaborato da Freud alle idee di Sade sulla necessità della distruzione ai fini del continuo rinnovamento nel mondo naturale. Secondo Lacan, in modo analogo a quanto fatto da Sade, Freud collegerebbe la pulsione di morte a una dimensione che si trova oltre la catena significativa:

La pulsione di morte va collocata in ambito storico, in quanto essa si articola ad un livello definibile soltanto in funzione della catena significativa, ossia in quanto un riferimento, che è un riferimento d’ordine, può essere situato rispetto al funzionamento della natura. Ci vuole qualcosa al di là, da dove essa possa essere colta in una memorizzazione fondamentale, di modo che tutto possa essere ripreso, non semplicemente nel movimento delle metamorfosi, ma a partire da un’intenzione iniziale. (*ivi*: 268)

Inoltre,

La pulsione come tale, e in quanto essa è allora pulsione di distruzione, deve essere al di là della tendenza del ritorno all’inanimato. Che cosa può mai essere – se non una volontà di distruzione diretta, se posso dir così per illustrare ciò di

cui si tratta?

Non mettete assolutamente l'accento sul termine volontà. Quale che sia stato l'interesse riecheggiante che ha potuto risvegliare in Freud la lettura di Schopenhauer, non si tratta di nulla che sia dell'ordine di un *Wille* fondamentale, ed è soltanto per far sentire la differenza di registro rispetto alla tendenza all'equilibrio che la sto chiamando così per il momento. Volontà di distruzione. Volontà di ricominciare da zero. Volontà di qualcosa d'Altro, nella misura in cui tutto può essere chiamato in causa a partire dalla funzione del significante. (*ivi*: 269)

Proprio questo *ex nihilo* determinerebbe l'articolazione della catena, sotto le cui spoglie si presenta tutto ciò con cui abbiamo a che fare nel mondo (*ivi*: 271). L'atto della creazione è importante nel pensiero di Lacan. La creazione originaria, infatti, attribuita tradizionalmente a un padre celeste, è la creazione di un simbolo (di un significante): in particolare, del simbolo del fallo (chiamato a volte da Lacan la Cosa, *das Ding*) (TARIZZO 2003: 74). La catena significante che deriva da questo primo atto è il luogo della legge del Padre, corrispondente al divieto dell'incesto, che vige nelle società fondate su di essa (*Ibid.*). A questo punto, risulta maggiormente chiara l'argomentazione di Edelman, che a tale struttura oppone la *queerness*, la quale non è mai

a matter of being or becoming but, rather, of embodying the remainder of the Real internal to the Symbolic order. One name for this unnameable remainder, as Lacan describes it, is *jouissance*, sometimes translated as "enjoyment": a movement beyond the pleasure principle, beyond the distinctions of pleasure and pain, a violent passage beyond the bounds of identity, meaning, and law. (EDELMAN 2004: 25)

Il Reale, in questo caso, deve essere interpretato come «l'irrazionale», nel senso di ciò che non si lascia integrare dalla teoria, ma la sfida" (SAFOUAN 2010 [2001]: 13). Piero, quindi, può essere considerato un personaggio queer, a patto di assumere la prospettiva lacaniana utilizzata da Edelman:

If politics in the Symbolic is always therefore a politics of the Symbolic, operating in the name and in the direction of a constantly anticipated future reality, then the telos that would, in fantasy, put an end to these deferrals, the presence toward which the metonymic chain of signifiers always aims, must be recognized, nonetheless, as belonging to an Imaginary past. This means not only that politics conforms to the temporality of desire, to what we might call the inevitable

historicity of desire – the successive displacements forward of nodes of attachment as figures of meaning, points of intense metaphoric investment, produced in the hope, however vain, of filling the constitutive gap in the subject that the signifier necessarily installs – but also that politics is a name for the temporalization of desire, for its translation into a narrative, for its teleological determination. Politics, that is, by externalizing and configuring in the fictive form of a narrative, allegorizes or elaborates sequentially, precisely as desire, those overdeterminations of libidinal positions and inconsistencies of psychic defenses occasioned by what disarticulates the narrativity of desire: the drives, themselves intractable, unassimilable to the logic of interpretation or the demands of meaning-production; the drives that carry the destabilizing force of what insists outside or beyond, because foreclosed by, signification (EDELMAN 2004: 9)

Il soggetto queer rifiuta di sottomettersi alla legge del Simbolico e all'idea che la nozione di futuro sia necessaria per produrre il significato, nell'ambito di una società basata sul modello eteronormativo. Il soggetto queer è, al contrario, continuamente implicato nel Reale e vive secondo la *jouissance* priva di significato, poiché al di là della catena significante (*ivi*: 72-73). A differenza di Lacan, e dell'altro suo interprete citato, Žižek, Edelman tende forse a concepire la *jouissance* come qualcosa di maggiormente accessibile.

Appare chiaro, quindi, il senso ulteriore della ribellione di Piero. Togliendosi la vita, egli abbandona la pericolosa posizione della donna-Cosa. Lo fa, tuttavia, disintegrando lo scenario sadomasochistico canonico dell'amor cortese, che è così costruito per dare l'illusione al soggetto attivo di poter accedere al significante vuoto rappresentato dalla donna. Egli si riappropria del ruolo di amante maschio, ma uccidendosi per un altro uomo, contrariamente a quanto succede nei testi letterari citati in precedenza, nei quali compare il suicidio dell'amante. Nell'*Inferno*, Pier della Vigna esprime – a mio avviso – il desiderio di creare una nuova catena di significato, che esprima la sua soggettività. Ciò che lo rende un individuo trasgressivo è il fatto che, attraverso il suicidio, egli abbraccia un sistema di valori stigmatizzato dal testo dantesco. L'orizzonte teleologico sul quale si basa la *Commedia* richiede, infatti, l'assimilazione dell'individuo al progetto divino, mentre Piero mostra un atteggiamento regressivo, che definirò pulsione di morte, nel senso attribuitogli da Edelman: “as the name for a force of mechanistic compulsion whose formal excess supersedes any end toward which it might seem to be aimed, the death drive refuses identity or the absolute privilege of any goal” (*ivi*: 22). Come spesso accade nell'*Inferno*,

Dante-autore sfrutta il racconto dei dannati per stigmatizzare idee e atteggiamenti per i quali Dante-personaggio prova empatia. Allo stesso tempo, rinnega definitivamente uno stadio superato del suo itinerario poetico, che procede di pari passo con quello etico. Anche in quest'episodio aleggia l'ombra del protagonista della prima parte della *Vita Nova*, il quale nutre per Beatrice un desiderio sublimato, ignorando la verticalità della storia riletta sulla scorta del giudizio divino. Ad ogni modo, il rifiuto della progressione lineare che produce un significato comporta una conseguenza: la stigmatizzazione, nelle varie forme simboliche, delle identità queer, prese di mira proprio perché fondate sull'idea di una sessualità non procreativa e sull'affermazione delle necessità del presente, governato dalla *jouissance*, contro quelle del futurismo.

4. STRATEGIE TESTUALI DELLA STIGMATIZZAZIONE DI PIERO

Una simile stigmatizzazione è in atto, a mio avviso, nel canto che sto analizzando. La strategia semiotica più riconoscibile si articola attraverso la descrizione della vegetazione dominante nella selva dei suicidi. Il poeta descrive in questo modo il panorama: “Non fronda verde, ma di color fosco;/ non rami schietti, ma nodosi e ‘nvolti;/ non pomi v’eran, ma stecchi con tòSCO” (*Inferno*, XIII. 4-6). A livello semiotico, menzionare il colore verde vuol dire alludere abbastanza chiaramente alla costellazione semantica della vitalità e della fertilità. Tuttavia, questa prospettiva viene recisamente negata, attraverso l'anafora dell'avverbio di negazione, a inizio verso, e della congiunzione avversativa, a metà verso. Questa rigida struttura retorica funziona come una gabbia, che ha la funzione di evidenziare la dicotomia tra fertilità e sterilità, la quale è alla base del canto. La negazione è ancora più incisiva, poiché ribalta – come ha notato Villa – una metafora frequentemente utilizzata nell'ambito della simbologia cristiana della fertilità: quella della vigna feconda. Essa viene impiegata da Isaia per esprimere l'idea del rinnovamento cristiano e si ritrova nello stesso epistolario di Piero (VILLA 1991: 137). I rami, poi, sono annodati, si arrotolano su loro stessi. Inoltre, la presenza delle Arpie inasprisce il supplizio dei dannati. Queste bestie mitiche, col volto di donna e il corpo di uccello, sono state interpretate in vari modi dall'esegesi dantesca, ma, ai fini di questa indagine, mi sembra importante ricordare la descrizione che di esse fa Virgilio nell'*Eneide* (“virginei volucrum vultus”) (*Aeneid*, III. 216) e il fatto che spesso siano state accostate alla sterilità (GINZBURG 2010: 155). Nell'*Inferno*, esse diventano

agenti del *contrappasso*: da un lato, strappano i rami dei dannati come loro strapparono l'unità di corpo e anima, dall'altro, prolungano l'incubo della sterilità infierendo su piante destinate a non generare nulla.

La strategia semiotica dantesca prende di mira il peccato del suicidio. A mio avviso, però, nel caso specifico di Piero, la stigmatizzazione operante nel testo riguarda anche l'infertilità del rapporto omosociale tra lui e il suo sovrano. Il rifiuto del bisogno di una progressione (e quindi di una procreazione) per produrre significato, da un lato, e la ricerca del godimento fine a se stesso, dall'altro, sono idee che emergono anche nel canto: Piero descrive in chiave erotica il suo rapporto con Federico e rende questa religione erotica il suo motivo di vita, arrivando a negare la dimensione dell'eternità attraverso il suicidio. L'organizzazione del supplizio di Piero punisce il suo comportamento in tutte le sue sfaccettature, rispecchiando, per contrappasso, il suo vero grande peccato: l'assenza di significato della sua vita, basata su un rapporto difficilmente classificabile – nell'orizzonte della *Commedia* – col sovrano. Il “disdegnoso gusto” (*Inferno*, XIII. 70) a cui allude il personaggio consiste nell'affermare in maniera plateale quest'assenza, a costo di fare violenza a se stesso. Di conseguenza, per quello che riguarda Piero, il bosco dei suicidi rappresenta il luogo dove il Simbolico mette in atto la demonizzazione del soggetto che non si piega alla sua legge. Ciò si evidenzia nella formulazione del contrappasso per i suicidi: come spiega il peccatore, quando l'anima si separa dal corpo dal quale è stata strappata violentemente, viene mandata nel VII cerchio e, cadendo nella selva, germoglia spontaneamente come essere vegetale. Come notava Spitzer, l'ibridismo era un'idea repellente per il pensiero cristiano medievale, dato che esso concepiva le varie specie come ben delimitate e disposte in ordine gerarchico. I suicidi, quindi, in quanto anime incarcerate in una forma naturale inferiore, vivono una condizione piuttosto infelice (SPITZER 1964: 225). A tal proposito, può essere utile ricordare la chiosa alla loro condizione realizzata da Jacopo Alighieri. Egli, basandosi sulla tripartizione platonica dell'anima in vegetativa, sensitiva e razionale, spiega che, in coloro che sono stati portati alla morte dalla spinta di una delle ultime due, per contrappasso sopravvive unicamente la prima: “però in piante silvestre cotal qualità di gente, figurativamente, si forma, siccome creature in isola vegetabile rimase, essendoci dell'altre due sè stesse private” (ALIGHIERI 1322). Piero, in particolare, è punito in quanto essere soggiacente a una pulsione di morte. Essa può affermare soltanto la sua meccanica ripetizione

e negare, al contempo, la presenza di un obiettivo, mentre tende a una zona nella quale non è più possibile distinguere le diverse forme biologiche (EDELMAN 2004: 22). Le anime-piante, che si limitano a vegetare per essere sottoposte a un perenne dolore fisico, risultano essere una parodia di Piero, il quale non ha fatto calcoli e non ha esitato a scegliere la morte, prendendo decisioni basate sulla logica del desiderio. Anche su questo desiderio di affermarsi come soggetto a pieno titolo agisce il contrappasso, che gli fa assumere la forma vegetale: la più lontana dall'idea di una coscienza individuale, secondo la mentalità medievale. Per capire meglio la crudeltà della rappresentazione del tormento, è utile fare un paragone con la funzione positiva associata alle piante in *Purgatorio* XXVIII. 85-133. Qui, arrivato al Giardino dell'Eden, Dante incontra Matelda. Come scrive Pasquini, essa è

simbolo della terrena felicità (sia nella sua manifestazione perfetta, anteriore al peccato originale, sia nella forma in cui resta concepibile e possibile dopo la caduta di Adamo, e cioè come beatitudine di questa vita, che si consegue con l'esercizio delle virtù morali ed intellettuali). (SAPEGNO 1985 [1956]: 309)

Matelda, a causa dello stupore del pellegrino dinanzi alla visione del Paradiso Terrestre, si preoccupa di spiegare il meccanismo grazie al quale, per mezzo della volontà divina, il luogo preserva automaticamente questo stato di perfezione. Leggiamo:

Or perché in circuito tutto quanto
l'aere si volge con la prima volta,
se non li è rotto il cerchio d'alcun canto
in questa altezza ch'è tutta disciolta
ne l'aere vivo, tal moto percuote,
e fa sonar la selva perch'è folta;
e la percossa pianta tanto puote,
che de la sua virtute l'aura impregna,
e quella poi, girando, intorno scuote;
e l'altra terra, secondo ch'è degna
per sé e per suo ciel concepe e figlia
di diverse virtù diversa legna.
(*Purgatorio*, XXVIII. 103-114)

Innanzitutto, il vento è generato dalla circolazione dell'atmosfera e l'acqua sgorga incessantemente da una sorgente. In particolare, poi, le piante

scosse dal vento permeano l'aria con la loro virtù generativa: non è sorprendente, quindi, il fatto che, persino sulla Terra, alcune piante fioriscano senza essere state seminate.

Secondo la teleologia che fonda la costruzione della *Commedia*, la storia umana tende verso un unico fine: il Giudizio Universale. Nell'ultima parte del suo discorso, Piero spiega che anche i suicidi, nel giorno del Giudizio Universale, accorreranno nella valle di Giosafat per riprendere il proprio corpo. D'altro canto, poiché si privarono di esso suicidandosi, dovranno appendere queste spoglie ai rami: per loro non esiste sviluppo ulteriore, ma, di fatto, dovranno rimanere inchiodati allo stato di lacerazione tra anima e corpo. A ben vedere, la mancanza di direzione è un'idea che appare sin dall'inizio del canto, dove si legge: "Non era ancor di là Nesso arrivato,/ quando noi ci mettemmo per un bosco/ che da neun sentiero era segnato" (*Inferno*, XIII. 2-3). Se, all'inizio della *Commedia*, lo smarrimento della "diritta via" (*Inferno*, I. 3) corrispondeva al traviamiento morale di Dante, in questo caso sembra avere maggiore rilievo l'idea della negazione della teleologia. Infatti, non bisogna dimenticare che, nella *Commedia*, Dante elabora una visione geometrica nella quale convivono tempo lineare e tempo circolare. Come sostiene Cestaro, la storia tende verso l'eternità circolare e perpetua, ma procedendo in questo cammino in linea retta (CESTARO 2010: 183). L'idea alla base di questo orizzonte culturale è il cosiddetto realismo figurale. Come ha spiegato Auerbach, esso prevede che le azioni umane siano prefigurazione di altri eventi, i quali fungono da tappe obbligate nel cammino della storia della salvezza. Questi eventi conferiscono un significato definitivo alle azioni dell'uomo (AUERBACH 1956: 206-213):

L'aldilà è, come già abbiamo detto più sopra, l'atto realizzato del piano divino; in rapporto a esso i fenomeni terreni sono figurali, potenziali e bisognosi di compimento. Ciò vale anche per le singole anime dei defunti; soltanto nell'aldilà esse conquistano il compimento, la vera realtà della loro persona; il loro apparire sulla terra fu soltanto la figura di questo compimento, e nel compimento stesso esse trovano castigo, espiazione o premio. (*ivi*: 213)

Il comportamento dei suicidi li condanna a partecipare al processo divino in maniera disfunzionale. Il motivo di ciò è da rinvenire nell'atto stesso del suicidio, valutato come testimonianza della loro volontà di regressione. Negando il futuro, essi rifiutano il compimento della volontà divina e

affermano lo scandalo delle azioni umane che non rivendicano un ulteriore significato. Leggiamo:

Come l'altro verrem per nostre spoglie,
ma non però ch'alcun se ne rivesta,
ché non è giusto aver ciò ch'om si toglie.
Qua le strascineremo, e per la mesta
selva saranno i nostri corpi appesi,
ciascuno al prun de l'ombra sua molesta».
Noi eravamo ancora al tronco attesi,
credendo ch'altro ne volesse dire,
quando noi fummo d'un romor sorpresi, [...].
(*Inferno*, XIII. 103-111)

L'atteggiamento di Dante e Virgilio è un dettaglio importante: i due personaggi aspettano ancora un ulteriore commento di Piero. Esso però non arriva, poiché non è possibile affermare altro, a margine della fissità definitiva del tormento. Nel caso di Piero, suicidio e omoerotismo risultano collegati: il suo investimento totale nel rapporto con Federico, a scapito della sua vita, corrisponde al rifiuto del futuro assicurato dalla riproduzione sessuale, che stabilisce l'orizzonte di fantasia entro il quale il soggetto aspira a un significato che è sempre non disponibile (EDELMAN 2004: 74). Di conseguenza, una temporalità alternativa, che si può definire temporalità queer, viene opposta da Piero alla temporalità monodirezionale che regola la storia umana. Il suicidio blocca inesorabilmente questo flusso temporale, sfidando il sistema creato da Dio, il quale è, in ultima analisi, un sistema che crea significato. A questo sistema, viene opposta una “nonteleological negativity that refuses the leavening of piety and with it the dollop of sweetness afforded by messianic hope” (DINSHAW *et al.* 2007: 195). Per Piero, anche tra i tormenti dell'*Inferno*, l'unica cosa che conta è rivendicare la giustizia della sua condotta: “Per le nove radici d'esto legno/ vi giuro che già mai non ruppi fede/ al mio signor, che fu d'onor sì degno” (*Inferno*, XIII. 73-75).

Sulla base di queste considerazioni, è possibile riconsiderare anche uno dei sensi impliciti delle scelte stilistiche e retoriche di Dante. In questo canto, il poeta fa un uso consistente di figure retoriche che si basano sulla reiterazione di suoni aspri: ossia, ripetizioni, anafore, reduplicazioni. Come dimostrato da Villa, questi espedienti dovrebbero rispecchiare, seppure attraverso l'originale rielaborazione di Dante, lo stile diffuso nell'ambiente

della cancelleria di Federico II (1991: 37). Tuttavia, l'estrema artificiosità di alcune figure – come ad esempio “infiammò contra me li animi tutti;/ e li ‘nfiammati infiammar sì Augusto, [...]” (*Inferno*, XIII. 67-68) – può essere analizzata adottando un altro punto di vista. Difatti, le figure retoriche non si limitano a impreziosire il discorso, ma sembrano impedirne il flusso naturale e complicare la comprensione del significato. Ricollegandosi alle considerazioni fatte sulla rappresentazione della natura nel canto, si può affermare che Dante abbia fornito una rappresentazione deformata della retorica della Magna Curia: anche dal sistema retorico, infatti, viene suggerita l'idea della ripetizione e della fissità meccanica e mortuaria, della contorsione abnorme che nasconde l'ombra della sterilità del discorso. Secondo Edelman, nelle società eteronormative si arriva a un paradosso, secondo cui

homosexuality, though charged with, and convicted of, a future-negating sameness construed as reflecting its pathological inability to deal with the fact of difference, gets put in the position of difference from the heteronormativity that, despite its persistent propaganda for its own propagation through sexual difference, refuses homosexuality's difference from the value of difference it claims as its own. (EDELMAN 2004: 60)

Se si tiene conto del fatto che la prerogativa del queer, secondo tale prospettiva, è la realizzazione della *jouissance* nel presente, si può reinterpretare la retorica di Piero come un processo di ritorno del represso formale. Esso si sviluppa parallelamente al processo di ritorno del represso sul piano del contenuto, che riguarda il sostrato culturale rappresentato dall'amore cortese. La teoria freudiana di Orlando è, per certi versi, meno coerente col quadro teorico che ho precedentemente tracciato. Come spiega Baldi, Orlando parte inizialmente da Lacan, ma poi lo abbandona, per abbracciare il pensiero di Matte Blanco (BALDI 2015: 74-83). In particolare,

il primo limite che Orlando evidenzia in Lacan è infatti la mancata distinzione fra differenti tipologie di manifestazioni dell'inconscio. Che il profondo della psiche parli nella lingua del sogno e del sintomo, o in quella scherzosa, piacevole e compromissoria del motto di spirito, non costituisce mai un problema nella teoria lacaniana. L'orgoglio con cui, all'inizio della sua teoria letteraria, Orlando differenzia le manifestazioni non comunicanti dell'inconscio da quelle comunicanti non è solo una pretesa di originalità, ma anche una precisazione importante visto che la prima somiglianza formale fra letteratura e linguaggio dell'inconscio sta nella presenza di quel destinatario che l'opacità dei sogni

porta invece continuamente ad ignorare. (BALDI 2015: 75)

Ad ogni modo, credo che il pensiero di Orlando sia utile per capire il linguaggio letterario impiegato da Dante e messo in bocca a Pier della Vigna. La nozione di ritorno del represso formale, elaborata dallo studioso siciliano, deriva da alcuni passaggi testuali del *Motto di spirito*, nei quali Freud parla dei primi stadi di crescita del bambino (ORLANDO 1992: 53). In questi frangenti, il bambino manifesta la sua attitudine a trattare le parole come se fossero oggetti. Di conseguenza, è libero di creare le più strane associazioni, facendo leva sulla mera somiglianza superficiale tra i vari termini. L'effetto di piacere creato dal ritmo, dalla rima o dalla ripetizione di alcuni suoni deriva dalla possibilità di giocare con le parole, senza essere vincolati dall'obbligo di dare loro un senso compiuto (FREUD 1961: 135-41). Il nucleo generativo di questo processo è la logica dell'inconscio, la quale si oppone alla logica diurna, basata sul principio di identità e sul principio di non contraddizione. Una tale logica agisce, secondo Orlando, anche nella formulazione delle figure retoriche in letteratura. L'elemento di profondo interesse, per la mia analisi, è il fatto che il significato, negli esiti più estremi, passa completamente in secondo piano, a beneficio del significante. Il processo può spingersi fino al punto in cui viene considerato normale condensare due o tre significati in un singolo sintagma. A mio avviso, un sistema retorico affine a quello descritto da Orlando permette la realizzazione della *jouissance* nel discorso di Piero. In esso, la funzione comunicativa del linguaggio viene parzialmente sacrificata per mettere in scena il modo di parlare di un personaggio costruito sotto il segno della regressione e del rifiuto del Super-io. Nel mondo dantesco, quest'istanza è rappresentata dal disegno divino che regola la storia degli esseri umani. Scomparsa, da un lato, la necessità di un ordine che stabilisca un prima e un dopo, e, dall'altro, la necessità di una successione direzionata entro la quale si possa produrre un significato, il linguaggio come mezzo di scambio simbolico diventa qualcosa di inutile: uno strumento che si può maneggiare liberamente, con la leggerezza necessaria alla produzione di piacere.

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ALESSANDRO GRILLI

“Le plaisir inexprimable d’être aimé”:
narcisismo e potere nei
Mémoires de l’abbé de Choisy habillé en femme

ABSTRACT: This paper aims to contribute to the interpretation of the *Mémoires de l’abbé de Choisy habillé en femme*; it contextualizes Choisy’s transgression within the power system of Louis XIV’s court in order to highlight the dialectical nature of the transvestite option with regard to society and the court. Confronted with the ubiquitous display of the monarch’s egotry, the courtier’s marginal ego is caught between the “natural” desire to assimilate oneself to the central subject and the impossibility to establish multiple centres within the same closed system. Choisy’s transvestitism can thus be read as a founding impulse of performative identity definition: through the self-empowering performance of femininity as the foundation of alternative social networks based on admiration and desire, Choisy’s queerness functions as an antidote to marginalization in the “straight” power structure, and can be seen as first and foremost the expression of an exquisitely political will to bring into harmony, through a performative enactment of the paradoxes of female identity, self-perception and social perspectives on the self.

KEYWORDS: François-Timoléon de Choisy; *Mémoires de l’abbé de Choisy habillé en femme*; cross-dressing; performance of gender identity; mimetic desire.

Alla memoria di Larry Schehr

Se non fosse per gli straordinari *Mémoires de l’abbé de Choisy habillé en femme*,¹ ben pochi sarebbero interessati oggi alla figura di François-Timoléon de Choisy (1644-1724), un contemporaneo di Luigi XIV tanto versatile e brillante quanto marginale sulla scena del *Grand siècle*. Del valore

¹ Conservati in un manoscritto della Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal (3188, ff. 1-51) e pubblicati in parte pochi anni dopo la morte di Choisy (CHOISY 1735). L’edizione moderna di riferimento è quella a cura di G. Mongrédien (*Mémoires de l’abbé de Choisy*, Paris, Mercure de France, “Le temps retrouvé”, 1966, rist. 2000), da cui traggio le citazioni. I *Mémoires de l’abbé de Choisy habillé en femme* seguono i *Mémoires pour servir à l’histoire de Louis XIV* (indicati qui dall’abbreviazione MH) e sono articolati in quattro segmenti: I. *Premières intrigues de l’abbé de Choisy sous le nom de Madame de Sancy* (431-55; abbreviato qui in MS); II. *Les amours de M. de Maulny. Rupture. Mademoiselle Dany* (456-70; abbreviato in MD); III. *Les intrigues de l’abbé avec les petites actrices Montfleury et Mondory* (471-3; MM); IV. *La comtesse des Barres* (474-522; CB).

della sua opera maggiore, una monumentale *Histoire de l'église* in undici volumi, doveva essere lui stesso poco convinto, stando alla celebre *boutade* che gli attribuisce d'Alembert: “J'ai achevé, grâce à Dieu, l'histoire de l'Eglise; je vais, présentement, me mettre à l'étudier”.² A vederla in sintesi, la vita di François-Timoléon sembra marcata dal rapporto privilegiato col potere: benché la famiglia di Choisy fosse di nobiltà recente,³ sua madre, Jeanne-Olympe Hurault de l'Hospital de Bélesbat, aveva un ruolo di rilievo a corte, dove era intima della casa di Gaston d'Orléans,⁴ nonché amica e corrispondente di figure di spicco, tra cui la regina di Polonia Maria Gonzaga, Madama Reale di Savoia e Cristina di Svezia (MH 31-32). Il giovane Luigi XIV ne aveva alta considerazione, se dobbiamo credere alla testimonianza di Choisy, che ricorda come il Re le accordasse ogni settimana ben due udienze private.⁵

Non sorprende dunque che François-Timoléon, ottavo e ultimo figlio, nato nel 1644, fosse cresciuto in parallelo al futuro duca d'Orléans Philippe (1640-1701), di poco più grande. Il giovane Monsieur, in qualità di fratello cadetto del Re, aveva ricevuto un'educazione studiatamente effeminata;⁶ secondo le voci che lo stesso Choisy riferisce, Mazzarino si proponeva in tal modo di ridurre le sue eventuali velleità di imitare nella ribellione alla corona il precedente duca d'Orléans Gaston, il bellicoso fratello di Luigi XIII: “tout cela [vestire da donna il giovane Monsieur] se faisait, dit-on, par l'ordre du cardinal, qui voulait le rendre efféminé, de peur qu'il ne fit de la peine au Roi, comme Gaston avait fait à Louis XIII” (MH 332; questo dettaglio, confermato da altre fonti, è di fatto un indizio di rilievo nella

² D'ALEMBERT [1777] 1821, III, I, 34-35.

³ Vd. VAN DER CRUYSSSE 1995: 15-31. Nonostante le considerevoli ricchezze familiari, il suo rango relativamente modesto rispetto ai parametri della corte doveva essere ben chiaro a Choisy, a giudicare almeno dai prudenti precetti materni. Quelli riportati testualmente all'inizio delle memorie storiche su Luigi XIV cominciano così: «Écoutez, mon fils ; ne soyez point glorieux, et songez que vous n'êtes qu'un bourgeois. [...] en France on ne reconnaît de noblesse que celle d'épée» (MH 30).

⁴ Il padre di François-Timoléon, Jean III de Choisy, era infatti “conseiller d'État” e “chancelier” di Gaston d'Orléans, fratello di Luigi XIII (VAN DER CRUYSSSE 1995: 23-29). Un albero genealogico semplificato della famiglia di Choisy in PARISH 1974: 312.

⁵ Compensandola («audiences [...] qu'il payait») con una pensione di ottomila franchi: MH 80. Sulla madre di Choisy la trattazione più completa a me nota è in VAN DER CRUYSSSE 1995: 33-44.

⁶ Per uno studio complessivo dell'effeminatezza di Monsieur in relazione all'identità omosessuale nel secondo Seicento francese vd. HOSFORD 2013; in generale è diffusa negli studi l'idea che “Monsieur's 'effeminacy' was a means to maximizing his brother's male/masculine authority” (GUILD 1994: 186).

storia della teoria dell’identità come performance, giacché dimostra che nella storia della Chiesa sono attestate, in collocazioni di assoluto prestigio, posizioni assai diverse da quelle degli attuali crociati anti-gender).

Presumibilmente per incoraggiare l’intimità di suo figlio col principe (“On m’habillait en fille toutes les fois que le petit Monsieur venait au logis”, *MH* 332), la madre di Choisy lo aveva abituato ai vestiti da bambina anche oltre l’età in cui l’abbigliamento cominciava a essere distinto in base al sesso. Come scrive lui stesso nelle sue memorie, “c’est une étrange chose qu’une habitude d’enfance, il est impossible de s’en défaire” (*MS* 431).⁷ Nel suo caso, peraltro, l’“habitude d’enfance” si era concretizzata in una fuga a Bordeaux, dove l’adolescente Choisy aveva calcato per alcuni mesi le scene della città, per recitare naturalmente in ruoli femminili (*MS* 431-2).

Questo breve periodo di trasgressione non gli aveva impedito peraltro di seguire la carriera ecclesiastica, e di consolidare la propria posizione al seguito del cardinal de Bouillon, che Choisy avrebbe accompagnato come assistente durante il conclave che elesse al pontificato Innocenzo XI Odescalchi (1676). Sotto la rubrica dei successi si può forse annoverare anche il suo viaggio in Oriente, come ambasciatore aggiunto di Luigi XIV al re del Siam.⁸ Dopo una conversione religiosa intorno ai quarant’anni, a seguito di una grave malattia, Choisy sembra cambiare vita e intensificare gli studi. Nel 1687 sarà ammesso all’Académie française, a motivo delle sue opere storiche e religiose.⁹ Ma anche negli anni della maturità e della vecchiezza l’austerità dello studio non lo distolse mai del tutto dal gusto del gioco e del travestimento.¹⁰

⁷ Il nesso tra inclinazione travestista e atteggiamento regressivo è esplorato, sulla scorta delle teorie mediche dell’epoca, da BILLAUD 2004: 136-8, che richiama tra gli altri LAQUEUR 1992 e DELON 1980.

⁸ L’edizione di riferimento del resoconto del viaggio in Siam è stata curata da Dirk Van der Cruysse (CHOISY [1687] 1995).

⁹ Una bibliografia sistematica dei manoscritti e delle opere di Choisy in ordine cronologico si trova in VAN DER CRUYSSSE 1995: 457-62; le opere pubblicate in vita sono elencate alle pp. 458-60, a cominciare da quelle, in verità non molto numerose, pubblicate prima dell’ammissione all’Académie: una traduzione della *Storia della guerra d’Olanda* di Primi Visconti (1682), una raccolta di quattro dialoghi religiosi di Choisy e di Dangeau (1684), una *Interprétation des Psaumes avec la Vie de David* (1687) e, soprattutto, il *Journal du voyage de Siam fait en 1685 et 1686* (1687).

¹⁰ Nelle note al suo *Éloge de l’abbé de Choisy* d’Alembert ricorda come Choisy amasse travestirsi anche da vecchio: “Peut-être suffirait-il, pour apprécier la valeur de ces annales ecclésiastiques, de se représenter un moment ce prêtre septuagénaire, sous un habit si peu fait pour son âge et pour son état, travaillant à l’histoire des martyrs et des anachorètes, et se mettant des ajustemens profanes de la même main dont il écrivait les décisions des conciles. Aussi, interrompant quelquefois son travail pour jeter un moment de tristes regards sur lui-même, il s’écriait avec la sincérité la

Non stupisce che una simile carriera abbia attirato in primo luogo l'attenzione degli eruditi curiosi, mossi da un'idea stereotipa di licenza *ancien régime* di cui Choisy può ben considerarsi antesignano.¹¹ Le sue memorie postume di travestito furono più volte ristampate,¹² ispirando lettori curiosi e autori di pruriginosi romanzi storici.¹³ Ancora nel Novecento, l'interesse per Choisy è tenuto vivo tanto dal gusto malizioso per le stravaganze del *Grand siècle*, quanto dal rispetto per la sua testimonianza storica, che muove da una posizione privilegiata in decenni cruciali per l'identità francese. Non è un caso che l'edizione ancor oggi di riferimento dei *Mémoires* sia pubblicata insieme ai ben più impegnativi *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de Louis XIV*, di cui viene considerata dallo stesso curatore una sorta di bizzarro controcanto: “Cet infâme livre’, comme dit l’abbé d’Olivet, est un curieux ouvrage” (MONGRÉDIEN 1966: 12).¹⁴ Il saggio introduttivo di Georges Mongrédien sembra peraltro esemplare di un disagio che si infiltra persino nel discorso impassibile della filologia: lungi dal mantenere la posizione distaccata dello storico, Mongrédien¹⁵ integra i ragguagli sui *Mémoires* del travestito con affermazioni di ironico distanziamento (quando non di diletta-tantistico psicologismo), che rendono preziosa questa edizione non solo come strumento filologico, ma anche come testimonianza, a sua volta, di una vera e propria tendenza nella ricezione di Choisy. Il resoconto delle sue avventure di travestito, concede Mongrédien, “n’a rien de provocant, mais il reste sans cesse *équivoque et malsain*” (1966: 12, corsivi miei). Non solo: presa per buona l’eterosessualità indefettibile del suo autore,¹⁶ lo studioso

plus naïve: ‘Quel peintre pour les Antoine et les Pacômes pour les Augustins et les Athanase!’” (D’ALEMBERT [1777] 1821, III, I, 46). Sul rapporto tra gioco e travestimento si veda anche oltre n. 37.

¹¹ L’esordio del saggio introduttivo all’edizione di riferimento dei *Mémoires* epitoma questa posizione: “L’abbé de Choisy nous apparaît aujourd’hui comme un homme du XVIII^e siècle égaré dans le XVII^e” (MONGRÉDIEN 1966: 9).

¹² La lista completa in VAN DER CRUYSSÉ 1995: 460-1. L’edizione di Anversa del 1735, che contiene solo CB, fu ristampata a Bruxelles da François Foppens nel 1736. *L’editio princeps* degli altri frammenti è nelle *Avantures* [sic] *de l’abbé de Choisy habillé en femme*, quatre fragments inédits à l’exception du dernier, qui a été publié sous le titre *Histoire de la comtesse Des Barres*, précédés d’un avant-propos, par M. P. L. [Paul Lacroix], Paris, Jules Gay 1862, ristampati numerose volte fino all’edizione 1966 di Georges Mongrédien.

¹³ Mi limito a ricordare la *causerie* di Sainte-Beuve per il lunedì 3 marzo 1851 (SAINTE-BEUVE 1852: 332-49) e il romanzo *Mademoiselle de Choisy* di Roger de Beauvoir (DE BEAUVOIR [1859] 1875).

¹⁴ L’allusione è alla biografia dedicata a Choisy dall’abate Pierre-Joseph Thoulier d’Olivet, suo collega all’Académie française ([OLIVET] 1742).

¹⁵ Nato nel 1901 e morto nel 1980, Mongrédien è stato un grande conoscitore del XVII secolo, su cui ha pubblicato decine di monografie, di impostazione soprattutto biografica e storico-letteraria.

¹⁶ Benché quello che sappiamo dell’autoginefilia (vd. LAWRENCE 2013 e oltre, n. 40) renda per-

non ha che da gettare la colpa sulla madre se il tanto più degno percorso di una normale vita sentimentale è stato precluso al figlio:

Les habitudes *néfastes* que sa mère lui donna, quand il était enfant, en le déguisant en fille, en firent un fétichiste du travestissement. Il est probable que, dans son *esprit déréglé*, le déguisement resta toujours intimement lié au souvenir de ses premiers désirs sexuels et resta toute sa vie pour lui “l’adjuvant de l’excitation sexuelle”. Non seulement il se travestit, mais il se plaît à travestir ses jeunes partenaires en garçons. C’est une véritable *déviaton de la sensibilité et de la sexualité* que Choisy a *subie* et dont sa mère, qui en fit une poupée vivante, est plus responsable que lui, *esprit faible et malade, incapable* de ressentir les joies de l’amour sans ce piment du travesti, *victime* d’une habitude tôt contractée dont il n’eut pas *la force de se libérer*. (MONGRÉDIEN 1966: 14, corsivi miei)

L’atteggiamento di Mongrédien è sintomatico dell’imbarazzo che le anomalie di Choisy suscitano nello studioso ‘serio’, che esplicita il suo tributo alla norma sociale come se temesse di incorrere nel sospetto di simpatizzare per o, peggio ancora, di solidarizzare con la pratica deviante.

Questa edizione dei *Mémoires* si rivela tuttavia determinante per la fortuna più recente dell’opera: la recente pubblicazione nella collana di memorialisti “Le temps retrouvé” porta infatti il testo all’attenzione di Jacques Lacan, che ne farà l’oggetto di analisi di uno dei seminari del 1966, e darà l’avvio a una serie di nuovi contributi interpretativi.¹⁷ La lettura lacaniana contribuisce a evidenziare alcuni elementi di rilievo nei *Mémoires de l’abbé de Choisy habillé en femme*, valorizzando in primo luogo la matrice dell’inclinazione al travestimento nel rapporto immaginario con la madre fallica:¹⁸

fettamente plausibile un’eterosessualità esclusiva di Choisy (BILLAUD 2004: 136 commenta così la coesistenza di travestimento ed eterosessualità: “Ordre et désordre se mêlent ainsi encore au détour des apparences”), è possibile presumere che le pratiche omosessuali siano state censurate nei resoconti. Sul problema vd. SCOTT 2015: 29.

¹⁷ Lacan propone la lettura dei *Mémoires* di Choisy nel seminario del 15 giugno 1966, dopo una relazione di Jean Clavreul all’École Freudienne di Parigi sul tema *Le couple pervers*. Vd. BRIENT 2006: 197 e n. 9. Il contributo di Brient si riferisce soltanto al Sem. IV e al Sem. V, mentre la riformulazione lacaniana dell’Edipo è articolata nel Sem. VI, che però Brient non considera (ringrazio A. Madonia per aver attirato la mia attenzione su questo limite).

¹⁸ La responsabilità della madre castrante è del resto un tema ricorrente anche negli studi di impostazione non squisitamente psicoanalitica. Ad esempio BILLAUD 2004: 133 non esita ad affermare che l’inclinazione travestista è frutto “d’une éducation maternelle émasculante” (sul ruolo della madre castrante vd. ancora BILLAUD 2004: 139-40). Dalle memorie di Choisy si evince in effetti che il progetto di valorizzare alcuni tratti ‘femminili’ del bambino era stato sistematica-

Lacan, dans son séminaire sur “ La relation d’objet ”, indique la fonction essentielle du voile dans la pratique travestiste. C’est au triangle imaginaire entre la mère, l’enfant et le phallus que celle-ci est à référer. Dans la fixation travestiste, l’enfant s’identifie à la mère phallée, la mère pourvue d’un pénis. (BRIENT 2006: 199)

In aggiunta alla testimonianza dei *Mémoires*, la peculiare situazione biografica di Choisy potrebbe aver lasciato traccia anche in una curiosa opera anonima pubblicata nel “*Mercuré galant*” del 1695, l’*Histoire de la marquise-marquis de Banneville*, racconto della vita di un giovane aristocratico educato fin dalla nascita come una ragazza. In quel testo anonimo gli studiosi moderni hanno voluto vedere un’opera di Choisy, scritta forse in collaborazione con Charles Perrault.¹⁹ Nell’*Histoire*, la scelta dell’educazione *cross-dressed* precede addirittura la nascita del bambino, che la madre vuole semplicemente sottrarre al destino di morte precoce del padre soldato. Nelle avventure della giovane marchesa, cresciuta ignorando di essere un ragazzo, l’*Histoire* tematizza dunque gli effetti di una capacità di determinazione che procede senza riserve dalla volontà materna:

L’*Histoire de la marquise-marquis de Banneville* se voudrait ainsi témoigner du désir originel de sa mère, du désir qui présida à sa naissance en tant que sujet: soit d’étouffer dans l’œuf la loi du père, en empêchant son fils de lui emprunter un trait. Et c’est bien ainsi que Lacan situe la configuration œdipienne pour l’enfant qui deviendra pervers, c’est-à-dire que la mère fait la loi au père. (BRIENT 2006: 200)

Un merito più generale della lettura lacaniana è aver sottratto finalmente i *Mémoires* del Choisy travestito allo sguardo malizioso o scandalizzato dei lettori moralisti, e averne valorizzato invece lo straordinario interesse per

mente perseguito dalla madre: “Je n’avais point de barbe, on avait eu soin, dès l’âge de cinq ou six ans, de me frotter tous les jours avec une certaine eau qui fait mourir le poil dans la racine, pourvu qu’on s’y prenne de bonne heure” (CB 475; cfr. anche MH 32: “On rira de me voir habillé en fille jusqu’à l’âge de dix-huit ans; on n’excusera pas ma mère de l’avoir voulu”; e MH 55: “Je dirai seulement, pour ma justification, que ma mère, par une fausse tendresse, m’a élevé comme une demoiselle: le moyen de faire de cela un grand homme!”). RUNTE 2006: 25 sottolinea a ragione la sorprendente modernità di una simile “mother-blame’ Theorie” nelle pagine dello stesso Choisy.
¹⁹ CHOISY [1695-1696] 1997, abbreviato qui in *HMMB*; l’“*Histoire de la marquise-marquis de Banneville*”, fu pubblicata originariamente in tre parti sul *Mercuré galant* (febbraio 1695: 12-101; agosto 1696: 171-238; settembre 1696: 85-185); il consenso pressoché unanime degli studiosi attribuisce a Choisy la paternità dell’opera, con la possibile collaborazione di Charles Perrault o di sua nipote Marie-Jeanne L’Heritier de Villandon.

la storia della psicologia e della cultura. Nelle letture più recenti, il travestimento di Choisy viene giustamente considerato un elemento di particolare pregnanza nell’orizzonte culturale del *Grand siècle*, un elemento che con la sua stessa “self-disclosure” osa significare l’impensabile, vale a dire che “the feminine is a construction” (GUILD 1994: 181). Questo spiega dunque l’attenzione prioritaria che gli studi hanno dedicato alla rappresentazione della corporeità di Choisy,²⁰ vista come un luogo dove il travestimento consente pratiche di trasformazione dei codici che si possono leggere come una “remise en question des repères sur lesquels reposent l’ordre établi et la distribution des rôles dans la société” (BILLAUD 2004: 135). È del resto un dato acquisito sin dallo studio pionieristico di Marjorie Garber che il travestimento è sovversione proprio in quanto determina una crisi categoriale (GARBER 1993: 17 e 25). Anche questo mio studio si propone di prendere in esame aspetti della *queerness* di Choisy riconducendo le strategie del travestimento quali emergono dai *Mémoires* a precise coordinate socioculturali e biografiche, grazie alle quali esse acquistano un significato leggibile in primo luogo nella relazione tra rappresentazione dell’identità di genere e dinamiche di potere. Come sottolinea giustamente Elizabeth Guild (1994: 180), “the representations of the body in these writings by Choisy fall both within and across the dominant sexual economy and politics of their time” nella misura in cui la crisi del verosimile “reveal[s] the gendered subject as a product of formation and representation”.

La contestualizzazione storico-culturale di Choisy permette inoltre di apprezzarne il carattere eccezionale, se si considera che altri memorialisti licenziosi dello stesso periodo si mantengono entro i confini di pratiche sessuali socialmente trasgressive, ma pur sempre conformi ai codici della norma eterosessuale.²¹ Di interesse forse anche maggiore è inoltre il rapporto intertestuale che gli scritti ‘proibiti’ di Choisy sembrano intrattenere con i modelli finzionali. Un legame privilegiato con *La princesse de Clèves* di Mme de La Fayette, più volte suggerito,²² sembra fornire ad esempio un’interessante chiave di lettura nei percorsi di costruzione del personaggio

²⁰ GUILD 1994; in particolare sulla teatralità del travestimento di Choisy vd. HAMMOND 1999. Una riconsiderazione complessiva del travestimento in relazione alle prospettive mediche e giuridiche dell’epoca in BILLAUD 2004 (in particolare 142). Per una considerazione più generale del fenomeno nella cultura francese *ancien régime* vd. anche STEINBERG 2001 e HARRIS 2005.

²¹ Ad es. Jean-Jacques Bouchard (i cui scritti autobiografici vengono letti in relazione a quelli di Choisy da CHARBONNEAU 1998).

²² Da GUILD 1994: 187 n. 8 e HARRIS 2006: 4-6.

della giovane marchesa di Banneville, il cui radicamento in un progetto educativo materno ne fa un corrispettivo stringente della giovane Mlle de Chartres nel determinante rapporto con sua madre.²³

Un contributo recente (SCOTT 2015) riconsidera sistematicamente la dimensione documentaria dei *Mémoires* di Choisy, e avanza un'ipotesi di rottura con l'intera tradizione degli studi: lungi dal rappresentare la cronaca di esperienze realmente vissute, gli scritti che compongono i *Mémoires de l'abbé de Choisy habillé en femme* non sarebbero altro che elaborazioni letterarie a partire da un'inclinazione e un'effettiva abitudine al travestimento. L'ipotesi di Scott, che sembra far vacillare molta della letteratura critica anteriore su Choisy, non è in realtà né del tutto inaspettata, né soprattutto incompatibile con molte interpretazioni di cui i due testi sono finora stati oggetto. Che i *Mémoires* fossero almeno in parte una “*élaboration romanesque*” era ipotesi avanzata già da molti anni in uno dei principali studi sistematici su Choisy:²⁴ sarebbe stato l'erede stesso dell'abate, il marchese d'Argenson, a corroborare le testimonianze emerse dai manoscritti inediti dell'illustre prozio. Anche per il biografo più recente, Dirk Van der Cruysse, cui Scott rimprovera peraltro di aver attribuito eccessivo valore documentario ai *Mémoires*,²⁵ il parallelismo delle avventure di Mme de Sancy e della contessa des Barres è troppo marcato per riflettere il semplice svolgimento di eventi reali.²⁶ Anche Frédéric Charbonneau sottolinea come nello stesso testo dei *Mémoires* siano disseminati indizi del piacere che Choisy ricava dall'ingannare il suo pubblico, e che giustificherebbero pertanto la “*méfiance avec laquelle il convient de lire ses révélations*”.²⁷

Paradossalmente, l'incertezza sull'autenticità evenemenziale dei *Mémoires* non costituisce un problema nella prospettiva di questa mia lettura. Lungi

²³ L'analogia è sviluppata da Joseph Harris, che vede nel rapporto intertestuale di *HMMB* con *La princesse de Clèves* una sorta di figura dell'atteggiamento stesso di Choisy nei confronti dell'*establishment* culturale contemporaneo: “In an oddly feminized version of Harold Bloom's *Anxiety of influence*, then, La Fayette's novel provides Choisy with a feminine parent-text which he attempts both to pay homage to and to overthrow” (HARRIS 2006: 14).

²⁴ REYNES 1983: 123 n. 13.

²⁵ SCOTT 2015: 14 n. 1.

²⁶ VAN DER CRUYSSSE 1995: 166. Analoghi dubbi sono sollevati da BILLAUD 2004: 134: “les aventures de l'abbé de Choisy habillé en femme frôlent la fiction ou la formule des faux *Mémoires*”. Al di là dell'orizzonte specialistico, la finzionalità dei *Mémoires* di Choisy sembra emergere anche nella loro capacità di ispirare un'elaborazione finzionale, come nel caso della scrittrice canadese Gabrielle Roy, le cui false memorie *Le temps qui m'a manqué* si presentano precisamente come un *pastiche* romanzesco dell'opera ‘autobiografica’ di Choisy (ROY 1997).

²⁷ CHARBONNEAU 1998: 119 n. 38, che rimanda anche a CHARBONNEAU 1996: 355.

dal voler riprendere e discutere analiticamente le molte prove fornite da Paul Scott in favore dello statuto letterario dei *Mémoires*, a me interessa infatti evidenziare più in astratto i significati che i ruoli di genere assumono nel codice sociale del *Grand siècle* e la semantica dell’operazione di riscrittura compiuta da Choisy – che si tratti di coraggiose stravaganze effettivamente realizzate o di godibili narrazioni di fantasia. Stabilire se le avventure di Mme de Sancy al Marais siano realmente accadute è quindi meno significativo ai miei occhi del fatto che esse siano state comunque *immaginate*, e immaginate con tale fervore da essere trasposte in un testo dallo statuto ambiguo, sospeso tra novella esemplare e falsa memoria.²⁸ L’obiettivo della mia lettura è infatti una ricognizione dei rapporti che intercorrono tra la semantica dello scambio di genere e la simbologia sociale del potere. La mia ipotesi di fondo è che alla base di tante inclinazioni che la psicoanalisi cerca di ancorare a un vissuto infantile e a specifiche dinamiche affettive con i genitori siano presenti anche determinanti psicosociali, che aiutano a spiegare, o almeno contribuiscono a illustrare (tra l’altro) i significati dei comportamenti sessuali non conformi. In merito agli scritti e alle vicende biografiche di Choisy a me sembra che vada valorizzata appunto questa convergenza di fattori emozionali privati e di dinamiche sociali.

Alla radice dell’azione di Choisy come travestito mi sembra si possa individuare una sinergia tra fattori in contrasto, almeno a prima vista: da un lato un atteggiamento di entusiastica soggezione nei confronti delle figure di potere, dall’altro una forte componente narcisistica.²⁹ La discrasia tra questi due atteggiamenti è solo apparente: l’atteggiamento di subordinazione deriva infatti da una fascinazione subita, mentre il narcisismo non implica necessariamente solipsismo autoreferenziale ma si manifesta

²⁸ In termini teorico-letterari, potremmo dire che si tratta di un caso particolarmente precoce di quella scrittura autofinzionale destinata a segnare in modo determinante la narrazione romanzesca nel Novecento. Lo stato particolarmente curato del manoscritto e alcuni indizi redazionali (sottolineati da CHARBONNEAU 1998: 117, n. 30) lasciano credere che si tratti di una copia. Questo significa che il testo, benché non destinato alla pubblicazione in vita, ha conosciuto comunque una circolazione privata già prima dell’*editio princeps*.

²⁹ Oltre ai numerosi passi dei *Mémoires* discussi in questo studio, vale la pena di richiamare un principio enunciato dalla madre della marchesa-marchese di Banneville, in cui si può forse riconoscere uno dei pilastri del sistema morale di Choisy: “être aimée de tout le monde et n’aimer que soi-même, voilà, ma fille, le souverain bonheur” (*HMMB* 980). Questo ruolo del pubblico indifferenziato nella dinamica narcisistica è ben chiaro a Charbonneau (1998: 119): “Le théâtre et le sexe sont pour Choisy dans un rapport circulaire, l’un menant à l’autre en une sorte de vertige. Grâce au regard posé sur lui, il retrouve l’émotion grisée de Narcisse, se contemplant *in figura* par l’œil de son public”.

soprattutto come potere seduttivo, declinato in modi che arrivano fino alla vera e propria manipolazione.³⁰ Il travestimento di Choisy, insomma, mi sembra vada letto in termini molto generali come un impulso mimetico compensatorio: la compensazione consiste appunto nel rovesciare gli effetti del fascino subito di fronte ai simboli del potere precisamente tramite un esercizio consapevole e attivo della fascinazione.³¹

Lo strumento ermeneutico più idoneo a render conto della convergenza tra fascinazione subita e desiderio di autoaffermazione è la teoria del desiderio triangolare di René Girard (GIRARD 1961), secondo cui il desiderio del soggetto si radica in un impulso di imitazione del desiderio riscontrato in (o attribuito a) un soggetto esterno. In questo caso l'aspetto della teoria girardiana più pertinente alla nostra analisi non riguarda tanto il desiderio triangolare in sé, quanto la sua natura di "desiderio metafisico" (ivi: 123). Girard sostiene infatti che la convergenza su un oggetto esterno è solo uno spostamento degli obiettivi, giacché il vero oggetto del desiderio è l'essere del mediatore. Percependo con disagio la propria inconsistenza ontologica, il soggetto desidera in modo imitativo al fine di acquisire la consistenza ontologica che attribuisce ai soggetti che assume come modelli. Ciò che lo interessa maggiormente in quei modelli non è tanto l'oggetto esterno del loro desiderio, quanto la loro solidità ontologica di soggetto. Girard articola questa idea analizzando un caso esemplare che si rivela di grande rilevanza per il nostro ragionamento:

Le roi-soleil est le médiateur de tous les êtres qui l'entourent. Et ce médiateur reste séparé de ses fidèles par une distance spirituelle prodigieuse. Le roi ne peut pas devenir le rival de ses propres sujets. M. de Montespan souffrirait davantage

³⁰ Ad esempio nella seduzione iterata di giovani ragazze, che non riconoscono la figura del travestito come una minaccia e rinunciano quindi ad atteggiamenti difensivi come nel caso di Charlotte in *MS* o di Mlle de La Grise in *CB*). In ogni caso non sono d'accordo con GUILD 1994: 184 quando dice che la scelta del femminile "entails a willingness to forgo the authority, political impulses, and privileges of the masculine". Al contrario, il carattere strumentale e compensatorio della bellezza come *performance* sociale può spiegare ad esempio il carattere dominante della fissazione narcisistica nel soggetto che già gode dei privilegi del genere maschile: "les hommes, quand il croient être beaux, sont une fois plus entêtés de leur beauté que les femmes" (*CB* 477).

³¹ Sul piano biografico un atteggiamento analogo si può vedere nell'inclinazione a compensare lo stigma della nobiltà di roba (stigma fortemente percepito, almeno in base ai precetti materni riportati sopra a n. 3) con la frequentazione esclusiva dell'aristocrazia di spada: "il est arrivé qu'à la reserve de mes parents, qu'il faut bien voir malgré qu'on en ait, je ne vois pas un homme de robe: il faut que je passe ma vie à la cour avec mes amis, ou dans mon cabinet avec mes livres" (*MH* 31).

si sa femme le trompait avec un simple mortel. La théorie du “droit divin” définit parfaitement le type particulier de médiation externe qui fleurit à Versailles et dans la France entière pendant les deux derniers siècles de la monarchie. (GIRARD 1961: cap. V)

Dopo aver demistificato l’ontologia dell’oggetto come fondamento del desiderio (in questo consiste appunto la ‘menzogna romantica’), Girard porta in primo piano la figura del mediatore, di cui Luigi XIV rappresenta un archetipo ineguagliabile. Nella prospettiva di Girard l’essere del mediatore viene pensato come l’autentica matrice del desiderio oggettuale, nonché come l’obiettivo ultimo del desiderio, di cui l’oggetto esterno è solo uno schermo. Per meglio intendere il caso di Choisy è necessario però richiamare un’importante integrazione a questo aspetto della teoria girardiana, articolata di recente da Carmen Dell’Aversano (DELL’AVERSANO 2021): contrariamente a quanto implica Girard, vale a dire che il soggetto desidera l’*essere* del mediatore, Dell’Aversano sostiene che questo desiderio riguardi non tanto l’essere ma la *posizione* del mediatore, vale a dire il ruolo stesso di mediazione svolto dal modello mimetico, a prescindere dalle sue caratteristiche specifiche. Essere e posizione sono elementi che vanno distinti nell’azione sociale come in letteratura è indispensabile distinguere l’attore dall’attante di una funzione narrativa. Questa distinzione, articolata da Greimas nel 1966, era chiaramente inaccessibile a Girard nel 1961, ma permette una precisazione alla teoria mimetica del desiderio che si rivela del tutto indispensabile per interpretare il travestimento di Choisy. L’obiettivo del desiderio mimetico di Choisy, infatti, non è tanto l’essere del sovrano, che si colloca su un piano di realtà incommensurabile, e dunque inaccessibile per definizione alla totalità dei sudditi;³² l’obiettivo che si può invece riconoscere nelle dinamiche del travestimento di Choisy è precisamente l’imitazione della *posizione* del sovrano, vale a dire una posizione centrale da cui promana una fascinazione universale nella cui unicità centripeta si manifesta la capacità di porsi come soggetto di potere.

Che questa posizione fosse desiderabile è implicito nel programma di accentramento simbolico attuato da Luigi XIV, che approfitta dell’agentività illimitata del sovrano assoluto per promuovere, a monte delle azioni politiche del suo lungo regno, una vera e propria strategia di organizzazione del

³² E infatti il Re rientra nella categoria che Girard denomina ‘mediatore esterno’, vale a dire ontologicamente ineguagliabile e pertanto immune dalle sollecitazioni del mimetismo competitivo.

desiderio. L'accentramento della corte a Versailles, e lo sviluppo ipertrofico della dimensione simbolica di questa centralità si possono leggere infatti come una strategia di coordinamento universale del desiderio mimetico. La finalità di una simile operazione, che chiaramente non può essere ridotta al mero egocentrismo biografico di Luigi XIV, è implicita già nella politica di rafforzamento monarchico avviata da Richelieu e proseguita poi da Mazzarino. Facendo propria la sostanza di quella politica, Luigi XIV promuove una nuova configurazione del monarca, che viene così a porsi esplicitamente (e consapevolmente) come mediatore centripeto del desiderio universale.

Nell'interpretare il travestimento di Choisy, mi sembra necessario partire dalla considerazione della posizione che il suddito, e in particolare il cortigiano, e in particolare il cortigiano ambizioso, occupa in un simile sistema del desiderio mimetico: da un lato, una sensibilità accentuatissima alla fascinazione, dall'altro un impulso incoercibile al desiderio della *posizione* da cui quella fascinazione procede. Questo perché, al di là del canale di confronto e di rapporto diretto tra il soggetto e il mediatore esterno, cioè al di là della venerazione che il cortigiano nutre per il monarca, sussiste altresì un regime di competizione tra i numerosi soggetti di quell'adorazione.³³ Il Re è il mediatore del desiderio metafisico, da cui dipende il riconoscimento ontologico del soggetto; quel riconoscimento, però, è anche oggetto di una competizione mimetica tra tutti i cortigiani, che lottano per una manifestazione di favore che non può premiare tutti in uguale misura. La forza del desiderio metafisico (piccolo principio girardiano di 'microfisica del potere') è tanto maggiore quanto minore è la distanza dal punto di irraggiamento. La vicinanza al centro rende infatti possibile non solo la visione più sistematica e dettagliata del punto di irraggiamento mimetico, ma alimenta anche nel soggetto l'illusione dell'esistenza di un rapporto interattivo con il suo mediatore di desiderio metafisico. Il cortigiano non solo venera il centro del potere e compete con i suoi rivali per i favori del sovrano, ma si illude

³³ L'evidenza storica relativa al parossismo competitivo dei cortigiani per il favore del sovrano è soverchiante; basta aprire a caso i *Mémoires* di Saint-Simon per rendersi conto dell'ubiquità di questo movente dell'azione sociale a Versailles (benché per un periodo considerevolmente successivo a quello delle avventure di Choisy: vd. SAINT-SIMON 1982, per gli anni dal 1691 al 1701). La rilevanza di questa situazione per un'interpretazione psicoanalitica delle dinamiche proprie di quel sistema sociale non sfugge a Annette Runte, che ne riconosce la dimensione patologica nell'anomala estensione del lacaniano stadio dello specchio: "Der in Versailles wie in einer 'Bonbonniere' (Voltaire) kasernierte Adel verkörpert sozusagen die intrasubjektive Aggressivität der Selbstbeziehung intersubjektiv, mit dem Vater-König als paranoidem Überich eines verallgemeinerten Spiegelstadiums" (RUNTE 2006: 31).

in primo luogo di poter *interagire* col monarca, rispondendo al suo fascino con l’esibizione di qualità che il Re possa apprezzare, e da cui si possa quindi lasciar influenzare e orientare nel suo irraggiamento metafisico.

La radice mimetica, cioè al tempo stesso subordinata e competitiva, del rapporto di Choisy col sovrano si inferisce dalla stupefacente disinvoltura con cui il memorialista intreccia nella sua storia del regno di Luigi XIV riferimenti alle proprie esperienze personali più minute.³⁴ Nelle prime pagine dell’opera il lettore è addirittura avvertito di un parallelismo che sembrerebbe poi limitato a poche sezioni dell’opera, ma che nella mia prospettiva è quasi una sua chiave di lettura generale:

Au reste, j’avertis le lecteur qu’en écrivant la vie du Roi j’écrirai aussi la mienne, à mesure que je me souviendrai de ce qui m’est arrivé. Ce sera un beau contraste, mais cela me réjouira; [...] Ce n’est pas que j’aie envie de me louer; mais, en parlant de soi, on y tombe sans y penser. Nos vertus nous paraissent plus grandes, et nos fautes plus légères. (MH 32)

I *Mémoires* sono in effetti concepiti come svago personale e forma di comunicazione con amici selezionati; nonostante la nitida presenza di un narratore impersonale, il testo riconosce esplicitamente che i *Mémoires* non erano destinati alla pubblicazione («ces Mémoires-ci ne sont pas faits pour être imprimés», MH 173). Tuttavia quello che sembra un vezzo diaristico si rivela un principio strutturante, legato al parallelismo tra le vicende del Re e quelle del suo suddito adorante (“Je laisserai tomber de ma plume tout ce qui me regardera personnellement, quelque petit qu’il soit”, MH 48). Ma non si tratta di piccolezze, nonostante la continua sprezzatura: lo dimostra un nitido autoritratto epigrammatico, collocato proprio nelle pagine iniziali dei *Mémoires*:

Une dame qui a tout l’esprit du monde a dit que j’avais vécu trois ou quatre vies différentes, homme, femme, toujours dans les extrémités; abîmé ou dans l’étude ou dans les bagatelles; estimable par un courage qui mène au bout du monde, méprisable par une coquetterie de petite fille; et, dans tous ces états différents, toujours gouverné par le plaisir. (MH 33)³⁵

³⁴ Il parallelismo memoriale tra la cronaca politica di Luigi XIV e le proprie esperienze autobiografiche è esplorato da BELLEMARE 2020.

³⁵ La diffrazione prismatica delle personalità di Choisy traspare anche dalle sue trasformazioni in ambiti lontani da quelli legati ai suoi *Mémoires*. Sulla tensione tra lo Choisy libertino e il moralista si veda almeno PREYAT 2004, in particolare pp. 227-34.

Del resto il sentimento di venerazione per il Re, al di là del dovere cortigiano, è esplicitamente ammesso da Choisy, benché in forma concessiva:

Louis lui-même, tout grand qu'il est, ne me tentera pas: *quelque faible que j'aie a son égard*, la vérité me soutiendra, l'amour du vrai triomphera en moi de tous les autres amours. (MH 39, corsivo mio)

Ma il rispecchiamento dei due centri di attenzione – quello esteriore del vertice sociale e quello interiore dell'autocoscienza – torna a più riprese (“je dis que si dans ces Mémoires je ne flatte point le Roi, je ne me flatterai pas non plus”, MH 55), al punto che non è facile liquidare come irrilevante l'istituzione di questa incongrua analogia:

Je vous promets pourtant bien sérieusement de vous entretenir presque toujours du Roi, ce sera ma basse continue; et si de temps en temps vous me trouvez à quelque coin, passez par-dessus moi. Comme je ne me contrains pas pour vous, je vous conseille de ne vous pas contraindre pour moi. (MH 56)

Questo atteggiamento idealizzante e di adorazione incondizionata è facile da motivare, stando alle testimonianze dei contemporanei, con gli insegnamenti della madre di Choisy.³⁶ In generale, dall'*historiette* che Tallemant des Réaux dedica alla bella Jeanne-Olympe (1960-1961: II, 399-402), emerge un profilo di persona straordinariamente sicura di sé, e perfettamente capace di dominare anche le situazioni sociali più delicate. Jeanne-Olympe era stata infatti una dama di corte bella e spregiudicata,³⁷ e la sua ambizione era stata compensata da un rapporto privilegiato col giovane Luigi XIV, evidentemente non insensibile al suo fascino.³⁸ Purtroppo, il venir meno di questo fascino nel tempo non aveva intaccato la consapevolezza che Jeanne-Olympe aveva maturato della propria capacità di sedurre, con effetti di cui lo spietato sguardo dei cortigiani suoi colleghi e rivali non aveva difficoltà a cogliere il ridicolo. Tallemant riporta un aneddoto da cui si ricavano

³⁶ In uno degli episodi autobiografici riportati nelle memorie storiche, Choisy ricorda come sua madre lo avesse spinto con veemenza (“me pensa manger”) a rendere omaggio al duca d'Albret, futuro cardinale di Bouillon, che aveva avuto uno screzio con l'abbé d'Harcourt, che era invece amico di Choisy (MH 34). La logica della madre era quella corretta: il cardinale di Bouillon sarebbe diventato in seguito il principale protettore di Choisy e promotore della sua carriera.

³⁷ “Elle a esté jolie” (TALLEMANT DES RÉAUX 1960-1961, II, 399, corsivo mio); Sul personaggio in generale vd. VAN DER CRUYSSÉ 1995: 33 ss.

³⁸ Le principali testimonianze ivi, 42-3.

a mio giudizio informazioni preziose per l’interpretazione del travestimento di Choisy:

Estant au bal auprès de Mme d’Angoulesme la jeune, qui seroit bien sa fille, elle luy disoit: “Il faut avoüer que les blondes esclattent plus ici; mais nous autres brunes, nous avons l’agrement”. Et disoit cela du meilleur serieux qu’elle eust. (TALLEMANT DES RÉAUX 1960-1961: II, 401)

Le parole di Tallemant sottolineano la discrasia tra la bellezza sfiorita e il permanere delle illusioni; questo rivela che, ancora nella mezza età, la percezione di sé della madre di Choisy, che era nota per l’abitudine preziosa di riferirsi ai propri occhi come a “mes vainqueurs”,³⁹ continuava a presupporre la capacità di seduzione. La cosa non è irrilevante per comprendere i criteri che l’avrebbero guidata nell’educare suo figlio. Jeanne-Olympe, non dimentichiamolo, aveva quarant’anni al momento della nascita di François-Timoléon, e doveva dunque trovarsi precisamente nel momento in cui la scomparsa della bellezza giovanile esalta per contrasto il ruolo degli *stage props* nella performance della femminilità seduttiva. Questo elemento mi sembra in grado di illuminare la sua scelta di avviare il figlio al gusto per gli strumenti della seduzione e della civetteria femminile. Molti studi su Choisy sottolineano infatti il ruolo della ‘madre castrante’ nella costruzione dell’identità del figlio come feticista del travestimento.⁴⁰ Ma nel dare conto di questo ruolo essi trascurano in genere il *significato* che l’identità femminile, vale a dire la performance estetica ed erotica della femminilità seduttiva, avevano con ogni verosimiglianza nell’esperienza privata di questa persona. Nell’immagine che di lei sopravvive nei resoconti memoriali, tanto del figlio quanto di altri autori, è sempre in primo piano la convergenza tra la sua ambizione e il suo disinvolto uso della seduzione. Il suo motto, “il n’y a rien de tel que le gros de l’arbre”, è trasparente indizio della connessione da lei evidentemente presupposta tra potere seduttivo e vantaggio cortigiano. Questo induce a ritenere che nella sua prospettiva l’identità femminile, ovvero i *parafernalia* che ne permettono la performance, fossero tutt’uno con la capacità di esercitare il potere implicito nella

³⁹ TALLEMANT DES RÉAUX 1960-1961, II, 400.

⁴⁰ Secondo BAILEY 2003: 171 il caso di Choisy va inteso come un esempio emblematico di passione autoginefila (naturalmente lo studioso presuppone il carattere attendibile e esclusivo delle esperienze eterosessuali riportate nei *Mémoires*); sull’autoginefilia in generale un orientamento in LAWRENCE 2013.

seduzione, cioè di esercitare il solo potere legittimamente riconosciuto alla donna in quel sistema culturale.

Questo significato è a mio giudizio cruciale per comprendere il codice sotteso ai suoi valori educativi, e al modello proposto al suo figlio cadetto. In questo codice femminilità e bellezza sono associate indissolubilmente, fino a risultare suoi equivalenti sinonimici, al desiderio di affermazione e all'esercizio di un potere.⁴¹ Mi sembrano dunque poco incisive spiegazioni generiche come quelle che ipotizza Van der Cruysse, secondo cui la marcata attenzione rivolta da Jeanne-Olympe all'educazione del piccolo Timoléon va attribuita al semplice addolcimento nostalgico di una bellezza sul viale del tramonto.⁴² Al contrario, proprio il venir meno della bellezza, e la consapevolezza più o meno nitida della conseguente perdita di potere, spiegano l'interesse per l'educazione del giovane Choisy, cui la madre può trasmettere per continuità il principio fondamentale del suo codice privato, vale a dire l'equivalenza tra seduttività e autoaffermazione cortigiana.⁴³

Accanto al modello e all'ammaestramento ideologico della madre, il percorso biografico di Choisy è segnato a a mio giudizio da un altro elemento utile per mettere a fuoco gli sviluppi delle sue peculiari inclinazioni: la sua condizione di cadetto. Nonostante l'appariscente contesto sociale richiamato all'inizio di questo saggio, il rapporto di Choisy con il potere è improntato a una relativa marginalità, che sembra seguire la sua condizione di figlio più giovane in una serie di posizioni costantemente subordinate o vicarie. Per un individuo vissuto in luoghi strutturalmente e ideologicamente centrali (la corte francese, la curia) è ragionevole pensare che questa marginalità, al pari della frustrazione di sua madre per il decadere della sua capacità di sedurre, abbia costituito un fattore identitario di un certo peso.

⁴¹ Un argomento collaterale in questa identificazione di travestimento e aspirazione al controllo è l'altra fissazione di Choisy, il gioco d'azzardo, che un passo dei *Mémoires* presenta come succedaneo del travestimento: "Le jeu, qui m'a toujours persécuté, m'a guéri de ces bagatelles pendant plusieurs années, mais toutes les fois que je me suis ruiné et que j'ai voulu quitter le jeu, je suis retombé dans mes anciennes faiblesses et suis redevenu femme" (*MS* 432). Il percorso inverso in *CB* 522: obbligato a smettere di travestirsi, Choisy-des Barres si dà al gioco: "Une passion chasse l'autre: je me mis à jouer à Venise, je gagnai beaucoup, mais je l'ai bien rendu depuis".

⁴² Nell'attenzione con cui Jeanne-Olympe si occupa del suo ultimo nato, VAN DER CRUYSSSE 1995: 46-7 vede in primo luogo il desiderio della donna matura di passare per una giovane madre.

⁴³ La radice mimetica dell'attenzione per la propria bellezza emerge anche da un dettaglio delle avventure della contessa des Barres: l'amante di Choisy-des Barres è rimasta incinta e ha messo al mondo una bambina; già poche settimane dopo, la madre si riprende dai disagi della gravidanza e del parto, e precisamente questo suo rifiorire ravviva l'attenzione narcisistica: Roselie "redevint plus belle que jamais, et alors je resongeai aussi à ma beauté" (*CB* 519, corsivo mio).

Se insomma l’organizzazione centripeta è l’insegna del mondo di Choisy, una radicale ‘secondarietà’ rispetto a ogni idea di centro è ciò che la sua posizione familiare e la sua esperienza pubblica gli prospettano: cadetto, compagno di cadetti, sostituto, coadiutore, viceresponsabile: la sua intera esistenza di ‘minore’ non gli ha mai concesso nemmeno una sola posizione di rilievo autonomo, anche rispetto alle cariche che i suoi stessi fratelli avevano ottenuto.

Nel quadro dei valori trasmessigli da una madre come quella che abbiamo descritto, la subordinazione anagrafica e familiare può facilmente essere correlata al gusto dello sconfinamento identitario. Lo rivela a mio parere un aneddoto che riguarda proprio il momento della scomparsa di Jeanne-Olympe: riuniti per la divisione dei beni della madre, i due fratelli maggiori se ne spartiscono le proprietà fondiarie, mentre al giovane Timoléon vanno (e sembrano interessare) soltanto i gioielli.⁴⁴ Un indizio leggibile in modo circolare. È sì innegabile quanto si sottolinea di consueto, che l’inclinazione feticistica al travestimento si manifesti come impulso irresistibile anche nelle situazioni più rigidamente codificate, ma è anche vero che, in base all’uso prevalente, al figlio cadetto *competano* beni meno ingenti.⁴⁵ Non è un caso quindi che il cadetto istituisca una relazione privilegiata con i beni che più da vicino significano l’identità femminile: essi sono infatti da un lato il segno di un orizzonte di possibilità più limitato (la subordinazione degli interessi del cadetto a quelli dei fratelli maggiori), dall’altro gli strumenti di una performance compensatoria, che supplisce all’inferiorità strutturale con l’esercizio di un potere legato al desiderio. Ne dà prova un curioso dettaglio, tanto più sorprendente quanto più disinvolto e sereno il tono con cui viene riportato:

La vie que je menais dans ma petite maison du faubourg Saint-Marceau était assez douce. Mes affaires étaient en bon état, mon frère venait de mourir, et m’avait laissé, toutes dettes payées, près de cinquante mille écus. (MS 441)

⁴⁴ L’episodio è raccontato con grande dovizia di particolari all’inizio di *CB*, 474-5. L’atteggiamento di Choisy è improntato a una grande generosità nei confronti dei suoi fratelli, cui egli concede un lotto più ampio del dovuto, in cambio di alcuni beni d’uso: gioielli, mobili e argenteria. Evidentemente l’eredità materna consiste anche in un valore d’uso dei beni cui si associa il massimo valore simbolico. È ovvio peraltro che la generosità relativa ai beni della madre non intacca la norma ereditaria, che riserva ai cadetti dell’aristocrazia un trattamento penalizzato in favore del primogenito.

⁴⁵ Un orientamento sul trattamento ereditario dei cadetti nella Francia del XVII secolo in BOURQUIN 2010.

La possibilità di assecondare le proprie inclinazioni e realizzare i propri desideri *coincide* con il ridursi di una subordinazione familiare, con la morte di un fratello che viene tranquillamente riportata tra le concause di una vita “*assez douce*”. È evidente che la libertà di realizzare il capriccio dipende direttamente dall’ampiezza dei mezzi economici garantiti dalla propria posizione nella gerarchia familiare.

Questo aspetto mi sembra fondamentale per apprezzare la rilevanza *teorica* del travestimento feticistico dell’abbé de Choisy. Esso infatti comincia, come tutte le pratiche performative,⁴⁶ a mettere in questione la connotazione prevalente della costruzione del genere nella nostra cultura, dove al maschile viene associata una posizione di superiorità, e al femminile una di inferiorità. Nel suo caso, queste posizioni sono esattamente ribaltate. Ma questa sovversione è solo una parte del processo: la mia interpretazione del travestimento di Choisy vorrebbe soprattutto mettere in evidenza come sia possibile e anzi necessario disancorare la prospettiva della ricerca sul genere dalla convinzione essenzialista che esso costituisca il punto di arrivo dei processi di significazione. L’idea che Choisy non sia altro che “*une âme de femme dans un corps d’homme*”, come lo definisce Mongrédien,⁴⁷ non mi sembra sufficiente ad illustrare la portata complessiva della risemantizzazione avviata (ma non esaurita) dalla pratica travestista.

Nella mia prospettiva, i tratti che definiscono la performance dei generi, e del genere femminile in particolare, si rivelano essere dei *significanti*, capaci di rendere articolabili contenuti che vanno al di là della semplice semantica delle identità di genere. La tesi che cerco di argomentare è appunto che gli impulsi al travestimento del giovane Choisy costituiscono nel loro insieme una consapevole strategia di recupero di uno spazio di potere egolatrivo di cui la nuova organizzazione assolutistica della corte forniva un modello tanto cogente quanto impossibile da replicare. In questa prospettiva l’appropriazione delle prerogative femminili si configura dunque come mezzo e non come fine: l’identità femminile viene risemantizzata come uno strumento di *potere*, capace di esercitare una forza di influenza e di attrazione grazie alla quale compensare le sollecitazioni paradossali del desiderio mimetico cortigiano. L’incessante irraggiamento apicale che promana dal sovrano induce l’uomo di corte a

⁴⁶ GARBER 1993: 17.

⁴⁷ L’espressione è ripresa anche da Isabelle Billaud nel titolo del suo saggio (BILLAUD 2004).

desiderare quella stessa posizione di vertice unico; al tempo stesso, quel desiderio è strutturalmente inibito dall’unicità centripeta della monarchia assoluta.

Gli elementi cruciali per comprendere l’esperienza di Choisy nel quadro di queste coordinate teoriche sono dunque da un lato l’esposizione ravvicinata e continua al fascino della regalità semidivina di Luigi XIV, dall’altro la scelta di ricreare in spazi marginali sistemi indipendenti dove dar luogo a nuove dinamiche di accentramento basato sulla fascinazione. La rilevanza di questa fascinazione per il potere è riconosciuta anche dagli studi su Choisy, che però non valorizzano le peculiarità di questa situazione sociale per interpretare la pratica travestista in quel particolarissimo contesto storico-culturale. I contributi a me noti si contentano di evidenziare il fatto che nel sistema culturale della civiltà di corte “[t]he body of the king becomes the focal point of legal, grammatical and sexual authority” (HAMMOND 1999: 165). L’azione di riscrittura corporea di Choisy, pertanto, “articulates the body as an object of power — with implications for the representation of the masculine body and its contemporary paradigm, the body of majesty, Louis XIV” (GUILD 1994: 181). Per questa studiosa, giustamente, i *Mémoires* di Choisy “celebrate the pleasures of ambiguity and the nuances of power-play that cross-dressing enabled him to explore” (180).

Una dinamica del genere si lascia del resto analizzare molto bene già con uno strumentario lacaniano:

La métaphore paternelle n’opère pas pour le sujet pervers, mais le Nom-du-Père est inscrit. Et si, dans le cercle que forment François-Timoléon et sa mère, le père réel est banni, un déplacement s’opère sur un Autre, le Roi de France, pour qui mère et fils eurent une admiration sans borne, en témoignent ces mémoires pour le “servir”. Louis XIV, donc, figure paternelle mais aussi phallus par sa personne toute entière (“le gros de l’arbre”). (BRIENT 2006: 200)

La prospettiva edipica di Lacan individua infatti gli elementi essenziali dello sviluppo della ‘perversione’ nell’azione della figura materna in relazione al principio di autorità. Essa evidenzia come particolarmente significativo proprio lo sconfinamento della madre nell’ordine paterno:

La pratique travestiste de l’abbé De [sic] Choisy illustre combien la structure du sujet dépend de l’imaginaire de la mère. Dès son enfance, il fut assujetti à une place dans le désir de sa mère, place qui lui permettait de dénier la castration pour

lui-même, mais qui répondait aussi à une négation de son propre manque chez la mère elle-même. (Ivi, 201)

Una prova indiretta dell'effetto pragmatico operato dal travestimento di Choisy si ricava dal fatto che i rimproveri rivolti al giovane non ne biasimano tanto la frivolezza o la depravazione, ma l'eccesso di amor proprio, che è "en désaccord avec le genre féminin et le rôle social que le travesti s'est octroyés" (BILLAUD 2004: 145). L'amor proprio appare incongruo proprio perché si realizza nella performance di un'identità inferiore. Ciò che Billaud non coglie, dunque, è proprio la *risemantizzazione* realizzata dalla pratica travestista sui segni della femminilità. Billaud si colloca insomma su una linea che comincia con i contemporanei di Choisy e prosegue fino a d'Alembert, per i quali l'assunzione di un'identità inferiore come quella femminile era di per sé un abbassamento;⁴⁸ prosegue con Sainte-Beuve, ai cui occhi la cifra della scelta di Choisy resta la "frivolité" (1851: 429-30; 450); e arriva fino a Elizabeth Guild, secondo cui "Choisy's and Monsieur's 'eccentric' orientation entails marginalization" (1994: 186). A me sembra che questa posizione così 'ragionevole' misconosca la componente di recupero consolatorio che il travestimento permette nei confronti di una marginalità pregressa. Quel ragionamento presuppone infatti l'implicito patriarcale, in base al quale l'identità maschile viene assunta come dotata di un significato assoluto, e non come frutto di un semplice privilegio di posizione. Choisy demistifica appunto questo implicito con la sua scelta di conseguire il primato in un ambito incommensurabile, e pertanto non competitivo, con il precedente. Ciò che nel codice di riferimento tradizionale è segno di inferiorità (il femminile come categoria strutturalmente subordinata al maschile) risulta risemantizzato nel codice privato di Choisy come un segno antonomastico di *superiorità*, in quanto capace di suscitare e controllare il desiderio degli interlocutori individuali e del pubblico indifferenziato. Il potere del travestito narcisista deriva dalla percezione di sé come un soggetto di irraggiamento universale di desiderio – il che equivale a dire, in prospettiva lacaniana, che la sua "jouissance" sta nel fatto "d'être le phallus" (BRIENT 2006: 202).

⁴⁸ Nelle note al suo *Éloge de l'abbé de Choisy*, d'Alembert sottolinea ad esempio il carattere "superficiel et frivole" dell'*Histoire de l'Église* di Choisy, che egli contrappone a quella, redatta nello stesso torno di tempo al termine di uno sforzo trentennale, da Fleury, un altro ecclesiastico membro dell'Académie française.

In questo senso vanno intesi ovviamente i riferimenti all’*“envie de plaire”* (MS 431), a quel *“plaire à tout le monde”* (MS 443) che viene costantemente addotto come impulso originario del travestimento, e che si vede in azione nei dialoghi che accompagnano le sue prodezze seduttive:

- Mademoiselle, (chiede l’intraprendente travestito) serais-je assez heureux pour être aimé de vous ?
- Ah ! madame, me répondit-elle en me serrant la main, peut-on vous voir sans vous aimer ! (MS 442)

Considerare queste affermazioni prove del narcisismo di Choisy mi sembra innegabile ma riduttivo. La dimensione elementare del narcisismo come infatuazione di sé non esaurisce infatti la portata che l’amore di sé assume in questo sistema culturale. Una spiegazione/confessione più esplicita di Choisy è particolarmente rivelatrice in tal senso:

J’ai cherché d’où me vient un plaisir si bizarre, le voici; le propre de Dieu est d’être aimé, adoré; l’homme, autant que sa faiblesse le permet, ambitionne la même chose; or, comme c’est la beauté qui fait naître l’amour, et qu’elle est ordinairement le partage des femmes, quand il arrive que des hommes ont ou croient avoir quelques traits de beauté qui peuvent les faire aimer ils tâchent de les augmenter par les ajustements des femmes, qui sont fort avantageux. Ils sentent alors le plaisir inexprimable d’être aimé. J’ai senti plus d’une fois ce que je dis par une douce expérience, et quand je me suis trouvé à des bals et à des comédies, avec de belles robes de chambre, des diamants et des mouches, et que j’ai entendu dire tout bas auprès de moi: “Voilà une belle personne”, j’ai goûté en moi-même un plaisir qui ne peut être comparé à rien, tant il est grand. L’ambition, les richesses, l’amour même ne l’égalent pas, parce que nous nous aimons toujours mieux que nous n’aimons les autres. (MS 435)

Questa pagina, più spesso citata che analizzata e compresa, è un indizio cruciale per interpretare il significato ‘sociale’ del travestimento. Il primo elemento di interesse è ovviamente l’imitazione di Dio, che assolutizza l’amor proprio in un desiderio di assimilazione all’essere supremo:⁴⁹ difficile non riconoscere in questo obiettivo, audace sino alla blasfemia, un riflesso del desiderio mimetico nei confronti della posizione apicale del sovrano. Altrettanto interessante è la caratterizzazione della bellezza come un dato

⁴⁹ Per RUNTE 2006: 41 l’amore di sé del narcisista è quello “eines souveränen Egoisten”, che in questa una forzatura eudemonistica sulla logica cristiana dell’amore di Dio.

assoluto e *non* relativo: da Platone in poi,⁵⁰ una costante filosofica è che l'idea di bello si incarni negli oggetti che la riflettono in modo relativo alla loro funzione. Esiste una bellezza del cane come esiste una bellezza dell'albero o della donna. Per l'abbé de Choisy invece la bellezza è non solo un assoluto, ma un assoluto puntualmente localizzato nella referenza della bellezza femminile. La bellezza della donna non è più solo la bellezza di una categoria particolare, ma una manifestazione della bellezza assoluta. Si tratta di un evidente paralogismo, la cui analisi permette di apprezzare la tendenza della risemantizzazione. Come argomenta Platone,⁵¹ l'esistenza del bello assoluto, cioè la cosiddetta idea del bello, può essere solo inferita dal fatto che ogni oggetto possiede una bellezza che gli è propria. Che cosa rende allora la bellezza della donna diversa da quella del cane o dell'albero? Semplice: il fatto che la bellezza della donna è la bellezza cui la cultura e l'esperienza ci insegnano che è normale rispondere con il desiderio amoroso ("c'est la beauté qui fait naître l'amour"). Naturalmente non si tratta di un desiderio generico, ma di un desiderio che la cultura di Choisy, erede di una tradizione erotica che va dai provenzali alla *Carte du tendre*, colloca in posizione apicale rispetto a ogni altro moto dell'animo. Il desiderio suscitato dalla bellezza femminile è dunque ciò che più si avvicina alla venerazione, come il paragone con Dio mostra ampiamente. Dunque la bellezza è sì ciò che produce amore ("quelques traits de beauté qui peuvent les faire aimer"), ma questo amore non va certo preso per l'emozione che siamo soliti collocare alla radice dei rapporti affettivi. Nel caso di Choisy, anzi, l'amore come sentimento di scambio individuale è chiaramente escluso e subordinato all'amore più importante, cioè a una forma di consenso sociale di cui l'io ha bisogno per ridefinire una propria posizione di centralità.

È quello che potremmo definire il "narcisismo ecumenico" dell'abbé de Choisy, e che si realizza in un patto secondo cui l'io viene rafforzato non dalle conferme di individui qualificati ma dall'esibizione sostenuta dall'apprezzamento generalizzato.⁵² Di fronte all'ammirazione del pubblico,

⁵⁰ Per un'esposizione della sulla dottrina della bellezza nei principali dialoghi platonici si veda HYLAND 2008.

⁵¹ Ad esempio nell'*Ippia maggiore*, 287d ss.

⁵² Questo è anche congruente con le prospettive dell'opportunismo cortigiano, che però non mi sembra esauriscano la spiegazione del fenomeno; la necessità di piacere a tutti è presentata infatti da Choisy come un suo tratto originario di carattere, ad esempio in un passo in cui il memorialista ormai anziano asserisce di non avere nemici e di poter ammansire qualunque persona a lui

Choisy travestito non sa trattenersi dal concedersi senza riserve:

“Mais est-il bien vrai que ce soit là un homme? Il a bien raison de vouloir passer pour une femme”. Je me retournai de leur côté, et fis semblant de demander à quelqu’un, afin de leur donner le plaisir de me voir. (MS 440)⁵³

Più precisamente, la possibilità di concedersi a un pubblico quanto più universale e generico viene identificata con l’amor proprio, e dunque con un rafforzamento dell’io, mentre l’apertura relazionale nei confronti di persone specifiche viene vista come una concessione fatta al benessere altrui, e dunque come una diminuzione:

je répondais à sa [della giovane sedotta] tendresse de toute la mienne; mais quoique que je l’aimasse beaucoup, je m’aimais encore davantage, et je ne songais qu’à *plaire au genre humain*. (MS 443, corsivo mio)

È evidente pertanto la rilevanza della dimensione teatrale per la corretta articolazione di questa dinamica. Nelle sue considerazioni sulla teatralità del travestimento di Choisy, Nicholas Hammond (1999: 168) ammonisce giustamente contro il rischio di confondere teatralità e performance identitaria; tuttavia è innegabile la costante interferenza tra i due piani, dato che anche sul piano dell’autopercezione e del desiderio sessuale l’atto performativo svolge un ruolo imprescindibile. Nel sedurre Mlle de La Grise, la contessa des Barres agisce in pubblico, mascherando le carezze erotiche da carezze affettuose: “Les personnes qui les regardaient les augmentaient encore; il est bien doux de tromper les yeux du public” (CB 503).⁵⁴ Per Frédéric Charbonneau

ostile: “pour des ennemis, grâce à Dieu je n’en ai point, et n’en eus jamais; et si je savais quelqu’un qui me voulût du mal, j’irai tout à l’heure lui faire tant d’honnêtetés, tant d’amitiés, qu’il deviendrait mon ami en dépit de lui” (MH 48).

⁵³ In un altro passo delle stesse avventure: “Après la messe, nous passâmes entre deux haies pour aller à notre carrosse, et j’entendis plusieurs voix dans la foule qui disaient: ‘Voilà une belle femme’, ce qui ne laissait pas de me faire plaisir” (CB 487). L’ammirazione sembra desiderata anche quando non è rivolta alla bellezza del corpo, ma alla raffinatezza delle capacità. Si ricordi l’episodio del concerto a Crespon, in cui la contessa des Barres eclissa la goffa cembalista locale facendo sfoggio dei suoi talenti musicali (“Je voulus d’abord donner quelques idées de ma capacité”, CB 489).

⁵⁴ Naturalmente la compiacenza del pubblico è un fattore determinante per la riuscita della performance: nell’episodio appena riportato, ad esempio, il parroco che fa parte della piccola corte di Mme des Barres, e che era stato selezionato *in quanto* compiacente (CB 483: “j’y [a Bourges dopo il trasferimento da Parigi] trouvai un curé fort homme de bien sans faire le bigot: il aimait l’ordre et la joie, et savait très bien allier les devoirs de sa profession avec les plaisirs de la vie”), esplicita

il travestimento di Choisy, che appare feticisticamente eccitato dall'inversione dei tratti esteriori, è precisamente "une théâtralisation du sexe" (1998: 119), in cui "le théâtre et le déguisement suscitent l'émoi sexuel, comme celui-ci suscite mise en scène et travestissement" (*Ibid.* n. 39). Per quanto centrale sia però la dimensione della teatralità, non basta affermare l'ovvio, che Choisy cerchi cioè di spettacolarizzare la propria esistenza: è necessario sottolineare piuttosto che quello che la spettacolarizzazione permette è in primo luogo la *ricostruzione radicale* di un mondo, la cui caratteristica primaria è di ruotare intorno al dato/evento del travestimento, che è il suo nuovo vero centro di interesse. Quello che interessa a Choisy non è semplicemente calcare le scene, come peraltro sostiene di aver fatto alla fine dell'adolescenza; è *creare* dal nulla un mondo possibile intorno alla propria rinnovata percezione (ed espressione) di sé, un mondo capace precisamente di assecondarla e asseverarla come dato socialmente condiviso. Questa finalità emerge con forza (e una punta di perturbante comicità) in un dettaglio delle avventure della contessa des Barres, in cui la rilevanza *ontologica* della convenzione sociale rivela una forza tale da prevalere sugli accertamenti obiettivi – che proprio la coerenza categoriale rende del tutto superflui:

Pour moi, j'avais une fort belle robe, bien coiffée, un collier de perles, des pendants d'oreilles de rubis; *ils étaient faux, mais on les croyait fins*: le moyen de croire que madame la comtesse qui avait tant de pierreries en voulût porter des fausses? (CB 507, corsivo mio)⁵⁵

Un ulteriore indizio significativo si trova nella pagina introduttiva dei *Mémoires*, dove l'io narrante, che di lì a poco assumerà l'identità di Mme de Sancy, si rivolge a un'anonima interlocutrice⁵⁶ protestando il carattere selettivo dei propri resoconti: "j'écrirai quelque acte de ma comédie, qui n'aura *aucune liaison avec le reste*" (MS 431, corsivo mio). La precisazione metadiscorsiva, che anticipa il carattere episodico dei fatti riportati, va intesa a mio giudizio anche come un segnale indiretto dello sforzo di

l'invito a non farsi scrupolo per quelle carezze: "Ce ne serait pas pour moi, madame, que vous vous contraindriez" (CB 504).

⁵⁵ È pertinente a questo proposito una considerazione generale di Annette Runte: "Deontologisch siegt der ästhetische Code (schön/hässlich) über den epistemischen (wahr/falsch), zumal ihre funktionale Ausdifferenzierung noch nicht vorangeschritten ist" (RUNTE 2006: 42).

⁵⁶ Identificata sin dall'edizione del 1735 con la marchesa de Lambert (1647-1733), su cui vd. VAN DER CRUYSSÉ 1995: 102.

assolutizzare l’esperienza trasgressiva del travestimento ponendola al centro di un nuovo, autonomo sistema di riferimento. Il dato più significativo in questo senso è che l’esibizione del travestimento ha luogo di preferenza in orizzonti appositamente selezionati per non presentare intersezioni con il mondo di provenienza, in modo da permettere il riconfigurarsi di una diversa gerarchia di posizioni, al cui interno Choisy possa finalmente occupare quella che più corrisponde alla sua fantasia idiosincratca:

J’ai acheté dans ce dessein [di vivere vestito da donna] une maison au faubourg Saint Marcel, au milieu de la bourgeoisie et du peuple, afin de m’y pouvoir habiller à ma fantaisie parmi des gens *qui ne trouveraient point à redire* à tout ce que je ferais. (MS 432, corsivo mio)

Che questo tentativo di ricostruire un sistema indipendente nasca a seguito di un impulso di riprodurre in miniatura (e *altrove*) l’ordine centripeto della corte si può evincere da una pagina dei *Mémoires* in cui viene narrato l’evento che determina, con il suo carattere spiacevole, la decisione di lasciare Parigi per vivere appieno il piacere del travestimento. Si tratta di un incontro tra Choisy vestito da donna e il Gran Delfino, ancora giovanissimo (“il pouvait avoir douze ans”, CB 478), in un palco del teatro dell’opera. Benché il Delfino dia mostra di apprezzare moltissimo la bellezza di Choisy (“l’on ne saurait dire toutes les amitiés que le petit prince me fit”, *Ibid.*), il suo aio, il severo duca di Montausier, si rivela più difficile da convincere:

– J’avoue, madame, ou mademoiselle (je ne sais pas comment il faut vous appeler), j’avoue que vous êtes belle, mais en vérité n’avez-vous point de honte de porter un pareil habillement et de faire la femme, puisque vous êtes assez heureux pour ne l’être pas? Allez, allez vous cacher, M. le Dauphin vous trouve fort mal comme cela.

– Vous me pardonnerez, monsieur, reprit le petit prince, je la trouve belle comme un ange.⁵⁷

J’étais très fâchée, et je sortis de l’opéra sans retourner à ma loge, résolue de quitter tous ces ajustements qui m’avaient attiré une si fâcheuse reprimande; mais il n’y eut pas moyen de m’y résoudre, je pris le parti d’aller demeurer trois ou quatre ans dans une province où je ne serais point connue, et où je pourrais faire la belle tant qu’il me plairait. (CB 478-9)

⁵⁷ Il Gran Delfino non è il solo a provare una tale ammirazione; anche in contesti più scopertamente seduttivi il giovane travestito si sente ripetere: “vous n’êtes pas jolie, vous êtes belle comme un ange!” (CB 504).

Nonostante l'innegabile spiacevolezza dell'episodio, non mi sembra condivisibile la posizione di BILLAUD 2004: 146, che parla del travestito Choisy come "condamné" all'esilio: al contrario, l'esilio è una scelta autonoma che perfeziona la fantasia nella sua dimensione principale, vale a dire la ricerca di una nuova centralità. Questa dinamica svolge un ruolo essenziale anche nelle memorie di Mme de Sancy, per cui l'apparizione nel teatro parigino si rivela un momento di confronto disforico:

Je hasardai un jour d'aller à la comédie avec mon cher Maulny et sa tante, mais je fus trop regardée, trop considérée; vingt personnes par curiosité vinrent m'attendre à la porte lorsque nous remontâmes en carrosse. Quelques-uns furent assez insolents pour me faire des compliments sur ma beauté, à quoi je ne répondis que par une mine modeste et dédaigneuse; mais je n'y retournai pas de longtemps, *pour éviter scandale*. (MS 451, corsivo mio)

È proprio l'impossibilità di assumere una posizione di forza nel sistema sociale di partenza a rendere necessario e desiderabile lo spostamento. Non a caso dopo l'episodio alla "comédie" Choisy-Sancy decide "de demeurer souvent dans ma maison, ou du moins dans mon quartier du faubourg, où je pouvais faire tout ce qui me plaisait sans qu'on y trouvât à redire" (*Ibid.*). Proprio in quella casa Choisy-Sancy tiene corte come una vera e propria signora di provincia, come mostra la descrizione della sua vita abituale e felice:

Je donnais à souper fort souvent à mes voisines, et quelquefois à M. le curé et à M. Garnier, et sans me piquer de faire grande chère, je la faisais assez bonne; j'avais quelquefois des concerts, j'envoyais mon carrosse à Descoteaux, mon ancien ami; je faisais le soir des petites loteries de bagatelles: *cela avait un air de magnificence*; je menais mes voisines à l'Opéra, à la Comédie; on trouvait toujours chez moi du café, du thé et du chocolat, je faisais dire tous les jours la messe à mon aumônier, à la présentation, à midi et demi; toutes les paresseuses du quartier n'y manquaient pas, et comme je me couchais fort tard, on venait m'éveiller souvent pour m'avertir que la messe sonnait; je mettais vite une robe de chambre, une jupe et une coiffe de taffetas pour cacher mes cornettes de nuit, et courais l'entendre; je n'aimais pas à la perdre. Enfin, il me semblait que *tout le monde était content de moi* [...]. (MC 441-442, corsivi miei)

Le parti che ho sottolineato col corsivo mostrano da un lato la finalità esibitoria della vita sociale che la munificenza del giovane Choisy è in grado di

garantire a un intero piccolo sistema sociale; dall’altro l’appagamento che deriva al suo protagonista dall’essere oggetto di un apprezzamento indifferenziato. Più che di apprezzamento, si tratta di cooperazione in un atto di naturalizzazione dei nuovi assetti identitari: mentre nel suo sistema di provenienza Choisy è un marginale, la cui marginalità è *accentuata* dalla stravaganza, nel sistema ricostruito per dislocazione il travestito diviene il soggetto centrale. Questa centralità viene corroborata dalla cooperazione naturalizzante dell’intero gruppo: stando al gioco, gli interlocutori di Choisy-Sancy avallano la risemantizzazione di fondo operata dal travestimento, quella per cui l’assunzione dell’identità femminile viene a *coincidere* con l’assunzione della posizione apicale. Va dunque corretta la prospettiva di Isabelle Billaud, che vede nel travestimento un abbassamento da riscattare in qualche modo:⁵⁸ a mio giudizio, non si tratta di compensare un abbassamento, poiché con la sua intera strategia di esibizione travestista Choisy sembra puntare precisamente alla costruzione di un sistema alternativo in cui l’assunzione dei tratti femminili viene a *significare* automaticamente la centralità e la posizione apicale.

Il punto è precisamente la naturalizzazione della trasgressione grazie al diverso posizionamento in una gerarchia: a corte Choisy è un marginale, e il suo travestimento è un capriccio che accentua la marginalità;⁵⁹ nel mondo ricostruito ai margini della società di corte Choisy-Sancy è il vertice indiscusso. È questa naturalizzazione che permette a Hammond di affermare che “theatricality in Paris comes closer to Butler’s notion of performativity in the provinces” (1999: 170): ciò che rende teatrale un travestimento a Parigi è l’indisponibilità degli altri soggetti sociali, paritari e dunque competitivi e giudicanti, a farsi complici in una risemantizzazione della performance identitaria alternativa; al contrario, quella che a Parigi sarebbe una colpevole manifestazione di insubordinazione diviene in provincia l’atto istitutivo di un nuovo, diverso sistema di riferimento, dove l’io del travestito acquisisce finalmente l’autonomia autodeterminata inaccessibile da una posizione più vicina alla corte e alla capitale. L’identità di cui Choisy articola la performance è dunque in primo luogo un’identità

⁵⁸ “Il suffit par exemple à Choisy, devenu femme aux yeux du public, de s’inventer veuve et comtesse pour déjouer l’effet d’avalissement produit par ce changement de genre” (BILLAUD 2004: 136).

⁵⁹ Il memorialista ammette di non aver goduto del favore personale del sovrano forse proprio a causa delle sue stravaganze, ma di essere stato privilegiato comunque per la sua posizione familiare (MH 39).

posizionale, che non consiste tanto nell'esibizione dei tratti dell'altro genere, ma nell'affermazione di una *posizione* di potere che nel sistema di provenienza non appare accessibile nemmeno all'identità originaria.

Questo spiega perché gli aristocratici, i parenti,⁶⁰ il cardinale, l'aio del Delfino, tutti quelli insomma che esercitano un ruolo autoritario su Choisy, siano implicitamente percepiti come un destinatario improprio dell'esibizione. Al contrario, l'elemento che rende appropriato un destinatario è la sua inferiorità sociale (“au milieu de la bourgeoisie et du peuple”, *MS* 432), che lo rende un oggetto plastico alle esternazioni della volontà. E in effetti il teatro dell'abbé de Choisy è soprattutto un teatro di regia: con una cura minuziosa e maniacale vengono regolati tutti i rituali e le condizioni degli spettacoli, dall'esibizione in pompa magna per la questua in chiesa (*MS* 439-40) alla celebrazione del finto matrimonio che permette al* giovane Choisy/Sancy finalmente innamorat* di compiere fino in fondo la seduzione della ragazza prescelta (*MS* 448-9). Il soggetto centrale che si esibisce si dà in pasto ai suoi spettatori per avere in cambio da loro una conferma della sua centralità.

Non c'è bisogno di approfondire ulteriormente il discorso per richiamare ancora una volta la straordinaria somiglianza fra le messe in scena dell'abbé de Choisy e il macchinario dell'assolutismo borbonico realizzato dall'etichetta di Versailles: il re è sempre su un proscenio e con la sua esibizione rafforza il proprio potere. La dinamica si realizza lungo i binari della fruizione teatrale, che riporta sui sudditi la funzione del pubblico di un teatro: tenere viva con la propria “fiducia semiotica” la realtà del mondo possibile rappresentato nella messa in scena.⁶¹

Esattamente allo stesso modo si comporta l'abbé de Choisy in ciascuna delle sue scappate. Il primo passo è la fondazione di un mondo autonomo, al cui interno il sovrano esibizionista potrà poi occupare la posizione centrale. Una volta definita la scena (la casa del faubourg Saint Marcel; il castello di Crespon) Choisy provvede a orchestrare il resto della rappresentazione. In ogni caso il suo obiettivo è confermare la propria posizione di centralità e di potere, legando a sé con i vincoli della seduzione un pubblico di sudditi disposti a eseguire – anche solo nei limiti della finzione – qualsiasi suo

⁶⁰ È significativa la conclusione delle memorie della contessa des Barres, ultimo frammento dei *Mémoires*: “Mes parents trouvèrent mauvais que je fisse encore un personnage qu'on avait pardonné à une grande jeunesse; il me vinrent voir, et me parlèrent si sérieusement que je me résolus de quitter tout ce badinage, et pour cela j'allai voyager tout de bon en Italie” (*CB* 522).

⁶¹ Per una sintesi storico-biografica della costruzione di Versailles e dell'accentramento della corte vd. *TREASURE 2001*, in particolar modo il cap. 7.

ordine. La posizione dell’autocrate al centro del termitaio si rivela insomma una sorta di modello che implicitamente dà forma all’esperienza della trasgressione, che può permettersi di riprodurne i meccanismi proprio grazie alla totale incommensurabilità dei modi e degli ambienti.⁶² Se il re è unico e non ammette secondi, l’eterno secondo Choisy sarà sospinto in modo del tutto naturale a diventare re di un mondo di finzione dove esercitare un controllo assoluto, e dove ostentare, come un sovrano, “un air de magnificence” (MS 441), anche se si tratta di distribuire solo cariche come “l’intendance des mouches” (MS 442).

Il travestimento dell’abbé de Choisy si rivela dunque animato da impulsi, e innervato da significati, difficilmente anticipabili sulla base della costruzione a noi familiare della dicotomia maschile-femminile. Il suo esempio illuminante dimostra che non soltanto il sesso biologico non codifica necessariamente o univocamente il genere, ma che, nell’orizzonte di un dato sistema culturale, neppure il genere codifica univocamente un ambito o un plesso di significati. Questo mi sembra un aspetto di cui è opportuno sottolineare la rilevanza in termini teorici: la semantica dei generi in una data cultura è infatti legata a una molteplicità di fattori anche specifici (come, nel caso di Choisy, le strutture della civiltà di corte e la peculiare mediazione del modello materno) che non vengono esauriti dalla semplice decodifica generica, come quella che si limita a richiamare le ben note gerarchie del patriarcato. La vicenda dell’abbé de Choisy non dimostra soltanto il dato che la società dell’antico regime era forse disposta ad accettare in maniera relativamente ap problematica performances di genere vistosamente non conformi, ma rappresenta un importante ausilio fattuale per teorizzare quella che si potrebbe definire una “performatività di secondo livello”, che amplia i percorsi della condivisione culturale tramite la performance non del genere bensì dei suoi significati simbolici di secondo grado. Per l’abbé de Choisy l’obiettivo della sua performance drag *ante litteram* era infatti l’identificazione non con il genere femminile bensì con un significato ulteriore – codificato agevolmente, nel particolare contesto sociale e culturale in cui la sua performance aveva luogo, attraverso i tratti di genere. Il fatto

⁶² Nel quadro di una stimolante analisi del personaggio in chiave di sociologia della cultura (RUNTE 2006: 23-50), Annette Runte osserva che una delle scene di seduzione di Mlle de La Grise a Crespon è strutturata come “das Pastiche einer königlichen Bett-Zeremonie” (RUNTE 2006: 34). Nello stesso contesto, d’altronde, la contessa des Barres riesce a imporsi sulla scena dell’aristocrazia di provincia come un’arbitra di eleganza, assumendo il controllo anche degli eventi promossi in case diverse dalla sua (CB 500 ss.).

che per *la ville et la cour* il drag MtF fosse allora associato, in maniera tanto immediata da non aver bisogno di esplicitazioni o spiegazioni, con un'identità sociale apicale come quella di Philippe d'Orléans,⁶³ rendeva la scelta performativa dell'abbé de Choisy atta ad esprimere un significato trasgressivo che andava molto al di là della rivendicazione di una femminilità non sorretta dal dato biologico: quello di un'identificazione proibita non dai confini di genere bensì da quelli della scala sociale, con la posizione più vicina al luogo centrale del potere assoluto.

Le strategie attraverso cui questo recupero della centralità si realizza si possono tutte ricondurre a forme di ridislocazione, cioè di quella riconfigurazione dei codici o dei sistemi di valore in cui si manifesta il ben noto potere sovversivo dell'identità come performance:

this perpetual displacement constitutes a fluidity of identities that suggests an openness to resignification and recontextualization; parodic proliferation deprives hegemonic culture and its critics of the claim to naturalized or essentialist gender identities. (BUTLER 1990: 138)

Nel caso di Choisy, una prima ridislocazione è quella spaziale e sociale, che colloca di preferenza il travestimento in un contesto periferico, dove esso riproduce, in un quadro di complessiva parodia, le stesse strutture del sistema sociale di riferimento. Un'altra forma di ridislocazione consiste invece nella risemantizzazione subliminale dei codici di riferimento, che vengono ampliati plasticamente pur mantenendo un rapporto di fedeltà formale con i principi di base. Come osserva lo stesso Choisy, “à la réserve de la *petite* faiblesse que j'avais de vouloir passer pour femme, on ne me pouvait *rien* reprocher” (MS 450, corsivi miei).

Un esempio interessante in questa prospettiva è lo spostamento e l'inversione di pertinenza nell'ambito del codice vestimentario fra la dimensione consuetudinaria e la zona delle prescrizioni positive. Colpisce infatti la paradossale insistenza con cui Choisy tende più volte a ribadire il fatto di non aver mai derogato dall'uso del nero, obbligatorio per il clero secolare (“chacun me faisait compliment sur mon ajustement, où l'on ne trouva rien que de modeste, car il est bon de remarquer que je ne portais jamais que des rubans noirs”, MS 452). Il fatto è che proprio l'attaccamento alle

⁶³ “J'allais au Palais-Royal toutes les fois que Monsieur était à Paris; il me faisait mille amitiés parce que nos inclinations étaient pareilles” (CB 477).

norme positive crea lo spazio di manovra per la trasformazione sostanziale delle norme consuetudinarie. Questo è il paradosso della regola: nessun sistema di prescrizioni, non importa quanto capillare e dettagliato, potrà mai esplicitare esaustivamente la totalità dell’esperienza da performare. Questo lascia dunque impliciti proprio i contenuti più fondamentali, la cui naturalizzazione ne fa dei presupposti che non hanno bisogno di prescrizione normativa. Ma questo è esattamente ciò che permette all’operazione di sovvertimento di colpire i gangli vitali del codice pur nel rispetto pieno delle forme. Nessun canone della Chiesa prescrive agli ecclesiastici di vestirsi da maschi piuttosto che da femmine, ma i colori vivaci sono limitati ai paramenti liturgici e sono vietatissimi nell’abbigliamento ordinario. In questo caso la dislocazione semiotica compensa l’osservanza dei divieti espliciti con l’implicita libertà su tutto il resto:

je ne porte que des robes noires doublées de blanc, ou des robes blanches doublées de noir; on ne me saurait rien reprocher. (MS 434)

L’utilità pratica di questo rispetto generale per la forma è evidente: mantenere inalterata la lettera della norma, che non esplicita mai i principi generali più ovvi, li rende luoghi strutturalmente più elastici e aperti alla trasformazione. Travestirsi non è un modo per negare l’identità originaria, ma per conservarne la sostanza, pur in una forma rinnovata, e poter dunque aggiungere ai privilegi originari quelli della performance di secondo grado. Ne fornisce una prova di un certo rilievo l’abitudine che risulta dalla lingua dei *Mémoires*, dove Choisy impiega indifferentemente per parlare di sé entrambi i generi grammaticali.⁶⁴ Segno che il travestimento non mira tanto a sostituire un’identità *più autentica* all’identità biologica percepita come falsa, quanto a *superare* la dicotomia delle performance identitarie.

Esemplare del gradiente continuo che lega le opposte identità è l’astuta e riuscitissima operazione di *morphing* semiotico che porta il giovane Choisy a trasformarsi *impercettibilmente* nella bella madame de Sancy, mantenendo dunque vive *entrambe* le determinazioni identitarie:

D’abord j’avais seulement une robe de chambre de drap noir, fermée par devant avec des boutonnières noires qui allaient jusques en bas, et une queue d’une demi aune, qu’un laquais me portait, une petite perruque peu poudrée, des boucles

⁶⁴ Il fenomeno è sottolineato da GUILD 1994: 182-3 e da CHARBONNEAU 1998: 120 n. 41.

d'oreilles fort simples, et deux grand mouches de velours aux tempes. [...] Mais, au bout d'un mois, je défis trois ou quatre boutonnières du haut de ma robe, pour laisser entrevoir un corps de moire d'argent, qu j'avais par-dessous. [...] Je demeurai encore un mois sans m'ajuster davantage, afin que le monde s'y accoutumât insensiblement et crût m'avoir vu toujours de même, ce qui ne manqua pas d'arriver. (MS 432-3)

L'abbé de Choisy sembra in un certo senso il precursore del rivoluzionario prete fiorentino Lorenzo Milani, che a un amico preoccupato della rigidità della morale cattolica rispondeva: “tutto quello che non è proibito è permesso e credimi non è poco” (BALDUCCI 1992: 21). Il divieto, localizzato su un particolare esplicito ma opportunamente marginalizzato, viene aggirato nella sostanza, aprendo spazi a nuovi sistemi di riferimento. È la strategia di base dell'abbé de Choisy, che estremizza la marginalità dei propri comportamenti perché solo da una trasgressione completa dei confini di un sistema opprimente e eterodiretto si può sperare di recuperare una dimensione di centralità del proprio io.

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FILIPPO BOSCO

Performing a brushstroke. Pop Paintings on Abstract Expressionism*

ABSTRACT: This paper aims to give a queer reading of some mid-1960s Pop Art paintings, whose more or less direct subject is the brushstroke. Queer hermeneutical instruments, like the concept of performativity, can recount the strategies set up by Pop artworks in order to deconstruct the essentialist meanings associated with the image of the thick, gestural brushstroke typical of Abstract Expressionism. All along the Fifties and Sixties, details of abstract painting spread and got a centrality due to Rosenberg's and Greenberg's pervasive critical systems as regards painting. The former interpreted the brushstroke as the direct expression of the life and the action of the painter; the latter, as the "nature" of painting itself as pure color on a surface. Countering this critical rhetoric, Lichtenstein artificially constructed flat images of the Expressionist brushstroke; Dine called into question its status of representation or reality; Rosenquist formulated food-like metaphors of abstraction, stressing its popularization in the mass media, and overturned the rhetoric of "natural" expressionist creation; Hockney camouflaged photographic figuration as a form of "drag abstraction".

KEYWORDS: Performativity; Pop Art, Roy Lichtenstein, Jim Dine, James Rosenquist, David Hockney; Abstract Expressionism; brushstroke; art criticism

o. A QUEER READING OF POP PAINTING

"Do you think Pop Art is queer?" is one of the questions the young critic Gene Swenson asked Andy Warhol in 1963 and then (obviously) expunged from the published interview, which appeared in the November issue of *ARTnews* and has since become a defining text in Pop Art historiography.¹ The recent discovery of the original record of the conversation, as well as

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¹ See SWENSON 1997 [1963].

the reconstruction of the homophobic environment in which it took place,² have shed light upon the actual meaning of some of Warhol's famous statements, like – to name but one – “Everybody should like everybody”.

Even before the discovery of the question, over the last twenty years an (affirmative) answer has already been provided, together with a rich literature on the theme. Queer studies about Pop Art were inaugurated by the 1996 collection of essays *Pop Out: Queer Warhol*³ and their main contribution has been to fully acknowledge Warhol's queer subjectivity in the analysis of his work and his historical role as a leading figure of Pop Art.⁴

Up to its most recent examples,⁵ this literature has shown some trends: it tends to be limited to Warhol (or other queer artists like John Cage, Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, who are not labelable as Pop) and it privileges his trans-medium *œuvre* (above all his films), his personality as it emerges from interviews and writings, or the cultural reception of his work, rather than his paintings (out of the twelve essays in *Pop Out*, only one is dedicated to Warhol as a painter). It therefore seems difficult to extend such a queer reading to the whole Pop phenomenon: other artists like Roy Lichtenstein, James Rosenquist, Robert Indiana or Jim Dine would be not suitable for this interpretation, since they did not show queer subjectivity⁶ and identified themselves explicitly as painters.

² “At the time of this 1963 interview, the wounds inflicted under ‘a savagely policed, McCarthyite America’ [...] were freshly reopened in advance of the 1964 World's Fair in New York, with brutal crackdowns on queer life in the city” (SICHEL 2018: 66).

³ See DOYLE, FLATLEY, MUÑOZ 1996.

⁴ Among the best results of this approach, a proper reading has been given back to a lot of coeval commentaries about Pop in which nobody before had pointed out gender and sexual orientation biases. See for example the discussion of extracts from a Rudolph Arnheim's unpublished interview in KATZ 1996; or Harold Rosenberg's early notes on the concept of “camp” in KATZ 2004.

⁵ See the 2014 issue of *Criticism* entirely dedicated to Warhol, and especially FLATLEY, GRUDIN 2014.

⁶ It is interesting to see what Gene Swenson, Warhol and his assistant Gerard Joseph Malanga say about the other Pop artists, in other extracts of the 1963 original interview:

SWENSON: You want it [the homosexuality] in your interview?

WARHOL: Yeah. But it should be on somebody else's too, just to, uh...

SWENSON: Oldenburg?

WARHOL: Yeah.

SWENSON: Who would be the best one?

WARHOL: Uh... Rosenquist.

SWENSON: Rosenquist?

WARHOL: Yeah.

MALANGA: He's too gentle!

WARHOL: Yeah, he's so gentle. No, no, he's just... no, I mean, he's sweet.

What I propose to do here is give a queer reading of a circumscribed feature in the historical phenomenon of Pop Art. It is an iconographic theme, namely the “Abstract Expressionist brushstroke”, which appears in some paintings realized in the USA around the mid-Sixties. I will examine renowned Pop masterpieces (Lichtenstein’s *Brushstrokes*, Dine’s palettes series or Rosenquist’s spaghetti paintings) but the attempt to consider these artworks as a coherent group is unprecedented. Although Warhol’s works often treat abstraction as an ironical subject, from Mondrian to Barnett Newman, the paintings explicitly dedicated to the material, swirling Abstract Expressionist brushstrokes are rare, late and often discussed (the most famous example being the 1978 made-of-urine *Oxydation* series, often read as an “insulting parody” of Pollock’s dripping); therefore, I won’t take them into consideration.⁷

Rather than mapping in its entirety this iconography among Pop paintings, my aim is to explain what such a “brushstroke” meant at that time, and which strategies were involved in its representation as an iconographic subject. In the early critical accounts of Pop Art, the opposition to Abstract Expressionism was intended to bring artists together into a unified movement and generation, along with other typical themes like the new influence of Dadaism or the use of commercial images as sources for figuration. In his 1963 interview Swenson asked the artists to take a position with respect to Pollock and De Kooning. Warhol expressed himself with provocative words, undoubtedly “queer”: “Pop is love in that it accepts all... all the meaner aspects of life, which, for various esthetic and moral considerations, other schools of painting have rejected or ignored” (Andy Warhol in SWENSON 1997 [1963]: 26). Other answers, however, are very nuanced,⁸

SWENSON: [pause] Do you think Pop Art’s queer? [laughing] I’ll ask Rosenquist that.

WARHOL: Yessss! That would be fantastic! [...] Oh that’s really marvelous. And Jim Dine too, just to get his reaction.

MALANGA: No, Bib Indiana! Awww, are kidding me!

WARHOL: No, well you can’t do it on everyone’s.

MALANGA: No, but Bob Indiana should have that question asked to him... because he’d go, ‘Ooooh, no that doesn’t make sense...’ [laughing]. (SICHEL 2018: 69)

⁷ Warhol’s obsession with abstract painting is discussed brilliantly, together with Lichtenstein’s *Brushstrokes* and many other artworks of the XX century, in the chapter *Satire, Irony, and Abstract Art* in VARNEDOE 2006: 199–206.

⁸ For example, Jim Dine stated: “I tie myself to Abstract-Expressionism like fathers and sons. [...] Certainly Abstract-Expressionism influenced me, particularly Motherwell” (SWENSON 1997 [1963]: 110). Even Warhol’s position recognized the historical value of the Abstract Expressionism: “If A-E dies, the abstractionists will bury themselves under the weight of their own success and acceptance; they are battlers and the battle is won; they are theoreticians and their theories are

and today it would be imprecise to equate the different relationship of each artist with the previous generations of abstractionists. As I will show, what can be identified as the common thread among Pop artworks thematizing Abstract Expressionism is a radical opposition not to the example of their older masters, but to the pervasive critical rhetoric about painting itself, which coagulated in the iconography of the brushstroke.

Clarification is now needed on my use of queer theory as a hermeneutic tool and with respect to queer studies on Pop Art (or Warhol). In these paintings I won't look for queer content or subjectivity regarding sexuality or gender identity. I choose a queer analysis as a methodological point of view that provides some theoretical instruments and reading keys to highlight the precise meaning of the Abstract Expressionist brushstroke as a Pop subject. In fact, queer theory is dedicated to the study of the ontologizing of categories ("female", "male", but also "sexuality"; "human", "animal" but also "species"), and can account for the various strategies of their deconstruction. Instruments and concepts of such an analysis have been identified and fully articulated by recent contributions, which encourages us to extend their applicability to larger fields of cultural production, from literature to cinema.⁹ This paper is an attempt to experiment with this critical approach by putting it in a dialogue with the methodological instruments of art history: as a cultural phenomenon, painting itself and art criticism were constructed by (ontologized) categories (to name but one, "expression") and painters could elaborate strategies to challenge the dominant paradigms of their time.

I will focus principally on two concepts of queer theory, namely *performativity* and its dialectical counterpart, *essentialism*. Performativity is the

respected in the staidest institutions; they seem by nature to be teachers and inseminators and their students and followers are legion around the world [...]" (105).

⁹ "According to this vision, the most basic, and at the same the most abstract, idea in queer studies is the deontologization of categories, first of all of the categories towards which a given culture makes it compulsory to position oneself, those which define social identity. [...] by making the applicability of queer more general and abstract, it would make it possible to extend queer analysis to fields of experience which have not only been neglected by queer studies⁸ so far but which are socially (and thus politically) invisible" (DELL'AVERSANO 2018: 38). "I firmly believe that the most productive [...] way in which queer can transcend itself, is by daring to accomplish a leap from a lower logical level to a superordinate one, moving from the plane of the critique of the contents of particular categories, or of the modes of particular performances, to that of the analysis of the establishment, of the use, and of the function of the very procedures of categorization and performativity, and of their existential, gnoseological, psychological, social and political effects, with the purpose of questioning them, both in theory and in practice" (44-5).

concept that allowed Judith Butler to describe gender as a social construct,¹⁰ “an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (BUTLER 1988: 519). It can be proved applicable to other categories or objects given as “natural”, in order to point out the social, cultural or critical construction of their essentialism. The essentialist discourses about art too are characterized by what Butler defined a “process of repetition that both conceals itself and enforces its rules precisely through the production of substantializing effects” (BUTLER 1999: 185).

In what follows, I point out how the Abstract Expressionist brushstroke had been assigned its “essentialism” by a contextual discourse, which involved rhetorical and visual devices, both in the highbrow criticism and in the popular culture (for limits of space, I will limit my analysis of the latter to the sufficiently abundant cases in *Life Magazine*). On the other side, I will interpret the different strategies implemented by Pop painters to deconstruct this paradigm of painting as overall “performative”. In their works, the subject/target of irony and parody is not a generic painterly way of painting or someone of the Abstract Expressionists, but precisely the “brushstroke” as a critical construction.

1. LICHTENSTEIN’S BRUSHSTROKES

Our analysis cannot but start from Roy Lichtenstein’s *Brushstrokes*, which were first exhibited in a solo show at Leo Castelli gallery in New York, entitled *Roy Lichtenstein: Brushstrokes and Ceramics*, from November 20th to December 11th 1965. Anticipating the opening, two other exemplars of the series were reproduced in the Italian art journal *mETRO*, on the cover and among the illustrations of the October 1965 issue (figures 1-2).

With these works, as Lucy Lippard noticed in her brilliant review of the show, “Lichtenstein has arrived at the non-objective fold” (1966). Unequivocally appearing as “deadpan renderings of abstract expressionist brush splashes” (SCHLANGER 1966: 42) in his typical comic-like style, they were easily identified as “parodies on Abstract Expressionist gesture and the good old dependence upon brushstroke and paint” (LIPPARD 1966). Since then and up to recent literature this series has been interpreted as a

¹⁰ “[...] performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration” (BUTLER 1999: xv)

self-reflective meditation about painting itself.¹¹ It is not a coincidence that Michael Lobel, in his fascinating monography about Lichtenstein, assigned to the *Brushstrokes* a function of recapitulation and completion of all the main themes of his production of the early Sixties.¹²

To investigate more deeply Lichtenstein's subject, that is to understand what a "brushstroke" was in 1965, one should pay attention to the unusually well-documented origin of the series. It dates back to almost two years earlier, at the beginning of 1964, as we know from a long interview which lasted several days between November 1963 and January 1964, organized by the collector Richard Brown Baker¹³ for the American Art Archive of the Smithsonian Institution.¹⁴ In their last meeting on January 15th, 1964, Lichtenstein said:

I'm thinking of doing now some things on Abstract Expressionism [...] and there the problem will be to paint a brush stroke, a picture of a brush stroke... [...]", and then he specified: "purposely dripped paint and things, you know, where the drips are actually drawn as drops of water drawn by a commercial artist. (BROWN BAKER, LICHTENSTEIN 1963-4)

The moment in Lichtenstein's career when the idea of the *Brushstrokes* germinated is quite significant. At the beginning of 1964, Lichtenstein was establishing himself in the art market and becoming notorious for the first time.¹⁵ Important proof of this visibility was the article the very popular magazine *Life* dedicated to him roughly at the same time as Baker's interview and published on January 31st, with a rich photographic documentation

¹¹ According to Diane Waldman, who wrote the first (1969) and the last monography (1993) about Lichtenstein as a curator of the Solomon Guggenheim Museum of New York, the whole series "is about the essential nature of painting and the meaning of a mark or a brushstroke" and it is intended ultimately "to address the issue of what characterized style in art" (WALDMAN 1993: 151).

¹² See LOBEL 2002: 158-167.

¹³ Baker at that time had already bought three paintings and a drawing by Lichtenstein, see CROW 2011.

¹⁴ Baker met Lichtenstein in his studio at West 26th Street in New York City five times: on 15 November, 20 November, 6 December, 11 December 1963 and 15 January 1964. An audio excerpt of the first interview and the complete transcript of the two are consultable online, see <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-roy-lichtenstein-11994>. I will refer to the online transcript, which is not inscribed with numbers of pages, as BROWN BAKER, LICHTENSTEIN 1963-4.

¹⁵ In late 1963 Baker acknowledged this new fame: "I just wanted to bring out the fact that you have become a "name" artist now. Do you find this burdensome?" (BROWN BAKER, LICHTENSTEIN 1963-64).



FIG. 1 – R. Lichtenstein, *Brushstrokes*, 1965, *mETRO*, Oct. 1965, cover.

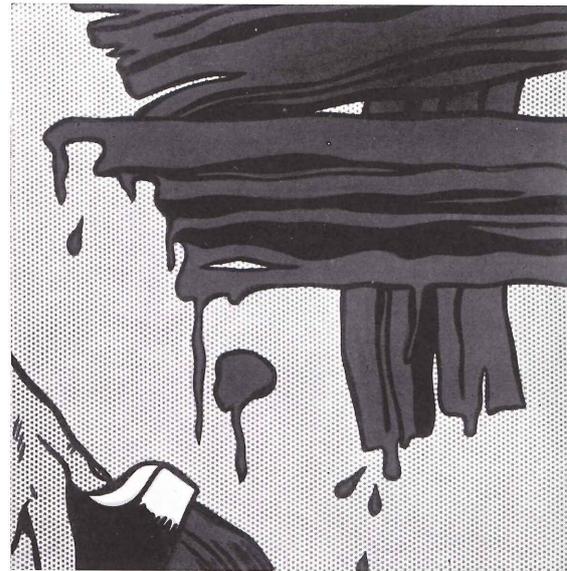


FIG. 2 R. Lichtenstein, *Brush Stroke*, 1964. In *mETRO*, Oct. 1965: 6.

of his studio work by John Loengard.¹⁶ The titled *Is He the Worst Artist in the U.S.?* clearly inverted the famous article cementing Pollock's fame, published more than a decade before on the same journal, under the title *Jackson Pollock. Is he the greatest living painter in the United States?*¹⁷ It would be no coincidence that Lichtenstein undertook the depiction of the brushstroke and the "dripped paint" of Abstract Expressionism, just at the moment when he started to be publicly compared with the artists embodying those techniques (figures 3-4).

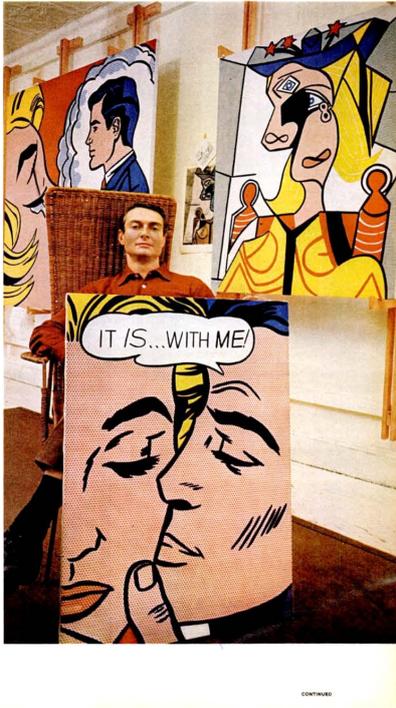
The reference to the unforgotten 1949 article on Pollock clearly played with a paradoxical overturning of the meaning and practices of painting. It

¹⁶ In the pictures, the large *Thinking of Him*, commented in the interview with Brown Baker, hangs on the wall easel.

¹⁷ The author of the text is not listed in the issue, albeit it is known that Dorothy Seiberling interviewed Pollock for the occasion; see SEIBERLING (?) 1949. Illustrations of the article were a bold portrait of the painter by the renowned photographer Arnold Newman, which presented Pollock standing "moodily" – as the caption says – in front of his large painting *Number Nine*, as well as other images which tried to investigate the new Abstract Painting in the making, that is two close details of his paintings and two images of him at work, taken by the photographer Martha Holmes.

LIFE visits a controversial pioneer of pop art, Roy Lichtenstein

Is He the Worst Artist in the U.S.?



For some of America's best known critics and a host of laymen, the answer to the above question is a resounding YES. Artistic of the New York Times, holding only a bit, pronounced Roy Lichtenstein "one of the worst artists in America." Others insist that he is no artist at all, that his paintings of blown-up comic strips, cheap ads and reproductions (right) are tedious copies of the banal. But an equally emphatic group of critics, museum officials and collectors find Lichtenstein's pop art "fascinating," "forceful," "starkly beautiful." Provocative though they are, Lichtenstein's paintings have done more than stir up controversy. They have done something significant to art—as discussed on a following page.

The critical stew enveloping his work is gratifying to Lichtenstein. A quiet, affable man of 40, he fully expected to be condemned for the subject matter as well as the style of his paintings. But he little dreamed that within two years of his first pop exhibition, his canvases would be selling out at prices up to \$4,000 and he himself would be a *cause célèbre* of the art world.

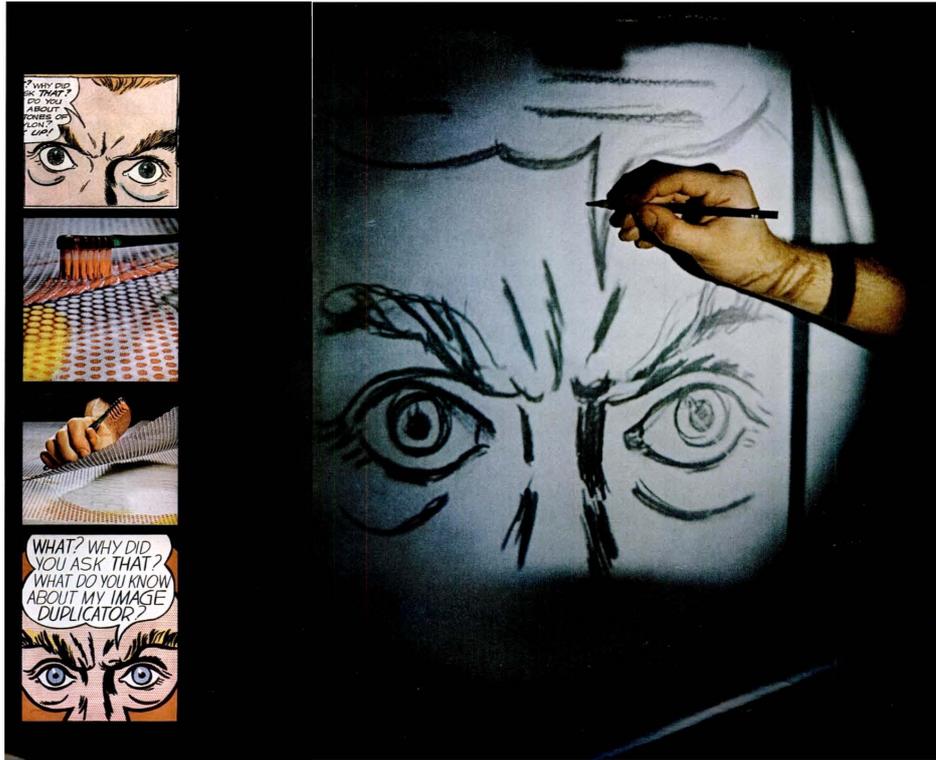
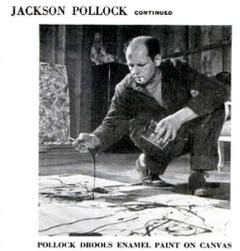


FIG. 3 – “Is He the Worst Artist in the U.S.?”, *Life*, 31st Jan. 1964: 79-81.



JACKSON POLLOCK, 37, stands moodily next to his most extensive painting, which is called *Number Nine*. The picture is only 3 feet high, but it is 18 feet long and sells for \$1,300, or \$100 a foot. Critics have wondered why Pollock happened to stop this painting where he did. The answer: his studio is only 22 feet long.

ART

JACKSON POLLOCK CONTINUED

POLLOCK DRINKS ENAMEL PAINT ON CANVAS

Is he the greatest living painter in the United States?

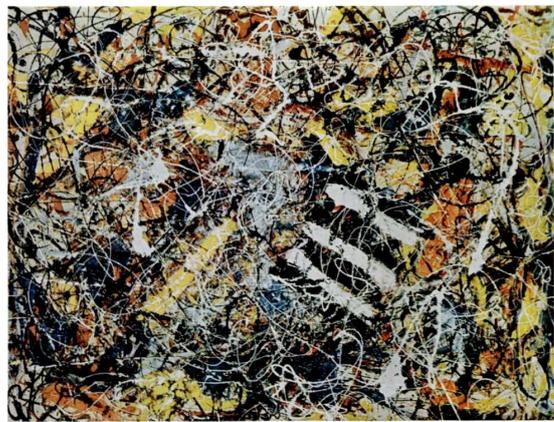
JACKSON POLLOCK



"NUMBER TWELVE" reveals Pollock's liking for aluminum paint, which he applies freely straight out of the can. He feels that by using it with ordinary oil paint he gets an exciting textural contrast.

Recently a formidable high-brow New York critic hailed the brooding, puzzle-looking man shown above as a major artist of our time and a fine candidate to become "the greatest American painter of the 20th Century." Others believe that Jackson Pollock produces nothing more than interesting, if inexplicable, decorations. Still others condemn his pictures as degenerate and find them as unsplatable as yesterday's macaroni. Even so, Pollock, at the age of 37, has burst forth as the shining new phenomenon of American art.

Pollock was virtually unknown in 1944. Now his paintings hang in five U.S. museums and 40 private collections. Exhibiting in New York last winter, he sold 12 out of 16 pictures. Moreover his work has stirred up a furore in Italy, and this autumn he is slated for a one-man show in ornamental Paris, where he is fast becoming the most talked-of and controversial U.S. painter. He has also won a following among his own neighbors in the village of Springs, N.Y., who amuse themselves by trying to decide what his paintings are about. His groove brought one which he identifies for bewildered visiting salesmen as an aerial view of Siberia. For Pollock's own explanation of why he paints as he does, turn the page.



"NUMBER SEVENTEEN" was painted a year ago in several sessions of work which took place weeks apart so Pollock could appreciate what he was doing and "get acquainted with the picture." He numbers his paintings instead of naming them, so his public will not look at them with any preconceived notion of what they are.

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HOW POLLOCK PAINTS (with enamel, sand and a trowel)

Jackson Pollock was born in Coly, Wyo. He studied in New York under Realist Thomas Benton but soon gave this up in utter frustration and turned to his present style. When Pollock decides to start a painting, the first thing he does is to tack a large piece of canvas on the floor of his barn. "My painting does not come from the easel," he explains, writing in a small magazine called *Posibilities*. "I need the resistance of a hard surface." Working on the floor gives him room to scrawl around the canvas, attacking it from the top, the bottom or the side (if his pictures can be said to have a top, a bottom or a side) as the mood suits him. In this way, "I can... literally be in the painting." He surrounds himself with quart cans of aluminum paint and many hues of ordinary household enamel. Then, starting anywhere on the canvas, he goes to work. Sometimes he divides the paint on with a brush (below). Sometimes he scrubs it on with a stick, scoops it with a trowel or even pours it on straight out of the can. In with it all he deliberately mixes sand (below), broken glass, nails, screws or other foreign matter lying around. Cigaret ashes and an occasional dead bee sometimes get in the picture inadvertently.

"When I am in my painting," says Pollock, "I'm not aware of what I'm doing." To find out what he has been doing he stops and contemplates the picture during what he calls his "get acquainted" period. Once in a while a lifelike image appears in the painting by mistake. But Pollock cheerfully rubs it out because the picture must retain "a life of its own." Finally, after days of brooding and doodling, Pollock decides the painting is finished, a deduction few others are equipped to make.



HE APPLIES SAND TO GIVE ENAMEL TEXTURE

FIG. 4 – “Jackson Pollock. Is he the greatest living painter in the United States?”, *Life*, 8 Aug. 1949: 42-43, 45.

concerned many aspects: Abstract Expressionist's inspired gymnastic and action painting turns into a repetitive mechanical operation, in which the Pop artist simply fills the holes of an overlay sheets to paint the Ben Day dots on the canvas; the brush becomes a toothbrush; the close ups once reserved to details of the brushstrokes are substituted the comics frame cutting, enlarged and screened with a headlamp projector.¹⁸

The 1949 Pollock article spread into popular culture some of the early critical readings about Abstract Expressionism, typically statements by the artists themselves published in avant-gardist journals of short circulation. Some important quotes were taken directly from a statement by Pollock originally published the year before in *Possibilities*:

When I am *in* my painting" says Pollock, "I'm not aware of what I'm doing". To find out what he has been doing he stops and contemplates the picture during what he calls his "get acquainted" period. (SEIBERLING (?) 1949: 45)

In Pollock's rare own voice, the act of painting goes out of focus, becoming an involving and blind experience, hermetically defined as a "contact" not to be lost with the painting. This metaphor of being "in the canvas" implied that there would be no room, no spatial distinction between the painter and the painting. In the 1948 original statement Pollock further described the process of dripping as a "pure harmony, an easy give and take, and the painting comes out well" (POLLOCK 2005 [1948]: 140).

As Ann Eden Gibson stated in 1988, what seems here a lack of awareness is instead a voluntary "evasion of language" and it was originally typical of all the Abstract Expressionists.¹⁹ The artists' reluctance to explain both what their paintings meant and the process of their creation was strategically intrinsic in their poetics of the uninterpretable, mystic and mysterious.

Historically, in the following decades this evasion "creates a vacuum that was occupied by these two systems of criticism (Greenberg's and Rosenberg's) each of which narrowed the implications of the work to a significant degree" (GIBSON 1988: 212). In the next paragraphs, I will account for the cultural consequences of these two criticisms, which were being

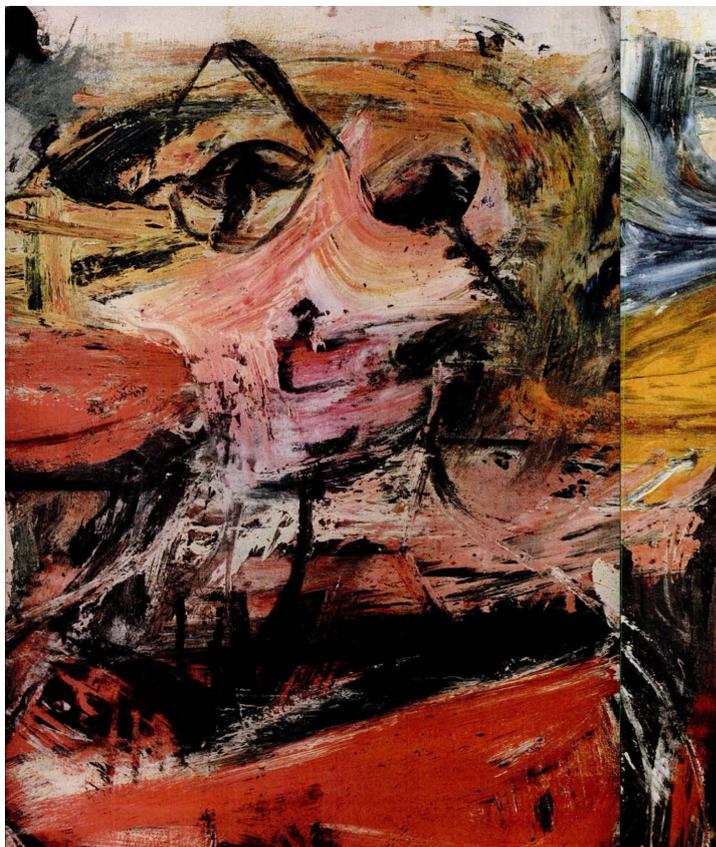
¹⁸ For a short analysis of the ironical intention of the 1964 *Life* article, see LOBEL 2002: 13.

¹⁹ "The Abstract Expressionists' resistance to interpretation was remarked upon by their critics, both friendly and hostile. It was also expressed by the avoidance of recognizable images in their work and in their refusal to explain, except in the most general terms, what the work "meant" (GIBSON 1988: 208).

consolidated in the early Sixties, when Lichtenstein and other Pop artists approached the brushstroke as a theme.

1.1 IMAGES OF “A TUBE OF PAINT SQUEEZED BY THE ABSOLUTE”

Commenting the historical role of Lichtenstein’s *Brushstrokes*, Diane Waldman claimed that “before Lichtenstein painted this series, the brushstroke had been a construct with no concrete identity of its own, usually acting only as a signifier of form in painting. By enormously enlarging the brushstroke and making it self-referential, as the subject of the paintings, he has provided it with such an identity” (WALDMAN 1993: 156). If it is true that a brushstroke was a totally new subject (and title!), it is not totally correct to say that the construct of the brushstroke had no concrete identity yet. On the contrary, all along the Fifties and up to the Sixties, it had received a precise visual identity: together with photographs of the athletic gesture of the Action Painters, magnified details of the brushstrokes were the favored means to illustrate the new features of Abstract Expressionism. Waldman herself remembered, even if without any precise reference, that “*ARTnews* magazine was notorious for frequently emphasizing details of



NEW ART AT CLOSE VIEW

Details from the Carnegie show dramatize painters' approaches

The 59-year-old Carnegie International Art Exhibition, once a conservative affair, has come abreast of the more provocative styles of the times. This year's show, now on view in Pittsburgh, is a full-blown exposition of modern art from 23 countries. Most voluminous is the display of 144 American paintings which indicate the major directions the nation's painters are taking and demonstrate their wide range of expression.

On these pages, *Life* reproduces three Carnegie paintings which, when viewed in their entirety, are seen to represent different styles. But to show how the paintings go beyond the limits of any style, *Life* has moved in on each work, focusing on enlarged details which are shown beside each painting. These close-ups provide a concentrated view of each artist's sensitivity and insight and, in fact, convey the essence of his approach.



A VIOLENT VERSION BY AN EXTREMIST

In the close-up at left of extremist Willem de Kooning's *Woman I* (above), the maelstrom of slashing strokes and jarring colors emphasizes the artist's violent expressionistic version of a female figure.

CONTINUED

FIG. 5 – “New Art at close view”, *Life*, 21 Nov. 1955: 134-5.

paintings on its pages during the 1950s” (*Ibid.*) and this trend also characterized the more largely popular imagery about abstraction.

An eloquent example is Pollock’s 1949 article, where two details of the weft of dripping and brushstrokes were illustrated alongside two shots of him at work (figure 4), which anticipated the most famous photographs by Hans Namuth for *ARTnews* of two years later.²⁰ Following this iconography through *Life* magazine, we meet a review of the 1955 Carnegie show entitled *New Art at Close View*. *Woman VI* by De Kooning was illustrated with a full-page “dramatizing” detail of the female face (figure 5). The caption reported that “these close-ups provide a concentrated view of each artist’s sensitivity and insight and, in fact, convey the essence of his approach” (*NEW ART... 1955*: 135). In 1959, when Abstract Expressionism was already acknowledged as the most important American movement and painters like De Kooning were hailed as “the world’s dominant artists today” (SEIBERLING 1959A: 69),²¹ a two-part enquiry about the art movement still used the dual strategy of a close-ups of the painting’s surface and a dynamic gesture of the author to represent abstraction.

This iconography shows the influence of one of the two critical systems indicated by Gibson, that is Harold Rosenberg’s “action painting” definition, first elaborated in 1952. This very well-known text contains the effective birth of the essentialism of the brushstroke, the critical vulgate of its possibility to concentrate the artist’s sensitivity or “essence”, to use terms from the *Life* articles quoted above. The spatial absorption in Pollock’s description of being “in the painting” suggested to Rosenberg the famous metaphor of the canvas as an arena:

At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act – rather than as a space in which to re-produce, re-design, analyze, or “express” an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event. (ROSENBERG 2005 [1952]: 190)

The substitution of the picture with an event corresponds to the choice of photographing the gesture of the artist rather than the resulting image. The theoretical consequence of such a substitution is to prevent a reading

²⁰ See GOODNOUGH 1951.

²¹ Such an “imperialist” acknowledgment was mainly due to the 1958-59 traveling exhibition *The New American Painting*, which had literally exported Abstract Expressionism in Europe.

of the artwork as a system of signs, culturally constructed and therefore readable. The “event” prevents the distinction between the artist and his creation, between the doer and the deed. Rosenberg goes on:

A painting that is an act is inseparable from the biography of the artist. The painting itself is a “moment” in the adulterated mixture of his life [...]. The act-painting is of the same metaphysical substance as the artist’s existence. The new painting has broken with every distinction between art and life. (191)

Scholars have already highlighted the philosophical background of European Existentialism that sustained this conception of painting.²² Rosenberg acknowledges that this rhetoric about Abstract Expressionism could bring to an inner, dramatic heroism or even to forms of “Mysticism”: “[...] the new movement is, with the majority of the painters, essentially a religious movement”. The work on the canvas transcends completely the limits of materiality, becoming “a new moment in which the painter will realize his total personality”:

When a tube of paint is squeezed by the Absolute, the result can only be a Success. The painter need keep himself on hand solely to collect the benefits of an endless series of strokes of luck [...]. In a single stroke the painter exists as a Somebody – at least on a wall. (195)

Here we are at the foundations of the essentialist definition of the brush-stroke, charged with such a responsibility to convey the essence of the artist and of the value of painting itself. It happened to do so without any “technique”, behavior or cultural determination, but only by virtue of “luck”.

Curiously, Rosenberg’s text and the images of Pollock at work would have a parallel and opposite historical effect on the creation of the “performative subject of postmodernism” (JONES 1998: 15). In fact, Pollock’s action painting has been always recognized as a cornerstone of happening and performance art, at least since its first programmatic text by Allan Kaprow *The legacy of Jackson Pollock*; furthermore, it has been showed how much the birth of performance art was intertwined with the coeval first formulations of a theory of performativity by Austin and Goffman.²³ The paradox shows at its best the importance of criticism to pilot the popular

²² See LYON 1991 for a comprehensive introduction to this major issue.

²³ See JONES 2020: 54-71.

interpretation of artworks and images and the function of Rosenberg's intentional focus on the brushstroke (which is absent in Kaprow's text) to the detriment of a theatrical and performative hermeneutics.

The best description of Rosenberg's overt essentialism was provided some years later by his main competitor in the interpretation of artists like Pollock, Franz Kline or Clifford Still, namely Clement Greenberg. In the early Sixties, he took as an "explicit target" the definition of "action painters" and the esoteric vocabulary used by Rosenberg in a pamphlet entitled *How Art Writing Earns Its Bad Name*.

Mr. Rosenberg explained that these painters were not really seeking to arrive at art, but rather to discover their own identities through the unpremeditated and more or less uncontrolled acts by which they put paint to canvas. For them the picture surface was the "arena" of a struggle waged outside the limits of art in which "existence" strove as it were to become "essence". "Essence", or the identity of the painter, could be recognized by the painter himself only in the very act of painting [...]. The painted "picture", having been painted, became an indifferent matter. [...] The covered canvas was left over as the un-meaning aftermath of an "event", the solipsistic record of purely personal "gestures", and belonging therefore to the same reality that breathing and thumbprints, love affairs and wars belonged to, but not works of art. (GREENBERG 1993 [1962]: 136)

Even if he opposed to the concept of the "artist's essence" in such existentialist terms, we will see how Greenberg's own criticism ended up in another, if not more pervasive, form of essentialism.

1.2 "AT WAR WITH WHAT WE CONSIDER PAINTING"

Lichtenstein's *Brushstrokes* set up a very precise strategy in order to represent the twists and crests of the brush. In a passage of the interview with Baker, we find an important hint at the first attempts to illustrate a brushstroke. Skeptical about going to Pollock's or De Kooning's exhibitions and copying brushstrokes "from life", as Baker suggested, Lichtenstein reports his method of working without direct visual models:

I've made some little sketches but most of the shapes look like wooden signs rather than brush strokes, they look like a lot of cartoon drawings of wooden signs, you know how the edges are zigzagged and they've got marks through them which look more like weathered wood than they do – I have to think of a way of representing. (BROWN BAKER, LICHTENSTEIN 1963-4)

As Michael Lobel has fully documented, Lichtenstein found an answer to this impasse in two ways. On the one side, in late 1964 he found a comic source for the representation of the brushstroke, which is the origin of the first exemplar of the series (figure 2) and explains the residual presence of the painter's hand in the corner of the picture.²⁴ On the other side, as Lichtenstein himself told Bernice Rose in 1987, he used a sophisticated technique to obtain a graphic image of the brushstroke, in order to mitigate the rigidity still present in this first work (which apparently needed the depiction of the hand to dispel the ambiguity of "weathered wood"-like signs). He laid little strokes of Magna painting on some repelling acetate sheets, which created easily controllable studies then projected onto the large canvases.

Lichtenstein isolated and repeated the action of the brush, artificially manipulating the outcome until it gained the desired appearance of "juicy swirls of pigment" (LIPPARD 1966).²⁵ The effect of immediacy, spontaneity and "expression" is then simulated, contradicting the substantial connection with the essence of the painter. Not only, as Waldman noticed, "in satirizing Abstract Expressionism by focusing on its characteristic brushstroke, Lichtenstein unlinked process (the action or event) and end-product (the record of that action or event) and thus diminished the ineffable mystery of artistic creation" (WALDMAN 1993: 151). His strategy can also be interpreted as "performative" as it shows a brushstroke coming out from a reiterated process of construction *a priori*, by default.

Obviously, the concept of performativity belongs to our hermeneutical instruments and not to Lichtenstein's own terminology or conceptual apparatus. Nevertheless, it accounts for an attitude difficult to describe with generic terms like "satire", "caricature" or "irony" (none of them used by the artist) of the Abstract Expressionist brushstroke, or the opposition to the "pale imitation" and "slavish emulation" (*Ibid.*) by the late generations of abstractionists. Lichtenstein's *Brushstrokes* are not such forthright statements about actuality: Lippard acutely observed in 1966 that "it is too late to be mordant about action painting anyway" (LIPPARD 1966). Not

²⁴ The comic strip was *The Painting*, in the series "Strange Suspense Stories", published in October 1964. For a full analysis of the source, and its specific thematic meaning for Lichtenstein's relationship to the artificiality of images, see LOBEL 2002: 164-7.

²⁵ Such a performative, repetitive execution of the brushstroke could have a famous precedent in Robert Rauschenberg's *Factum I* and *Factum II*, a duo of combine paintings made simultaneously in 1957 in which the artist repeated accurately (but not exactly) the same features of dripping, brushstrokes and collage.

to mention the fact that Lichtenstein remained loyal to the teaching of modernist composition, like all other Pop artists, and shaped the design of many of his figurative paintings playing explicitly with reminders of abstraction.²⁶ What is at stake in Lichtenstein's *Brushstrokes* is rather the rhetoric of essentialist painting, as a lasting paradigm loading the meaning attributed to the acts of a brush on a canvas.

An indirect proof of this awareness may be found in the photographs, referred to by Lobel, that Ugo Mulas in league with Lichtenstein arranged in his atelier: he programmatically stressed the paradoxical process of execution, setting the acetate sheet in front of the finished large *Big Painting no. 6*, shortly before sending it to the Castelli gallery.²⁷ A more explicit formulation of the intention behind this performative strategy can be found in the 1964 interview with Baker. Asked about his recent trip to Paris, Lichtenstein commented Honoré Daumier's production of cartoons, expressing his own purpose to "remove apparent aesthetic qualities" from his paintings. Baker, interpreting this purpose as a contraposition to the aesthetical richness of Abstract Expressionism, asked him:

[Brown Baker:] But you are at war, as it were, with certain manifestations of modern painting?

[Lichtenstein:] With what we consider painting, which I think almost every painter is at war with really. I would think that almost all painters are at war – most of the major changes in painting can be looked at, at least as a war with painting that went – preceding and - ...

[Brown Baker:] and you are, I take it, in rebellion against the brush stroke.

[Lichtenstein:] Yes. (1963-4)

Lichtenstein's clarification indicates the specific meaning of his *Brushstrokes*.

²⁶ See, for example, Lichtenstein's interview recorded in the 1965 film *L'École de New York* from the series *Métamorphoses* by Jean Antoine, then transcribed in the French journal *Quadrum*: "I think I've always been interested in the relationship between certain abstract painting and certain commercial art or material which we took as realistic. For instance, I've done a tire which – let's say - with the repetition of the threads might look very much in principles like the work of Vasarely or I've done a notebook cover, a composition book cover, which looked like something like Jackson Pollock or maybe Jack Youngerman's work. [...] I think in these 'cartoons' which I am doing of landscapes in this show, they range all the way from more or less conventional cartoons of landscapes to work that is so abstract that if you didn't know they were landscapes to begin with it would be very difficult to tell what it was that was going down on the painting. But there is allusion here made possibly work of Rothko and other abstract painters which I think might be evident in these landscapes" (LICHTENSTEIN 1965: 162).

²⁷ See LOBEL 2002: 162.

With the expression “certain manifestations of modern painting”, Baker probably wanted to speak in terms of schools (Abstract Expressionism) or protagonists like Pollock and De Kooning. Instead, Lichtenstein moves the object of his rebellion onto “what we consider painting”, that is the critical discourse about painting, the parameters and canons established to judge art, inevitably addressing also Rosenberg’s strong influence on the coeval critical debate. If in art history every slight shift from one paradigm of painting to another can be represented as “a war”, the overcoming of the Abstract Expressionist hermeneutics appeared more radical: it involves re-considering the meaning of very basilar element of painting, that is color material laid onto the canvas.

2 ART IN THE MIRROR

In late 1966, Gene Swenson was assigned the curatorship of an interesting exhibition at the MoMA entitled *Art in the Mirror*²⁸. In a “small per-



FIG. 6 – A room view of the exhibition ‘Art in the Mirror’, MoMA, New York, November 22, 1966. Photo: February 6, 1967. Gelatin silver print, 17.8 x 24.8 cm. By Rolf Petersen (© The Museum of Modern Art, New York). Photographic Archive. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York. Catalogue n.: IN812.2. Digital image © The Museum of Modern Art, New York/Scala, Florence

²⁸ *Art in the Mirror* opened on November 22nd and closed on February 6th 1967.

sonal selection” he gathered paintings, sculptures and graphic artworks that “reflect art itself, and its place in the world both as a subject and a point of departure” (SWENSON 1966). At that time, and with the favor of the same critic who launched Pop Art in 1963, nothing prevented artworks by Warhol, Indiana, Tom Wesselmann and Lichtenstein from being included in a show that went from Pablo Picasso to Max Ernst or Francis Bacon.

In his short text for the leaflet of the exhibition, Swenson commented about the possibility for modern art to depict “art itself”:

All art is to some extent about itself, about form and color and materials. Paul Signac, in 1902, wrote, “The subject is nothing. Or at least just one of its parts, no more important than the other elements – color, design, composition.” Recently some critics and painters have taken that dictum to extremes where the only permissible “subject” is color or paint. [This show] does not include any work without an image of art, that is, none whose subject is “pure” paint or color or line. (*Ibid.*)

With these indications and with a selection that privileged the Dadaist and surrealist tradition, Swenson took a position against the still pervasive critical discourse of modernism formulated by Greenberg, who had been a prominent promoter of Abstract Expressionism in the critical milieu of the Fifties. In 1965 his essay *Modernist Painting* appeared in the journal *Art and Literature*, famously recapitulating his “prescriptive” (COLLINS 1987: 36) positions about modern art:

Each art [...] had to perform this demonstration [of value] on its own account. [...] Each art had to determine, through its own operations and works, the effects exclusive to itself. [...] It quickly emerged that the unique and proper area of competence of each art coincided with all that was unique in the nature of its medium. [...] Thus would each art be rendered “pure”, and in its “purity” find the guarantee of its standards of quality as well as its independence. (GREENBERG 1994 [1965]: 86)

Greenberg’s parameters of modernism and peremptory principles of quality represented in the early Sixties a normative, hegemonic discourse. We have seen how he was opposed to Rosenberg’s essentialism. Nevertheless, his authoritative appreciation of Pollock and other Abstractionists charged

the “brushstroke” with a parallel essence. As the color material on the surface is the specific and exclusive element of the medium of painting, the value of the brushstroke is that of confirming the essence or the nature of painting itself as a closed system.

Swenson, as well as the Pop artists, responded to Greenberg’s criticism first of all by an overt resort to figuration, which was no longer admitted in modernist painting as an external feature. At *Art in the Mirror*, a Lichtenstein’s *Brushstroke* was exhibited²⁹ and there was no doubt that it was meant as figurative, a therefore paradoxical depiction of modernist painting. An analogous play with abstraction through figuration is a main theme of Jim Dine’s paintings and graphics exhibited on the same occasion (figure 6). Swenson in particular chose from a private collection in New York a large painting dated 1961. Inscribed with a Magrittian title, *A 1935 Palette*³⁰ is an intensely autobiographic work, since 1935 is Dine’s year of birth and the wrong spelling of “palette” is a mark of the dyslexia he was diagnosed with from his school years. This metonymic self-portrait of the artist through his professional tools was interpreted by Swenson as a mirrored image of art itself. In fact, between 1963 and 1964 Dine returned to the use of such devices as palettes, color charts (but also bathrobes) in numerous graphic and painting series, partly exhibited in an important solo show at the Sidney Janis gallery in late 1964. In the 1961 forerunner exemplar, the monumental enlargement of the palette, reaching a human size, makes the distinction between figuration and abstraction (between the image of a palette covered with random pigment and appearance of pure colors on a surface) all the more ambiguous.³¹ This play, which resorted to a gimmick typical of *trompe l’oeil* painting of the XIX century, questions the essence of the thick brushstrokes represented: are they arranged by the artist as an inspired, expressive abstraction; or do they reproduce faithfully the involuntary and barely practical disposition of

²⁹ It was an exemplar of a 1966 multiple made of enamel and steel, and it was borrowed by Richard Brown Baker. It seems that Swenson selected it just before the opening of the show, since it is not present in the list of artworks in the leaflet.

³⁰ Oil on board, 184 x 110 cm. Franklin Königsberg had already lent the work from his collection for the 1963 crucial show *Six Painters and the Object* at the Guggenheim Museum.

³¹ A vivid evidence of this ambiguity can be read in a review of a 1964 show at the Sidney Janis gallery, where Jim Dine exhibited *Dream no. 2*, consisting in a huge palette with brushstrokes and a tube of aluminum departing from it. The Italian writer and artist Dino Buzzati spoke of “un quadro di tipo astratto” (“an abstract kind of painting”, BUZZATI 1964) without even noticing the palette.

undiluted color on a painter's palette? Above all, Dine denies a real difference between the two options.

More subtly than Lichtenstein's effort to artificially reproduce the gestural brushstroke, Dine's strategy to face the essentialist criticism about the abstraction can be interpreted in terms of performativity too. In executing those brushstrokes, he showed his ability in "performing" the technique, the gesture and the expressive intensity of an abstract painter, without meaning it. The fact itself that the image is meant as a self-portrait indicates that he "constructed" his own image showing his skill in abstraction; this self-reflection can be interpreted as an ambiguous answer to Rosenberg's claim that paintings are inseparable from the artist's life.

3 FOOD-LIKE BRUSHSTROKES: ROSENQUIST'S METAPHORS OF ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

With the examples of Dine and Lichtenstein in mind, in his 1966 exhibition Swenson explained the possibility of Pop figuration to lead a self-reflective discourse on painting itself:

Pop art, which first seemed a realistic relief, is slowly revealing itself as a return to metaphor. If the sledge hammer sound of its images penetrates our consciousness, it then continues to reverberate with increasing subtlety. (SWENSON 1966)

Beside Dine's palettes and Lichtenstein's first attempts to represent the brushstroke, a 1964 painting by James Rosenquist may suggest the "return to metaphor" of Pop Art. *White Bread* was exhibited in June in the artist's first European solo exhibition at the Ileana Sonnabend Gallery in Paris. The image of a knife spreading margarine on some toasts was no exception among other canvases for the use of commercial advertising images, the flat and anti-pictorial technique of execution and the large format (figure 7). Commenting it Edward Fry noted in the catalog:

White Bread for example is first of all a strict composition of closely related colours in planes which indicate space without making use of spatial illusions. The white bread, made with artificial preservatives, is spread with margarine – artificial butter: an objective reflection of industrialized cuisine. The image is painted with a flat anonymous technique, and we suddenly realized that at another level of meaning it is an ironic symbol directed against the heavy impastos of abstract expressionism. (FRY 1964)

Rather than a symbol, this painting is a metaphor for typical Abstract Expressionist twists of brush. Its strength is due, on the one hand, to the ordinariness of the metaphorical imagery, drawn from domestic and kitchen imagery; on the other, to the tension between the levigated surface of the canvas and the thick brushstroke of margarine illustrated.

Although Fry's comment is important testimony of the effective functioning of metaphorical meaning in Rosenquist's painting, some of the terms used in it like "ironic symbol", or its position "against" abstraction, sound generic. In order to understand what specific concepts are involved in the painter's strategy, it might be of some interest to comment on how metaphors contributed in the previous decades to the critical construction of the Abstract Expressionist brushstroke.



FIG. 7 – J. Rosenquist, *White Bread*, 1964, oil on canvas, 138,48 x 154,3 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington ([also available at NGA website](#)).

3.1 THE ESSENTIALIST FUNCTION OF NATURE

A theme of Abstract Expressionism, superficial at first sight, nevertheless haunts – so to say – in the critical history of the movement. It is the involuntary appearance of figuration, that is, of recognizable images, from a totally abstract painting, executed “blindly”.

Already in the *Life* 1949 article about Pollock discussed above, a sort of “pentimento” (or a correction in the making) is described: “Once in a while a lifelike image appears in the painting by mistake. But Pollock cheerfully rubs it out because the picture must retain ‘a life of its own’” (SEIBERLING (?) 1949: 45). This evasion of a figurative interpretation of abstract painting followed Greenberg’s prescriptions about modernism; however, it did not prevent highbrow and popular comments from recourse to “figurative” devices, such as metaphor, in order to explain an art always considered difficult. We can follow this theme within Pollock’s criticism. Nature becomes a rhetorical device in order to described the cryptic sense of lines, dripping and brushstroke on his canvas, in the 1952 catalogue of a solo show at Betty Parson gallery:

His painting confronts us with a visual concept organically evolved from a belief in the unity that underlies the phenomena among which we live. [...] An ocean’s tides and a personal nightmare, the bursting of a bubble and the communal clamor for a victim are as inextricably meshed in the coruscation and darkness of his work as they are in actuality. His forms and texture germinate, climax, and decline, coalesce and dissolve across the canvas. [...] Forms and images, dissolve and re-form into new organisms. (OSSORIO 1952)

As Lawrence Alloway pointed out already in the mid 1960s, American art since the Forties was largely “biomorphic” combining “various forms in evocative organic wholes”. He noticed without difficulty the debts to the long-lasting fortune of Surrealism in the frequent reference to the organic, the animal, and the bodily. As Alloway put it,

Particular cases of resemblance are not interesting: the point is the identity of everything with its simultaneous phases of seeding, sprouting, growing, loving, fighting, decaying, rebirth. The impression is of a natural and personal abundance [...]. The desire for a nuanced and subjective imagery was manifested in paintings that did not subordinate the artist’s use of paint to a tidy and cleaned up end-state. On the contrary, rich meanings were located within the creative

act itself, so that the process-record itself is sensitized. [...] The artist's gestures are image-making and keep their identity as physical improvisation beyond the point of completion. Gorky's and Pollock's linearism, Rothko's liquidity, Baziotes' scumbled haze of color, were all technical devices fused with permissive meanings. (ALLOWAY 2005 [1965]: 253)

The abstract brushstroke, in its various embodiments by each artist listed by Alloway, was charged with an “organic function” due to its own open, process-recording, “permissive meanings”. As a critical and rhetorical feature, the function of nature had a consequence which Alloway did not stress: natural and organic “explanation” of the paintings was both a symptom and a reinforcement of the essentialist status of the abstract brushstroke. In fact, the quoted references to nature are metaphors to describe artworks as spontaneous processes or acts, something that does not tolerate if not an organic, self-explanatory reason of its making: the recurrence of terms like “inextricably”, “germinate”, “coalesce”, “personal abundance” or “physical improvisation”, all stand for the unwillingness to explain the configuration of the brushstrokes on an abstract canvas.

In a queer perspective on social and hermeneutical categories, the appeal to “nature” or the “natural reasons” of an object is precisely the tool

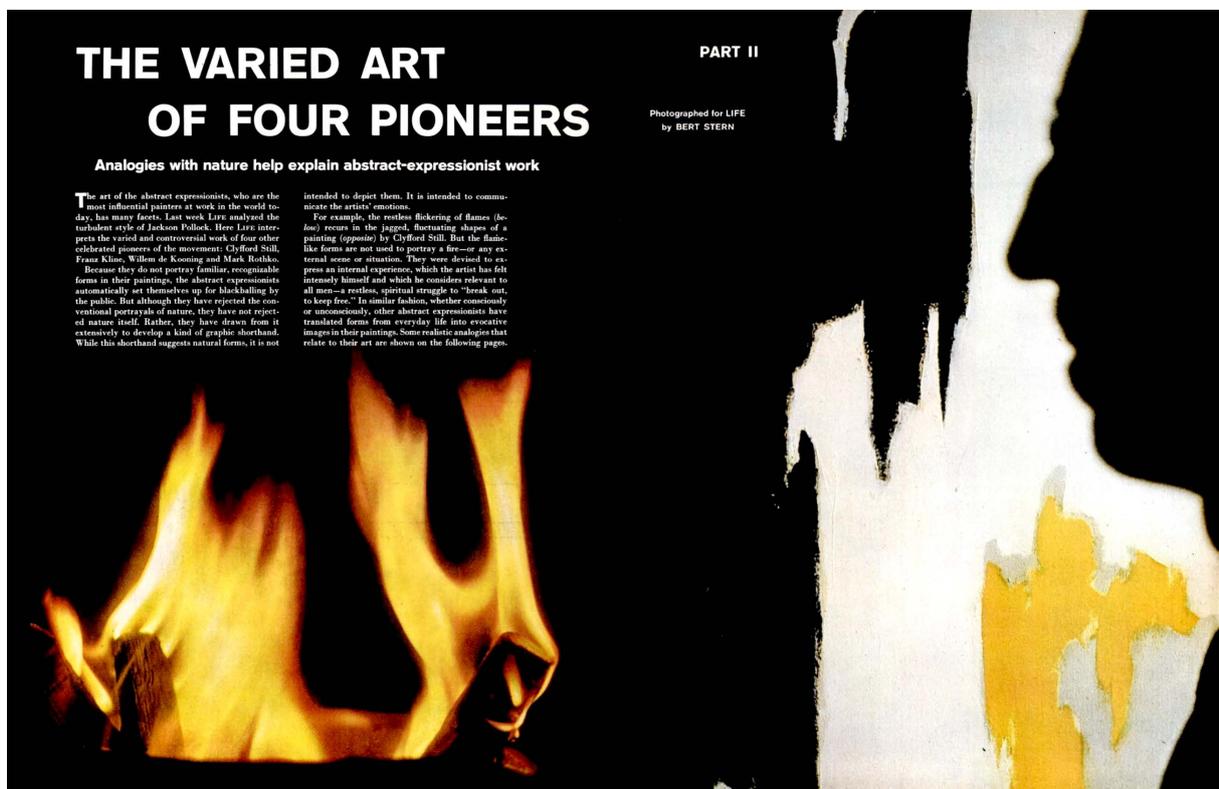


FIG. 8 – “The varied art of four pioneers”, *Life*, 16 Nov. 1959: 74-75.

to make it essentialist. The classic example is gender, that in most social discourses is said to be the female or male “nature”. This serves to control the existing relationships between the categories involved, since it prevents the “natural object” and its features from being called into question.

A visual manifestation of this appeal to nature in order to recount the constitution of the abstract brushstroke is found in *Life* magazine, as previous evidence of a larger popular sharing of these critical features. The second part of the already quoted 1959 issue about the Abstract Expressionists presented “the varied art of four pioneers”. The caption reported that “analogies with nature help explain abstract-expressionist work”, since “although they have rejected conventional portrayals of nature, they have not rejected nature itself” (SEIBERLING 1959B: 70). Wonderfully illustrated pages followed, which showed comparisons between flickering flames photographed on a dark background and “jagged, fluctuating shapes of a painting” by Clifford Still (figure 8). Or the analogy between the “breadth, rugged force and endless variety” of a patch of grass and De Kooning’s incisive and crisscross “conglomerations” of strokes (figure 9). Or the common evoking “luminous hues” of some photographs of sunset’s shadows out of focus and Marc Rothko pulsing emotional colors (figure 10).

**Willem
DE KOONING**

Explosive images of a dislodged and ambiguous world

Vestiges of realism crash and slide in and out of the paintings of Willem de Kooning. Like landscapes “racing” past a train window, or movies rapidly run backwards, his paintings present a kind of split-second view of the world. There are “handles” to grab at—a woman’s bulbous curves or popping tires, letters from a street sign, a streak of highway or, as in *Suburb of Haven* (shown opposite with de Kooning in his backyard) a forked tree. But they are brashly distorted and dislodged from their familiar surroundings.

This unsettling, ambiguous effect is a fundamental aspect of what de Kooning wants to say. The speed of modern life, the constantly changing scene, the myriad jarring images that crowd into one’s sight all contribute to a sense of multiplicity, tension and impermanence. To re-create these effects on canvas, de Kooning works with fast, slashing brush strokes, garish colors in harsh juxtaposition, conglomerations of suggestive shapes. In paintings like the one opposite, done after a holiday in Cuba, he has used this seemingly slapdash style (see detail, bottom right) to suggest the breadth, rugged force and endless variety that characterize not only vast scenes of nature but the tiniest patch of grass (top, right).

Like the other pioneers of abstract expressionism, de Kooning had a strong grounding in traditional art. In Holland where he was born in 1904, he studied eight years at the Rotterdam art academy. Arriving in America in 1926, he spent the next decade working as a housepainter, display artist and bar muralist. But a year on the WPA art project persuaded him to spend full time on his own painting. Already he was doing abstracts that bore traces of Miró and Picasso. By the mid-1940s he had developed a highly individualistic style of swooshing shapes and sinuous lines which created an ominous impression of a world sliding apart.

In 1951 de Kooning burst into public notoriety when he won top prize at a national show—and outraged the public. Since then he has continued to hold the limelight. His paintings of women—explosions of blowsy flames with toothpaste lores—caused a sensation. His uninhibited style was imitated by artists everywhere. His latest show sold out in a day at prices up to \$14,000.

Though his recent paintings suggest nature, de Kooning says, “You never know what nature really is. You look at it and get an illusion of it. I try to leave my paintings ‘open’ to the light of nature can come in.” Then he adds, “It’s as if a housepainter paints, and suddenly a miracle happens and transforms his work. I try to catch that miracle.”

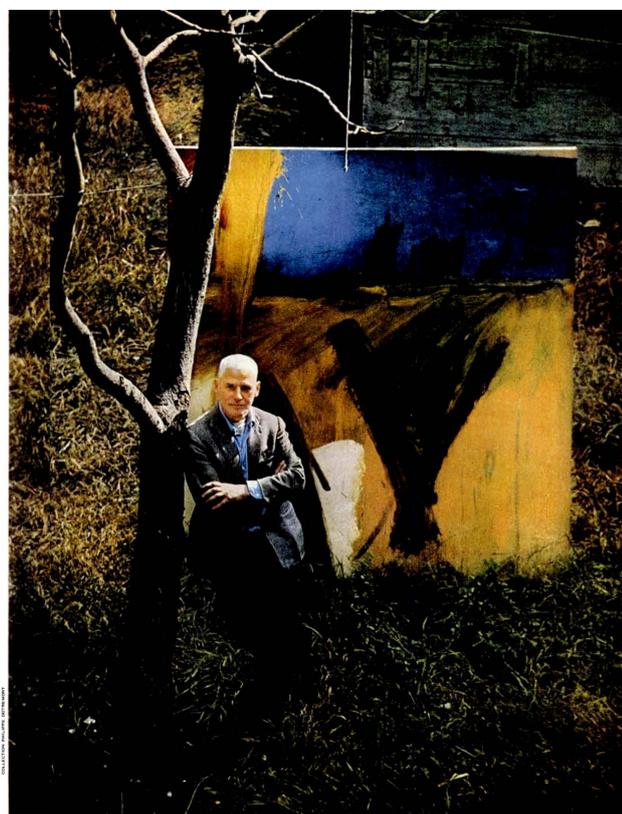


FIG. 9 – “The varied art...”, *Life*, 16 Nov., 80-1.

Rosenquist loved to recall an anecdote of something that probably occurred in the late 1950s, which reaffirms the theme of the figurative “fear” in abstract painting. Although in it there should be “no meaning, except pure color and it’s supposed to be pure color and pure form. Well in the attempts at doing these non-objective paintings [...] things would appear, unconsciously”.

I saw an exhibition at the Howard Wise gallery on West 57th of this old artist whose teacher had been Hans Hoffman [the great exponent of Abstract Expressionism, ed]. And Hans Hoffman walked into the room. [...] He said to this man who had been his student, “What’s that there?” And he replied, “It’s winter solstice” or something like that. And Hans says, “looks like Popeye to me. Looks like Popeye sitting in a chair, see, see his head.” And there was Popeye. He had a pumpkin head, a stick body, big feet, hands, and it was supposed to be totally non-objective painting. Only colors. Feeling. And it embarrassed the man and from there onward that was Popeye. (STANISZEWSK, ROSENQUIST 1987)

The awareness of such a perceptive ambiguity of abstraction lays behind Rosenquist’s own use of images. This was intended as an overturning of the uncontrollable “permissive meaning” of Abstract Expressionism, in order to erase its abundance: in his own words, “my ambition at that time was

Mark ROTHKO

Luminous hues to evoke emotions and mystery

Though it lacks the explosive textures and “wild” shapes of most abstract expressionist work, the art of Mark Rothko is equally concerned with the forms, emotions and mystery of life. To evoke them, he relies on the responses that colors summon up in a spectator. Just as the hues of a sunset (bottom of page) prompt feelings of elation mingled with sadness or unease as the dark shapes of night close in, so Rothko’s colors stir mixed feelings of joy, gloom, anxiety or peace. Though the forms in the painting opposite (also

seen with Rothko below) seem simple at first glance, they are in fact subtly complex. Edges fade in and out like memories; horizontal bands of “cheerful” brightness have “ominous” overtones of dark colors. Born in Russia in 1903, Rothko grew up in Oregon, went to Yale. Working from realism to surrealism, he arrived at his present style around 1948. His paintings have stimulated varied interpretations: “doorways to hell,” “swath of light.” Says Rothko, “A painting is not a picture of an experience; it is an experience.”

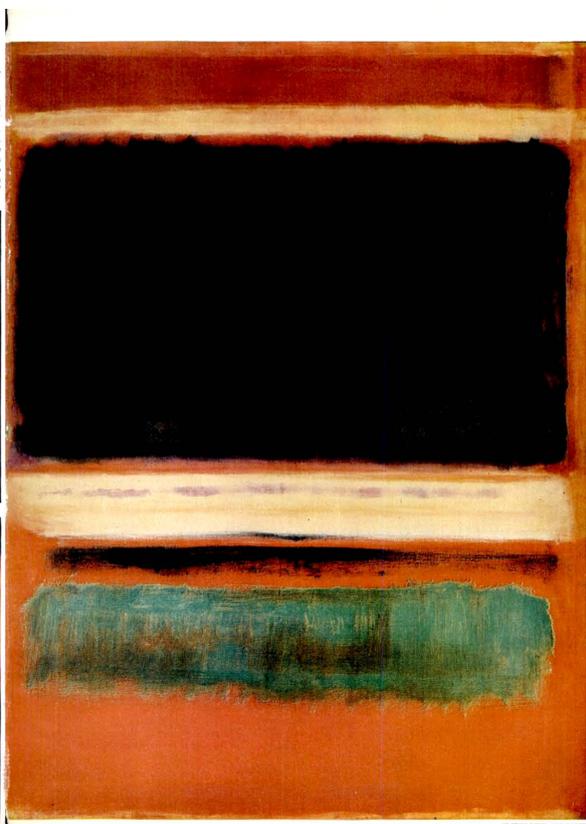
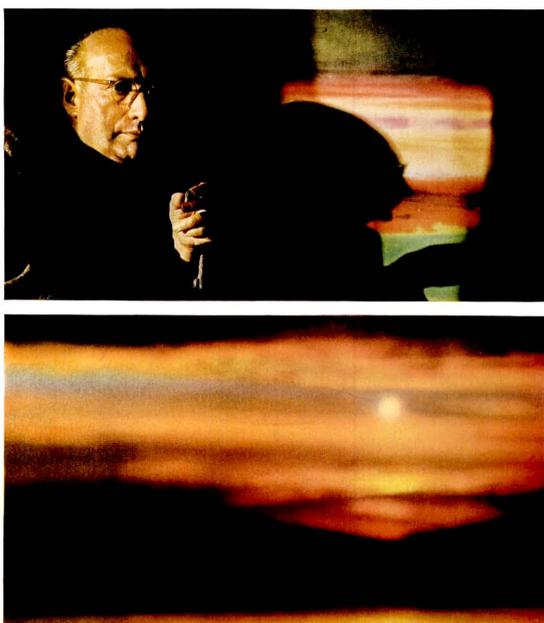


FIG. 10 – “The varied art...”, *Life*, 16 Nov., 82-83.

to get below zero”. With this aim, Rosenquist mixed fragments of colorful advertising pictures in his canvases and magnified them to uncanny proportions, so that “it would be like seeing an image, but you wouldn’t quite know what it is” (*Ibid.*).

When Rosenquist started to exhibit in the early Sixties, Greenberg’s ban on representational painting was still a dominant feature of the artistic debate. We must imagine how much suspicion there was of the work of the “new realists”, who returned to images after being mostly trained as abstract painters, as Rosenquist himself had been in the 1950s. Facing the current strict paradigms of what modern painting should be, Rosenquist expressed his theoretical position, answering Swenson in the 1963 interview:

[Paint and paint quality] are natural things before you touch them, before they’re arranged. As time goes by the brutality of what art is, the idea of what art can be, changes; different feelings about things become at home, become accepted, natural. (SWENSON 1987 [1963]: 115)

The almost banal relativity introduced by the artist in judging art shows its queer potential since it confronts the “natural” with the “cultural” of taste, criticism and novelty in “what art can be”.

3.2 SPAGHETTI AND BRUSHSTROKES

The interview took place a few months before Rosenquist started working at *White Bread*, and it contained an interesting hint at images of food in his “painting below zero”: “The images are like no-images. There is a freedom there. If it were abstract, people might make it into something. If you paint Franco-American spaghetti, they won’t make a crucifixion out of it [...]” (*Ibid.*).

Food, and precisely pasta, had a previous famous occurrence in the public debate about Abstract Expressionism of the Forties and Fifties. In fact, the first reviews of Jackson Pollock in the Forties mocked at his works often comparing the chaotic pictorial surface to food like “half-baked macaroni”. The 1949 article on *Life* presented Pollock to a large public explaining that some critics “still condemn his pictures as degenerate and find them as unpalatable as yesterday’s macaroni” (SEIBERLING (?) 1949: 42), explicitly juxtaposing a detail of his vermicular painting texture (figure 4). Taking into account this famous association between canned food and Pollock’s

dripping and brushstrokes, it is possible to assign a further meaning to the frequency with which Rosenquist used spaghetti advertising. First introduced in early major works like *I love you with my Ford* (1962),³² images of spaghetti were often taken from advertisements of the Franco-American brand, which belonged to the Campbell Soup Company. Around 1964, they gained a new prominence in Rosenquist paintings. The former collage-like insertion limited to a decorative pattern, like in *Nomad* (1963), gives way to the centrality achieved for example in works like *Orange Field* (1964) and the diptych composed of *Spaghetti Grisaille* and *Spaghetti Red* (1965).

Even if Rosenquist explained this interest in terms of a purely consumerist attitude toward the food product (“I like the ways it looks and I like the way it tastes”, HOPPS 2003: 9), the “abstract” meaning of spaghetti is evident: their gentle curvilinear trend hints at the vermicular design of the abstract brushstrokes. A visual metaphor for abstract painting is the intention behind the choice of such patterned images as *Spaghetti and Grass*, which was used as the cover of Lucy Lippard’s 1966 forerunner book about *Pop Art* (figure 11).

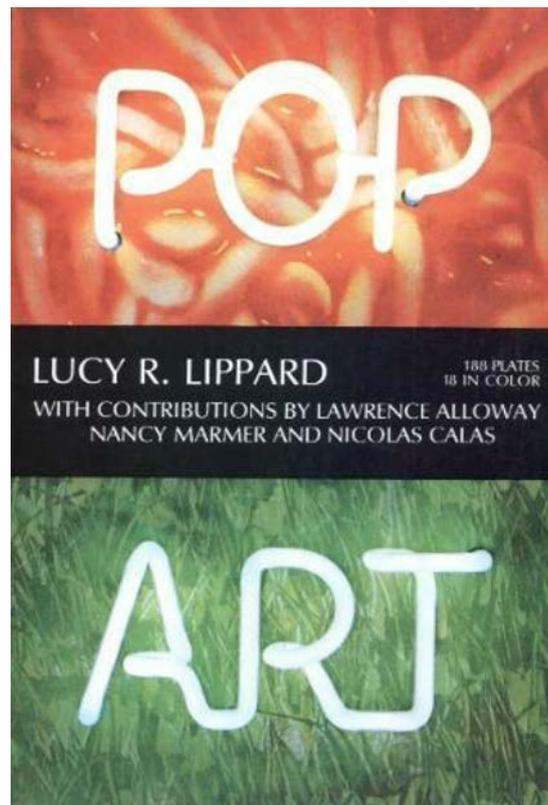


FIG. 11 – L. Lippard, *Pop Art*, Thames & Hudson, London 1966 (book cover).

³² Differently from what has been argued in the richest reconstruction of Rosenquist’s ad sources to date (see BANCROFT 2017: 126-127), this image of spaghetti does not come from a Franco-American advertisement, but from a Heinz 57 ad., for example in *Life Magazine*, 39, 16 (17 October 1955): 62.

Many of the spaghetti artworks revolve around Rosenquist's well-known masterpiece of the Sixties, *F-111*. In the 26 meter-long murals, spaghetti appear twice as a background motif: on the lower left, the image was taken from an advertisement of a Franco-American canned product (it is the same image already used in *Orange Field*); at the upper right corner, the large mass of spaghetti is drawn from a photograph by the artist and friend of Rosenquist's, Hollis Frampton.³³ Frampton's photographic work already played with the abstract fashion of canned spaghetti scattered in the sauce: Rosenquist used details from colored and black and white prints of the photograph in many works, like the already quoted *Spaghetti Grisaille*, *Spaghetti Red*,³⁴ *Spaghetti and Grass*, or *The Friction Disappears* (1965) and the lithograph *Spaghetti* (1970). This metaphorical and visual association between spaghetti and abstract painting got reversed and at the same time reaffirmed in the cover of the 1968 issue of the *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, reproducing *F-111*. The photographer Malcolm Varon seemed to respond to Rosenquist's own allusion to abstraction and magnified two details from the segments on the right with the red slimy pasta, to the point that it is difficult to recognize spaghetti and the nuances of color looked like non-figurative painting (figure 12).

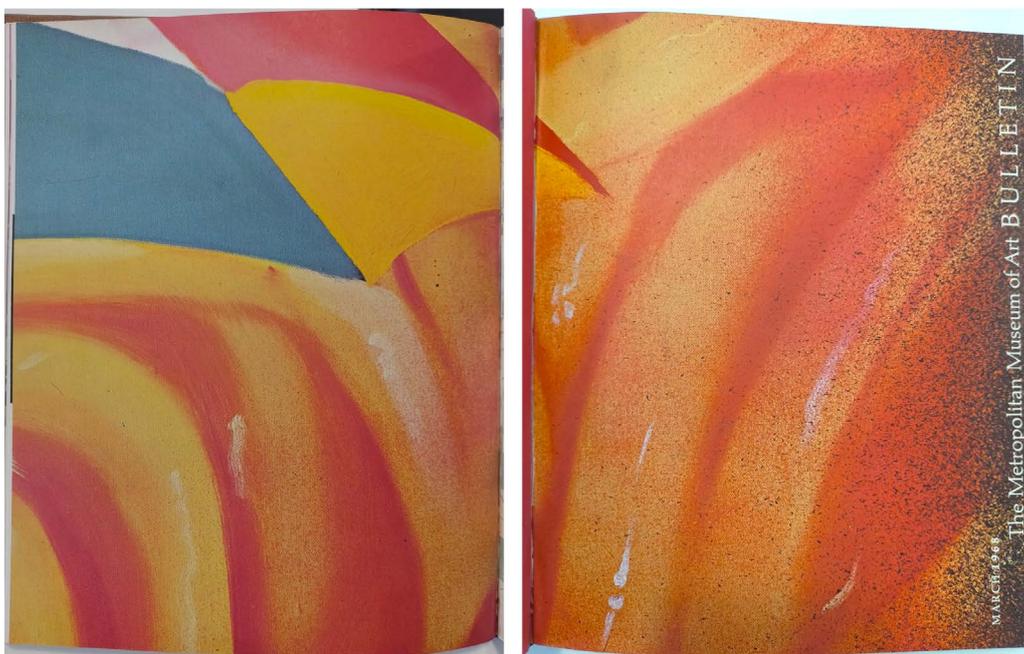


FIG. 12 – *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, Mar. 1968, cover and back cover.

³³ See BANCROFT 2017: 140-141.

³⁴ BANCROFT 2003: 292-293. It is interesting to notice that for the diptych of *Spaghetti Red* and *Grisaille*, Rosenquist cropped two details which were adjoining in Frampton's photograph, apparently without much intervention in composition.

The leveling of abstract painting and details of food could also have something to do with the main source of Rosenquist's imagery. In popular magazines like *Life*, advertising images of food were continuously, involuntarily and shockingly put side-by-side with images of war, politics, public events of importance, and modern art. An eloquent example is the news of Pollock's death in a car crash in 1957: the article illustrates a typical close up detail from his late paintings, and contains the usual reference to his critical distrust ("works like this [...] reminded other [critics] of half-baked macaroni", see *A tragic end...* 1956). On the opposite page the reader finds a triumphal, acrid colored advertisement of Chef Boy-ar-Dee spaghetti (figure 13). Rosenquist's attention would have gone to both the two images, as he was triggered by the effects of visual and thematic fragmentation and combination typical of the mass media.³⁵



FIG. 13 – “Rebel Artist’s Tragic Ending” and advertisements, *Life*, 29 Aug., 58-9.

³⁵ “The juxtaposition of ostensibly separate types of content was a basic characteristic of the magazine’s approach: the ‘intermingling of articles and ads typified *Life*’s look, and much of the rest of modern mass media, where supposedly separate categories of editorial and commercial distinction were, in fact, often indistinguishable” (LOBEL 2009: 31). The quote contained in this passage is from Erika Doss ed., *Looking at Life Magazine*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press 2001, p. 10.

The popularization of Abstract Expressionism, the introduction of its iconography in the mass media (that is the details of brushstrokes) and the inevitable contradictions it encountered in that specific visual context, provide Rosenquist with a figurative strategy to disrupt the essentialist rhetoric of abstraction. In his paintings abstraction was paradoxically obtained and constructed by figurative means; the expressionist brushstroke, which should be the outcome of an event of existential importance, is parodied with daily, repetitive and meaningless gestures. This strategy can be seen also as a reversal of the rhetoric of nature and organic development as the explanation for Abstract Expressionism, and a sarcastic comment about the formal comparisons like the ones in the 1959 *Life* issue.

The advertising sources of *White Bread* too reveal Rosenquist's formal and thematical strategy (figure 14). The original image was cropped so that the squared toast echoed with the shape of the real canvas and gave monumental autonomy to the yellow color field on its surface. Furthermore, a little caption in the original advertisement may have amused the Pop artist:



FIG. 14 – Advertisement of the National Association of Margarine Manufacturers, *Life*, 22 Nov. 1948: 148.

the over-all yellow page was intended to remind the customer that artificial coloring of the margarine was heavily taxed and this “discriminated” the manufacturers.³⁶ The stressed artificiality of the color can be therefore interpreted as a further metaphor for artificiality of painting, opposed against the “natural” essentialism claimed by Abstract Expressionism.

Titles are an important part of the visual and parodic metaphors that Rosenquist elaborated in his paintings around 1964 in order to deconstruct the Abstract Expressionism paradigm of painting. *Orange Field* refers clearly to Greenberg’s label of “Color Field Painting”,³⁷ and *White Bread* literally indicates the primed canvas awaiting for the all-over yellow painting. Another less known painting by Rosenquist, *White Frosting* could hint at Rauschenberg’s series of *White Paintings* as an inspiring precedent, as the 1951 artworks set a radical critique of the originality and uniqueness of Abstract Expressionism’s works. The overflowing mass of the white cream alludes metaphorically to the richness of the expressionist surface, but it is contradicted in the smooth finishing of Rosenquist’s execution of the monumental monochrome.

4 “DRAG” PAINTING? A CONCLUSION

Lichtenstein, Dine and Rosenquist, as well as Robert Indiana or Tom Wesselmann, were all (more or less happily) married, and as far as we know none of them were closeted. This paper is not an attempt to answer the question which opens it, that is if Pop Art or Pop artists were “queer”. Beside questions of subjectivity and sexuality, categories that are present in their works, these artists were able to find, deconstruct and therefore “to queer” radically the dominant paradigms about the painting of their times, based largely on essentialism, as we have observed.

Other artists could be added to this American group, as they explored a performative conception of abstract painting in their own way and played with the paradox of non-essentialist brushstrokes. A prominent case would be that of Gerard Richter and his use of photography to stimulate an exchange between figurative and abstract painting.³⁸ Richter’s flatly painted

³⁶ Attention was explicit drawn to the color of the page: “This page is yellow so you will again ask yourself, ‘Why can’t I get margarine ready-colored yellow the way I want it?’”. See *Life Magazine*, 25, 21 (22 November 1948): 148.

³⁷ For the history of the term, which was originally employed by Greenberg since 1955, see HOBBS 2005.

³⁸ All along the Sixties Richter thematized a seamless exchange between photographic pic-

1972-3 *Ausschnitte* (“Details”) magnify details of swirling, material color, so that this series can conclude the trajectory of the iconography of the brushstroke described above. However, I would like to conclude my analysis with an artwork by the British painter David Hockney. Since his education in the early Sixties, he was particularly sensitive to the current models of painting coming from the US: his “eclecticism” (STEPHENS 2017: 15) of style and sources employed frequently clear but witty references to American Abstraction.³⁹ A painting executed in 1971, when he lived going back and forth between California and London, often travelling around Europe, has the descriptive title of *Rubber Ring Floating in a Swimming Pool* (figure 15). As for the most of Hockney’s subjects, the source of the image is a photography: it was taken in Cadaqués and it shows how the artist himself was leaning on the water, as we can see his whimsical sandals and the swimming pool cot, then cropped off from the painting image. Even if Hockney faithfully reproduced the photography, the cropping is sufficient to prevent the viewer of the painting to recognize the reference. Without reading the title, the two fields of blue (water) and bright brown (marbled pool edge)

tures and abstraction. He isolated gestural “brushstrokes” (like the ones sweeping away the underlying photorealistic image of *Tisch* (“Table”), 1962; or those applied gesturally on a levigated background in the 1968 *Ohne Titel*). Or he forced his images by cropping and enlarging details to big formats, so that what appears at first is not the subject but its optical or abstract features. In this sense, the alternated chiaroscuro of the 1965 series of *Vorhänge* (“Curtains”) challenges mechanisms of Op Art; the 1967 *Wellbleche* (“Corrugated Irons”) mock Frank Stella’s hard edge painting. In some later series, like the 1969-70 *Wolken* (“Clouds”), Richter indulged in the “natural” abstraction provided by the chosen subjects, in a way that probably tried to evoke the formless disposition of the brushstrokes in Abstract Expressionist paintings by Still, De Kooning or Pollock. This can be argued because the series has been directly followed by another, the 1970-73 *Ausschnitten* (“Details”), which is a far more explicit reflection about abstraction as obtained by magnified photographed details of thick impastos. Discussing the *Clouds* and the *Details* series, Mark Godfrey wrote: “Both series are made from photographs of their subject, but whereas in recent work Richter had rendered photographic sources with impasto, in these works he painted as flatly as possible so that hardly a trace of brushwork remains on the surface. This makes the *Detail* paintings particularly strange, since crests and dips of paint produced by squeezes of tubes and twists of brushes are rendered as if without human touch, so that what seemed very physical appearance dematerialised” (GODFREY 2011: 84).

If it is true that Lichtenstein’s *Brushstrokes* are barely thematic source for the German painter, as suggested by Godfrey due to the formal difference between the two series, a more interesting comparison could be made with James Rosenquist’s enlargements of food and other ads images as abstract patterns.

³⁹ “This overtly stated playing with notions of style, and the use of images from a non-hierarchical range of sources, were part of a larger intention to signal a kind of self-reflexive knowingness, to announce the artificiality of the artwork and the scene it purports to depict” (STEPHENS 2017: 15).

and the red circle were arranged in a purely abstract composition. Among the flat geometric shapes, Hockney also highlighted the mottling of the marble and the bubbling of an underwater syphon, as two textures alluding to the painterly brushstrokes on the surface of an abstract painting.⁴⁰ The quite long title, with almost pedantic precision, stressed the paradoxical realism of this “abstract” image.

Through a subtle mimicry, the artist was interested in transforming a realistic image into abstraction and vice-versa: “At first glance it looks like an abstract painting, but when you read the title the abstraction disappears and it becomes something else” (David Hockney, 1976, quoted in ALTEVEER 2017: 225). More than simply a “wry comment on abstraction”



FIG. 15 – D. Hockney, *Rubber Ring Floating in a Swimming Pool*, 1971, acrylic on canvas, 91,4 x 120 cm, © David Hockney. Photo credit: Fabrice Gilbert. Private collection.

⁴⁰ For these paintings, Hockney used acrylic he had thinned down with water and a bit of detergent, applying it in washes of colour to specific areas of raw, unprimed canvas – what Livingstone calls ‘a “waterly” technique to represent a watery subject’. This was a process pioneered by American abstract painters in the 1950s – particularly Helen Frankenthaler, whose techniques were then adopted by artists working with colour field strategies, particularly those in the Washington Color School such as Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland. (ALTEVEER 2017: 225)

(LIVINGSTONE 1987: 140) or generic “appropriation and parody” (STEPHENS 2017: 15), this transformation and its effect could be compared to the practice of drag which artificially constructs gender through its appearance and performative features, “dramatiz[ing] the signifying gestures through which gender itself is established” (BUTLER 1999: XXVIII). Hockney’s “camouflage” of photographic images as abstraction highlights the perceptive conditions and the cultural features that were associated to pure color and forms, and above all pure brushstrokes; but he does so with an ironic and untrustworthy performance of it, discarding its underlying essentialism. In Butler’s words, “drag is an example that is meant to establish that ‘reality’ is not as fixed as we generally assume it to be” (xxiii-iv). Hockney’s “drag” painting “undermines the purism of high modernism” (STEPHENS 2017: 16), or its inevitable “idealism” (VARNEDOE 2006: 191), showing how abstraction would not need to be the expression of the painter’s own essence or of a strictly defined nature of painting itself.

Hockney’s sly and playful camouflage, as well as all the artworks gathered in my selection, may be considered as a subset of the larger group discussed by Kirk Varnedoe in the chapter *Satire, irony, and abstract art* of his Mellon Lectures. As Varnedoe points out, since the very birth of abstract art (roughly from Matisse onwards), the possibility of questioning its good faith has appeared:

We expect of abstraction, perhaps more so than other art forms, that its intentions be whole, that it be meant earnestly. Traditionally we think of abstraction as pure and unmitigated, a set of black-and-white principles that will not admit of grays. In other words, we associate abstraction with a kind of idealism. The question arises, If we are suspicious of idealism, are we then suspicious of abstraction? Is it necessary that abstraction be ideal and that it be in good faith? (VARNEDOE 2006: 191).

Narrowing my attention to some “bad faith” depictions of one certain kind of abstraction, which found in the brushstroke its poetic and critical core, my analysis has focused upon the shift from the essentialist paradigms formulated about Abstract Expressionism. Coherently with Varnedoe’s considerations, this essentialism carried values of “good faith”, as the direct expression of the artist’s interiority and existential self, urgency, immediate efficacy; or, in Greenbergian terms, it stated rigorous and autonomous self-definition of the “nature” of painting itself.

Each artist showed a different strategy in order to face the rhetoric of the brushstroke. Whether directly illustrating, alluding metaphorically to it or “camouflaging” it through other figurative images, these portraits of the brushstroke try to present it as the result of an artificial process, an indirect construction. Performativity as formulated in queer hermeneutics can be a fruitful instrument in order to point out this shared attitude. Evidence of performativity is found in Lichtenstein’s strenuous attempts to elaborate a plausible image of the brushstroke. The paradox of an artificial “expressionist” brushstroke determines the ambiguity of Dine’s *Palettes* paintings, where the observer must face the presence of “real” strokes on fictitious depicted palettes. Perhaps less obvious, a performative character is also implicit in the metaphorical functioning of Rosenquist’s works: overturning the rhetoric of the natural “correlatives” to the Abstract Expressionist creation, “abstract” food images highlight the appropriation by magazines’ popular visual culture of the Expressionist iconography, of his materiality and gestures. Finally, photographic camouflage, or “drag”, as abstraction in his painting *Rubber Ring Floating in a Swimming Pool* stands for dismantled essentialism of Abstract Expressionism. Moreover, it is an example of how queer critical instances can be expressed, and historically traced, in the field of painting.

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GIAN MARIA ANNOVI

Corpi queer: omosessualità, politica ed effeminatezza secondo Pasolini

ENGLISH TITLE: Queer bodies: Homosexuality, politics and effeminacy according to Pasolini.

ABSTRACT: Some scholars criticize Pier Paolo Pasolini for his negative representation of homosexuality, his conservative views on gay politics, and his alleged internalized homophobia. While considering the impact of the socio-cultural context on Pasolini's early view of homosexuality, this essay argues that, at the turn of the 70s, Pasolini conceived of homosexuality as an important force in the fight for real tolerance and an alternative to capitalist society. Some of his later writings, interviews, and projects show that Pasolini was indeed elaborating a radical, anti-identitarian homosexual politics, which can remind of some reflections developed by the queer movement two decades later. In particular, in the years before his premature death, despite his exclusive attraction to heterosexual male bodies, Pasolini came to consider and represent the effeminate homosexual body as a radical destabilizing force against hegemonic masculinity and homosexual identity politics.

KEYWORDS: Pier Paolo Pasolini; queer theory; effeminacy; homosexuality.

La straordinaria nebulosa delle opere pasoliniane appare come una gigantesca macro-formazione intermediale in costante movimento centripeto. Il centro di questo universo è occupato da Pasolini stesso. Pasolini non è però solo un autore centrale e accentratore, ma l'autore italiano che più di ogni altro ha saputo creare quella che appare se non la più potente figura autoriale del secolo passato, di certo la più resistente al tempo, e soprattutto la più complessa e problematica per chiunque voglia dedicarsi allo studio della sua opera e all'analisi della cultura italiana. L'enfasi posta da Pasolini sulla propria figura, soprattutto a partire dalla metà degli anni Sessanta, in totale controtendenza rispetto all'affermarsi della teoria barthesiana della morte dell'autore, comporta quale effetto primario uno schiacciamento del *corpo* dell'autore sul *corpus* autoriale. È insomma impossibile parlare dell'opera senza anche prendere in considerazione la figura di Pasolini, sempre in primo piano grazie a quelle complesse e spesso spiazzanti performance

autoriali che ho recentemente cercato di ricostruire e descrivere (ANNOVI 2017). Questo fenomeno non ha generato solamente importanti meccanismi di senso all'interno della sua opera, ma anche nodi critici notevolmente problematici. Uno di questi riguarda, per esempio, la questione dell'omosessualità, forse uno dei principali nuclei generativi dell'attività artistica pasoliniana.

Tra le critiche rivolte più di frequente a Pasolini c'è anche quella di aver rappresentato l'omosessualità in termini negativi e di non aver condiviso l'agenda politica dell'allora nascente movimento omosessuale italiano. Ben note sono ad esempio le prese di distanza da parte del FUORI (Fronte unitario omosessuale rivoluzionario italiano), una delle primissime associazioni dedicate alla politica omosessuale in Italia. Negli anni Settanta i militanti del FUORI consideravano le posizioni di Pasolini "vittimistiche e difensive" (FUORI 1975a), salvo poi elevarlo al rango di martire omosessuale dopo il suo brutale assassinio (FUORI 1975b).¹ Ancora negli anni Novanta, gli autori di alcuni degli interventi contenuti in un importante e pionieristico volume curato da Stefano Casi e dedicato al tema dell'omosessualità nell'opera di Pasolini continuano a sostenere non solo l'inutilizzabilità del suo discorso ai fini della lotta del movimento gay, ma di fatto cristallizzano l'immagine di un autore incapace di superare la propria interiorizzata omofobia (CASI 1990). Tra questi, Giovanni dall'Orto, uno dei principali studiosi della storia dell'omosessualità in Italia, ritiene che "solo una persona la cui sessualità costituisse un problema quotidiano da rinegoziare giorno per giorno per tutta la vita, poteva farne un nodo di interessi così essenziale" (DALL'ORTO 1990: 151). Più di recente, intellettuali e scrittori gay si sono espressi in modo simile. Secondo Piergiorgio Paterlini, per esempio, "proprio sull'omosessualità Pasolini non è mai riuscito a esercitare la lungimirante, spietata lucidità critica che lo contraddistingueva, invece, su quasi tutto il resto. Dell'omosessualità aveva una visione stereotipata, ingenua, arcaica, superficiale e acritica" (MIRENZI 2016). Un giudizio ancora più netto su Pasolini viene poi dallo scrittore Mario Fortunato: "Pasolini è stato un esempio distruttivo per i ragazzi omosessuali del nostro paese: ha assomato in sé una serie di segni negativi" (DEBENEDETTI 1999). Anche fuori dall'Italia non sono mancate critiche di simile tenore. Lo studioso britannico Richard Dyer, ad esempio, vede la rappresentazione dell'omosessualità

¹ Si vedano anche MIELI 1977: 150-53 e ROSSI BARILLI 1999: 78-79..

nell'opera di Pasolini come fortemente marcata dell'ideologia eterosessista, e per questo indissolubilmente legata a concetti quali la colpa, il peccato, la malattia, e la perversione (1977). Per ragioni non troppo differenti, anche Ken Anderson considera Pasolini come un mero "attivista accidentale", il cui contributo principale sta nell'aver reso visibile in Italia la questione dell'omosessualità attraverso la sua opera e la sua esposizione in prima persona, ma col demerito di non aver considerato il proprio orientamento sessuale come degno di azione politica (2016).

Queste letture, sebbene legittime e in linea con la vulgata condivisa da molti, sono problematiche per più di una ragione. La principale, su cui vorrei soffermarmi, riguarda esattamente l'incapacità di separare l'omosessualità di Pasolini, quella vissuta nel suo corpo desiderante, dalla rappresentazione dell'omosessualità nel suo corpus artistico e intellettuale. Di norma, insomma, si dà per scontato che Pasolini abbia sempre e solo parlato di un'omosessualità stereotipata e filtrata dal suo desiderio e non dell'omosessualità nella complessità del suo fenomeno. E che anche la sua rappresentazione dell'erotismo omosessuale sia limitata a una precisa fenomenologia, corrispondente a quel "corpo popolare" (Pasolini 1999: 261) cui lo stesso Pasolini accenna con incredibile consapevolezza nel saggio del 1973 intitolato *Tetis*. Senza dilungarmi molto su questioni che sono fin troppo conosciute, mi limito a riassumere le caratteristiche di questo corpo popolare con appena pochi aggettivi: contadino, sottoproletario, terzomondista. E ancora, adolescente, puro, maschile, eterosessuale. Pasolini non ha mai fatto mistero della sua attrazione per questo tipo di corpo: "io mi innamoro", scrive in una lettera a Massimo Ferretti, "esclusivamente dei ragazzi sotto i vent'anni, e molto ingenui, direi quasi soltanto del popolo" (1988: 410). È innegabile che nell'opera di Pasolini, e in particolare nelle poesie e nelle opere narrative dei suoi esordi, ma anche nella sua opera cinematografica, a questo tipo di corpo sia riservato ampio spazio e che la rappresentazione dell'eros omosessuale sia anche connessa a un forte autobiografismo. Si pensi alle poesie in friulano, ma anche ad *Atti impuri* e *Amado mio*, scritti quando Pasolini era un giovane di provincia che cercava nei testi di Freud a sua disposizione la chiave per interpretare quello che considerava il suo segreto terribile e degradante, un male e una colpa, quando non una malattia (NALDINI 1990). Erano, va ricordato, gli anni Quaranta e Pasolini, poco più che ventenne, era, non per scelta ma per nascita, il prodotto della cultura e della morale religiosa del tempo.

Pasolini resterà sempre convinto che solo la psicoanalisi freudiana è “in grado di spiegare cosa sia l’omosessualità” (Pasolini 1999: 490), ma è criticamente inesatto assumere che la posizione negativa, diciamo pure l’omofobia interiorizzata di un giovane ventenne educato durante la dittatura mussoliniana, possa servire a interpretare il complesso della sua opera successiva. Pasolini non ha vissuto in un’epoca di omogeneità culturale. Al contrario, ha attraversato uno dei momenti più rivoluzionari del Novecento e ha subito e per molti versi contestato nei modi che ben conosciamo anche quella che Foucault ha chiamato “la grande predica” della rivoluzione sessuale (1978: 13). Ben altra è infatti la posizione del Pasolini maturo, consapevole – come racconta all’inizio degli anni Settanta a Jean Dufлот parlando dell’omosessualità – che “i codici dell’amore cambiano, più rapidamente ancora che non quelli del linguaggio e della dignità di essere uomo” (1999: 1535). Termini come ‘amore’ e ‘dignità’ sarebbero sufficienti a mostrare un radicale cambiamento rispetto al senso di colpa e peccato che emergevano dai suoi scritti di vent’anni prima, e ad avvicinare Pasolini alla consapevolezza foucaultiana che anche la sessualità è un dispositivo, il prodotto di una struttura di potere/sapere. Nella stessa intervista, infatti, Pasolini assume una posizione antagonistica rispetto al codice morale “dei benpensanti sessuali” dell’epoca:

per quanto abbiano ragione di aborrire quello che sento e quello che sono, io rivendico di fronte alla loro abominevole autorità quella di poter scegliere la via problematica dell’errore. E se poi, come sono convinto, essi non sono né nella verità né nell’errore (visto che nessuno può fissare la norma morale dell’attività erotica dell’uomo, fin quando attenta alla vita altrui – intendo all’esistenza fisica), avranno sicuramente perso il loro tempo a crocifiggermi sul loro codice. (1999: 1334-35)

Per uno scrittore che aveva assunto volontariamente l’immagine sacrificale della crocifissione a simbolo del proprio bisogno d’essere punito (BENINI 2015) queste parole paiono particolarmente significative.

A dispetto dell’immagine di un Pasolini incapace di modificare la sua visione dell’omosessualità e di considerarla in termini politici, che si rintana in un individualismo “il cui scopo principale era garantire uno spazio di agibilità alla [sua] sessualità” (DALL’ORTO 1990: 173), negli anni Settanta Pasolini stava invece maturando una concezione differente dell’omosessualità, non più vista solo come problema individuale, relegato a quella

che Derek Duncan ha chiamato “la stanza del sé” (2006: 90), ma come una questione da considerare in termini ampiamente politici nel contesto generale della società. La ragione di questo mutamento sta in parte nel fatto che Pasolini non è più in grado di affermare il potenziale sovversivo di quel corpo popolare che un tempo vedeva come ai margini estremi del mondo capitalista. Lo conferma la sua celebre “Abiura dalla *Trilogia della vita*”, in cui ammette di aver compreso, con orrore, che i suoi film “servono al potere per quella tolleranza e permissività che non ha niente a che vedere con la vera libertà, sessuale e non” (1999: 1711).

Nella riflessione pasoliniana degli anni Settanta assistiamo al passaggio dall’omosessualità come *problema individuale* alla *questione* dell’omosessualità, interpretata nei termini di una forza destabilizzante e potenzialmente sovversiva per la morale adottata dalla società del capitalismo avanzato: “il tabù dell’omosessualità è uno dei più saldi chiavistelli morali della società consumistico-produttiva del capitale. L’omosessualità rimane un modo di vivere la propria sessualità che disturba e minaccia (potenzialmente) di distruggere l’ordine sessuale, l’economia libidinale su cui poggia l’intera costruzione delle nostre società industriali” (1999: 1539). In particolare, Pasolini vede nell’omosessualità un “controtipo pericoloso per la riproduzione, compresa la riproduzione dei modelli ideologici che la cellula familiare secerne o tramanda” (1539). A considerazioni molto simili era giunta, quasi contemporaneamente, anche un’altra importante figura legata al Fronte di liberazione omosessuale francese, Guy Hocquenghem, molto più giovane di Pasolini ma come lui espulso dal partito comunista per il suo orientamento sessuale. Anche Hocquenghem, oggi considerato un anticipatore del pensiero queer, enfatizza il carattere sovversivo del desiderio omosessuale, che gli pare non assimilabile al sistema familistico e riproduttivo che domina la logica del patriarcato e del capitalismo. L’analisi contenuta nel desiderio omosessuale sarebbe infatti contraria alla logica di progresso e alla nozione acritica di futuro impliciti invece nel coito eterosessuale (HOCQUENGHEM 1973; BERSANI 2010). È suggestivo, se si guarda al discorso sull’omosessualità articolatosi negli ultimi vent’anni, ritrovare simili riflessioni nei discorsi più radicali di alcuni teorici del pensiero queer. Lee Edelman, per esempio, in un volume provocatoriamente intitolato *No Future*, individua proprio nella non riproduttività il discrimine che permette di considerare il queer come una forma di negatività perturbante opposta alla politica della speranza riproduttiva ed eteronormativa (EDELMAN 2004).

Anche Pasolini, che nell'ultima parte della sua vita esprime pubblicamente una visione apparentemente senza speranza, sembra respingere il valore positivo di ogni progettualità politica proprio perché fondata su un'illusione: "Non bisogna mai sperare in niente. La speranza è una cosa orrenda, inventata dai partiti per tener buoni i [loro] iscritti" (2001a: 3015). Sono in molti a prendere alla lettera queste parole e vedere nell'ultimo Pasolini un pensatore apocalittico. Per lui, in realtà, la lotta politica non si situa mai in un futuro immaginario (quello, appunto, della speranza) ma può solo essere radicata nell'immanenza e nel presente e condotta attraverso un'immediata e continua capacità d'improvvisare e cambiare per restare costantemente un passo più avanti del potere.²

È necessario inoltre evidenziare che quello che Pasolini presenta negli anni Settanta non è solo un modello di omosessualità destabilizzante e distruttivo rispetto all'ordine eteronormativo dominante, ma anche un modello di conoscenza e di sapere alternativi: "Direi che l'omosessuale tende a preservare la vita, non accelerando il ciclo procreazione-distruzione, ma sostituendo alla perennità della specie, la coerenza di una cultura, la continuità di una conoscenza" (1999: 1544). Si tratta di un passaggio di estrema importanza perché ciò che Pasolini afferma qui esplicitamente è l'esistenza e il valore di una cultura e di un sapere omosessuale condivisi. Proprio una delle principali critiche che gli vengono rivolte riguarda il solipsismo autobiografico della sua posizione in merito alla politica omosessuale, mentre, come evidenzia il tono differente di questo tipo di affermazioni, Pasolini riconosce l'omosessualità come un fenomeno culturale e non meramente sessuale. Quella di Pasolini non è la posizione isolata di un anacoreta represso, ma una precisa strategia di politica antagonista non allineata alla posizione dominante nell'allora nascente movimento omosessuale italiano.

La sua peculiare prospettiva in merito alla modalità di azione politica del soggetto omosessuale si trova nell'intervento postumo che Pasolini avrebbe dovuto pronunciare al Congresso del Partito Radicale del 1975. Il testo, ritrovato dalla cugina ancora sulla macchina da scrivere subito dopo la sua morte, non è certo da leggere come un testamento, ma come l'ultima

² Lo stesso Gramsci, nelle sue riflessioni di prigionia, afferma che per seguire i costanti cambiamenti nella relazione tra gruppi dominanti e subalterni, una risposta politica radicale dovrebbe impiegare la modalità dell'improvvisazione, abbandonando l'ipotesi della prevedibilità perfetta dei risultati e contemplando la possibilità dell'errore.

testimonianza del tipo di elaborazione politica pasoliniana, che nulla ci dice di cosa avrebbe fatto o pensato di fronte alla mutata situazione del presente. È proprio in questo intervento postumo che Pasolini esprime, provocatoriamente come suo solito, una posizione apparentemente contraria alla lotta per i diritti civili, e una ancor più provocatoria chiamata alla rinuncia di tali diritti da parte delle minoranze. In realtà, la sua posizione è ben più complessa di quanto possa apparire a prima vista. Pasolini si mostra contrario a una *specific*a forma di acquisizione di diritti, quella basata su una forma d'identificazione sociale tra soggetto dominante e soggetto subalterno, che “insegna che chi serve ha gli identici diritti di chi comanda” (1999: 709). In breve, Pasolini si oppone a una forma di realizzazione dei propri diritti che non scalfisca né modifichi la struttura sociale esistente, e che promuova semplicemente “chi li ottiene al grado di borghese” (710). La sua preoccupazione è insomma quella di attuare una lotta che non riproduca un modello sociale, ma rivendichi diritti civili “in nome di una alterità”, secondo la dialettica marxista. Un'alterità che, per sua stessa natura, escluda “ogni possibile assimilazione degli sfruttati con gli sfruttatori” (710-11; 713). L'acquisizione di diritti, insomma, non deve essere la “lotta per la prevalenza di un'altra forma di vita [...] cioè di un'altra cultura”. Al contrario, per Pasolini “bisogna lottare per la conservazione di tutte le forme, alterne e subalterne di cultura” (713). Si tratta di una posizione molto vicina a quella del già citato Hocquenghem, per il quale il sistema capitalista trasforma la classe operaia in un'imitazione della classe media, così come trasforma gli omosessuali in soggetti eterosessuali falliti. La forma di tolleranza offerta dalla società neocapitalista agli omosessuali non è reale perché viene concessa solo dall'alto e comporta un'omologazione al sistema consumista che la rende intrinsecamente repressiva. Nel suo discorso Pasolini non parla esplicitamente di omosessualità, ma è facile includerla nel suo riferimento alle minoranze e alle forme alterne e subalterne di cultura. Occorre poi ricordare che, nel 1974, il FUORI si era federato al Partito radicale, “con l'intenzione di imboccare la tanto vituperata via riformista alla liberazione gay” (ROSSI BARILLI 1999: 73). Il modello riformista della lotta omosessuale aveva come obiettivo l'assimilazione di un soggetto omosessuale identitario, ossia la creazione di un'immagine normalizzata delle minoranze sessuali nella società, non il cambiamento del sistema stesso. È questa la posizione con cui Pasolini sembra polemizzare. All'interno del FUORI, tuttavia, esisteva ancora un'ala dichiaratamente marxista rivoluzionaria, vicina alle

posizioni che avevano portato alla fondazione stessa del collettivo. A questa componente ribelle va ricondotto, per esempio, il pensiero di Mario Mieli, che insisteva sul potenziale dell'effeminatezza e sottolineava come la società moderna inglobasse e normalizzasse le minoranze sessuali per farne consumatori su cui speculare (MIELI 1978). È insomma plausibile ipotizzare che nel suo discorso Pasolini si rivolga al Partito radicale proprio per il suo stretto legame con il movimento omosessuale, e che il suo invito strategico “a essere continuamente irriconoscibili”, a “continuare imperterriti, ostinati, eternamente contrari, a pretendere, a volere, a identificarsi col diverso” (1999: 1795), come ha notato anche Rinaldo Rinaldi, rappresenti una presa di posizione verso a una politica riformista basata sull'identità (RINALDI 1990). Quella di Pasolini è dunque una prospettiva politica radicalmente anti-identitaria, per nulla conservatrice, tanto che per alcuni aspetti pare addirittura anticipare elementi della teoria queer sviluppatasi vent'anni dopo.³

Di certo c'è solo che chi ha visto in Pasolini il nemico di una visione politica dell'omosessualità lo ha fatto dalla prospettiva identitaria del movimento gay riformista, assumendo tale punto di vista come unico possibile e praticabile. Proporre l'esistenza di un collegamento tra il queer e la prospettiva politica pasoliniana significa invece collocarla nel contesto di “quei gruppi radicali che non si accontentano delle rivendicazioni dei diritti civili espresse dalla maggior parte dei movimenti LGBT, che contestano l'immagine rassicurante delle minoranze sessuali come vittime di discriminazione, che chiedono un'assimilazione alla società esistente (il matrimonio, l'adozione, il diritto di far parte dell'esercito, tutti gli strumenti che possano garantire il comfort di una vita omosessuale borghese), e che promuovono, invece, politiche antagoniste volte alla trasformazione della società” (BERNINI 2013: 26). Il tipo di critica alla società capitalista presentato da Pasolini, che impedisce di scindere la questione omosessuale da quella economica, razziale o di classe, è in linea con le riflessioni di alcune componenti minoritarie del movimento omosessuale dell'epoca, libere “dall'ansia di moderazione e di integrazione” che ha invece finito col dominare la scena politica fino ai nostri giorni (PASOLINI 1999: 493).

³ Di questo avviso è anche la studiosa femminista Beatrice De Vela: “L'opera di Pasolini anticipa molte tematiche che il movimento queer internazionale ha cominciato ad affrontare almeno un decennio dopo; in Italia ancora si fa fatica a parlare di certi temi e si preferisce l'immagine monolitica e rassicurante di un Pasolini ‘martire dell'omofobia’”. Cfr. DE VELA 2013.

L'invito di Pasolini a non abbandonare la critica al sistema economico e a condividere un percorso di liberazione insieme a “tutte le forme, alterne e subalterne di cultura”, infatti, ha punti di tangenza anche con la pratica politica della componente antiliberista dell'odierno movimento LGBTQ italiano e internazionale (AZIONE GAY 2004).

Il termine ‘queer’ riferito all'evoluzione del pensiero politico dell'ultimo Pasolini serve dunque a indicare il suo modo radicale d'immaginare alternative esistenti a sistemi egemonici che fanno leva sull'anticonformismo, su pratiche anticapitalistiche e su stili di vita non riproduttivi. La critica alla rivendicazione di diritti proposta provocatoriamente da Pasolini non sottende una mancanza di resistenza, ma una pratica politica eversiva che vuole spiazzare il funzionamento della logica sociale dominante. Pasolini, per impiegare le parole di Leo Bersani, ci invita a “pensare l'omosessualità come autenticamente dirompente – come forza che non si limita agli obiettivi modesti della tolleranza per differenti stili di vita, ma che incita alla scelta politicamente inaccettabile e assieme politicamente indispensabile di un'esistenza fuori-legge” (1998: 76).

È in questo senso che l'invito pasoliniano al rimanere irriconoscibili ricorda la pratica di politica antagonista del margine che si trova nel *Queer Nation Manifesto* distribuito durante il Gay Pride di New York nel 1990:

Essere queer significa condurre un tipo di vita differente. Non ha niente a che vedere con il mainstream, i margini di profitto, il patriottismo, il patriarcato o con l'essere assimilati. Non ha niente a che vedere con i direttori esecutivi, il privilegio, l'elitismo. Ha a che fare con lo stare ai margini che ci definiscono, con la destabilizzazione del genere [*gender-fuck*] e con i segreti, con ciò che è sotto la cintura e nel profondo del cuore; ha a che fare con la notte. (QUEER NATION 1990)

È chiaro che qui non sto suggerendo che la posizione di Pasolini combaci con quella del movimento queer, esso stesso pluristratificato, complesso e in costante trasformazione. Farlo sarebbe tanto anacronistico quanto pretendere di interpretare il pensiero di Pasolini, confinato dalla sua morte agli anni Settanta, alla luce delle recenti battaglie per il riconoscimento del matrimonio omosessuale. Il mio è solo un tentativo di problematizzare la prospettiva pasoliniana e – per utilizzare un termine importante nella sua ultima produzione – di dilatarla nel più ampio contesto della politica omosessuale.

È naturale che questo tipo di operazione non possa che suscitare resistenza e sospetto. Anche accettando la logica del margine si può obiettare che la visione dell'omosessualità di Pasolini sia tutt'altro che fluida, distante dunque dall'enfasi posta dal movimento queer sulle pratiche di destabilizzazione del genere, che contestano nozioni normative eterosessiste di mascolinità e femminilità. Senza contare, è bene precisarlo, che Pasolini ha sempre rivolto la sua attenzione quasi interamente all'omosessualità maschile, un problema, peraltro, che all'epoca riguardava anche il FUORI (ROSSI BARILLI 1999: 62). Chi volesse argomentare in tal senso, non avrebbe che da citare – come già hanno fatto tutti coloro che hanno insistito sulla insostenibilità della sua posizione – la definizione di omosessualità fornita da Pasolini nella recensione del 26 aprile 1974 al libro di Marc Daniel e André Baudry intitolato *Gli omosessuali*:

Dal libro di Daniel e Baudry risulta, almeno implicitamente, che un omosessuale ama, o fa l'amore con un altro omosessuale. Mentre le cose non stanno affatto così. Un omosessuale, in genere (nell'enorme maggioranza, almeno nei Paesi mediterranei) ama, e vuol far l'amore con un eterosessuale disposto a una esperienza omosessuale, ma la cui eterosessualità non sia posta minimamente in discussione. Egli deve essere 'maschio'. (1999: 493)

Se è vero che questa affermazione pasoliniana sembra rendere conto della peculiare dinamica erotica del suo desiderio, leggerla in modo apodittico e totalizzante non può che rivelarsi fuorviante, soprattutto perché è Pasolini stesso a esporne retoricamente i limiti. Dapprima sembra fornire una definizione generale (“in genere”), salvo poi specificare parenteticamente che il suo è un discorso quantitativo (“nell'enorme maggioranza”) ma da iscriversi solo in un preciso contesto geografico-culturale (“almeno nei Paesi mediterranei”). Insomma, si tratta di un'affermazione che lo stesso Pasolini segnala come insufficiente a descrivere la complessità del fenomeno omosessuale e che tuttavia, occorre ammetterlo, descrive una variante omosessuale che esisteva ed esiste. Partire da questa citazione per formulare un giudizio complessivo sull'atteggiamento di Pasolini verso l'omosessualità risulta quanto meno problematico, sempre che l'intento non sia quello di descrivere l'erotismo dell'autore, come mi sembra si sia fatto finora in vario modo. La citazione, infatti, almeno a giudicare dalle acrobazie retoriche pasoliniane, è una forma di provocazione verso un libro sull'omosessualità

“onesto, chiaro, esauriente, democratico, moderato” (1999: 487), che ha come obiettivo principale quello di promuovere la tolleranza. Quanto sembra reativo nella caratterizzazione pasoliniana dell’omosessualità va dunque letto ricordando il potenziale sovversivo che Pasolini stesso le associa. L’omosessualità “disturba e minaccia (potenzialmente) di distruggere l’ordine sessuale, l’economia libidinale su cui poggia l’intera costruzione delle nostre società industriali” (1999: 1539). La radicalità di questa sovversione, sembra suggerire Pasolini con la sua provocazione, diminuisce potenzialmente se si considera l’omosessualità solo in maniera identitaria, cioè come un affare di omosessuali che amano e desiderano altri omosessuali. Ciò che destabilizza l’ordine eterosessuale, secondo lui, non è *solo* l’individuazione di un soggetto omosessuale tollerabile in quanto alieno a tale ordine, ma *anche* l’ambiguità pulsionale interna al maschile egemonico su cui si fonda.

Se avesse davvero ritenuto l’omosessualità come una forma di attrazione verso un uomo eterosessuale e maschile, non si spiega, per esempio, per quale ragione, solo pochi mesi dopo aver scritto la recensione al libro di Daniel e Baundy, in un’intervista rilasciata a Massimo Fini, Pasolini parli invece dell’erotismo omosessuale in questi termini: “Io stesso, che credevo di appartenere a una certa famiglia di gusti, di atti, di rapporti, di indoli carnali, mi sono accorto in questi anni, parlandone con un po’ più di confidenza, che ci sono dei profondi abissi anche fra gli appartenenti alla stessa famiglia erotica” (1999: 1713). La consapevolezza della natura poliforme dell’eros omosessuale trova conferma anche in una scena apparentemente marginale del *Decamerone* (1971), che mette proprio in discussione l’immagine arcaica dell’omosessuale mediterraneo. È una scena che non si trova né in Boccaccio, né nella sceneggiatura originale del film, e proprio per questo ancor più intrigante. Mi riferisco alla sequenza in cui l’allievo di Giotto, un pittore interpretato dallo stesso Pasolini, fa il suo ingresso per la prima volta all’interno della chiesa napoletana per la quale gli è stato commissionato un grande affresco. La sequenza contiene un punto di vista insolito per Pasolini, quello di due monaci particolarmente effeminati che mostrano una spiccata attrazione proprio per il pittore-Pasolini.

Prima di analizzare nel dettaglio la composizione di questa sequenza è bene ricordare che il *Decameron* non è il primo film in cui Pasolini rappresenta corpi che, dal punto di vista socio-culturale, incarnano quello che Judith Butler chiama un genere non intellegibile (BUTLER 2006). “Gridolini, urletti e tutto uno sciscì” (2001: 176-77) annunciano, per esempio, il gruppo

di “frocetti” che accompagnano, tra gesti azzimati e mossette, l’ultima passeggiata notturna di *Mamma Roma* (FIG. 1). Mi sembra interessante che il corpo dell’omosessuale effeminato si presenti nella forma di un gruppo vivace e ilare. Una di queste froce – il termine dispregiativo impiegato da Pasolini è, insieme a checca, la traduzione italiana più prossima del termine queer – si mette persino a ballare un cha-cha-cha. Proprio il ballo, come manifestazione eminentemente corporea, caratterizza anche la breve sequenza di *Uccellacci e uccellini* nella quale Totò e Ninetto si fermano brevemente presso un bar di periferia, dove un gruppo di ragazzi sta ballando in modo scatenato al suono di un juke-box. Tra di loro si distingue un altro ragazzo effeminato che “balla meglio di tutti... con insolenza e distrazione” (FIG. 2). Anche lui è descritto come “smorfioso” e nella sceneggiatura Pasolini si sofferma sulla descrizione fisica del suo corpo: “i calzoni fasciati stretti ai fianchi un po’ troppo rotondi” (2001: 752-53). Nella scena



FIG. 1 – *Mamma Roma* (Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1962).



FIG. 2 – *Uccellacci e uccellini* (Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1966).

effettivamente girata è l'unico che balla senza seguire i passi di gruppo e quando improvvisamente si allontana con una corsa che non lascia dubbi circa la sua effeminatezza, è chiaro che Pasolini vuole isolare visivamente la fisicità del suo corpo.

In *Uccellacci e uccellini* e *Mamma Roma* il corpo effeminato, caratterizzato da un'apparente gioiosa carica vitale, funziona semplicemente come il segnale di un'alterità riconoscibile. È una figura di sfondo, che conferma nello spettatore precisi stereotipi legati all'omosessualità senza coinvolgerlo in dinamiche d'identificazione tali da mettere in discussione il suo sguardo. Qualcosa di diverso mi sembra accadere nella sequenza dei fraticelli del *Decameron*.

Soffermiamoci dunque sulla sequenza nel dettaglio. Dapprima vediamo un primo piano dei due monaci, la testa dell'uno appoggiata a quella dell'altro; gongolano con un sorriso malizioso stampato sulla faccia mentre osservano qualcosa, inclinando manieratamente il capo di lato (FIG. 3).

L'inquadratura successiva ci mostra il loro punto di vista: un campo medio sulla navata laterale della chiesa al centro della quale si vede il pittore-Pasolini di spalle. Subito dopo, i suoi assistenti spingono verso la parete ancora vuota l'enorme impalcatura che servirà per la realizzazione dell'affresco, mentre il pittore resta immobile. È a quel punto che ritornano poi in primo piano i due fraticelli, sempre sorridenti e come estasiati da quello



FIG. 3 – *Il Decameron* (Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1971).

che stanno osservando. Si mordono le dita e fregano le mani con un'affettazione che non lascia dubbi sul loro desiderio. Dopo un breve stacco sul pittore ancora davanti all'impalcatura, l'inquadratura successiva è un campo lungo che mostra il pittore di fronte e i due fraticelli dietro di lui (FIG. 4). Segue un primissimo piano di Pasolini che osserva con sguardo rapito ciò che nell'inquadratura successiva si rivela essere la nuda parete della chiesa sulla quale sta forse proiettando mentalmente il suo affresco. Il gioco di punti di vista (e il campo lungo in particolare) rende evidente che l'oggetto dell'osservazione dei monaci e di Pasolini-pittore non è il medesimo. I due monaci osservano il pittore come un oggetto di desiderio, mentre il secondo, concentrato sulla parete, li ignora. I personaggi occupano letteralmente due piani differenti e una completa mancanza di reciprocità caratterizza i loro sguardi.

Non è azzardato definire quello dei due monaci come un 'cruising gaze' che ha come oggetto un altro omosessuale. Che Pasolini intendesse associare al personaggio dell'allievo di Giotto una chiara componente omosessuale lo rivela il fatto che, in un primo momento, per questo ruolo il regista aveva pensato all'amico e poeta Sandro Penna, cantore sublime dell'omoerotismo. Il regista, infatti, lo considerava "il nostro più grande poeta vivente" (1999a: 1647), proprio come Boccaccio considerava Giotto il miglior "dipintor" del mondo. Dopo il rifiuto di Penna, Pasolini si convince a interpretare lui stesso



FIG. 4 – *Il Decameron* (Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1971).

la parte del pittore medievale, ben consapevole però del “nuovo senso che avrebbe preso la [sua] opera, attraverso il [suo] ingresso fisico dentro di essa” (1999: 1648). La sua presenza sullo schermo comporta infatti “un’analogia fra il personaggio e l’autore” (MAHANI 1972: 6). Si tratta di un esempio perfetto del tipo di performance autoriale che Pasolini dissemina nella sua opera, in cui l’ambiguità tra personaggio e autore viene attentamente calcolata, così che lo spettatore non può evitare di associare al personaggio anche le caratteristiche dell’autore del film, compresa la sua omosessualità. Se interpretiamo, come mi sembra legittimo fare, questa sequenza come una messa in rappresentazione di un desiderio omosessuale, la totale mancanza di reciprocità tra lo sguardo dei due monaci e quello di Pasolini sembrerebbe ribadire il disinteresse di quest’ultimo per chiunque non corrisponda a quell’ideale erotico fondato sulla virilità a cui ho accennato prima. Si tratta, per altro, di un ideale ben rappresentato sin dalle prime scene del film dall’alter-ego pasoliniano per eccellenza, Sergio Citti, nel ruolo di Ser Ciappelletto, un omosessuale dai tratti virili e per questo indistinguibile tra la folla napoletana entro la quale seduce un ragazzo giovanissimo che ben incarna il “corpo popolare” erotizzato da Pasolini.

Eppure, se osservata dal punto di vista dei due monaci, il significato della scena cambia notevolmente. Banalmente, la sequenza ci mostra quanto Pasolini finge di negare nella sua recensione al libro di Daniel e Baudry: anche nei paesi mediterranei (il *Decameron* è quasi interamente ambientato a Napoli) esistono omosessuali attratti da altri omosessuali. Ciò che rende però interessante l’episodio dei due fraticelli è l’alternanza dei punti di vista tramite cui Pasolini ha concepito la sequenza. La tecnica, infatti, produce quel meccanismo di sutura dello sguardo che obbliga lo spettatore a identificarsi proprio con i due monaci, due corpi che scardinano, tramite la loro effeminatezza, il genere e la sessualità del tipo di sguardo spettatoriale che domina il cinema classico, ovvero uno sguardo maschile ed eterosessuale (MULVEY 2013). A riprova di quanto affermato prima sul significato della sua obiezione al modello di omosessualità presentato da Daniel e Baudry, è coinvolgendo quel tipo di sguardo normato nella dinamica omoerotica che Pasolini individua il potenziale sovversivo dell’omosessualità. Si tratta di una variante della modalità di “negoiazione omoerotica dell’eterosessuale” che Joseph Boone individua in *Il fiore delle mille e una notte*, in cui Pasolini infrange le convenzioni eterosessuali della rappresentazione cinematografica (BOONE 2014: 417). Se in quel film Pasolini otteneva questo risultato

attraverso l'attenzione ai dettagli dell'anatomia maschile, che arrivano a occupare l'intera inquadratura, sembra interessante che, nel *Decameron*, Pasolini rappresenti il desiderio omosessuale anche attraverso l'immagine non rassicurante, né normalizzata, dell'omosessuale effeminato, che il movimento di liberazione gay degli anni Settanta cercava invece di lasciarsi alle spalle, facendo della mascolinità uno spazio di desiderio e di identificazione. Nell'ambito specifico dell'omosessualità maschile, il corpo effeminato rappresenta più di altri un esempio di corpo queer, proprio perchè tra le sue molteplici declinazioni, scrive Richard Dyer, il queer "ha a che vedere con il non essere propriamente maschile o femminile" (DYER 2002: 97).

Nella sua importante storia dell'effeminatezza in Europa, Alan Sinfield è stato il primo ad individuare nella fine XIX secolo il momento in cui l'effeminatezza, da sinonimo di un diffuso tipo di sentimentalismo associato alla sensibilità femminile, diviene un significante dell'omosessualità e, al contempo, una funzione disciplinare del maschile (SINFIELD 1994). Come ha spiegato Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in *Between Men*, nella modalità omosociale, la mascolinità non è regolata dalla paura dell'intimità maschile, ma da quella dell'effeminazione; l'effeminatezza non è una proprietà dei soggetti queer, ma una paura che organizza la mascolinità, trasposta su di loro (SEDGWICK 1985). Paradossalmente, il corpo effeminato, così marcatamente riconoscibile, è anche il più irriconoscibile secondo la caratterizzazione pasoliniana di questo termine, in quanto profondamente destabilizzante rispetto alle categorie normative che strutturano la società repressiva. È insomma anche nella forzata identificazione momentanea dello spettatore con una fisicità demascolinizzata, con un corpo queer, che Pasolini dimostra di voler creare nel suo film "un linguaggio che metta in crisi l'uomo medio, lo spettatore medio" (1999: 1433) e dunque anche la società che l'ha prodotto.

Non pare una coincidenza che un cultore della mascolinità come lui passi dal rappresentare il corpo effeminato in maniera quasi folclorica al suggerire il suo potenziale destabilizzante in concomitanza con l'apparizione, nelle maggiori città occidentali, di una nuova figura di omosessuale, lo 'straight-acting homosexual', un omosessuale ipermaschile. Quest'immagine dell'omosessuale virile e mascolino, ampiamente diffusa anche attraverso la moda, l'estetica e il materiale erotico, annuncia anche un mutamento di sensibilità del movimento omosessuale e il rifiuto dello stereotipo decadente dell'omosessuale effeminato che anche Pasolini, come abbiamo

visto, contribuisce a rappresentare. Ciò che colpisce, però, è che proprio lo sviluppo del modello di omosessualità ipermaschile, in quanto tangente al modello di mascolinità egemonica, ha creato quell'“effemino-fobia” che, per Sedgwick, ha determinato la “posizione marginale e stigmatizzata [...] nella quale sono stati relegati gli uomini adulti effeminati” all'interno della comunità omosessuale (SEDGWICK 1991: 20). Gli effetti di questo fenomeno di stigmatizzazione dell'effeminatezza nella cultura omosessuale, che rappresenta un vero e proprio cambio di paradigma micro-sociale, sono evidenti ancora oggi nelle dinamiche di relazione imperanti nella comunità gay a livello globale (HENNEN 2008: 47-9). Alla luce di questa contrapposizione tra opposti corpi maschili all'interno del movimento omosessuale degli anni Settanta, vorrei concludere soffermandomi brevemente su una parte della sceneggiatura di *Appunti per un film su San Paolo*, un progetto non realizzato, iniziato da Pasolini nel 1968 ma rimaneggiato nel 1974. Nell'episodio “più lungo e ricco del film” ambientato a New York, che Pasolini vede come la nuova Roma imperiale, Paolo si ritrova a predicare davanti a un gruppo di persone in cui non è difficile identificare una micro-società di minoranze ed emarginati:

Ci sono dei negri, con un'aria pericolosa e teppistica, con curiosi capelli e abbigliamenti quasi selvaggi; ci sono dei giovani 'beats' e 'hippies' sporchi e provocanti quanto basterebbe a mandare su tutte le furie il più liberale dei borghesi; un gruppo è intorno a una ragazza che canta, suonando su una chitarra, una canzone contro ogni specie di potere. [...] Altri ancora in gruppo, stanno chiacchierando vivaci: si tratta di lepidi discussioni, tra un gruppo di omosessuali, molto femminili, e truccati, con dei giovani prostituti, vestiti quasi in costume, tanto è l'eccesso della loro violenza, della loro virilità; intorno ci sono relitti di varie specie: vecchi ubriaconi venuti dai più insondabili bassifondi; vecchie puttane ridotte a mendicanti; ragazze corrotte, fuggite dalla famiglia [...] ci sono anche degli intellettuali, riconoscibili non dai vestiti, ma dai loro volti spenti e dai loro occhi attenti. (2001a: 1994)

Questa folla, dapprima affascinata dall'apostolo, finisce col reagire con fischi e urla di protesta al suo invito conformista a non contrastare l'autorità, ma ad accettare la sua legge. Le parole di Paolo, infatti, sono in aperta contraddizione con il loro modello di società progressista, basato sull'idea d'istituzioni “sempre instabili, indefinite, aperte, in movimento” e sulla pratica di un linguaggio rivoluzionario “inventato giorno per giorno” (1998). Sono idee che appaiono davvero familiari se confrontate con la

provocatoria nozione di irriconoscibilità promossa da Pasolini, un invito a tutti i soggetti minoritari a modificare costantemente le proprie modalità di lotta per non essere ricondotti dall'autorità a un'identità fissa, facilmente irreggimentabile.

Per comprendere meglio il significato simbolico della precisa composizione della folla radunata per ascoltare il discorso di Paolo possiamo confrontarne la descrizione con quella della società di Sodoma, una città utopica interamente omosessuale che si trova nella sceneggiatura di un altro progetto cinematografico, *Porno-Teo-Kolossal*, a cui Pasolini stava lavorando, in parallelo al *San Paolo*, all'epoca della sua morte. In questa immaginaria Sodoma, che come la New York del *San Paolo* ricorda Roma, “tutti sono ‘finocchi’, ‘tutti ricchioni’” (2001a: 2705-7). Si tratta di una società che si basa “su regole di bontà, di mitezza, di comprensione, di tolleranza reale”, dove “tutto è fondato su una reale democraticità [...] Nel mondo di Sodoma trovano poi posto anche le minoranze di qualsiasi tipo. Non soltanto minoranze eterosessuali, ma anche minoranze di negri, minoranze di ebrei, minoranze di zingari, che lì vivono nella più assoluta libertà *anche interiore*” (ivi: 2710, 2713). Nonostante Sodoma sia una città omosessuale, al cui governo si alternano un presidente omosessuale a una presidentessa lesbica, la sua ideologia, che Pasolini adatta dal popolare volume *Corpo d'amore* di Norman O. Brown, non è di carattere identitario ma basata sulla convivenza di minoranze accomunate dalla condivisione di una cultura, quella di una tolleranza reale, non concessa dall'alto ma conquistata dal basso.⁴ È lo stesso linguaggio che Pasolini impiega nel discorso scritto per il convegno del Partito radicale. Parimenti, la comunità radunatasi per Paolo sembra contrapporsi alla medesima visione identitaria delle minoranze. È anche per questa sua tendenza a mettere al centro il problema delle differenze multiple, sessuali ma anche etniche e religiose, che la visione del tardo Pasolini sembra incontrare il pensiero queer.

Quello che mi preme far notare ai fini del mio discorso è però la presenza nel gruppo eterogeno riunitosi davanti a Paolo di corpi ben precisi. Penso al gruppo di ragazzi effeminati (“molto femminili, e truccati”) che conversa con alcuni prostituti ipermaschili, che sembrano “vestiti quasi in costume” tanta è l'esposizione della loro virilità. Si tratta di una presenza

⁴ Per l'importanza del volume di Norman O. Brown per la genesi di *Porno-Teo-Kolossal* si veda, MAGGI 2009, § 2.

particolarmente rivelatoria all'interno di questo film-da-farsi, se – come ricorda lo stesso Pasolini nella già citata recensione al libro di Daniel e Baudry – all'origine del tabù dell'omosessualità ci sarebbe anche “una breve frase di san Paolo contenuta nella epistola agli Efesini: ‘Che queste cose non vengano da voi neanche nominate’” (1999: 487).

Da un lato, la presenza di questi corpi queer rafforza l'impressione che Pasolini considerasse anche l'omosessuale non conforme alla sua esperienza come un soggetto politico, sebbene all'interno di un ambito di lotta anti-identitaria. Proprio il corpo dell'uomo effeminato, cui non mi sembra che fino ad ora si sia prestata la dovuta attenzione dagli studiosi di Pasolini,⁵ sembra funzionare come significante privilegiato per un tipo di omosessualità che resiste nel tempo al conformismo di genere non solo dell'immaginario eterosessuale ma anche della cultura omosessuale sviluppatasi a partire dagli anni Settanta.

Come ha notato Simon Watney, mentre il corpo omosessuale effeminato genera di solito riprovazione per la sua evidenza, quello teatralmente mascolinizzato tende invece semplicemente a sparire, in una neutralità conforme al genere, in un'immagine socialmente accettabile e asettica (1987: 78-79). È forse anche per questa ragione che dovremmo pensare come omosessuale anche la mascolinità esagerata del gruppo di prostituti che si intrattiene, in conversazioni non superficiali (si veda l'uso del preziosismo “lepide”), con il gruppo di ragazzi “molto femminili e truccati”. Pasolini, infatti, si premura di indicarci che quei corpi virili contengono un grado di finzione, come se la loro fosse una performance (“come in costume”), un atto teatrale.⁶ Sembra insomma che Pasolini stia qui mettendo in evidenza anche il nuovo tipo di soggetto omosessuale emerso negli anni Settanta che, come ha scritto Denis Altman, “mette in mostra il suo orientamento attraverso un aspetto maschile teatralizzato” (1980: 52). Questa mascherata identitaria, che è – nei termini di Judith Butler – una vera e propria performance di genere basata sulla ripetizione teatrale, è diventata non solo la tendenza

⁵ A una lettura queer dell'ultimo Pasolini incentrata proprio sull'ambiguità tra maschile e femminile, Manuele Gragnolati ha dedicato pagine brillanti, analizzando i due momenti ‘fondamentali’ di *Petrolio*, ossia la trasformazione in donna del doppio protagonista del romanzo incompiuto (GRAGNOLATI 2013).

⁶ Sebbene il termine “costume” possa indicare anche lo slip da spiaggia, il fatto che i ragazzi siano descritti con l'espressione “vestiti come in costume” e non “come in costume” (ossia svestiti o seminudi) sembra confermare la mia interpretazione della loro virilità teatrale, simile a quella degli archetipi maschili rappresentati da Tom of Finland.

dominante nella cultura gay ma, per la mancanza di trasgressione rispetto alla struttura binaria del genere, anche un modo per “rivendicare, erotizzare, e mostrare i simboli dominanti della mascolinità egemonica” (MESSNER 1997: 83), secondo cui il potere si stratifica gerarchicamente (CONNELL 1995). Sebbene questo tipo di nuovo omosessuale nato in coincidenza con il movimento di rivendicazione gay rappresenti per qualcuno una maniera trasgressiva di abitare il maschile, ad esempio nelle sue varianti bear e leather (HENNEN 2008), per Altman l’omosessuale iper-mascolino risulta in generale “assertivo, particolarmente consumista e per nulla rivoluzionario, sebbene pronto a manifestare per i diritti gay” (1980: 52). Questo processo di omologazione culturale interno alla comunità omosessuale, che procede espungendo le soggettività problematiche per una definizione conformista e rassicurante dell’omosessualità, come se l’effeminatezza non fosse altro che uno sviluppo disciplinare interno alla mascolinità egemonica, non è però presente nella scena descritta da Pasolini. Lì, infatti, i due poli opposti, l’omosessuale effeminato e quello iper-mascolino, non sono autoescludenti né in conflitto, ma in dialogo, e inseriti nel modello di società che Pasolini sembrava auspicare, quello in cui forme di alterità differenti non si elidono ma partecipano in un comune processo di resistenza anti-identitaria.

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VALERIA SPACCIANTE

The successful impotent

Deconstructing Platonic Eros in Walter Siti's *Scuola di nudo*¹

ABSTRACT: This article analyzes the development of the protagonist's conception of desire in one of the most relevant works in the Italian queer canon – Walter Siti's *Scuola di nudo* – in order to show how the Platonic erotic conception eventually yields to modern theories on social behavior in the context of power relations between individuals as formulated by Hegel, Kojève, and Girard. Such a conclusion marks the paradoxical failure of the main character Walter, since it proves his intellectual defeat against the prevarication logic governing the contemporary world. From the close reading of the novel, it appears that the analysis of desire becomes the stage of Walter's personal struggle, who at the end of the novel rejects intellectualized love and accepts abusive relationships as the only successful kind of relationship. An effective image to describe Walter's inner development throughout the novel is the “katabasis”, since he moves from an extremely intellectualized to a utilitarian conception of love. Such a shift of perspective ensures Walter's integration into society, but on the other hand confirms his intellectual ineptitude and inability to oppose an ideological system which he despises.

KEYWORDS: Walter Siti; contemporary Italian literature; Plato, theory of Eros; Queer theory; Slave-master dialectic; René Girard, mimetic desire.

Walter Siti's *Scuola di nudo* (1994) can legitimately be considered a novel about desire.² It is an *autofiction*³ about Walter,⁴ a homosexual professor of literature at the University of Pisa and first-person narrator, and his

¹ This article is greatly indebted to Prof. Alessandro Grilli's and Prof. Nikolas Kakkoufa's helpful suggestions and criticisms. I am also grateful to the two anonymous reviewers at *Whatever* for their criticisms and bibliographical recommendations.

² MAZZONI 1995: 153; SIMONETTI 1995: 114; GRILLI 2012: 445.

³ I will not address in this analysis the genre issues surrounding this work, which has been classified as autofiction. The word *Autofiction* designates a fictionalized autobiography (see GASPARINI 2008). The relation between fiction and biography has been at the center of the attention of Siti scholars – and in general of the Italian contemporary literary debate – for at least two decades now. This topic already came up in Siti's first reviews (MAZZONI 1995: 150; SIMONETTI 1995: 113-114; CONTARINI 1999), which were followed by several essays. See for example CASADEI 2008: 51-52; GIGLIO 2008. For an overview about the Italian contemporary autofiction see MARTEMUCCI 2008, ZINATO 2011, DONNARUMMA 2014: 127 ff. and MARCHESE 2018. See also Walter Siti's own perception on his fake autobiography in CRISTIANO 2012.

⁴ I will henceforth refer to the author as Walter Siti (or just Siti) and to the character as just Walter.

attempt to write a monograph about male nude, alternating it with his own (auto)biographical erotic experiences occasionally inspired by real life episodes. More precisely, *Scuola di nudo* is a novel about unsatisfied desire, specifically Walter's desire for self-affirmation, which is addressed from both a sexual and a social point of view. The novel's theoretical assumption is that everything in the world is governed by the individual desire to prevaricate.⁵ Such a worldview comes to Siti from Hegel's slave-master dialectic and its subsequent developments by Alexandre Kojève and René Girard, who have a great part in shaping the novel's universe (SIMONETTI 1995: 114-115; GRILLI 2012: 435-436).

In such an agonistic logic, Walter is destined to lose because of his innate passivity. Siti makes this very clear halfway through the novel, when he has Walter reassess his own story, by changing it from "the story of a homosexual" to "the story of an impotent" (*SDN*: 255) He is socially impotent, since he cannot affirm his own will at the others' expense. This inevitably affects Walter's sexual relations: he can be nothing but passive, to the point that he ends his relationships when asked by his partners to penetrate rather than to be penetrated. Being unable to conform to the power dynamics underlying human relationships, Walter tries in his monograph to formulate an alternative erotic conception – the theory of Eros – based on the aesthetic enjoyment of the abstract perfection of male bodies. To oppose the slave-master dialectic Walter draws on Plato and his followers (GRILLI 2012: 446-448; TINELLI 2017: 104-106). Walter's theory is therefore an intellectual rebellion to the dominant theoretic framework which Siti adopts for the rest of his novel. Walter rightly presents his monograph as an act of revolt, a way to free himself from the violence of this system:

Resterò seduto quando la frase si chiude: non ho da perdere che le mie catene, ho un'individualità da guadagnare. Trentacinque anni sono forse troppi per uscire di minorità: ma si sa che l'omosessualità e l'accademia fermano gli orologi. (*SDN*: 6)

I will stay seated when the sentence ends. I have nothing to lose but my own chains, I have my own individuality to acquire. Thirty-five years are too many to

⁵ *SDN*: 157, "E dai con la storia del senza-desiderio: ma l'universo è impastato di desiderio, e mi pare un po' vigliacco, se non ti dispiace, sottrarsi al dolore dei desideri frustrati." ("Enough with this no-desire story! Universe is stuffed with desire, and I think it's cowardly – if you don't mind – to avoid the pain arising from frustrated desires").

leave minority. Though everybody knows that homosexuality and academia stop the clocks.⁶

By adopting a new theoretical framework, Walter promotes an intellectual dissociation from the worldview as it is offered in the novel and advocates for his own passivity and impotence, namely for his right to be an under-achiever. Walter's erotic theory is hence an existential, other than an intellectual statement: Walter is interested in alienating himself from the world by focusing on intellectual beauty – this way, he does not have to comply with the prevarication logic which regulates social relationships. Walter's theory of Eros is an attempt to intellectually justify his social impotence. In this regard, the novel is not simply an account of Walter's sexual life and of his own erotic conception, but it rather engages with Walter's *Weltanschauung*, which is described through the lens of the homosexual desire.

The novel's complex structure – which alternates narrative, essays, and more introspective parts – reflects the complex nature of desire, which is addressed from many different perspectives. We can enucleate two macro-areas of critical reflection on desire: the former, which mostly corresponds to the extracts of Walter's in-progress essay, deals with the theoretic aspects of desire and is inspired by the above-mentioned Platonic theory. The latter draws on Hegel-Kojève-Girard's social theory and relies on the narration of Walter's (auto)biographical experiences.

Such a dichotomy⁷ can be summarized not only as an opposition of theoretical paradigms, but also as a conflict between theory and practice, namely between what Walter would want for himself and what he experiences in his life. Specifically, Walter's theory proves more and more delusional as the story progresses, being continuously confuted by the events. Halfway through the novel, Walter becomes physically impotent: such a traumatic event leads him to try to reacquire his sexual prowess by any means. This unexpected desire forces Walter to review his own theory. In fact, when he becomes impotent, Walter realizes that he is not immune to the society's prevarication logic and wants to succeed like anybody else. This brings Walter to progressively reassess his theory, until he eventually disproves it. Walter's colleague and *alter ego* Matteo, nicknamed il Cane (the Dog), plays a great part in this revision process. Matteo, unlike Walter,

⁶ All the English translations are my own.

⁷ For a systematic survey of the dualistic tendency in Walter Siti's works see CUCCHI 2021.

is the prototype of the successful man according to the society's standards: he has no qualms about destroying the others for his own benefit, and he is also sexually very capable. The relationship with Matteo deeply influences Walter's theory – Walter formulates it in the first place to distance himself from Matteo, but eventually he has to admit that Matteo's worldview is the only possible response to the contemporary society. In the end, Walter quits writing his monograph and abandons his intellectualized conception of desire. From an intellectual perspective, Walter's final act marks the victory of the Hegelian social theory over Platonism.

In this article I will try to reconstruct the novel's interplay between erotic and social theory in order to show how the former eventually yields to the latter. More precisely, I will show how Walter's erotic theory – modelled after Plato and his followers – is progressively destroyed by the novel's theoretical framework, dominated by the social theories of Hegel, Kojève, and Girard. Through my reading I will illustrate how in *Scuola di nudo* the analysis of desire becomes the stage of a theoretical struggle, in which contemplation-oriented philosophy yields to social studies. An effective image to describe this theoretical movement is the "katabasis". I am using this term with reference to Dante's journey to the Underworld in the *Inferno*, which is one of *Scuola di nudo*'s hypotexts (BROGI 2007; FONIO 2008: 195-197). Like Dante in the first *cantica* of the *Commedia*, Walter goes further and further down into moral abjection, except that he totally embraces and enjoys it at the end of the novel. As in a katabasis, he moves from a hyper-idealized down to an extremely opportunistic conception of love and desire, to the point of equating them to consumer goods in the conclusion of the story. However, unlike traditional katabaseis, Walter never comes back from his journey, nor learns a good lesson for the rest of his mortal life. On the contrary, throughout *Scuola di nudo* Walter rejects something morally higher to embrace something lower: his katabasis is of no moral example to him, but it rather marks a one-way trip to abjection. What makes this conclusion even more paradoxical and sarcastic is the fact that Walter's final corruption in fact establishes his own social success. At the end of the novel, Walter is well regarded by his colleagues, who finally consider him a full-fledged member of their community. Nonetheless, this success is the ultimate proof of Walter's social impotence – by rejecting his theory, Walter renounces to advocate for his own passivity. Therefore, *Scuola di nudo* is the story of the failure of Walter's theory, which proves

ineffective before the world's social struggle; this theory, on the other hand, was formulated by Walter in the attempt of preserving his own identity. Consequently, *Scuola di nudo* is the story of a doubly failed act of revolt, both from the intellectual and from the social point of view. In the end, Walter is a paradoxical 'successful impotent': he is successful because after giving up on his ideal Eros he finally manages to integrate in the society;⁸ on the other hand, he is impotent because he has not been able to oppose the system. Consequently, Walter is paradoxically impotent because he is not able to advocate for his own impotency and even repudiates his initial theoretical cornerstones.

Desire indisputably is the novel's main theme. In a long paragraph, Walter quotes an anonymous source in the attempt of investigating the nature of desire:

Il desiderio umano ha sempre come oggetto un altro desiderio: ma desiderare un desiderio significa voler sostituire se stessi al valore desiderato da questo desiderio... Ogni desiderio umano, antropogenico, è quindi in ultima istanza funzione del desiderio di "riconoscimento": l'azione tesa al soddisfacimento di questo desiderio fondamentale si inizierà con l'atto di imporsi al primo "altro" in cui ci si imbatte... E poiché questo altro, se vuol essere un essere umano, deve fare altrettanto, la prima azione antropogenica assume di necessità la forma di una lotta: di una lotta mortale tra due esseri che pretendono di essere uomini. Senza questa lotta mortale, di puro prestigio, non ci sarebbero mai stati, sulla terra, esseri umani... Ciascuno dei due deve distruggere il valore dell'altro come valore umano oggettivo, e incorporare questo valore nella propria soggettività; di fatto esistendo lui solo e negando l'esistenza umana dell'altro... Se tutti gli uomini si comportassero nella stessa maniera, la lotta condurrebbe necessariamente alla morte di uno degli avversari o di tutti e due a un tempo; ma in tal caso la rivelazione dell'essere umano sarebbe impossibile, perché nessuno potrebbe "riconoscere" l'altro o farsi riconoscere da lui. Perché la realtà umana si possa costituire come realtà "riconosciuta", occorre che i due avversari sopravvivano alla lotta. Ora, questo è possibile solo a patto che nella lotta si comportino in maniera diversa: uno di essi deve aver paura dell'altro, deve cedere all'altro, deve ritirarsi di fronte al rischio mortale – ciò equivale a riconoscere l'altro come signore e a farsi riconoscere come suo servo... quest'ultimo è l'avversario vinto, che nel rischio della vita non si è spinto fino all'estremo: ha preferito alla morte la schiavitù e perciò, rimanendo in vita, vive da servo. (SDN: 102)

⁸ See STURLI 2020: 193 ff. on Walter's (and Siti's) paradoxical integration.

Human desire always has another desire as its object; however, to desire a desire implies to be willing to substitute ourselves to the value that we attribute to this desire... Therefore each human desire – being anthropogenic – ultimately is a function of the “identification” desire: the act of satisfying such basic desire will start by imposing the self on the first “other” we will encounter... And since this other has to do the same, if he wants to be a human being, the first anthropogenic action is by necessity a form of conflict. A mortal conflict between two entities demanding to be humans. Without this mortal conflict – a conflict of mere prestige – there would never have been humans on the earth... Each of the two must destroy his adversary’s value in its objectivity and humanness, and to incorporate such value in his own subjectivity; in fact, by so doing he must negate the other’s existence as a human and only admit his own existence... If all men acted the same, the conflict would necessarily result in the death of either or both the adversaries. But in this case the human’s revelations would be impossible, since nobody could “identify” the other or be identified by him. In order for the human reality to be “identified”, the two adversaries need to survive the conflict. This cannot happen unless they act differently in the conflict: one must fear the other, must yield to him, must withdraw before deadly risk. This means to identify the other as master and be identified as slave... The latter being the defeated adversary, the one who did not push himself to the extreme risk. He chose slavery over death and thus, being still alive, he lives as a slave.

Even though not revealed by the author, this long passage is a quotation from Kojève’s commentary to Hegel’s slave-master dialectic in his *Introduction à la lecture d’Hegel* (MAZZONI 1995: 152): social relationships are based on prevarication, namely on one’s desire to annihilate the other. For this reason, in Hegel-Kojève’s view no other form of relationship is possible than the one between master and slave. In other words, any relationship is a struggle for supremacy. Such theoretical framework is enriched by Girard’s notion of mimetic desire – as explained in *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque* –, according to which an individual ends up desiring someone else’s object of desire exactly because someone else is desiring it (SIMONETTI 1995: 114-115). In other words, any desire is triggered by the more powerful desire of dominating the other, which necessarily generates a conflict for supremacy between two selves (“E poiché questo altro, se vuol essere un essere umano, deve fare altrettanto, la prima azione antropogenica assume di necessità la forma di una lotta”). The only possibility for the world to survive is that one of the selves submit to the other, namely recognize the other’s ontological superiority. This

social dynamic is represented by the master-slave dialectic (“uno di essi deve aver paura dell’altro, deve cedere all’altro, deve ritirarsi di fronte al rischio mortale – ciò equivale a riconoscere l’altro come signore e a farsi riconoscere come suo servo...”), which logically and inescapably divides the world into winners and losers.

Walter undoubtedly fits the second category: a few pages after having presented this theory, he defines himself as an inept:

La mia indegnità è un dato semiologico, una particolare disposizione endocrina che mi vieta di reagire: non discrimino tra minacce e inviti, tra gentilezze e incubi. Ritiro la punta del pensiero prima che esca il sangue, evito le zone nevralgiche o di pelle sottile: non tanto per paura di soccombere ma come se temessi di aizzare me contro me stesso. (*SDN*: 159)

My inaptitude is semiological, a specific endocrine condition which prevents me from reacting. I make no distinction between threats and invitations, pleasantries and nightmares. I take back the tip of my thought before I start bleeding, I avoid neuralgia areas and thin-skinned zones. I fear to succumb no more than to pit me against myself.

Walter describes himself as passive and incapable of taking actions. Consequently, he has the others decide for him. In Walter’s own words, this has been his lifestyle until he decided to write his monograph. His academic supervisor – significantly nicknamed *il Padre* (the Father)⁹ – has always picked the research topics for him, therefore Walter has gone down a path which *il Padre* chose for him – “Ho fatto la mia carriera come un cane ammaestrato”, he says in the very first pages of the novel (*SDN*: 4, “I pursued my career as a trained dog”). In the slave-master dialectic system, Walter is a slave, someone who gave up on himself to submit to someone else’s will. His monograph marks a break with this system both theoretically and practically. It proposes an idea of relationship which theoretically challenges the Hegel-Kojève-Girard’s social scheme. Moreover, this is Walter’s first project not to be approved by *il Padre*. Thus, this monograph is Walter’s intellectual attempt to detach himself from the oppressive environment which surrounds him.

⁹ The name is clearly inspired to Freud’s theory, which gives great importance to the father in a man’s psychological development. For the Freudian implications behind the relationship between Walter and *il Padre* see FONIO 2008: 202-203 and GRILLI 2012: 434-436.

Halfway through the novel Walter exposes his own erotic theory. Drawing on Plato,¹⁰ Walter introduces his concept of Eros:

L'eros è desiderio, tensione verso l'alto, fiamma scala volo freccia, attratto dal sublime e dall'assoluto; mediante l'eros il soggetto si distacca dalla miseria e dall'insensatezza di questo mondo e si proietta in un più nobile aldilà; motivato dal fulgore del suo oggetto, l'eros percorre tutti i gradi dell'essere e trasforma l'amante in una scintilla esule alla ricerca della propria origine; liberando il soggetto dalle catene, lo proietta in una sfera iperurania e lo rende inattaccabile dall'impurezza. (*SDN*: 437)

Eros is desire, upward tension, flame ladder flying arrow, and it is attracted to the sublime and the absolute. Through Eros the subject parts from this world's misery and nonsense and tends toward a nobler "beyond". Motivated by its object's radiance, Eros climbs up each grade of being and turns the lover into a wandering spark looking for its own origin; by releasing the subject from his¹¹ chains, Eros sends him to hyperuranium and makes him impurity resistant.

Eros enables the lovers to part from the world ("mediante l'eros il soggetto si distacca dalla miseria e dall'insensatezza di questo mondo e si proietta in un più nobile aldilà"); they do not love the object per se, but they aim to attain perfection through it. Following Plato, Walter loves perfect bodies to come closer to abstract perfection.¹² From the very beginning Walter justifies his love for the male nudes as an attempt to reach the infinite:

Il primo significato costante del bel nudo maschile è la sua natura di corpo infinito: se guardo una foto di glutei e ne seguo la curva, capisco che infinite altre curve infinitamente vicine a questa potrebbero disegnare glutei attraenti, e molte altre fotografie potrebbero stare al posto di quella che ho scelto – ma nel momento in cui avverto la contrazione al basso ventre allora quella curva è la sola possibile. L'infinito si è condensato in quel solco, che è il risultato di un'approssimazione infinitesima; i numeri alla destra e alla sinistra dell'*x* si precipitano sempre più fitti a delineare l'inafferrabile nettissimo profilo. Il desiderio nel suo livello più

¹⁰ The text seems to recall what Plato says in the *Symposium* – Eros desires and aspires to wisdom, hence he is *philosophos* ("lover of wisdom"). Consequently, the lover is inspired by Eros to pursue wisdom (Pl. *Symp.* 210d6-211a7). For further details on Siti's sources see GRILLI 2012: 446-447.

¹¹ Although the Italian is ambiguous (*amante* can be either masculine or feminine) I have chosen to use the masculine version. Given the topic of Walter's essay, I assume that he is talking about a male lover attracted to another man.

¹² For the development of Eros in Siti's subsequent production see RACCIS 2017. See also STURLI 2017: 466-467.

profondo ha sempre a che fare con grandezze infinite; la struttura dell'essere si divide e si complica progressivamente, ma c'è una zona del nostro cervello che reagisce a questa complicazione immaginando un mondo dove non c'è né prima né poi, né tempo né spazio, né effetto né causa, né io né nonio. Il nudo maschile, quando è perfetto, è il materializzarsi di questo desiderio: non un oggetto ma uno scatto che realizza l'assenza di relazioni logiche. Il bel nudo maschile non ha durata, è solo l'astratto luogo matematico dove il principio di piacere si confonde al principio di inerzia. (SDN: 10-11)

The first continuous meaning of the handsome male nude is its status of unlimited body: if I look at a picture of buttocks and follow their curve I can see that infinite other curves immeasurably close to this one could outline attractive buttocks, and many other pictures could replace the one that I picked out. But as soon as I have that contraction of the lower abdomen then I know that that very curve is the only possible. Infinity condensed in that slope which is the result of an infinitesimal approximation. The numbers to both the right and the left of x progressively pile up in order to outline the ungraspable, very distinct, silhouette. Desire at its deepest stage has always something to do with unlimited measures. The structure of being is progressively split and becomes more and more complicated; however, there is an area in our brain which reacts to such a complication by imagining a world with neither before nor after, neither time nor place, neither effect nor cause, neither "I" nor "non-I". The male nude – when perfect – is the materialization of this desire. It is no object, rather a snapshot materializing the absence of logical relations. The handsome male nude has no duration, it is but the abstract mathematical locus where the pleasure principle mingles with the principle of inertia.

As we can see from this description, Walter's love is intellectual – he is attracted to ideal models rather than concrete individuals. The perfect male nude is a "mathematical locus", an ideal place. Interestingly, the perfect male nude is also the place "where the pleasure principle mingles with the principle of inertia", namely the place in which he can indulge into inertia and passivity. In order for Walter to achieve this, these nudes must be detached from the reality: they are "alien to history"¹³ and "live a life opposed to life"¹⁴, meaning that they are the negation of life. Consequently,

¹³ SDN: 12, "Il nudo maschile è estraneo alla storia, non ha niente a che fare col tempo e quindi è del tutto estraneo al movimento" ("The male nude is alien to history, it does not have anything to do with time and therefore is completely alien to any movement")

¹⁴ SDN: 13, "I nudi maschili vivono una vita che si oppone alla vita, se ne separa come le gocce d'olio in emulsione nell'acqua; per questo la macchina fotografica è l'autentico organo del mio desiderio, perché fissa il movimento in poche immagini statiche su una sottile membrana; per questo, anche, le mie più stupende avventure si concludono in un clic" ("Male nudes live a life

they are also alien to the social conflict, and hence provide Walter with a safe space to escape the struggle for supremacy. As an Eros lover, Walter is only interested in the body builders as a symbol for aesthetic perfection:

Il nudo divino è ospite in un corpo, vi emerge come una roccia dalla sabbia, disarmonico dal punto di vista della materia che l'imprigiona; il suo torace è troppo sviluppato rispetto alla parte inferiore del corpo, o le gambe un po' corte e arcuate sono il segno che la sua perfezione appartiene a un altro ordine; ogni eleganza, ogni snellezza, o levigata armonia sarebbero un ingresso per l'estetica e quindi per la storia. (SDN: 16)

The divine nude is a guest in a body, from which arises as a rock from the sand, inharmonious with respect to the imprisoning material; his overbuilt torso – compared to the lower part of his body –, or his legs – slightly short and bandy – are the sign that such a perfection belongs to a different order of things; any elegance, any slenderness, would be a gateway to aesthetics and hence to history.

As he explains, the bodybuilder's body is but a host, the carrier of perfection. To engage with this carrier would mean to engage with reality and hence any perfection would be lost. Eros is thus an exercise for the lover to attain perfection, it does not actually pertain the love object.

Walter is aware that such love has no correspondence in the real world: “[l']eros si nutre dell'illusione di poter diventare come dei”, (SDN: 438, “Eros feeds on the illusion to be able to become like gods”), says at some point of his treatise. On the other hand, he has no interest in dealing with the real world – in fact, he elaborated this theory precisely to avoid becoming involved in it. Following Plato, he loves the bodybuilders' bodies as the corporeal copy of the archetypal perfection. He has no more interest in the individual behind the body than in what that body stands for – an image of perfection. Consequently, Walter's love is solipsistic, and it is only meant to boost the lover's self. To make this happen, the love object has to prevent any interaction between the lover and the outside world. For this reason, Walter describes his lovers' bodies as ‘too full’ to welcome life:

La rotondità dei muscoli ha anche questo significato, di un ‘essere troppo pieno’ che respinge la vita da sé come si respinge il cibo quando si è fatta indigestione. Il

opposed to life, separate from it as oil drops in water emulsion. For this reason the camera is the authentic organ of my desire, since it captures movement in a few static images on a fine membrane. For this same reason my most wonderful adventures end in a click”).

nudo maschile è *corpo gnostico* perché comunica un'infinita voglia di non partecipare. (SDN: 22)

The muscles' roundness stand for this too, for someone being "too full", pushing life away from him as one pushes food away when having indigestion. The male nude is a *gnostic body* because it expresses its great unwillingness to participate.

The male nudes' principal attributes are roundness and fullness – traditionally, the circle is a symbol of perfection and completeness – which make them appear self-sufficient. In Walter's view, the bodybuilders' bodies are literally 'full of themselves', to the point that they cannot participate in the world: being perfect, they do not need to engage with life, since they already have everything that they need. This is the kind of perfection to which Walter aspires and to which he devotes his theory.

Walter follows this logic up until halfway through the novel, when he starts a long-term relationship with Ruggero. At some point, after a long delay, Walter accepts to penetrate Ruggero, but he fails. After realizing that this is not an isolated case, Walter must admit that he is impotent. Such a revelation makes him reassess his own erotic theory:

Ciò di cui ci si vergogna di più non è necessariamente il più sotterraneo: amo i corpi divini perché sono i., o sono i. perché desidero l'infinito? Il mio corpo è più saggio di me, o è il tiranno storpio dei miei pensieri? (SDN: 254)

What you are most ashamed of is not necessarily the deepest. Do I love divine bodies because I am i., or maybe I am i., because I long for the infinite? My body is wiser than I am, or it is rather the crippled tyrant of my thoughts?

Once he discovers his impotence, Walter can no longer ignore the body as a physical entity. Until now, his mind intellectually justified his body's failures, even to the point of making up a theory which totally neglects the body ("Il mio corpo è più saggio di me, o è il tiranno storpio dei miei pensieri?"). Yet, as soon as Walter realizes that he is impotent, he shifts his point of view, moving from the *a priori* to the *a posteriori* logic. In other words, he acknowledges that he made up his erotic theory to cope with his own impotence. From this new point of view, Walter realizes that Eros is an intellectualistic alibi in order not to admit his impotence:

Ora ho rivelato a me stesso che il fiasco non è l'eccezione, ma la regola: se voglio, non ci riesco. La mia illusione di virilità è stata finora come quegli omini dei videogiochi, ognuno dei quali arriva, subisce angherie e finisce schiacciato ma subito elettronicamente sostituito da un altro: adesso basta, resterò in eterno a fissare il game over. Appesantito dalla coscienza, il mio cazzo di piombo cade per ottomila metri lacerando le nubi.

Lo sfintere che dovrebbe essere forzato per entrare è il punto di comunicazione tra me e la realtà; avendolo sistematicamente trascurato è diventato il luogo geometrico del mio odio, l'astrazione intellettuale di un diaframma che mi separa dal mondo. Mentendo per tutta la vita a proposito di questa questione fondamentale, mi è parso naturale mentire sul resto: e siccome sulla questione fondamentale mi sentivo innocente, ho preso l'abitudine di sentirmi innocente per qualche menzogna. Se l'erezione è un mezzo per arrivare a un fine, ossessionato dal mezzo ho elevato questo fine e ho perduto ogni idea di una meta da raggiungere, di un altro da amare. [...] L'erezione serve per entrare in un altro ma io non ho voglia di entrare in nessuno, ho solo voglia di dimostrare a me stesso che posso avere un'erezione: sviliti nella loro essenza, i corpi cavernosi si ritraggono. (SDN: 255-256)

Now I have disclosed to myself that the failure is not the exception, but the rule: if I want, I cannot. My illusion of virility has until now been like those videogame stickmen, each of which shows up, gets abused and ends up crushed. It is substituted by another in no time. Now that is enough, I will stare at the game over forever. Weighed down by consciousness, my lead cock falls from 8000 metres ripping the clouds.

The sphincter which one is supposed to break in is the communication point between myself and reality; since I have systematically neglected it, it has come to be the geometrical locus in which my hatred converges, the intellectual abstraction of a diaphragm separating myself from the world. Since I have been lying my all life about this fundamental issue I considered it obvious to keep lying about the rest; and since I felt innocent about the fundamental issue, then I started feeling innocent about some lies. If erection is a means to achieve a goal, obsessed by this means I elevated this goal and I lost any concept of a goal to achieve, of another to love. Erection is to enter into someone else, but I do not want to enter into anybody, I just want to prove to myself that I can have an erection: the corpora cavernosa shrink, demeaned in their own essence.

Walter must admit that his theory of Eros is an attempt to intellectually dignify his impotence – Eros is an “illusion of virility”, as well as body-builders are illusions of live bodies.¹⁵ Once he becomes aware of this, Walter

¹⁵ SDN: 28, “Usare i nudi non per prendere o dare piacere ma per convincersi, abitando piramidi con i cilindri, di quanto la vita sia schiuma precaria, guittata estemporanea. Come esiste una

reaches the conclusion that physical love is inseparable from the power dynamics underlying every interpersonal relationship. He makes the relation between sex and power very clear: the sphincter is “the communication point” between Walter and reality, namely the place where he must prove his virility. Consequently, by treating the sphincter as a purely ideal locus Walter does not need to prove anything. On the other hand, Walter admits that this is but an attempt to cover up his impotence (“Lo sfintere che dovrebbe essere forzato per entrare è il punto di comunicazione tra me e la realtà; avendolo sistematicamente trascurato è diventato il luogo geometrico del mio odio, l’astrazione intellettuale di un diaframma che mi separa dal mondo”): in order not to admit it, he has so far considered the anus as a mathematical locus, as an abstraction; yet, Walter is forced to stop when he has to treat the anus as a physical entity.

To look at the world abstractly has two advantages – it keeps Walter from taking his chances and preserves him from the possibility of failure. He makes this very clear at some point in the book, when he describes the conclusion of a sexual encounter:

Volevo parlare di casi fortunati e ho finito per parlare di occasioni perdute (d’altra parte ogni caso fortunato non è che l’indicatore di innumerevoli occasioni perdute: se alle dieci e quarantadue di martedì incontro un ragazzo, vuol dire che in qualunque minuto di qualunque giorno molti ragazzi si trovano dove io non sono). Se un culturista si prende la briga di salire nella tua camera, si mette come vuoi tu, si fa tastare, è perché ha preso atto e gli sta bene, altrimenti non ti farebbe arrivare fin lì. Passata più o meno implicitamente quella linea, risulta più strano per lui, e più difficile per me, non fare piuttosto che fare; qual è la controenergia che mi trattiene, che cosa ci guadagno a ritirare la mano?

Timidezza, è la diagnosi più ovvia; incertezza sull’obiettivo finale del desiderio, la seconda – voglio un uomo da amare, o voglio la conferma dell’impossibilità di amare un uomo? Si soffoca con la soddisfazione troppo addosso. Là dove la vita non ha altra pelle che se stessa, delizia insopportabile. I pettorali dei culturisti, alba pratalia, sono cosparsi di un polline che aggiunge alle loro perfezioni la perfezione ultima che è l’inesistenza; il caso che sorride nasconde una maschera che piange, e quella ancora una bocca che sorride e così via: questa alternanza è l’unico destino che sopporto. L’assenso è un sole troppo glorioso perché possa

pomata spermicida, i culturisti hanno una gelatina cosmocida spalmata su di sé”, (“To use the nudes not to receive or give pleasure but to be persuaded, by inhabiting pyramids, cones, and cylinders, that life is but ephemeral foam, an extemporary flicker. As there is a spermicide gel, so the bodybuilders have a chosmicide gel spread all over their bodies”).

guardarlo direttamente in faccia. Ripetere la sconfitta è il modo più economico per restare nei pressi della vittoria. (SDN: 181-182)

I would have liked to talk about fortuitous events, but I have ended up talking about missed opportunities (on the other hand, each fortuitous accident is but the sign of countless missed opportunities: if on a Tuesday, at 10.42 AM I meet a boy, this means that every minute on any other day many boys are somewhere else). If a bodybuilder bothers to come up to your room, stands as you like, lets you touch him, it is because he is aware and is fine with it. He would not let you go that far otherwise. Once you cross that line – more or less implicitly – it gets weirder for him and harder for me – to act rather than not, I mean. What is this counter-energy that keeps me, what do I gain from withdrawing my hand? Shyness, most obviously. Then, uncertainty about desire's final goal, Do I want a man to love, or do I rather want to be certain that it is impossible to love a man? Too much satisfaction will suffocate you. Where life has no other skin than its own – unbearable pleasure – the bodybuilders' peccs, *alba pratalia*, are sprinkled with pollen adding the ultimate perfection on top of all their perfections, namely inexistence. The smiling fortune hides a crying mask, and this hides a smiling mask and so on. This succession is the only fate which I can bear. Consent is too a glorious sun for me to watch. To perpetuate defeat is the easiest way to stand by victory.

Walter explains that he did not want his lover to consent to the sexual act, in order not to risk failure. The intellectualized love allows Walter to withdraw his hand before the actual sexual encounter starts. This way, impotence can be only a suspect, as well as Walter's social inadequacy.

In fact, he is aware that even sex is affected by the agonistic mentality which he despises. As said above, Walter developed his theory of Eros in opposition to the slave-master dialectic and its further elaborations. However, his reflections after the sexual failure with Ruggero prove that he is not immune to the agonistic mentality as imposed by the slave-master system. In fact, at the end of his confession, Walter says that he cares to regain his sexual potency to prove that he is able to have an erection even more than to enjoy sexual intercourse (L'erezione serve per entrare in un altro ma io non ho voglia di entrare in nessuno, ho solo voglia di dimostrare a me stesso che posso avere un'erezione"). In the slave-master system the ability of having an erection comes together with the ability of being a master: for this reason, as soon as Walter acknowledges his impotence, he feels compelled to leave the realm of theory and join the struggle for supremacy – he must overcome his impotence in order not to be a slave.

Thus, impotence is a traumatic discovery not only because of its sexual implications, but also and above all because it proves Walter's theory of Eros ineffective. Despite all his efforts, Walter still finds himself trapped in the world's agonistic mentality which he tried so hard to avoid. He fails twice, since he must admit first that he is impotent, and then that he is not immune to this twisted self-affirmation logic. Since sex and power are so tightly related, Walter's impotence is therefore much more than a physical problem – his inability to penetrate puts his social status at risk. For this reason, his attempt to regain sexual potency is closely tied to his ability to impose his own will over the others.

Walter's desire of self-affirmation is connected to his personal struggle with his colleague Matteo, complementary to him¹⁶ and his rival in gaining il Padre's favour. Unlike Walter, Matteo is successful and feels perfectly comfortable in the agonistic system. Since he shares and promotes the pre-variation system, he is il Padre's favourite. Walter, on the other hand, proves unable to comply with this logic and hence formulates his own theory of Eros. At the beginning of the novel, Walter admits that he is writing his monograph to differentiate himself from Matteo:

Quando mi perdo nelle cattedrali dei muscoli, tra bicipiti e deltoidi, trapezi e radiali, addominali striati e obliqui esterni, è per non essere costretto a pensare che si può essere come lui, che a questo può ridursi un uomo. Lo schifo che provo per il suo corpo e l'adorazione dei nudi angelici nascono dai labbri della stessa ferita. (*SDN*: 34)

When I get lost in the muscle cathedrals, between biceps and delts, trapezius and radial muscles, striated abs and obliques, it is not to be forced to think that you can be like him, that this is the point which a man can reach. The disgust I feel for his body and the adoration for angelic nudes come from the edges of the same wound”

Walter associates the opposition between ideological Eros and social circumstances with the opposition between the bodybuilders' body and Matteo's. Unlike the bodybuilders, Matteo's body is not idealized – it is a body

¹⁶ The novel, for example, plays on how their names' initials (W and M) are one the mirror-image of the other, and Matteo playfully describes himself as Walter's "Walter-ego" (*SDN*: 35). For more detail about the kind of relationship the two characters share see MAZZONI 1995: 151; FONIO 2008: 200; GRILLI 2012: especially 435.

meant to act rather than to be contemplated. As a worthy representative of the ‘masters’, Matteo is also sexually dominant. More precisely – in Walter’s view – Matteo is successful exactly because of his sexual behavior:

– ‘Rompono i coglioni e le donne più di loro: sembra che perché hanno partorito abbiano fatto un’opera rara.’

– ‘Ci vogliono troppe vite per farne una.’

– ‘Sicché voi che non vi riproducete, adesso vi sentite all’avanguardia.’

– ‘Ho smesso di considerarmi omosessuale: il vostro guaio è che siete soltanto voi stessi.’

– ‘Coi paradossi si va poco lontano.’

– ‘Se i ricchi continuano a diventare sempre più ricchi e i poveri sempre più poveri, spero che alla fine qualcosa succederà.’

– ‘Ne hai voglia, eh, di marocchini che ti facciano il culetto?’

– ‘I giovani si suicidano come lemming: una società che progetti se stessa come totalmente confortevole corre verso l’autodistruzione... il vuoto che volete cancellare vi distruggerà.’

– ‘Ma ‘vi’ chi?’

– ‘Voi collaborazionisti.’

[...]

– ‘Per voi la fica è un mezzo di produzione, il culo per me è poco più di un effetto speciale.’

– ‘Invece la materialità del culo è fondamentale, scusa: quella carne bianca, un po’ frolla...’

– ‘La predisposizione fisiologica al possesso vi aiuta quando si tratta di prevaricare.’ (SDN: 432-434)

– They [new fathers] bust our balls and women even more: it seems that since they gave birth they made a masterpiece.’

– ‘It takes too many lives to make one’

– ‘So, since you guys don’t breed, you now feel like you’re on the cutting edge.’

– ‘I stopped considering myself homosexual; your problem is that you are just who you are.’

– ‘You won’t go far by paradoxes.’

– ‘If the rich keep becoming richer and richer and the poor poorer and poorer I hope that eventually something will happen.’

– ‘You are dying for Moroccans to fuck you up, aren’t you?’

– ‘The youth kill themselves as lemmings: a society projecting itself as totally comfortable runs toward self-destruction... The void which you want to fill up is going to destroy you.’

– ‘But... ‘you’ who?’

– ‘You collaborators.’

[...]

– ‘For you the pussy is a means of production, for me the ass is little more than a special effect.’

– ‘And yet the ass’ materiality is fundamental: that white, a bit flabby, flash...’

– ‘Your physiological predisposition to possess helps you when it comes to prevaricate.’

In this long conversation with Matteo, Walter draws a parallel between sexual conduct and social role; significantly, he describes the female organ as a “means of production” (“per voi la fica è un mezzo di produzione”) and defines Matteo and his fellows as physically predisposed to possession. Earlier in the novel, in conversation with il Padre, Walter describes society as “erection-based”.¹⁷ Consequently, success is inseparable from sexual potency – for this reason, Walter perceives his impotence as the proof of his unfitness for the social struggle. On the other hand, Matteo’s sexual prowess makes him an accomplished and successful man. That is why so many pages in the novel are devoted to the description of Matteo’s body, which Walter perceives as extremely vigorous and life-giving, but also overpowering and oppressive. For example, Walter witnesses a sexual intercourse between Matteo and their colleague Fausta:

Come se guaisse, come se avesse la testa infilata tra le ginocchia del Cane; immagino pose terribili perché indistinte. Ma finalmente posso spiarli, lui è seduto sulla poltrona e lei si è rannicchiata sullo sgabello; lui è nudo, lei no. Una volta l’ho vista che masturbava due paracadusti, due cazzi uno per mano: ma ora è peggio, l’oscenità che vedo mi rovina addosso e mi respinge indietro, luminosa come un bue squartato – ora lei gli sta tagliando le unghie dei piedi. La manica di cotone azzurro del kaftano sottomessa alla pianta rossiccia del piede come il bene sottoposto al male. Lui è nudo e il suo corpo si espande. (SDN: 96)

It seemed that she was yelping, with her head between il Cane’s knees. I imagine terrible positions, since they are undistinguished. I finally get to peek at them: he’s sitting on the armchair and she is crouching on the stool; he’s naked, she’s not. Once I saw her masturbating two paratroopers, one cock per hand. Now it is even worse, though. The obscenity which I see crashes upon me and pushes me back, as shiny as an ox ripped apart. Now she’s cutting his toenails. The sleeve of her blue cotton kaftan was submitted to the reddish arch of his foot in the same way as the good is submitted to the evil. He is naked and his body expands.

¹⁷ SDN: 189, “Una società basata sull’erezione”.

This scene clearly shows how sexual behavior mirrors social behavior: Walter is spying on Matteo and their colleague Fausta, with whom Matteo has started a sexual relationship. The scene is set up to display the power relations between the two: Fausta consents to cutting Matteo's toenails and sits on a stool, while he sits in an armchair. Walter's attention is caught by Matteo's body, perceived as an expanding organism. Unlike the bodybuilders, whose bodies are static,¹⁸ Matteo's body is moving, incorporating everything around it, including his partner. As a result, Matteo's relationships are abusive, modelled after the slave-master relationship. This clearly appears in the relationship with Fausta, who is described in this scene as a slave attending to her master's needs, to the point of cutting his toenails. Accordingly, Walter describes Matteo and Fausta respectively as the evil suppressing the good ("come il bene sottoposto al male"). Fausta wears a blue kaftan, which Matteo tramples with his reddish feet: such an image paradoxically reverses the traditional Christian image of the Virgin Mary trampling the devil, in the form of a snake. Blue is Virgin Mary's traditional color, while red stands for the devil and hell. Matteo is hence depicted as the devil crashing the innocent Fausta. In a system based on the slave-master dialectic, the only successful relationship is abusive. Fausta's submission to Matteo, for example, is not only sexual, but also physical and psychological, since Matteo beats her up and controls her career.

Yet, Walter's judgment on Matteo's behavior is never totally negative. For example, when Walter comforts Fausta after Matteo's attack he discovers himself willing to emulate Matteo:

Mi gemeva all'orecchio con un grido cadenzato come di gru: la sbarra mi abbassava la cerniera, mi cercava l'ano. Pestarla. Mi disgusta l'idea che Matteo abbia fatto di lei quel che voleva, non mangerò nel piatto dove lui ha sputato (mi piacerebbe essere lui e lei nello stesso tempo). [...] Il suo dito mi penetra, le cosce mi diventano di ceramica, si indurisce quello che lei inghiotte tra saliva e lacrime; poi abbiamo sbriciolato il pane per le tortore. (SDN: 203)

¹⁸ Usually Walter asks his lovers to stand in specific positions and even takes picture of them. The bodybuilders' bodies are hence objects for contemplation, images rather than physical entities. See for example *SDN*: 14: "Quando un corpo infinito si muove, ho bisogno di fissarlo in una posizione che riassume tutte le altre, una posizione perfetta che può essere determinata solo dal caso e che è abolizione del caso." ("When a measureless body moves, I need to catch it in a position encompassing the others, a perfect position which cannot be determined by anything but chance, but which is the elimination of chance"). For further details about Siti and photography see TINELLI 2017: 206-207.

She was moaning in my ear by rhythmically crying like a crane, the bar unzipping my pants, looking for my anus. To beat her. I'm disgusted by the idea that Matteo did what he wanted with her, I'm not going to eat in the dish where he spat¹⁹ (I would like to be him and her at the same time). [...] Her fingers penetrate me, my thighs turn into ceramic, she swallows among tears and saliva something getting harder. Then we crumbled the bread for the turtledoves.

In Walter's description, pain and sex overlap – Fausta moans of desire as well as of pain. Though disgusted by Matteo's behavior (“Mi disgusta l'idea che Matteo abbia fatto di lei quel che voleva, non mangerò nel piatto dove lui ha sputato”), he cannot conceal his admiration for him and even admits his desire to be like Matteo (“mi piacerebbe essere lui e lei nello stesso tempo”). Furthermore, he also wants to be Fausta and be possessed by his colleague. However hard he tries to deny it, Walter not only admires, but he even desires Matteo, therefore he unconsciously approves his behavior and is willing to emulate it. Proof of Walter's ambiguous attitude toward Matteo is a dream which he has immediately after he discovers Matteo's relationship with Fausta:

Due notti dopo l'ho sognato vestito come Bruno, camicia bianca e cravattino nero, e anche i capelli corti a spazzola. Era seduto sul davanzale della finestra (nel sogno ho rovesciato la situazione reale di vertigine, come se l'inconscio fosse più realista di me) e mi stava insultando: ‘Ma cosa credi, che sia possibile mettere alle strette un uomo di fronte alla sua famiglia, porco, lurido verme, avvicinati ancora che voglio sputarti in faccia’. Mi avvicino e sento prudere le mani, montare la rabbia, urlo: ‘Ieri m'hai detto ‘non buttarti giù’, be’ adesso sei tu che devi reggerti perché sta per arrivarti la più spaventosa scarica di botte della tua vita, figlio di cane, tu che ti ritieni apprezzato dalle donne, con un calcio ti spappolo la ragione per cui ti stimano tanto, e getta la sigaretta che ti servono tutt'e due le mani per coprirti quella faccia di merda’. Ma la tensione nelle dita invece di chiudersi a pugno si apre a toccare la stoffa all'altezza delle ginocchia, rovesciandolo indietro e cercando la cerniera, mentre allarga le gambe. Ho voglia di fare l'amore con lui, gli accarezzo l'interno delle cosce e sto per arrivare al cazzo.

È lui l'infinito. Mi sono svegliato che battevo i denti; non può essere vero, sarebbe come dire che il sale diventa zucchero.

[...] [S]e ammetto questo non torno più indietro. Ma è il patto, non mentire per quanto è possibile. Il latte di mia madre inacidisce nei fossi, dunque diciamolo: ‘io amo quest'uomo’. (SDN: 164-165)

¹⁹ It's an allusion to the Italian saying “sputare nel piatto in cui si è mangiato” (to spit in the dish where one eats), namely to reject something the we liked in the first place.

Two nights later I dreamt of him. He was dressed up as Bruno – white shirt and black tie – even with a crew-cut. He was sitting on the windowsill, insulting me (in my dream I reversed the vertigo scene happened in the real world, as if my unconscious were more down-to-earth than myself): ‘What were you thinking, that you could put a man with his back to the wall in front of his own family? You creep, bastard, come here, so that I can spit in your face!’ I approach him and my hands start itching, I feel the rage building... I cry: ‘Yesterday you said: ‘don’t jump off!’ What now? Now brace yourself, because you’re about to take the most tremendous beating of your life, son of a bitch! You who think that women cherish you – I will crush the reason why they appreciate you so much with a kick – and throw away that cigarette, you will need both hands to cover that fuckface of yours.’ Yet, the tension in my fingers did not lead me to make a fist. On the contrary, I opened my hand to touch his pants at the height of his knees, overturning him while looking for the zipper. He spreads his legs – I want to make love to him, I caress his inner thigh and am about to reach his cock. He is the unmeasurable. I woke up, my teeth chattering. It can’t be true – it would be like saying that salt can turn into sugar.
[...] [I]f I admit this there is no going back. This is the deal, though, not to lie as much as possible. My mother’s milk turns sour in the ditches; let’s say it, then: ‘I love this man’.

In his dream Walter tries his best to oppose Matteo and apparently wants to castrate him (“tu che ti ritieni apprezzato dalle donne, con un calcio ti spappolo la ragione per cui ti stimano tanto”), but in the end he finds himself attracted to him. As in the scene with Fausta, pain and desire are closely connected, so much that pain is the precondition to desire. Walter is hence unconsciously attracted to Matteo’s violent behavior and wants to be possessed by him. In addition to this, he also wants to emulate his colleague’s sexual conduct by reacquiring his potency – a few pages earlier, Matteo challenges Walter and asks him to be penetrated. Eventually, Walter declines.²⁰ Walter is therefore torn between attraction and repulsion for Matteo – since he knows that he cannot compete with him nor possess him, he uses his theory of Eros to subjugate him at least on the intellectual plan.

Walter’s hateful admiration for Matteo and his ability of imposing over the others is proved by the many descriptions of Matteo’s body throughout

²⁰ SDN: 162, “Il mio regno per un’erezione, che lo spaventi e gli certifichi la mia serietà; lontano rumore d’aereo, volante cavallo dei pantaloni. Mi sfida: ma gli intestini diventano di smeraldo, scoiattoli e vegetali si pietrificano nei loro colori fiammanti.” (“My kingdom for an erection, to scare him and prove that I’m serious. An airplane roaring in the distance, flying crotch pants. He dares me. My guts turn into emerald, squirrels and vegetables freeze in their bright colors”).

Scuola di nudo. Walter is obsessed with Matteo's body and devotes many pages to its description. In particular, Walter lingers on Matteo's extraordinary sexual prowess, which is symbolized by his body expanding. In Walter's perception, Matteo's body expands because he imposes his personality over the others. In a dream, Walter even sees Matteo's body endlessly reproducing:

Ho sognato che aspettava un figlio da una ragazza sconosciuta: i dottori circolavano per casa come fosse una clinica, anzi no era casa di Fausta, io e Alfredo eravamo saliti sul terrazzo a vedere i fuochi che scoppiavano mosci, giù c'era grande agitazione perché il bambino era morto, ma Matteo ne stava avendo un altro da un'altra donna. Un medico arrivava da una stanza lontana e annunciava che la seconda donna aveva un utero "a cannocchiale", e dietro il primo bambino se ne intravedeva un altro, e poi un altro ancora; indicava Matteo e diceva: 'è una forza della natura'. (SDN: 182-183)

I dreamt that he [Matteo] was expecting a child from a stranger. The doctors moved all around the house as if it were a clinic – it was Fausta's place, actually. Alfredo [Walter and Matteo's boss] and I were on the terrace to see the fireworks, which were prosy, and the people downstairs were upset, since the baby was dead. But Matteo was having another one with another woman. A doctor coming from a room far away announced that the second woman had a "spyglass" uterus, and therefore there was a baby peeking from behind the first one, and one more behind him. The doctor pointed to Matteo and said: 'This man is a force of nature'.

Matteo is described by Walter as extremely potent and capable of replicating *ad infinitum*. Such a description betrays a certain admiration from Walter for the vital energy coming from Matteo's body, which opposes Walter's lovers' perfect bodies, whose "life is opposed to life". While Walter and his lovers reject life, Matteo not only embraces, but even generates it.

In terms of erotic theory, by Walter's descriptions of Matteo's affairs a new kind of love emerges, a love serving the slave-master dialectic. From the quotations so far analyzed, we can gather that this kind of love is as self-centered as Eros, but in this case the lover is willing to take over the world rather than escape it; for this reason, he subjugates the others and exploits them at his own will.²¹ I will call it mimetic Eros, since the lover adapts Eros' self-affirmation principle to the social struggle induced by

²¹ I am here using the male pronoun only because in the novel this kind of love seems to be only associated to male characters, such as Matteo and il Padre.

Girard's mimetic desire. Like Eros, the mimetic Eros is concerned by the love object only to boost the lover's ego; yet, while Eros is meant to obliterate the world and project the lover onto an ideal plan, mimetic Eros exploits the love object in order to enable the lover to win the social struggle. In other words, Matteo's mimetic Eros serves the agonistic logic.

The most significant example of mimetic Eros happens in the second half of the book, when Matteo impregnates il Padre's wife.²² The relationship between Matteo and Olga, the wife, is interpreted by Walter as a case of Girard's mimetic desire:

– In ogni caso non avresti dovuto contribuire personalmente e comunque non di nascosto, strisciandogli in casa di soppiatto.

– È impressionante il maschilismo di voi froci : secondo te è stata una faccenda tra noi due, eh, Olga era la vittima che se ne stava lì a aspettare ...

– È cominciata prima o dopo che ti facesse vincere il concorso?

– Durante. Ero su una brutta piega e Olga m'ha tirato fuori, quella donna le perversioni non sa neanche cosa siano; non ci son stati problemi, ha risolto tutto con una risata. Se vuoi saperlo mi ero buttato sul sadico per compensare.

– Questo mi secca.

– In che senso?

– Mi secca che quando la crisi di impotenza l'ho avuta io, non ho trovato il coraggio di parlargliene.

– Credevi di avere l'esclusiva?

– Non ti facevo così fraterno, anzi, fratello sì ma che ha vinto la battaglia per il miglior capezzolo. (*SDN*: 348)

– In any case you should not have contributed personally and not behind his back, by sneaking into his own house.

– It's incredible how sexist you faggots are – you think it was between me and him, don't you? That Olga was the victim standing there, waiting...

– Was it before or after he made you win the competition?

– In the meantime. I was doing bad and Olga saved me. She has no idea of what perversions are. There was no problem, she handled it with a laugh. If you care to know, I turned to sadism to compensate.

– This annoys me.

²² This episode can be described as the enactment of Freud's Oedipus complex, since Matteo lies with his symbolic father's wife. *SDN*: 347, “– Lo aiuto, una donna così non la regge da solo. – C'è qualcosa d'incestuoso.” (“– I'm helping him, he cannot handle such a woman by himself. – This is some sort of incest”). Matteo, unlike Walter, manages to emancipate himself from the father by symbolically killing him (he succeeds him as department chair) and coupling with the mother. See GRILLI 2012: 434-435.

- How so?
- It annoys me that when I was impotent I didn't have the guts to confront you.
- Did you think you were the only one?
- I didn't think you were so brotherly. In fact, a brother who won the fight over the best nipple.

In Walter's view, Matteo started the relationship with Olga to win the competition to become full professor. Matteo replies by accusing Walter of sexism, since he interprets the whole matter as two men fighting over the possession of a woman. More precisely, according to Walter, Matteo is trying to subjugate il Padre by seducing his wife. This kind of situation falls into Girard's mimetic desire: Matteo desires Olga because she is il Padre's object of desire.²³ Although disgusted by the agonistic system, Walter cannot find an alternative way of interpreting relationships. He is so haunted by the agonistic mentality that when Matteo tells him that he experienced sexual failure before meeting Olga ("Ero su una brutta piega e Olga m'ha tirato fuori, quella donna le perversioni non sa neanche cosa siano; non ci son stati problemi, ha risolto tutto con una risata.") Walter is disappointed because he was not brave enough to share the news of his impotence with Matteo. Even a shameful event as impotence becomes a challenge. Once again, Matteo wins, because he has managed to overcome his impotence and at the same time secure his career. Furthermore, Matteo's confession is annoying to Walter because it removes any possibility for him to differentiate from his colleague. Up to that moment, impotence, shameful though it was, still marked some sort of ontological difference between Walter and the others. Impotence somehow justified his staying at the margin, as it appears from this encounter with il Padre:

Alfredo è al telefono, lui è un maschio adulto e io sono i.: posso soltanto andarmene per non disturbare. (*SDN*: 267)

Alfredo is on the phone. He is an adult male and I am i. I can just go not to bother him.

²³ From a gender perspective, this is exactly a homosocial desire kind of situation. This term was coined by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in her *Between men. English literature and male homosocial desire* (1985). Taking her cue from Girard's mimetic desire, she explains that male relationships are governed by homosexual desire, which is covered by a specious desire for a woman. The male desire's object would then ultimately be the other man, rather than the woman, who is but a surrogate, the socially acceptable object of desire.

Walter's impotence is a form of denial: since he is impotent, he cannot take part in the social struggle. Even this excuse drops when Walter finds out that also Matteo suffered from impotence: Walter not only must admit that he is not different from his colleague, but he also must face the fact that Matteo managed to overcome it and successfully re-enter the social struggle. Even in their shared condition of impotence, Matteo is more successful than Walter. Such a move implies that Matteo accepted and faced the impotence, unlike Walter, who on the contrary formulated his theory of Eros as an intellectual self-justification.

Impotence uncovers Walter's wishful thinking and exposes his desire to be in the social struggle. On the other hand, such a troubled relationship with Matteo – and consequently with the 'masters' – prevents him from joining the battle for supremacy. Initially, he tries his best to regain his potency. When it finally happens, he feels satisfied because he can physically perform the master's duty:

Sono guarito per sempre dall'impotenza e per questo posso nominarla. Penetro dove e quando voglio, come i padri energici e sonori; ogni ingiustizia è dimenticata. *Mo' so' uguale.* (SDN: 341)

I recovered from impotence for good. Now I can nominate it. I can penetrate wherever and whenever I please, like the energetic and loud fathers. Any form of injustice is now gone. *Mo' so' uguale* (now I am like them).

Reacquiring sexual potency means to Walter to fully participate in the 'erection-based democracy': by being able to penetrate, he can dominate the others "like the energetic and loud fathers".²⁴ Sexual prowess makes him like the people whom he despises and fully enables him to participate in the social system which he dislikes. From an intellectual point of view, Walter's acquired potency is a failure – once he discovers his situation, he is not able to resist the slave-master system. When Walter realizes it, he goes through a personal crisis, which Siti symbolically describes as a disease. A few pages after the narration of the reacquired prowess, Walter starts feeling sick and believes that he has AIDS:

Condiscendendo al mio bisogno di normalità, ho trasgredito al mio dovere di

²⁴ Earlier in the novel Walter felt ashamed of being around il Padre because of his impotence. See n. 39.

trasgressione: per poche natiche conquistate (quattro) ho sventolato uno stracetto di giubilo, mi sono permesso di consentire. C'ero quasi arrivato, a esser gentile col mondo perché il mondo fosse gentile con me. Mi contraddico, anche l'orgoglio della lucidità m'abbandona. Ho accettato la promiscuità mentale, la contaminazione assiologica. Troppo ansioso di essere uguale ai miei nemici ho abbattuto le paratie dell'io e con quelle sono cadute le difese; l'appagamento entrando in me ha operato una mutazione genetica e m'ha reso vulnerabile. L'Aids è la sola interpretazione, fermentata in patologia, che il mio organismo poteva dare del concetto di socialità. (SDN: 356)

I transgressed my transgression duty by indulging my need of normal. I rejoiced for a few buttocks conquered (four), I allowed myself to assent. I was almost there, to be kind to the world so that it would be kind to me. I contradict myself, even the pride of clear-sightedness deserts me. I accepted mental promiscuity, axiological contamination. Too anxious to be like my enemies, I knocked down the bulkhead of ego and along with it my defences fell. Satisfaction, by getting into my body, modified it genetically and made me vulnerable. AIDS is the only interpretation – turned into disease – that my body could give of the concept of sociality.

Walter thinks that he got AIDS as a punishment for surrendering to the slave-master dialectic (“Condiscendendo al mio bisogno di normalità, ho trasgredito al mio dovere di trasgressione”). He rather consented to a mentality which he found abject than persevering in impotence and rejecting the agonistic mentality, which ultimately makes him a loser. Therefore, at this point of the novel, Walter feels guilty and develops this imaginary disease which he associates with AIDS.²⁵ Interestingly, Siti symbolically pairs up the aggressive behavior of individuals like Matteo to illness and destruction – when Walter starts adopting this same attitude, the disease arises. This symbolizes the dangerous effects that this social system has on individuals and pushes Walter to dissociate from it.

As we have seen, neither impotence per se nor the reacquired potency make Walter feel morally and intellectually better than his adversaries. Furthermore, he perceives potency as an even bigger failure than impotence. Therefore, he tries to find an alternative way to enjoy his new condition without embracing the slave-master dialectic. Since his theory of Eros proved ineffective, this time Walter shifts the focus from the intellectual to

²⁵ It is worth remembering that AIDS traditionally is a “gay disease”, but in this case Siti associates it to a mainly heterosexual context, since Walter gets it after imitating Matteo and il Padre’s behavior.

the sentimental plan and tries to have a long-term relationship:

Della fine dell'impotenza non ho potuto vantarmi con nessuno perché non l'avevo mai confessata; ormai mi conviene mirare al bersaglio più difficile e vantarmi direttamente di un amore realizzato. (SDN: 347)

I never got the chance to brag about the end of my impotence because I never confessed it. Now I better aim at the hardest target and brag about an accomplished love.

The “accomplished love” about which Walter talks is the relationship with Ruggero, his former lover, whom he had left when he found out about his own impotence. After having reacquired his potency, Walter goes back to him and starts a committed relationship. Unlike in the past, he focuses this new relationship on Ruggero rather than on himself,²⁶ in the attempt of rejecting both Matteo's mimetic Eros and his own intellectualistic Eros.

If Matteo is the representative of the mimetic Eros, Ruggero is a Caritas lover, an alternative kind of love which Walter explains along with his theory of Eros. As opposed to Eros, Caritas is a selfless kind of love, entirely oriented toward the others.²⁷ It is not meant to dignify the lover, but to humiliate them:

La caritas non si innalza ma si abbassa, ama ciò che non ha valore e proprio perché non ne ha; il suo modello è l'amore immotivato di Cristo per la nostra miseria; non purifica il soggetto ma lo coinvolge nell'imperfezione, si gloria dell'umiliarsi come di una più matura offerta di sé; vive dentro ciò che è limitato e muta insieme a quello. (SDN: 438)

Caritas does not raise, it puts itself down. It loves what is not worthy exactly for that. Its model is Christ's unjustified love for our misery. It does not purify the subject but it rather brings it into imperfection, it exalts itself in humiliation as a more conscientious self-offering. It lives in the limited and changes along with it.

Unlike Eros, Caritas is a temporal feeling (“vive dentro ciò che è limitato e matura insieme a quello”).²⁸ The Caritas lovers do not aim to reach an ideal

²⁶ SDN: 374, “D'ora in poi dovrò risolvere un problema che non mi ero mai posto: *che farne della vita di un altro*.” (“From now on I will have to handle a problem which I have never considered before: *what I should do about some other's life*”).

²⁷ Not surprisingly, this kind of love has its roots in the Christian tradition. See again GRILLI 2012: 446-447 for further details.

²⁸ SDN: 437, “[M]a la caritas non se ne cura perché è fatta della stessa sostanza del mondo, cioè

realm, nor think of the others as a metaphor of perfection – they love the others as imperfect beings and put them before themselves.²⁹

Despite what may seem, Caritas is not exactly opposite to Eros, but rather complementary to it. In fact, they share some degree of idealization, since they are both attempts to have no part in the social struggle. While Eros is meant to alienate the subject from the world, Caritas makes the lover put their ego aside. In other words, both Eros and Caritas allow the lover to lose the social struggle – the former by ignoring it, the latter by surrendering to the other. Eros rejects the conflict by making the lovers assume that they are the winners, whereas Caritas makes them assume that they are the losers. Therefore – once Eros is defeated – Walter turns to Caritas in the attempt of opposing the mimetic Eros. The perfect opportunity comes when Walter finds out that Ruggero is sick of MS and decides to assist him through his illness, trying to put his ego aside. Walter starts taking care of Ruggero in the belief that this could be an alternative, more edifying way to participate in the world, since he would now be forced to take care of someone other than himself:

In generale, forse, l'angoscia agisce mediante una seduzione di maturità: hai l'impressione che le motivazioni per vivere siano infantili e che il cervello, adulto, ti mostri la mancanza d'uscite. In altre parole, la cosa spaventosa dell'angoscia è che ti pare che abbia sempre ragione. Ruggero è il simbolo del mondo infermo e inchinarsi a lui è un rito iniziatico. (*SDN*: 386)

Overall, anxiety acts perhaps through a mature seduction: you think that motivations to live are infantile and your adult brain shows you that there are no ways out. In other words, what's scariest of anxiety is that you think it is always right. Ruggero is the representative of the ill and to kneel to him is an initiation rite.

He talks of Ruggero as “the representative of the ill” and thinks of taking care of him as an initiation rite to Caritas. In fact, Caritas and illness are connected in Walter's view; Ruggero is described in many places as consumed by love, which would be the real responsible of his disease:

di sacrificio” (“but caritas does not care, since it is made of the same stuff as the world, namely sacrifice”).

²⁹ *SDN*: 437: “[N]ell'eros c'è più odio che amore, nella caritas più compassione che odio; l'eros è superbia che gonfia, la caritas altruismo che edifica.” (“There is more hatred than love in Eros, more compassion than hatred in Caritas; Eros is boosting pride, Caritas edifying selflessness”).

Lui che accusavo d'essere troppo influenzabile dall' esterno è invaso da un auto-cannibalismo che non sembra avere limiti; è questo l'amore, questa decomposizione impresentabile? Questa devastazione dell'io? Quando si dice «capisco quello che provi», non è vero; se si capisse quel che l'altro prova, nessuno lascerebbe mai nessuno. (SDN: 408)

The man [Ruggero] whom I accused of being too easily manipulable by external factors is instead affected by an apparently limitless self-cannibalism. Is this love, this unpresentable degradation? This ego devastation? When someone says "I feel you" it is not true. If anybody knew how the other feels, nobody would ever leave anybody.

Caritas is destroying Ruggero, as if it were his actual disease. Walter comes to this conclusion after experiencing first-hand the devastating effects of Caritas, when he tries to sacrifice himself for his lover. For example, once regained his sexual function, he tries to direct his newly acquired vital potency toward Ruggero through pranotherapy, but he thinks that this is dangerous for himself:

Perché non dovrei avere capacità di pranoterapeuta, dopotutto? Gli si rilassano le reni, l'insensibilità dolorosa alle gambe s'attenua («la forza dell'amore»); gli impongo le mani a lato delle ultime vertebre e la corrente comincia a passare. Le palme si informicolano come quando mi venivano le crisi isteriche, solo che allora ero sigillato in me stesso mentre adesso il formicolio è transitivo; l'energia varca la frontiera della mia pelle ed entra attraverso la sua. Quello che passa è fluido vitale che io possiedo e lui assorbe: non ne possiedo all'infinito, quel che trasmetto a lui viene a mancare a me. (SDN: 380)

Why should I not be a good pranotherapist, after all? His limbs relax, his painful leg numbness decreases ("the power of love"); I put my hands beside his last vertebrae and energy flows. My palms tingle as when I had hysterics, with the difference that then I was wrapped up in myself, while now this tingling transits. Energy crosses my skin's border and enters his. What flows is vital energy which I have and he absorbs. It is not unlimited: what I transmit to him is no longer mine.

Pranotherapy symbolizes the sacrifice which each Caritas lover should make, that is to give some parts of themselves to the loved one. Yet, Walter cannot sacrifice himself: burdened by Ruggero's sickness, he takes body-builders as lovers.³⁰ Eventually he leaves Ruggero, accusing him of keeping

³⁰ SDN: 395, "Le pienezze di Steve m'impediscono d'inghiottire una qualunque delle sporgenze

him down.³¹ In other words, Walter blames Ruggero for the care needed and the sacrifice required on his part. Significantly, Ruggero replies this way:

- «La mia bella pergolina: l’avevo preparata per te, per leggere in primavera.»
[...]
- «Ci inviterai i tuoi amici.»
- «Che amici, io non ce n’ho amici, quelli che avevo son diventati i tuoi perché te sei espansivo, geniale...»
- «Non posso fare lo stupido e il cafone per non darti ombra.» (SDN: 408)

- “My lovely porch, I had built it for you, in order to read outside in the spring.”
[...]
- “You will invite your friends”
- “What friends? I don’t have any friends; the ones I had are now your friends, because you are expansive, brilliant...”
- “I can’t act like a fool and a slob not to overshadow you.

Ruggero accuses Walter of being “expansive”.³² Even the different physical structure of Walter’s and Ruggero’s bodies represents the different roles which they play in their relationship: Ruggero is thin and emaciated, whereas Walter tends to gain weight.³³ Ruggero, as a Caritas lover, donates, whereas Walter absorbs and expands, even in this supposedly committed relationship. This confirms that Walter is structurally unable to be a Caritas lover. Walter’s physical characteristics make him resemble Matteo and his expanding body more than he would like to admit. The end of the relationship with Ruggero forces Walter to realize that he is not able to choose someone else over himself, which makes Caritas as ineffective as Eros.

di Ruggero: quel po’ di sesso, ora, è una tale sfacchinata, un cilicio di letame e di brina.” (“Steve’s fullness prevents me from swallowing any of Ruggero’s bumps: that tiny bit of sex is such an ordeal now, a sackcloth made of dung and frost”).

³¹ SDN: 406, “M’hai tenuto sotto sequestro per troppo tempo... non potrò combinare niente di importante finché ci sei tu.” (“You have kept me as an hostage for too long... I will never be able to do anything important until you are around”).

³² The original Italian plays on “espansivo”’s double meaning, “friendly” and “having a tendency to expand”.

³³ SDN: 448, “[L]ui con le curve all’incontrario, la gobba e un po’ di buzzo nonostante la magrezza che gli fa contare le costole, io condannato a questa enfiagione della sostanza corporea: per ora sette-otto chili, non di più, ma abbastanza per dilatare dove non serve e far pendere quel che non dovrebbe.” (“He was convex, hunchbacked and pot-bellied though being so thin that one can count his ribs. I was condemned to bloat: 7-8 kilos for now, no more, yet enough to unnecessarily swell and become flabby”).

In fact, the power dynamics between Walter and Ruggero serves the social struggle more than Walter would admit. Once he has become potent, Walter cannot help imposing his will over Ruggero:

Fin che era lui il potente e io l'i., lo squilibrio bilanciava la mia superiorità in tutto il resto; ora è la sua stessa schiacciante inferiorità che me lo fa apparire irraggiungibile. (*SDN*: 379)

As long as he was the potent and I was the i., this unbalance balanced out my superiority in everything else. But now it is his own inferiority which makes him appear unattainable in my eyes.

Ruggero appears unattainable to Walter exactly because of his inferiority, namely his ability to humiliate himself for the loved one. This proves that Walter cannot be a Caritas lover, but he on the contrary “expands” at Ruggero’s expense. As Ruggero remarks, at the end of their relationship Walter isolated Ruggero from his friends; after all, the relationship between Walter and Ruggero was an abusive relationship which Walter elevated as a Caritas love. When he went back to Ruggero, Walter thought that he could learn how to be a Caritas lover and differentiate from Matteo, but he eventually finds out that he was acting like Matteo all along. In fact, he never accepts Ruggero’s illness:

La malattia lo sta rendendo legnoso, lo chiude in un tronco; le cellule immunitarie divorano una parte del corpo a cui appartengono, sicché si può dire che il malato di sclerosi è un violento contro se stesso. [...] Quando mi tocca, anche la mia epidermide si trasforma in corteccia: ho dovuto proporgli di non fare più l’amore insieme [...] (*SDN*: 422)

His disease is turning him into wood, he wraps him up in a log. His immune cells destroy their own body, therefore one can say that the MS patient suffers self-destructive behavior. [...] Whenever he touches me, my skin turns into wood too; I had to ask him not to make love to me any more [...].

From Walter’s words it is clear that he does not want to be like Ruggero; Walter is scared of getting Ruggero’s disease, which means that he is scared of getting Caritas too. This proves that Walter is not capable of embracing Caritas. Once he realizes it, he leaves Ruggero, who eventually dies of MS. The end of the relationship forces Walter to realize that he is

not able to choose someone else over himself, which makes him as overpowering as Matteo.

Walter loses his last chance to oppose Matteo and his mimetic Eros along with Ruggero. Consequently, after Ruggero's death he is devastated and decides to leave for a long journey. However, when he comes back, he has changed: he has taken a male prostitute as his lover and has reconciled with il Padre, obtaining a permanent position at the University. Most importantly, he quit his monograph on the male nude. In the last pages, Walter exposes his revised theory:

Che cosa meglio del puro denaro per soddisfare il desiderio d'assoluto? Il denaro è l'archetipo dei nudi perché è il modello di un bene che vale per l'immagine di pienezza che riflette e non per l'uso che se ne fa. Se il corpo muscoloso è merce, il denaro è ciò in cui tutte le merci si dissolvono: il culturismo è ricchezza muscolarizzata. (Detto altrimenti: il denaro è la forma universale in cui tutte le passioni possono essere scambiate, è la passione stessa liofilizzata e privata dei cattivi odori.) (*SDN*: 574)

What's better than pure money to satisfy my longing for absolute? Money is nudes' archetype because it is the model for a good worthy for the image of completeness which it reflects and not for its own use. If the muscular body is commodity, then money is the thing in which all the commodities dissolve. Bodybuilding is muscular wealth. (In other words: money is the universal form, in which all passions interchange, is passion itself lyophilized and odorless.)

At the end of the novel, Walter is resigned to following Matteo's example and the society's rules. In particular, he comes to the conclusion – always suggested, but never clearly stated in the novel³⁴ – that money is the only way to gain power and hence self-affirmation. Consequently, masters have money and power, through which they dominate the slaves. Therefore, he decides to take a prostitute as his lover so that he could be mentioned among the masters. By doing this, he brings to the extreme the concept of Eros as he learnt it from Matteo – a way to win the social struggle – and turns it into a consumption good (SIMONETTI 1995: 127-128). Since money is the dividing point between slaves and masters, Walter must buy his slave – in this sense, mimetic Eros is a purchasable good. Walter then

³⁴ For example, in conversation with Matteo, when Walter defined the femal organ as a “means of production”.

simply embraces the idea of bodies as a means of production and literally buys them to win his social struggle. After having rejected the bodies' physicality in the name of the abstract and symbolic perfection of the male nudes, he now admits that the body is tragically concrete, in such a way as to even be commodifiable.

By treating the body like a tradable good Walter reaches his katabasis' last stage, in which he deprives love of any symbolic value. It is no longer the way to attain perfection – as it was Eros – nor a moral alibi like Caritas. The only possible love is the mimetic Eros, which needs to serve the social struggle. Consequently, the only way to be happy is to comply with the slave-master system. Therefore, at the end of the novel, after having experienced the failure of all his alternative models of love, Walter surrenders to the system. Consistently, he gives up on his monograph, since he no longer intends to attempt his intellectual revolt:

Non lo scriverò più, il libro, vivere non richiede giustificazioni. C'era una sproporzione tra mezzi e fine, ero disposto a rovinarmi la vita pur di creare nei miei nemici un piccolo sconcerto. Per paura del mondo la mia scrittura la tenevo al riparo: invece che il mio bambino era diventata il mio parassita. Era una gravidanza isterica, e il culto della bellezza un alibi alla depressione. (*SDN*: 577)

I'm not going to write my book. Life does not require justifications. There was a disproportion between means and goal: I was willing to ruin my own life as long as I could slightly baffle my enemies. I used to keep my writing hidden in fear of the world – rather than my baby, it was my parasite. It was a false pregnancy, and my cult of beauty but an alibi to depression.

Walter expressly blames his male nude theory for his distress and admits that he feared the world, therefore he made up the erotic theory in order not to take part in it. He calls intellectual Eros “an alibi to depression”, namely a way to elevate his inability to engage with the social struggle.

Eros is not the only one to be dismissed by his own author: the same thing happens to Caritas, since the novel ends with a marriage of convenience between Walter's lover and Fausta, so that he can get the Italian citizenship and stay in Italy with Walter. Then even Caritas, which is supposed to be the marital love,³⁵ is diminished. Even the marriage complies

³⁵ *SDN*: 437, “[Caritas] È l'amore coniugale dopo che sono passati anni dal matrimonio” (“[Caritas] is the marital love years after the wedding”).

with Walter's new ruling principle and is only a way to keep Walter's partner with him.

In the end Walter destroys any alibi and symbolic meaning which he has created so far and totally embraces reality as it is, a battlefield for self-affirmation:

Perdo l'amata tranquillità, guadagno il rischio di far rigermogliare la mia vita. Di nascere, finalmente. È finita la stagione in cui mi vergognavo di guardare il denaro dritto negli occhi. (SDN: 575)

I am loosing my beloved tranquillity, but I am gaining the risk to make my life spring forth again; to be born, finally. The time when I was ashamed of directly looking at money is over.

Walter "makes his life spring forth again". For the first time in the book, he associates himself to life rather than non-life – this testifies that he has finally renounced his believes to follow Matteo's example. This apparently gives Walter everything that he wanted: a lover, a career, his former enemies' respect. Yet, the book's very last pages question Walter's newly acquired satisfaction:

(il rimedio è stato peggiore del male, non si esce da una stanza se la porta è finta, sto qui a guardare la mia torre che si scioglie, come se fosse un gelato, questa è la storia di un poveruomo che non è stato capace di vivere, la storia di un uomo vile che non è stato capace di non esser capace di vivere, non credevo di dover rimpiangere persino il terrore). (SDN: 596)

(the treatment turned out to be worse than the disease. You can't exit a room if the door is fake; I'm standing here looking at my tower melt – as if it were an ice cream – this is the story of a poor man who has not been able to live, the story of a vile man who has not been able to not be able to live. I didn't imagine I would have even regretted terror).

In the end, the character confesses to be still unsatisfied: he got rid of all his alibis, but he still trapped himself in an unauthentic life ("non si esce da una stanza e la porta è finta"), made of a fake marriage, a fake love and an even faker success. In fact, he did not win the supreme social challenge – the challenge against life – because he did not manage to dominate it. In the end, he surrenders to life and adjusts to the system, and therefore he

loses the social struggle. Nonetheless, he is now like his former enemies, who consistently accept and respect him: Walter's paradoxical acceptance among the winners shows how inconsistent the slave-master system is. In fact, to be a winner is necessary to surrender to life, therefore nobody will ever be a winner.

Walter's paradoxical success is thereby a shared condition – the novel shows that there is no alternative to being a loser, since the individual is structurally forced to either surrender to reality – and then being intellectually defeated by it – or to live against it and be perceived as a loser. At the end of the novel, reality urges Walter to accept its brutal slave-master system, with no possibility of intellectual or moral elevation. The conclusion of the novel illuminates the man's helpless condition, who can only affirm themselves by self-suppression. In sum, however one decides to act they are destined to lose on some front – on the intellectual and moral front if they embrace the social struggle, on the social front if they reject it. In Walter's case, he ends up being a loser before himself rather than before the society, since he gave up on his theoretical principles in order to be socially accepted. Such an attitude, since it concerns the moral implications of Walter's choices, justifies the novel's katabatic motion. Furthermore, the very katabatic structure of the story and its paradoxical happy ending reveal the inescapability of this condition, according to which one must be morally and intellectually unsuccessful in order to be socially successful. Thus, the society as described by Siti is ultimately a trap, in which the katabasis is an unavoidable experience. Walter's individual experience is but a sample of everyone's experience, which implies that there are no winners and losers, as the slave-master dialectic makes us believe, but there are only losers. In this context, any attempt of emancipation and self-affirmation is nothing but delusional. In this theoretic framework, Walter appears to be successful, since he acknowledges the delusion of his newly acquired success and resigns to perpetual failure.

In conclusion, we can see that *Scuola di nudo* clearly is “the story of an impotent”, as well as a novel about desire: in fact, it is a novel about the frustrated desire of an impotent to become potent, who eventually gives up an illusion for another, even crueller. As in a katabasis, the character has travelled all the way down from the theory to the materiality, from Eros to the mimetic Eros, from the intellectual self to the socially imposed self, and has eventually discovered that none of these brings

success. As in a traditional katabasis, Walter has experienced the peak of moral abjection, which gave him insight and self-consciousness. Though in this case, unlike a traditional katabasis, there is no way out.

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ARNO PLASS

Queer Achilles vs. masculine mimicry A movement-centered critique of masculinity

ABSTRACT: The essay is interested in masculine movement and its contribution to fostering toxic masculinity. To exemplify the analysis, the author draws on the film version of the dance piece *Enter Achilles*. Masculinity is conceived of a mimicry-like dynamics that forces individuals to set respective acts. The dynamics thereby only allow a small range of movements and immediately punishes deviation. It causes uniformness instead of individuation. Queerness, on the contrary, seen as an allowing dynamics helps to reconnect to playfulness and vividness. A dynamics that is able to establish caring bonds, as queerness allows difference and thereby reappropriates otherness as something that connects.

KEYWORDS: cultural studies; masculinity; dance; movement; mimicry; queering; intussusception; body schema.

AN INTRODUCTORY PERSONAL MOVE

A personal story introduces the issue of this essay. Being a passionate Argentine Tango dancer, I have to cope with the lack of a queer tango community in my city. Luckily, Vienna is an accepting place, and I frequently go out to dance at the local conventional *milongas* (dance events). In the meantime, everybody knows I am a queer¹ dancer. Slowly, more and more heterosexual men are daring to dance with me. The most blatant repudiation I get is being cold-shouldered. In many cases I am not able to tell if this behavior is homophobic, or if it is just the same thing I do, since I also disregard some people for whatever reason. Sometimes, a bunch of women and men and I gather at the bar and talk. The next *tanda* (set of dances) starts and the women leave for the tango. Thus, it happens that I end up alone with some of the men at the bar and that is when it occurs: the

¹ I use the term “queer” throughout the essay for individuals not falling short of, not wanting to follow, never fitting into the hegemonic paradigm – be it the heterosexual nerd, be it the non-binary person, be it the trans*person. The term designates all those confronted with the menace of hegemonic masculinity.

communication stops, the perception of being part of the group is over, and every attempt to connect just slips off an invisible wall. I know for sure, these men are not homophobic; otherwise, I would leave the situation. But there is something that inhibits the contact between us.

Over time, I have learned that this behavior does not concern me. I just do not understand what is going on in the situation. Of course, I follow the talk and understand the sense of the conversation; of course, I participate with my own opinion. But my ignorance of how masculinity negotiates itself unconsciously and how these dynamics involve the bodies present, pushes me outside. Suddenly, there is no place for me within the group. From one moment to the next I am of no significance. To make it clear, the scene does not picture hypermasculinity (RUXTON 2019: 88). It is rather comparable with what Miriam J. Abelson (2019) has called “Goldilocks masculinity”, an “in-between-masculinity” that “incorporates aspects of nonhegemonic masculinities to sustain the existing gender order amid challenges to its legitimacy” (6). In this scene (and especially regarding masculinity in the Argentine Tango community, see TOBIN 2009), we find a form of masculinity that is already transformed through feminist policy, a certain acceptance of queer life, and a kind of progressive life style. After all, in Argentine tango, many men contribute themselves to a certain bending of traditional representations of masculinity by attaching great importance to being well but sometimes quite unusually groomed, by fanning themselves to cool down, etc. Nonetheless, they are still motivated by the desire to stabilize the masculine agenda. It really took some time to realize what exactly was going on. It is not about being kicked out actively or being despised. I learned that it is a process of negotiating their masculine status within the group, their *need* to be recognized as masculine – individually, mutually, and collectively.

Meanwhile, I am able to smile at these situations, and I now observe what happens with curiosity. What I find is masculine mimicry: a series of micro-movements that go beyond the obvious gestures that are commonly perceived as masculine. It is my ignorance of these micro-movements that puts me outside the circle. I have come to understand these micro-movements through Marcel Jousse (1969), who conceives them as complex motors in the individual, which also order inner life (53). In his concept of intussusception, we learn that the mimetic process does not follow a conventional appropriative logic, like seeing, imitating, failing, seeing

again, imitating, succeeding. It is a different mode of becoming aware of something (122). Intussusception describes the incorporation of structures that do not need to be consciously trained in order to replay them. The mimeticism introduces the relevant structures to be followed in a certain realm (HARRASSER 2018: 161). It is thereby thrilling that, within masculine mimicry, the mimetic mode of intussusception seems to follow a strict and narrow path. It thus leads to recognition (*Ibid.*) – to the recognition of belonging to the masculine realm which results in being possessed by the masculine dynamics. Intussusception is negotiated corporeally through interaction, “all constituent parts ,act on‘ each other and are simultaneously ,acted upon” (NIXON 2019: 99). To describe this concept, Jousse uses the term *anthropos*, a “unified body-mind-soul entity” (*Ibid.* 100). In spite of a theoretical difference, this concept is similar to the body schema (see further down). Both describe the simultaneous appropriation of meaning and structures through movement.² Intussusception is thus part of a two-fold mimetic process: First, one takes notice of something, and through intussusception, the individual incorporates it. Second, in what is called *rejeu*, what is embodied “tends to be reproduced, voiced, and re-played” (SCHEFFLER 2016: 182). Intussusception as such is neither positive nor negative; it is instead intrinsically world-making (SIENAERT 2016: 18) and transformation is always possible (this is, e.g., what performance practitioners use in their training sessions – NIXON 2019, SCHEFFLER 2016). However, the *rejeu* stays bound to the structures that intussusception has provided (HARRASSER 2018: 162), and therefore reproduces them. In the intussusceptive structures of masculinity, we find no layer of playfulness and human difference. Queerness, consequently, could represent a different mode of intussusception since it works in the permanent becoming of individuals; a becoming that opposes the necrotic reproduction of stereotypes (Comité des Études Marcel Jousse in JOUSSE 1969: 67). Queerness, in other words, unveils itself in “aesthetic enactments that gesture towards innovative ways of imagining, subjectivity and relationality” (WALSH 2016: 2). We can “sense [queerness] among emotions, moods and sensations that tingle

² To outline the difference very briefly: Marcel Jousse is more concerned with orality (and therefore language that not only consists of spoken language but mainly of bodily gestures) as a backdrop for the sociocultural construction (Jousse in SIENAERT 2016: 25). The phenomenological concept of the body schema, on the other hand, takes physical movement as a starting point for appropriating and thereby constructing a world (MERLEAU-PONTY 2012: 100ff).

with the hope or need for brighter days to come” (*Ibid.*). A queer intus-susceptive mode allows other forms of interactions, as these structures draw on a different repertoire, as Eve Gianoncelli, for example, has shown in her study of Claude Cahun (2017: 183). To further clarify my position: As I know of many (non-)queers who perfectly represent the macho-type without engaging in the dynamics of masculine mimicry, it is important to understand that masculinity in this article is not about masculine-labeled body postures, or about different forms of masculine expression (like those written and thought about in ABELSON 2019, DI MARTINO 2018, HALBERSTAM 1998); it is about going along with what Thomas Page McBee (2018) expressed with “[b]eing a man unwilling to face the worst parts of masculinity guaranteed that I was passively part of the problem” (52). It is about the interactive movements that arrange the space to act and provide the attraction towards masculine mimicry.

This essay intends to identify different layers of masculine mimicry by drawing on the film *Enter Achilles* – a dance piece featuring DV8 Physical Theatre under the direction of Lloyd Newson. The piece was choreographed for Wiener Festwochen in 1995, adapted for film in collaboration with Clara Van Gool, and revived for the stage in 2020. Since many queers in the Global North find themselves in a situation of broad acceptance, hetero/homonormativity and especially masculine normativity flip over to what could be called a queer world. With the elaboration of my argument, I also want to write against any form of masculinity instead of arguing for queer masculinities, still recognizing the strategic value this train of thought clearly demonstrates in social politics and activism. To avoid antagonizing readers from the beginning who argue in favor of queer masculinities, I might console them for the time being with the thought that the concept of masculinity I refer to in this essay does not assume masculinity as something residing in a person or something that might be put on like a coat or even embodied. It is not about identities or masculine-labeled forms of expression. Here, masculinity is understood as the homogenous, uniforming *dynamics* one follows by performing the right micro-movements, gestures, and actions in order to create the impression of being masculine. The appropriation of these dynamics is something that happens “through some cultural osmosis” (MCBEE 2018: 41). These dynamics are involved in a never-ending process of tying masculinity to maleness and to specific ideas through the implicit consequence of repudiating anything

that might shatter the masculine illusion (CLATTERBOUGH 2004: 201-202). Therein resides no concept of possible difference; on the contrary, it only activates a particular, quite stereotypical range of behaviors as the concept of intussusception/rejeu suggests.

For the purpose of my argument – and thereby highlighting its inter-individual dynamics, expressed through (micro-)movements – I have decided to skip the customary overview concerning the literature on masculinity at this point. Nevertheless, the relevant literature is inserted throughout the text in order to underline my point, using different aspects found within the field of critical studies on men and masculinities as well as queer, trans* and female masculinities, all of them addressing the topic in order to deconstruct hegemonic masculinity. My argumentation, though, starts from a different angle: instead of foregrounding power structures or forms of expression, its core thought sets out from the *sediment* that operates in all of us, which David Buchbinder, for example, quoting Raymond Williams (2013), calls the *residual*, a past that is still “active in the cultural process” (158); in phenomenological thought, the sediment is what we as individuals always already find as intrinsic cultural meaning when arriving in this world. Thereby, we inevitably appropriate the sediment (e.g., WALDENFELS 2000: 183; JOAS 1996: 270-271). The sediment realizes itself through bodily expressions in the many ways we *move* and thus act in this world. I therefore draw on phenomenological thought, combining it with positions from the wide field of performance studies. Even though this move might seem eclectic to some, it is not. Both phenomenology and performance studies come from an intrinsic (therefore not always explicitly expressed) bodily positioning (even though performance studies’ argumentations might be based on different body theories). Phenomenology with its concept of the lived body (and the body schema as its concrete expression) delivers a counterposition to dualistic thought. We learn to transgress the body-mind split, thus allowing us to think about the *naturalness*³ of human actions (cf.

³ I had several conversations about the use of the word *natural*, as it immediately draws on the discourse of nature/culture. In this context, *natural* describes self-evidence, matter-of-factness, a kind of behavior that is invariably accustomed to something, so s*he, of course, acts this way without questioning what and how something is done. Still, I stick to *natural* as it terminologically marks the phenomenological background and the connection to the body schema; expressions like self-evidence and alike would suggest too much consciousness of what one does. Thanks to Ray Batchelor and Mark Miscovich for helping me to find a way through this tricky problem on how different languages work.

Jousse's *anthropos* above). In performance studies, it is evident that our bodies are the instruments that express what is found on a cultural layer. They show that there is no difference and no distance between the individual bodies and the cultural layer.

The film *Enter Achilles* serves as a movement-based reference opus for my argumentation, and this essay therefore leaves out the definitely important genesis of the piece and its contextualization. It presents a wonderful depiction of masculine mimicry, or as Justin Wyatt would label it, a “male buddy film” (2001: 53) that celebrates masculinity through “open homophobia” (*Ibid.*). As this essay does not intend to discuss the art of dance in this production, the storyline will only be told in a run-through. The essay will instead focus on specific scenes to show certain mimetic structures. Nevertheless, I recommend the reader watch the piece because it is a great work of dance art. To differentiate between the nameless protagonists, the dancers will first be referred to by their official full names and then afterwards by their first names. Only Achilles, who is performed by Juan Kruz Díaz de Garaio Esnaola, will keep his dramatic name. After all, the hero Achilles himself serves as a very suitable reference point since his love for Patroklos has been the source of controversial debate for centuries, as Marta González-González (2018) has shown. The hero, the protagonist of an epic about a man who loves another man, was obviously *normal* to Homer, but already scandalous to Plato (*Ibid.* 69). The figure in *Enter Achilles* is a superhero, which is emphasized in a scene where he takes off his shirt and trousers to reveal a superhero costume underneath, just when he is attacked for the very first time for being different. The use of the term superhero seems to place my argumentation within the narrative of good vs bad subjects (MUÑOZ 1999: 11). However, I want to position Achilles as the representation of an intussusceptive queer mode that disidentifies (*Ibid.*) and points to a utopian openness which is yet to come (MUÑOZ 2019); a superhero of not-yet-lived difference who constantly interferes, breaks, and changes what stereotypically persists; a superhero who disidentifies as he knows he cannot escape, but is able to deal with what is there.

The story we are presented with in *Enter Achilles* may be summarized very briefly by highlighting a queer Achilles who maintains his place in a toxic environment. The superhero and demigod is not, as we might remember him from the epos, the ideal(ized) male – his superpowers and, at the same time, weak point, the so-called Achilles' heel, is precisely his

queerness. *Enter Achilles* tells the story of a night in the pub, “The Plough”. Throughout the feature we witness a bunch of men entertaining themselves, and it seems that these entertainments are very common. Throughout the film we stay immersed in a homosocial setting, an ambience which serves to prove masculinity (KIMMEL 2004: 186). With aesthetic precision, we are led to understand that the homosocial milieu constantly depends on its separation from the homosexual (WYATT 2001: 62), and consequently from queerness. Some scenes take us outside the pub: in the courtyard, under a bridge, and in an apartment where one of the protagonists lives. The story told is one of masculine friendship, which consists of adapting to certain behaviors like violence (KIMMEL 2004: 189), self-destruction (BUCHBINDER 2013: 2), bullying (DYER 2004: 22), competition (HOCH 2004: 104f), alignment (RUXTON *et al.* 2019: 88), sexualization (STOLTENBERG 2000: 3), and avoidance of weakness and difference (MILLER 2001). The depicted scenes are quite well known in the Global North, even though they might differ in expression in different countries with their respective cultural touch. Concerning the latter, Miriam J. Abelson (2019) informs us accurately about how coercive influences are determined by geographical spaces (e.g., in the film, a not further named industrial city in the UK) and sociocultural places (e.g., “The Plough”) (ABELSON 2019: 11, 18). However, there are intussusceptive similarities to be found in the different expressions; it is masculine mimicry at work. We learn that one must carefully understand the do’s and don’ts that seem to follow quite random but in fact quite serious rules to become and to stay a member of the group. We learn that masculinity is a power game that applies rules for either acceptance or humiliation. Although persistent, we find out that masculinity is a friable concept that is upset by queer easiness which is attractive and seductive – masculinity is a concept that is only maintained through the coercive dynamics of masculine mimicry.

MASCULINE MIMICRY. AN ORIENTATION TOWARDS DEATH

Masculinity is persistent. Its persistence is affected by mimicry, the imitation of the same, the extinguishment of difference. Still, almost 30 years after the ground-breaking publication of Raewyn Connell’s book *Masculinities* (1995), we find ourselves amid of a world that may be defined as masculine. Women and queers have to fear masculine aggression – both physical and emotional. Masculinity still seems to remain attractive – even gay men

foster masculinity and benefit from the so-called “patriarchal dividend” (CONNELL 2009: 142). These persons – whether queer or not – thereby contribute to reinforcing cis-masculinity and solidifying homonormativity. It is an inconspicuous, internalized homosocial coercion that operates from within as an exclusionary force (WYATT 2001: 57). This force is sensed in the individual, it there arouses the “fear of disconnection” (Brené Brown quoted in MCBEE 2018: 181).

Human evolution can be described as mimetic (WULF 1989). *Doing as-if* is a dynamic perceivable in all sorts of groups. To belong to a group, individuals have to show that they have understood what it is that holds the group together. Instead of signing a declaration of mindset or first principles (like we find in organizations and states), sociocultural groups unconsciously negotiate the decision of whether a human being is *in* or *out* through body movements. However, it is not that black and white since we find groups that, even though considering somebody an outsider at first, stay open towards these individuals, allowing them to approach and even reaching out towards them. This is a sociocultural move transferred by means of the body.

Acting mimetically may be categorized as either following mimesis or following mimicry. Even though in the literature the reader might find various definitions and synonyms, I would like to distinguish between the terms for the purpose of the current analysis. In this essay, mimicry is based on the understanding of Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer (2002). In the *Elements of Antisemitism* chapter in their book, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, we find the very often cited quote:

Where the human seeks to resemble nature, at the same time it hardens itself against it. Protection as petrified terror in form of camouflage. These numb human reactions are archaic patterns of self-preservation: the tribute life pays for its continuous existence is adaptation to death. (148)

What is called *camouflage* in the English version is labelled *Mimikry* in the German original. In this text, Adorno and Horkheimer reflect the dynamics of antisemitism. These dynamics intrinsically operate by constantly detecting the particular/different. When localized, classified, and isolated, the different is forced to adapt. When it does not adapt, disgust comes naturally: “Uncontrolled mimesis is proscribed” (*Ibid.*). Uncontrolled, here, is an important word as it points to coercion. The authors do not neglect a

mimetic process in societies but rather consider it as something that happens anyways. The problem of adaptation in their thought is that, over the time of human history, the confusion of natural adaptation with adaptation to certain concepts has been absorbed by the cultural sediment. What they discuss is the rational, hence embodied, dynamics of appropriating sociocultural concepts (which nowadays would also cover the known markers of gender, race/ethnicity, class, etc.) and realizing them in a form of world-making that depends on sticking to these concepts by applying them constantly. Its means is terror, as terror guarantees sameness – terror that subordinates differences to the same, searching for repetition, regularity, and stereotypes (*Ibid.* 148-149). In their view, antisemitism “is based on a false projection” (*Ibid.* 154). It is a paranoid dynamics that switches its mimetism, and thereby “brand[s] the intimate friend as foe” (*Ibid.*). In this article, I transpose their concept to masculinity, i.e., mimicry here is a mimetic interaction that protects the individual by killing life and its vivid expression through adaptation to the masculinity game. In my view, masculine mimicry threatens individuation and inhibits a good life for all.

Right from the beginning, the possible threat is revealed: one of the dancers, Ross Hounslow, has a nightmare. Being one of the two tops (the other one is Robert Tannion) in the hierarchy, Ross fears his tender relation to a sex doll will be discovered. He dreams of men approaching, even creeping in archaic movements. This threat comes closer and closer, shaking him awake. He quickly forgets the awful dream as the sex doll lies beside him. Ross starts touching the sex doll, and we can see his tenderness, his love projected onto the doll. The scene’s suggestions are ambivalent, as it also displays misogyny and female objectivation (especially as his girlfriend is calling, and he does not pick up the phone, preferring contact to a plastic phantasy to human reality). It is his emotions, his sensibility, and his naive playfulness that he fears being discovered. And his premonitions come true in the end when his secret becomes a true source of amusement to the others. Liam Steel has by chance witnessed Ross’ particular liking through the window. He presents the doll, distracting the others from bullying Achilles in the pub’s courtyard. Immediately, the presence of the doll takes the masculine dynamics to a higher level. Ross tries to rescue his beloved item. Defending the doll escalates the humiliating game; the others make fun of him by harassing and forcing Achilles to have sex with Ross’ love object, the atmosphere suggests this will end in a gang bang. But Robert kills the



FIGURE 1 – A scene depicting masculine mimicry in the recreation 2020 of *Enter Achilles*, a work by Lloyd Newson (DV8 Physical Theatre, from the 2020 production by Rambert/Sadler’s Wells; photo by Hugo Glendinning).

doll, which seems part of the game and may serve to confirm the rules to Ross. Both the emotional bound with the doll and the revelation of a tender, instead of rude porn, relation leaves the loving Ross alone, banished from the masculine bond and suffering an emotional breakdown. Masculinity does not allow tender bonds; masculinity has to prove a violent attitude towards sex. Having tender sex with a fetish, a sex doll, is too queer.

Enter Achilles presents us with the insight that masculinity does not reside within the individual; it is an interdependent attitude that confirms the masculinity of each other (and oneself). There are coercive dynamics that force individuals to participate in a shared ritual. Mimicry’s dynamics is nourished by reproduction and symbiosis (WULF 1989: 103), where reproduction necessitates a certain competence and skill. This competence is grounded on an “external intention” (ADORNO *et al.* 2002: 159) that easily objectifies the other; in this way, it already inflicts violence on this other (*Ibid.*). The reproduction of masculinity, however, needs a dedication and an awareness of what must be done. Therefore, masculinity can be conceived as a belief system that, in fostering “short-winded” (*Ibid.* 163) thoughts, gets “socialized” (*Ibid.* 162). Within, masculinity works as an “intoxication

of the communal ecstasy” (*Ibid.*). Symbiosis is the reward, it is masculinity’s nourishment – nourishing the dynamics as well as the individual who gets incorporated into the group. Having proven a successful mastership of masculine movement, belonging to the group is secured for a while; however, the belonging does not exhibit a caring quality, but a quality of obedience to the rules.

Of course, it is not just about appropriating and perfecting masculine movement. In *Enter Achilles*, we witness this right from the beginning. Liam, who, again and again, succeeds in incorporating himself into the group before falling out again as the piece unfolds, prepares himself in the pub’s toilet for the evening. He exemplifies the ever-present hierarchical order within a homosocial group (BAKER *et al.* 2018: 5). Liam is nervous: he concentrates on his appearance while checking his face in the mirror. On the window ledge there is a pint. Liam moves very consciously in a specific manner to take hold of the glass. This is a rehearsal of masculine movement, believing mistakenly that mastering the moves and poses guarantees belonging to the group. Nevertheless, it may serve the purpose of deception for a while (to deceive oneself and others). Liam takes a few sips, helping himself to some liquid courage. Obviously, he is preparing for what awaits him outside, the struggle of belonging, the fear of being bullied – a dynamics that treats others with contempt by means of laughter, making jokes about their actions (ADORNO *et al.* 2002: 151f). The next shot shows him leaving the toilet from a perspective taken from the pub’s bar. There is a mirror where some of the other dancers are enjoying themselves in superficially adjusting and thereby demonstrating their appearances. In this scene, we know they belong to the group. The adjustment of their clothes, the controlling touch of their shaved cheeks and chins, and the masculine posing are nothing more than a demonstration, not a rehearsal as in Liam’s case. Not being disturbed, being left alone in front of the mirror, *and* just being side by side with the others, proves the privilege of belonging.

Masculine belonging boasts a feature of uniformity. Its movements are a characteristic mark and must be recognizable. But it has to occur in the right form at the right moment. Even though the dancers exhibit different movements, they make use of a specific repertoire that frames different movements as angular and block-like, rather big and sweeping – with an aura of seeming self-confidence. In the movie, this is not too obvious at the beginning, even though the gestures are directly comprehended as

masculine movement. This form of movement gets challenged to a certain extent with the appearance of Achilles, as we see that his movements contrast not only physically but also meaningfully with masculinity. First, as he slides in, entering the bar with a respectful distance towards the others and with an expression of curiosity, avoiding bodily contact with the rambling men, the others do not take note of him. His soft and small movements are not perceived, especially as the others are focused entirely on the masculine dynamics, which shows the interdependent character of masculine relations. From Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2012), we learn that their movements follow a shared motor space, which describes the immediate realization of bodily knowledge through the body in space of what it perceived as essential in a situation (101). But suddenly, he is seen, as his material body is right there in the pub. As a stranger, he becomes the target of the other's curiosity; one can see that he is attractive to the others. He has and does something that the others sense and restrict in themselves (ADORNO *et al.* 2002: 149). Their attempts to establish contact with him stem from the desire to classify him, to find out if he adapts to the masculine dynamics. Since Achilles does not follow their suggestions, the men intensify their efforts to get him under their control. It seems to become their mission to subject and subordinate him by breaking his type. This scene shows that masculinity constitutes itself by establishing an atmosphere of latent threat; an ambience of menacing physical violence is created in order to find out whether or not the intruder adapts, becomes intimidated, or possibly claims (a new) leadership. Making use of a submissive repertoire within the masculine, which is part of the intussusceptive mode of masculinity, would secure a place, but with his queerness, Achilles keeps on bending the norms.

The movement logic of masculinity seems to follow a paranoid uniformity, with the result that all-male associations find a fertile ground to persist (ADORNO *et al.* 2002: 163). Considering the paranoid notion of masculinity, we can describe it as a vicious cycle of self-referentiality: everything is done to nourish itself in order to maintain the association. In *Enter Achilles*, we find some very delicate scenes that showcase that the slightest suspicion menaces the sense of belonging. Jordi Cortés Molina, the first person to become aware of Achilles' presence, finds himself seduced twice by Achilles' playfulness. While the other dancers follow dance movements that encapsulate them as a group which behaves masculinely, Achilles offers an individual interpretation of the music, hopping, moving smoothly. Jordi's

awareness seems to turn towards Achilles quite sympathetically, which is highlighted by the fact that he does not join in the bullying of Achilles. His expression shows that he questions the behavior of both misogynist and homophobic actions. His withdrawal from the group's bullying of Achilles is punished by Robert, who readjusts Jordi's legs. Since he is apparently not sitting in a masculine way, he must be disciplined. Subordination might then be the way back into the group; otherwise there will be expulsion. As Achilles escapes the pub and the others pursue him, Jordi stays behind. The following scene is paradigmatic as it shows the ritual notion of mimicry in group dynamics (WULF 1989: 109). Even though he is alone, Jordi tries to remasculinize himself by instrumentalizing the binding marker, the beer. He pours out his pint, wets the floor, and rolls around in the liquid – a liquid that is used to mark bodies with masculinity. As one of modern civilization's way of marking a territory – as the film portrays other items, like a soccer ball – it seems to offer the protagonists the possibility to reterritorialize themselves within masculinity by making use of the ritual item. Jordi wants to use this procedure to erase his misbehavior in terms of masculinity and to protect his rank within the crowd. Jordi likes to believe that a ritual marker promises that belonging is just that easy; that bathing in the masculine liquid washes off the suspicion.

The second scene causes fewer problems for Jordi, since he is not associated with Achilles, but shows the intussusceptive character of mimetic actions, thus the new possibility of discovering different ways of moving (NIXON 2019: 110). As Achilles' escape goes on, he reappears for a short time in the pub before leaving again through the window. Jordi follows him and finds him outside. A soccer ball comes from somewhere. This can be seen as a metaphor for the seduction, the invitation to deviate through and to transpose the meaning of a typically masculine item (there is a significant amount of literature about the gendered territorialization of concepts and objects that are in themselves neutral, e.g., gender expression (HALBERSTAM 1998), sexual identity (STOLTENBERG 2000), trauma (WALSH 2010), fashion (MOORE 2018)). Achilles entices Jordi to play with the soccer ball, but not like one *should* play with a soccer ball. Achilles plays with the ball with his hands, arms, and the parts of his upper body. The movement is a fluid one, impeding the broken movements we know from soccer players when they try to trick their opponents. In this way, Achilles snatches the soccer ball away from the competitive battle setting. After getting the soccer ball,

Jordi enjoys playing with it differently. He learns to use the soccer ball in “a form of extended engagement of the self”, which “encourages receptivity to new ways of doing” (NIXON 2019: 111). Obviously, it is fun and causes pleasure. This insight remains with him, and he wants to pass it on to Jeremy James, but Jeremy does not even notice the offer, instead grabbing the ball and playing with it in a soccer-like fashion. The masculine intussusceptive mode only activates a *rejeu* of respective soccer movements. The soccer ball, a thing that might serve multiple uses, that might open various worlds, falls back into the realm of masculinity.

The lack of openness is in fact the paranoid structure of masculinity. This structure is established in the body schemas that make respective action available within the masculine dynamics. The exclusive notion of hegemonic body schemas manifests itself through the way in which movement and its meaning are performed. The phenomenological concept of the body schema (e.g., MERLEAU-PONTY 2012: 100f; GALLAGHER 2013: 26f; GALLAGHER *et al.* 2012: 164ff) explains human actions by what an individual has found and finds when moving or learning to move in this world. It not only encompasses motor movements but also the cultural layer of movement, i.e., its meaning. It thereby creates an experiential field that a specific situation activates in the individual in order to find an appropriate act. The body schema is not fixed; it constantly constitutes itself by being in the world and repeatedly (re-)appropriating the world. In this way, it designs the horizon of actions and is thus decisive for inclusion or exclusion. The body schema may be understood as a person’s repertoire for acting in a situation. To avoid possible misunderstandings, the repertoire is not comparable to having different acts available like a book on a shelf. It is the synthesized experiential history of the individual in interaction. In this synthesizing process, each situation is a new one, as the context and the present people and things are always different. Thereby, each individual encounters new experiences, which again synthesize with what is already available in the body schema. As Waldenfels (2000) suggests with the term *virtuality* for acting, the function of the body schema is constituted in such a way that it projects possible ways to act into the future. It thereby realizes the actual act which supposedly fits the situation best (199-200). To the person, all acts feel normal or *natural*. Sara Ahmed, here, stresses the notion of orientation (2006: 25-27) to describe spatially that a certain orientation evidently causes us to lose sight of the overall context.

We are facing forwards and do not perceive what resides out of sight. Put this way, some bodies and objects appear, and others do not. Orientation is understood both towards where the body is oriented and what kind of possible individual expressions (in her book she focusses on sexualized, gendered, and racialized identities) are within one's naturalness. We here find a similarity between intussusception and the body schema, as in both concepts there is a situational and corporeal mode of action that responds to an underlying freedom or restriction of the concrete acts available to the individual.

When the others do not notice Achilles at the beginning – interpreting this now through the lens of the body schema – he does not appear to the others in the first move because he does not participate in masculine mimicry. Only the lack of a certain masculine-labeled naturalness, therefore marking him as an alien element, causes the others to take notice of him. The paradox he presents to masculinity – being different and staying in the pub – does not help to classify Achilles; consequently, he is subjected to the masculine dynamics that seeks to force him to participate in the mimicry. Here, the paranoid process of masculinity comes to the fore. The coercion that is implied in paranoid thinking and acting creates a certain kind of attitude; these men “can only endlessly repeat their own self, which has been alienated from them as an abstract mania” (ADORNO *et al.* 2002: 157). Taking this quote literally, one could say that masculinity cuts the connections of individuals to themselves, installing a remote-controlled behavior that is fueled by masculine dynamics. Within their repertoire, there is nothing to be found that might serve for acting differently. A pause in order to think, an interest in the other, etc. does not work within the paranoid set because the coercion to act masculinely inhibits one from breaking the rules. The coercion to act masculinely occasions immediate, fearful acts within the body schema that establishes masculine dynamics as the main determining factor of a situation. Seen from a moment's glance, the situation would also allow for different acts, too. Masculinity “seizes whatever comes its way and, wholly disregarding its peculiarity, incorporates it in its mythic web” (*Ibid.*). Since queerness threatens masculinity, it cannot be recognized as a peculiarity, which is being different and acting differently. It is a threat that has to be incorporated again and again. As “[t]he closed circle of perceptual sameness becomes a surrogate for omnipotence” (*Ibid.*), queerness has to be extinguished. Omnipotent masculinity has no means to escape its

closed circle. Yet “[i]n the abyss of uncertainty, which every objectifying act must bridge, paranoia installs itself” (159). As an internalized homosocial dynamics, masculinity is “fraught with danger, the risk of failure, and with intense relentless competition (KIMMEL 2004: 187). Thus, queerness always unsettles as it does not act coherently and stereotypically.

Apart from being coercive dynamics, masculinity is very well sedimented within human history. Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s notion of mimicry as adaptation towards death is a double-layered argument. On the one hand, mimicry produces puppets, dead figures which are animated by masculine dynamics but are never individuated. On the other hand, mimicry as natural behavior resides in the sediment (WULF 1989: 104) in so far as the danger of being expelled, harassed, or even killed is averted by this kind of intussusceptive mode. Christoph Wulf speaks of the contagious character of mimicry, that addresses the intrinsic violence. Although masculine mimicry compels one to adapt and conform, there is also a need to distinguish oneself, which presupposes competition and rivalry (*Ibid.* 107-108). Adaptation and differentiation are related paradoxically, i.e., adaptation does not allow differentiation (and individuation); thus, the differentiating tendency to set oneself apart from the others is an invitation to acting violently towards others. This intrinsic violence installs a hierarchy. Nevertheless, competitive violence in masculine actions, even though it might mean dropping a certain rank when one loses the game, is what is the masculine marker. Refusing to compete or participate in the rivalry expels one from the masculine universe.

In *Enter Achilles*, this position is primarily held by Robert. Throughout the film, he is the leader, if not the commander of the bunch. His behavior is a constant invitation to compete: we witness in several scenes that he incites the others to harassment and violence (e.g., when Achilles’ movements at the beginning of the film are used to feminize him and to threaten him sexually); he incites the other men to competition (e.g., the push-up-scene that is designed to re-establish the bond among the group by doing masculine body work); he embodies judgment and correction (e.g., when Jordi gets disciplined after being found to be suspicious); and he embodies the authority of speaking and executing a verdict (e.g., when he kills the sex doll after expelling Ross, the number two in the hierarchy, for his unconventional love).

Masculine mimicry, seen this way, is a blunt but complex set of dynamics aimed at violently extinguishing the non-masculine. The non-masculine

threatens male individuals because it is feared as a disintegrative force (PECHRIGGL 2018: 183-184). It is not an individuating power, but it is connected with severe, negative affectivity towards oneself, which leads to the fact that all the non-masculine tendencies within the individual must be extinguished. As this ambiguity of life and death cannot be borne, the affects are vented on everybody considered non-masculine. Putting on a performance of one's own masculinity is a reproduction of what the sediment and the masculine actions have done to the individual, a reproduction of what this individual has had to bear in his life. This disciplining tendency constantly cuts off the move towards individuation in the individual (*Ibid.* 186).

QUEER ACHILLES. A SYMBOL OF LIFE

Even though Achilles' queerness is what endangers him, at the same time, it represents life expressed through vividness, interest in others, and a playful enjoyment in being and connecting with others. Throughout the whole piece, Achilles transposes meaning, putting on a masterpiece of being in contact with others, relating to what they are doing, but doing it differently, and even performing parodies of what is done within the group or of the kind of bullying action with which he is threatened. Even though depicted as a superhero, Achilles shows us that it is not about escaping masculinity's dynamics but about finding a way of dealing with it. In Muñozian terms, Achilles disidentifies, as he "manag[es] and negotiat[es] historical trauma and systemic violence" (1999: 161).

In my view, Achilles' main power is seduction. Here, seduction is not only understood as something that concerns sexual aspirations, but rather as Eros, which always, on any (psycho)individual layer, castrates the "believing itself almighty Ego, which is the price to pay for the gain in knowledge and the desire for truth"⁴ (my translation, PECHRIGGL 2018: 49-50). Throughout the piece, Achilles demonstrates *what else* may be available in a situation, which, at the same time, can be viewed as a tactical misrecognition (MUÑOZ 1999: 168-169) of masculinity. He thereby creates meaning, creates movement, and creates different modes of connecting. But, at the same time, almost logically as part of the misrecognition, Achilles castrates masculinity. The most obvious point here is that

⁴ „Der Eros hat immer auch mit einer ‚Kastration‘ des sich allmächtig wahnenden Ego zu tun, die der für den Erkenntnisgewinn und die Lust an der Wahrheit zu begleichende Preis ist.“

he creates room for self-expression. Achilles does this mimetically by taking up what the others do but altering the way of doing it. This example clearly shows that one cannot simply escape from masculinity's dynamics, but it may still be possible to bend its rigidity, decipher its coercive force, and transpose it to a different mode of connecting. Achilles breathes life into the connections and thus into the individuals, as he makes the others following his invitation to dance to the Bee Gees' *Staying Alive* – squealing, shaking their hips, gesticulating wildly and taking off their clothes. What happens there is the opposite of mimicry's faking death; it is mimesis: "Mimesis aims at transformation, not the reproduction of the ever same. It is not a means for putting experience in order, but the competence that enables alienated subjects to experience the other/the world"⁵ (my translation, FUCHS 2011: 61). Sabine Fuchs' understanding (as we also find in many other reflections on mimesis) does not suggest that mimesis as active mover is a fully conscious process. Her concept draws on Elin Diamond (1997), who considers psychoanalysis and the unconscious. The mimetic force interweaves the psychoanalytical forces of acting out and action (as also conceived in PECHRIGGL 2018).

In the context of unconscious acting out and conscious action, we find a thought that Diamond refers to as Berthold "Brecht's alienation-effect" (1997: XIV), which is a different and more strategic understanding of alienation than the one offered by Adorno and Horkheimer. In my view, queerness alienates masculinity with every move; it cannot do other than "ruin' and 'destroy' [...] conventional mimetic practice" (*Ibid.*). The conventionality here is masculine mimicry. The queer use of one's body alienates the supposedly essential masculine; an invitation to those who invigorate masculinity "to move through and beyond imaginary identifications, rethink their own differences and contradictions" (*Ibid.*). Fundamental to the V-effect (alienation-effect) is the work on the *gestus*, i.e., gesture, which bridges intussusception and the body schema as it combines the movement and oral foundations of common expression. Gestus points at society's history as well as the interpersonally readable expressions of social class in the bodily acts of any individual. It describes the full repertoire of bodily communication that is made available for a specific

⁵ „Mimesis zielt auf einen Wandel ab, nicht auf die Reproduktion des Selben [...]. Sie ist kein Mittel zur Ordnung von Erfahrung, sondern eine Fähigkeit, die es entfremdeten Subjekten ermöglicht, das Andere/die Welt zu erfahren.“

situation, which is why Brecht (2018 [1964]) “places [...] the traditional understanding of gestures, facial expressions and speech intonation [into an intersubjective relationship]” (35).

In *Enter Achilles*, both Jordi and Liam – at least in some scenes – are led there by Achilles’ seduction. Jordi obviously questions the behavior of the other men. Liam completely forgets about the masculine game when he accepts Achilles’ invitation to swing on a rope and to climb acrobatically. In both protagonists, we can see the ambivalence of belonging. On the one hand, Jordi apparently comprehends what occurs in these dynamics; there is expression of sadness (he has to leave something behind that he has appreciated so far); there is bad conscience (he believes himself part of a group that obviously acts against his moral values and his newly established affective bonds); but the joy of newly acquainted playfulness interrupts the expression of withdrawal. Liam, on the other hand, cannot step back from his seemingly naive and childish attitude, which he wants to use to connect with the bunch, e.g., when he invites the others to play the roles of Olivia Newton John and John Travolta while singing to the *Grease* hit *Summer Nights*. He does not realize that this openness to impersonating different genders puts him in conflict with masculine coercion; fun within the masculine provides a very narrow range of activities.

Achilles’ actions, which are permeated by his seductive powers, may stand for what Elin Diamond expects from mimetic transformation (1997: XV). Again it is Berthold Brecht’s concept which serves as a model, explaining that a “gestus traces how humans relate to one another» (BRECHT 2018 [1964]: 707), and that “the *gestus* is the stage sign (verbal and/or gestural) that reveals historical relations – the personal/social contradictions implied in the play’s fable. To read the sign or image against bourgeois myths of historical continuity is to see, as a transformative act of cognition, the possibilities emerging of another reality, what is not there, but could be” (DIAMOND 1997: 145). I would like to substitute the word masculine for what Brecht and Diamond refer to here as bourgeois. Queering the (behavioral) sign or image against masculine myths of historical continuity – which can stand for the persistent notion of masculinity – is to see, as a transformative act of moving, the possibilities emerging of another (queer) reality, what is not there, but could be. Achilles symbolizes queer futurity or, coined differently also in Muñozian terms, queer virtuosity: as it “offers the potential for a certain escape [...] virtuosity offers a certain

defection of our current system” (MUÑOZ 2019: 178).

But Achilles, and thus as other queer people, is not a stranger to masculine movement; he knows all too well how these dynamics work. The difference in his way of using these dynamics is to alienate them, to “estrangle the social gestus underlying every incident.” (BRECHT 2018 [1964]: 494). In *Enter Achilles*, we experience a very nice, though ambivalent, parody of masculine violence. Jeremy is stopped by Achilles, who wants him to give back the soccer ball. When Jeremy refuses to do so, Achilles intussusceptively falls back on the masculine, but estranges and queers it. He still takes advantage of its power, since Jeremy is not able to realize that there is no concrete danger apart from the symbolic danger which is foregrounded in this scene. Achilles menaces Jeremy with a can of shaving foam and a razor. Jeremy is scared and lets Achilles rip off his clothes. The latter quickly applies the foam, threatening Jeremy with turning him into a woman by shaving off the little hair he has anyway on his chest and legs – a suggestive castration. Achilles leaves him on the floor like a victim of rape, with his buttocks naked and some foam in his posterior rugae. What makes this violent scene parodic, strange, and serious at the same time is that queer nonsense takes place. First, the parodic, the real danger to men of losing their masculinity through a queer menace, an assault with shaving foam; second, the weird, the threat of having one’s masculinity shaved off through effemination; third, the serious, because the scene is an instantiation of violence as masculine power.

Effemination here points towards several aspects that endanger masculinity (DYER 2004: 22; HALBERSTAM 1998: 1). It shows the hierarchy in the binary world. Losing one’s anatomical sex, the penis, is not only an injury and loss on the mere physical level, but it also means the severe loss of an entire world, that presupposes a penis to belong, no matter if it is covered or displayed. Effeminated beings, whether anatomically female or not, constitute what many feminist thinkers have referred to as *the other*. Within this hierarchical disbalance, all the movements, behaviors, and expressions that do not correspond or reconfirm the masculine are relegated to a secondary, already excluded position. The razor scene remains ambivalent because of the violence depicted and the shaving action that uses effemination as an instrument. However, I would like to offer an alternative reading of this scene, one in which the depicted process of effemination offers a possible way out of masculine mimicry. In my view,

effemination does not mean a devaluation of the other, as the word suggests in a conventional understanding. Instead, I see the other as an individual that comes into being by deviating from masculine mimicry. This way one is automatically subjected to effemination – everybody who does not participate in this deadly mimetic process self-evidently becomes the other. The other could be a valuable position, as in the end, it is an *other person* that is seen. This means a re-appropriation of otherness that makes available different forms of connections, caring forms of belonging and social dynamics beyond anatomical designation, sexual relations or identities – and additionally a possible way for solidarities to arise between different groups.

Achilles is a queer, effeminate superhero, one who uses an otherness reminiscent of Brecht's *gestus* throughout the piece. Otherness here operates as a gestural form that points to how seemingly natural masculinity objectifies, as the other never fits into a supposedly natural norm, something Brecht (2005) called commodification (243). Achilles' superpowers seem to lie in othering everything he encounters. Here *othering* is used in different sense than that usually applied in queer-feminist thought; it is read against the grain. It relates to what Erving Goffmann called stigma-philic response (1963: 31). Knowing and having grasped the impossibility of corresponding a certain standard may turn out to be a possible way of doing, acting, moving differently, since it is clear that one can never succeed. Instead, it suggests a fundamental understanding of otherness that values being different; another person is *an other than I am*. Therein also lies one possible way of dealing with and finally accepting differences.

On the level of movement, doing differently is to allow smooth movements, to allow contact with one's own skin, to shorten the vocal cords, to circle the hips, to connect to others – to establish a connection with one's full range of expressions. On the level of meaning, doing differently demands casting aside the frames of gendered categorization and being open to other expressions of belonging instead of following a mimicry-like adaptation to the ever same – ultimately opening towards mimetic thinking and acting that builds connections and acknowledges the difference of the other.

THE MASCULINE SEDIMENT. A CONCLUSION

Elin Diamond offers a striking quote: "To seem womanish in behavior is to become womanish." (1997: vi). Masculinity as a self-centered force

persists in a mode of self-affirmation. Masculinity cannot reside in a single individual; it follows an idea, or more precisely, a stereotype. Individuals cannot mobilize this stereotype by and in themselves, for it is not to be found within them: masculinity is in need of the “womanish”. The expulsion of *misbehaving* individuals, the suppression of one’s own “womanish” tendencies, and the inevitable constitution of those as targets of violence or affective unloading (PECHRIGGL 2018: 186), makes masculinity itself come to life and be installed, at least seemingly for a moment, *in* the individual. It is a permanent process of appropriation, that is slippery in so far as once it seems achieved, it is already gone. It therefore needs constant repetition. The otherness is defined by what does not match – be it a part of the body, or behavior, or style, and so forth. Devaluing women in general and effeminating those who do not conform is part of masculine mimicry. We discover masculinity as a practice which draws on and thereby actualizes its sedimented meaningful actions (*Ibid.* 177). Masculinity still plays a major role in societies. Socio-anatomical males are drilled a certain way that results in them only finding their places in this world by falling back on these masculine dynamics. Otherwise, they become the first targets of the intrinsic violence. But we have to be alert and *care-ful*. Masculine mimicry does not only take place in social contexts like those depicted in *Enter Achilles*; it can wear many sophisticated disguises. Masculinity persists even though looks and scenes change and different apparently egalitarian, activities become possible – the tendency to mimicry reveals it.

The particular type of pub in *Enter Achilles* might have changed its features here and there, as in the meantime a quarter of a century has passed. But it might serve as an example that sedimentation also creates sociocultural places, or “culturally communicating containers, in which psyches arrange themselves newly, transfigure themselves in their bodies and situate themselves – also in time” (my translation, PECHRIGGL 2018: 181)⁶. However, the film ends at dawn. A *new* day begins. Achilles, the queer superhero, walks on the roof of “The Plough”. The pub’s name now suggests that masculinity is both ploughed into bodies and ploughs social settings – all the time. Nonetheless, there is Achilles on the rooftop, a queer demigod

⁶ „... sie sind kulturell kommunizierende Gefäße, in denen die Psychen sich immer neu arrangieren, sich über ihre Körper transfigurieren und neu – auch in der Zeit – verorten.“

moving freely and being moved by a morning breeze. A Muñozian utopia that suggests that queerness is able to defeat the masculine, just by using one's fingers to symbolize the beat of an eyelash.

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JOANNA STAŚKIEWICZ

The queering relief of the humor in the new burlesque

ABSTRACT: According to Peter L. Berger, in turn inspired by Eugène Ionesco, the most significant moment of the comic lies in the “magical transformation of reality” (BERGER 1997: 182). Also for Jacques Rancière (2004), humor is the “art of distance,” and, especially in the “aesthetic distance” (2010), he sees the condition of the effectiveness of the art and its political impact. Particularly in times of political right-wing backlash is such a transformation of reality and distance through humor a possibility to create a safe space, where social heteronormativity and the gravity of national-religious scripts can be relieved, for the time being, through a queer carnivalesque spectacle in the art of new burlesque. This article thus follows the plea of Jack Halberstam (2011), who calls for research into the “silly archives,” supposedly the banal, and foolish of the *queer art of failure*, which can reveal social power structures, myths, and “truths,” and analyzes the humorous effectiveness and the myth-shredding power of the new burlesque using selected shows in Warsaw and New Orleans as examples.

KEYWORDS: burlesque, humor, gender, queer, performance and theatre studies

For Michael Martin, in memoriam

What is comical is the unusual in its pure state; nothing seems more surprising to me than that which is banal; the surreal is here, within grasp of our hands, in our everyday conversation.

Eugène Ionesco (quoted in ESSLIN 2004: 144)

When I started writing this article, the 2020 Polish presidential elections were just taking place, which were won by the incumbent Andrzej Duda. One of the inglorious moments of the election campaign was Duda’s attacks against the LGBTQ community and his claim that being LGBTQ is an ideology, which he used to deny LGBTQ people subjecthood and human rights (WALKER 2020). These words fueled the already strong state propaganda of the right-wing-conservative government against LGBTQ people, supported by some local governments that declared themselves “LGBTQ-free communities” and encouraged attacks. This reminded me of

my research stays and burlesque observations in Warsaw and New Orleans in 2018, which gave me insight into the fascinating world of queer, magical, almost utopian places in which humor, playful deconstruction of local and national myths, and a solidarity of the creative scenes of burlesque, the LGBTQ community, and alternative theaters enabled a catharsis to prevail in times of conservative backlash.

Following the theories of queer utopian or heterotopian spaces and “queer time,” where everyday life and the matrix of social roles can be at least temporarily abandoned, I will analyze whether the new burlesque can create such a space as humorous queer, erotic-comedic performance. In doing so, I want to avoid the big question of social subversion through such shows, pursuing the theories that emphasize that every performance and every pop-culture phenomenon has subversive and affirmative elements (FISCHER-LICHTE & WULF 2004; KLEINER 2013). Rather, this article is about a kind of catharsis, a solidarity of a gathering of people who are looking for a space where they can escape the narrowness of everyday political and social life. I will show this by using the selected burlesque performances in Warsaw and New Orleans as examples.

1. PLEASURABLE QUEER SPACES

Utopia is a place outside all places, but it is a place where I will have body without body, a body that will be beautiful, limpid, transparent, luminous, speedy, colossal in its power, infinite in its duration. Untethered, invisible, protected – always transfigured. (FOUCAULT 2006: 229)

In his essay *Utopian body*, Michel Foucault (2006: 229) writes about a utopian space where one could be “a body without a body,” and finally escape the prison of one’s own corporeality, of this “pitiless place,” which only reminds one of aging, imperfection, fragility, and transience, “the same presence, same wounds.” A utopia, according to Foucault, always tries to transcend the physical, while, for him, “to be a utopia, it is enough that I be a body” (2006: 231). Even if utopias try to make the body disappear, it is the body that is the origin of utopias. According to Foucault, however, there are moments in which the body is not utopian: When looking at the body in the mirror, in the state of the corpse, and while making love. Angela Jones ties in with Foucault’s other concept – his heterotopias – the real

places in contrast to utopia, “which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (FOUCAULT 1986: 24). For Jones, queer heterotopias are possibilities for everyday withdrawal from restrictions and humiliations:

a radical post-human vision where nothing is fixed and there are no boundaries, and no hierarchies. These are spaces with no ordered categories that qualify and rank bodies. This will require the radical transformation of bodies, subversive performances, and transforming our minds, our souls, and our thoughts. (JONES 2009: 15)

Such queer heterotopias are not bound to any special forms or practices; their main characteristic is the subversion of hegemonic power relations, especially with regard to sex, gender, and sexuality. In a later text, Jones broadens the concept of queerness, which, according to her, cannot be limited to the question of sexual orientation or gender subversion, emphasizing the processional status of queerness and the aspect of rebelling against narrow, essentialist social norms and binaries. As she points out, “Queerness is always being made, remade, being done, being redone, and being undone. It is a quotidian refusal to play by the rules, if those rules stifle the spirit of queers who, like caged birds, cannot sing” (JONES 2013: 14). She also remarks that queerness requires failure, which recalls the concept of the “queer art of failure,” from Jack (Judith) Halberstam, who views the foolish, faulty, so-called “silly archives” as a key to liberation from the predominance of heteronormativity:

To live is to fail, to bungle, to disappoint, and ultimately to die; rather than searching for ways around death and disappointment, the queer art of failure involves the acceptance of the finite, the embrace of the absurd, the silly, and hopelessly goofy. Rather than resisting endings and limits, let us instead revel in and cleave to all of our own inevitable fantastic failures. (HALBERSTAM 2011: 186-187)

Halberstam opposes the social imperative of success, conformity, and formative mastery and pleads for the liberating effect of ignorance. Of course, in times in which ignorance and self-confident unknowingness can meanwhile become a successful tool for a political career climb up to the office of president, Halberstam’s plea acquires a bitter aftertaste. For Halberstam,

however, and in reference to Foucault, ignorance instead means ignoring the hegemonic production of knowledge, and implies the sovereignty of subversive intellectuality, which eludes academic and non-academic measures of disciplinarity. To this end, he additionally recommends opposing mastery by considering failure and stupidity as “counterintuitive modes of knowing” (HALBERSTAM 2011: 12). Failure thereby means the critical argument and dissociation from the capitalist principle of success and stupidity, not a lack of knowledge but a withdrawal from the restrictions and structures of hegemonic knowledge production. In a cheeky way, Halberstam also suggests a preference for the naive and non-sensical as an opportunity to acquire other knowledge practices and other pedagogy. In reference to Jacques Rancière’s work *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Halberstam (2011: 13) emphasizes that learning is a “two-way street” and requires a dialogue between teacher and student. An “ignorant schoolmaster,” according to Halberstam and Rancière, should not guide the learners through the paths they have learned, but rather should allow them to lose themselves in order to find their own ways of thinking and intellectual emancipation. Halberstam also proposes escaping the circle of remembering, especially traumas, in the sense of forgetting, because memory is subject to discursive practices. Forgetting means “a way of resisting the heroic and grand logics of recall and unleashes new forms of memory that relate more to spectrality than to hard evidence, to lost genealogies than to inheritance, to erasure than to inscription” (HALBERSTAM 2011: 13). Halberstam’s “queer art of failure” offers a refreshing approach to exploring particularly the “lower arts,” in which Halberstam sees a reserve of knowledge about social power structures and circumstances, and the so-called “silly archives” on the same level as established academic knowledge.

Already in his earlier book *In a Queer Time and Place*, Halberstam developed a concept of queerness as a time concept that is distinct from hegemonic, social-economic-productive social (everyday) time and describes queerness “as an outcome of strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices” (2005: 1). By queer time, Halberstam refers not only to the LGBTQ community, but to all those who evade the heteronormative time matrix of reproduction and family life. A similar approach is taken by Elizabeth Freeman in her concept of *chrononormativity*, meaning, the time in which people are stimulated to maximal productivity and capital accumulation, and to heteronormative life strategies

(FREEMAN 2010: 3). As a mode of countering *chrononormativity*, of escaping this temporality, Freeman proposes the strategy of *erotohistoriography*, meant as “a politics of unpredictable, deeply embodied pleasures that counters the logic of development” (2010: 59). Freeman offers a concept to escape the narrowness and trauma of the heteronormative hegemony and the time of *chrononormativity* in a pleasurable way. She explains, “Against pain and loss, erotohistoriography posits the value of surprise, of pleasurable interruptions and momentary fulfillments from elsewhere, other times” (FREEMAN 2010: 59).

In a special queer issue of the *Polish Theatrical Journal* from 2019, in the midst of the right-wing conservative backlash in Poland, the theater scholar Agata Adamiccka-Sitek wrote a similarly affirmative statement that could help to resist the current backlash and rising homophobia. According to the approach of reparative practices by Eve Sedgwick Kosofsky, and Michel Foucault’s notion of self-care, Adamiccka-Sitek asks for a strategy for finding hope and going through these times in queer solidarity. This solidarity is possible with self-care, pleasure, and sensitivity to oneself, which, in turn, enables one to empathize with another. She concludes:

The subtlety of queer strategies and the gentleness of reparative practices are obscured by the tumultuousness of the political process, which makes each queer statement sound like a manifesto. Our response to this must be solidarity and an unwavering practice of pleasure and joy. In the face of politics that strive to manage our fear, this is the most effective resistance strategy. (ADAMIECKA-SITEK 2019: 4)

Adamiccka-Sitek also refers to Vaclav Havel’s words about hope, which, for Havel, is not the joy of striving for something that leads to success, but for something that is “good” and does not necessarily promise success. Adamiccka-Sitek sees solidarity and queer commitment as the hopeful way – *A New Landscape with a Rainbow*, as she names her essay – to deal with the backward-looking, queer politics of the right-wing conservative government in alliance with the conservative Catholic Church in Poland.

In times of political backlash, queer utopian spaces appear as spaces of longing, spaces where “the everyday life of queer trauma” (CVETKOVICH 2003: 15) and the desolate “here and now” (Muñoz, 2009: 1) could be forgotten for a while. A temporary distancing from the wounds of political

and social life is enabled not only by hope and belief in the rightness of the commitment, but also, as Jacques Rancière describes it in his book *The Philosopher and His Poor* – by humor, which is, for him, “the art of distance that is learned at a distance” (RANCIÈRE 2004: 122). Adam J. Greteman refers to Rancière’s approach of humor and discusses it in the context of queer education as a “queer practice of dissent” (2014: 428). Humor in education allows for queer theory to dissent from and resist conservative and reactionary approaches. Sometimes it can fail as jokes can fail, but humor in connection with Halberstam’s queer art of failure, according to Greteman (2014: 428), allows one “to continue to dissent in all its anxiety-provoking, fear-inducing beauty.”

Dissenting with humor is also what Peter L. Berger (1997) writes about, inspired by Eugène Ionesco and the *Theater of the Absurd*. Ionesco emphasized the liberating effect of laughing at the world, in recognition of its absurdity and ridiculousness.¹ The recognition of this absurdity already leads to distance, to *depaysement*, a transgression of everyday reality. Following that approach, Berger concludes that the most significant moment of the comic lies in the “magical transformation of reality” (1997: 182). In the book *Art and Laughter*, Sheir Klein also writes about the importance and cathartic effect of humor and the postmodern concept of banalities as freeing, pleasurable concepts the artist can use to integrate humor into their art and forget the stigma of funny art not being serious art: “Humour may also be defined as an attitude that makes jokes and comedy possible through understanding reality, but refusing to be constrained by it” (KLEIN 2007: 9). The artist as a clown is, according to Klein, like a rebel against the painful sides of reality, like a clown balancing the world tragedy with comedy and transforming the world of sorrows into a kind of circus.

Referring to the aforementioned concepts of queer heterotopias and time, as well as spaces of dissent described above, an idea already emerges about the characteristics of such a queer space of transgression against the wounds of everyday life, from the norms of *chrononormativity* – these characteristics are hope, humor, queer failure, and pleasure. Now I will discuss the phenomenon of the theatrical-erotic performance of the new

¹ When mentioning the relieving effect of the joke, of course Sigmund Freud must not remain unmentioned, who in his *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* spoke about the joke as a kind of energetic and emotional vent and relief meant as a safe disposal of repressed desires. See FREUD 1983.

burlesque, and whether it can function as such a space, starting with a historical excursion to the origin of the new burlesque.

2. (NEW) BURLESQUE. QUEER BEGINNINGS?

As described above, a queer space is characterized by the questioning of hegemonic structures and binaries, and the rejection of playing roles according to heteronormativity. In this text, I argue that the (neo-)burlesque binds such a queer space and reveals, in a humorous way, the entrenched opinions about gender and sexuality, and how one should live in general. This humorous subversion is already evident if one analyzes the etymological origins of the word “burlesque,” which comes from the Italian word *burla*, meaning “joke.” The origins of the burlesque can be traced back to the Italian *Commedia dell’arte* of the 16th century and its parody of high culture; *burla* (a kind of practical joke) and *lazzi* (an improvised comical sequence and a precursor to modern clown acts) were part of the typical artisan repertoire of the *Commedia dell’arte* (KUPFERBLUM 2013; THEILE 1997). But burlesque can be found in various forms: as a literary genre, as a musical piece, and as a theatrical-erotic performance, the latter being the subject of this essay. The different meanings of burlesque are connected by the fundamental function of the humorous, grotesque distortion, and the travesty of cultural quotations of so-called high culture. The burlesque is also recognizable in Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1968) concept of the carnival, the abolition of norms, the overturning of the world, and the parodist reversal, which he captures in the example of festivals in Middle Age Europe, where the jester could be temporarily crowned king and the beggar a pope. This paper analyzes the burlesque and its late 20th-century revival as the new burlesque within the meaning of the comical-theatrical and erotic bodily performance, which is very complex in its form and which is emphasized in the definition of burlesque by Marie-Cécile Cervellon and Stephen Brown, who see the burlesque as “a multi-disciplinary performance art that, throughout history, has built on different theatrical traditions including playing, singing, dancing, clowning and, since the late 19th century, stripping” (CERVELLON & BROWN 2014: 271). The origins of the theatrical-erotic burlesque can be found in Victorian burlesque, which was a very popular theatrical art the middle of the 19th century, especially in London. Those shows were based on comical interpretation, a travesty of works of so-called high culture, such as the works of Shakespeare, Byron, and Greek

mythology. In London began the fulminate career Lydia Thompson, who is considered to be the first performer of the burlesque associated with the erotic aspect and spectacle of femininity and who, from the 1860s, was performing a mixture of theater, comedy, and ballet. Thompson and other female performers played male roles and performed in men's clothing, for example, in shorts. From today's perspective, one cannot speak of nudity back then, because the performers always wore body-colored stockings underneath their clothes, but at the time, this and the attendant inversion of Victorian gender roles were considered scandalous. As the scholar of the US-American burlesque Robert C. Allen accurately emphasizes, innuendos of female corporeality and the lower parts of the body were in themselves equated with nudity, and the burlesque began to be associated with the female spectacle and raised questions about the role of women on stage and the representation of femininity.

During their tour through the US in 1868, this scandalous aura accompanied Thompson and her five-member troupe, *The British Blondes*, with whom she established burlesque there. Thompson began her tour in New York with the burlesque play *Ixion; or, the Man at the Wheel*, by F.C. Burnard, a parody of classical culture and the myth of Ixion, whom Thompson played. These performances became very popular, attracted great attention, and were widely discussed, because, as Allen impressively shows in his book, Thompson's burlesque revealed, above all, the fears of the bourgeoisie of the danger of lechery and moral decay, propelled by the fear of the spectacle of femininity, especially femininity that was so clearly different from the then ideal of sentimental, high-necked, asexual, puritanical femininity (see for example DIJKSTRA 1988). The burlesque was denigrated as "leg business," and legs were meant, as Allen points out, as "the synecdotal sign of the lower body and of female sexuality in general" (1991: 146). It was the self-confidence of the performers, their physical erotic charisma, that brought sensual femininity to the stage, which has been banished to this day to the red-light and working-class districts, thus confusing the division between the holy, obedient Madonna and the unruly "whore" woman:

After decades of referencing the norms of femininity, primarily in terms of the "high" – angels, spirituality, ideality, fairies – bourgeois males saw that burlesque constructed femininity with reference almost exclusively to the "low" – the lower body, the profane, the working classes, prostitutes. (ALLEN 1991: 146)

Drawing on Peter Stallybrass and Allon White's concept of the *low other*, Allen shows how burlesque was marginalized as "low" by the dominant bourgeois discourse, and how the bourgeoisie defined its identity by the elimination of what was seen as low: "dirty, repulsive, noisy, contaminating" (ALLEN 1991: 146), lower body parts, lower social classes, and the lower culture of those lower classes. The burlesque was associated with the working class and its jargon, unsophisticatedness, and impertinence, but, at the same time, it aroused fascination and desire (see also Dolan, 1984).² An interesting aspect that Allen points out is that not only did the femininity of voluptuous, working-class women cause excitement, but also the "horrible prettiness" of the performers, as one critic described the appearance of women in Thompson's burlesque troupe (1991: 25). Their poised appearance and performance of masculinity in the plays made them a genderless curiosity: "[T]hough they were not like men, [they] were in most things as unlike women, and seemed creatures of a kind of alien sex, parodying both. It was certainly a shocking thing to look at them with their horrible prettiness, their archness in which was no charm, their grace which out to shame" (ALLEN 1991: 25). In the days when a woman returning the male gaze on the street could already be perceived as a prostitute, not only did burlesque performers address their audience directly and returned the gaze, but they also did it with "awarishness" (ALLEN 1991: 148; see also BUSZEK 1999).

Claire Nally sees the term "alien sex" in relation to burlesque performers of the time as concepts that can be found in contemporary theories about drag and cross-dressing. Following Marjorie Garber's "third term" concept, she underlines the role of the cross-dressing and drag performer as a cross-over between the sexes, not as one of the sexes being performed (NALLY 2013: 115). The transgression and the queer element in terms of gender norms can thus already be seen in 19th-century burlesque and is, as will be shown later, one of the many elements that make contemporary burlesque a queer practice.

² As Efrat Tseëlon remarks in reference to the "low other" concept by Stallybrass and White, the suppression of the low and carnivalesque by the bourgeoisie did not succeed; it was only shifted into the realm of the unconscious: "It was displaced into such areas of bourgeois discourse as art and psychoanalysis (in the form of unconscious). To use the terms of the discourse of psychoanalysis itself, the repressed carnivalesque has returned in the ambivalent mixture of attraction and repulsion exhibited towards the objects and subjects of these cultural forms. what has been expelled as other returns as the object of horror and fascination, nostalgia and longing" (TSEËLON 2001a: 8).

Here we come back to the concepts of queer spaces, where hope and pleasure prevail in order to forget the wounds of everyday life. It is interesting that, as Jacki Willson (2008) noted, the highlights of the development of burlesque are linked to economic crises. When the time of the constitution of the US-American burlesque began, the time of the Long Depression (1873 to mid-1890), including the consequences of the US Civil War, was still present. Not only burlesque, but also other forms of popular entertainment had their flowering time from the middle of the 19th century such as circuses, infamous “freak-shows,” minstrelsy, extravaganzas, variety, vaudeville, among others, due to the growing industrialization and urbanization and increasing demand for affordable entertainment for working classes (see, for example, ADAMS 2001; BOGDAN 2009; JANDO *et al.* 2008). The second peak of burlesque occurred in the 1920s and 1930s, that is, during the period of the Great Depression. During this time, US-American burlesque reached its heyday and found its way into the famous theaters of Broadway. The burlesque of that time, however, differed from Thompson’s burlesque, especially in the stronger eroticization, which had already started at the end of the 19th century with belly dance (“cooch”) and which, from 1920 on, was more and more supplemented by striptease (ALLEN 1991: 243). But very soon, burlesque was relegated back to the place of the low other: In 1937, New York mayor Fiorello LaGuardia decided to close all burlesque theaters because he saw the danger of the city’s moral decay. Burlesque was thus banished to the underground and gradually replaced by more and more exposing striptease and go-go dancing. With the growing porn industry, striptease came to include more and more nudity, and burlesque with its theatrical seduction was no longer needed (ALLEN 1991; BRIGGEMAN 2009; BUSZEK 1999; ŁUKSZA 2016; STAŚKIEWICZ 2017 and 2021; WERNER 2015).

The revival of the so-called new burlesque started in alternative and queer bars in the 1990s, with growing popularity in the 2000s. The aesthetics of new burlesque is based on the US-American burlesque of the 1860s, but also plays with the nostalgia for the pin-up tradition and the vintage style of the 1930s to 1950s, combined with the *retromania* and revival of swing dance and rock-and-roll (CERVELLON & BROWN 2018). Not only burlesque, but also other kinds of popular US-American entertainment, were taken up anew in the 2000s, in various forms, such as the Contemporary Circus (*Zeitgenössischer Zirkus*) in Germany, which places less emphasis on

artistry and more on theatrical performance, or the tradition of side shows, or “freak shows,” not to mention the ever-increasing popularity of clowns – from the latest *Joker* film (2019) to the circus-clown-themed production of *Rigoletto* during the Bregenzer Festspiele in 2019.³ In Great Britain, the retromania is particularly noticeable in the trend of neo-Victorianism and in subcultures such as steampunk, which draw their aesthetics from the Victorian period (NALLY 2019).

However, it must be emphasized that, while early burlesque was more the affordable entertainment of working-class people, the new burlesque should be seen as more in the category of a subculture (FERREDAY 2008), which attracts more the young, urban, culturally affine population, which takes place in alternative, often queer locations, using postmodern queer forms and practices like camp and drag, and, as I will also show later, which is very connected with the LGBTQ community, while also being a part of it. This leaves behind the early circle of the “low culture” of the working class, as contemporary burlesque is considered more art than striptease, which is being criticized because this attitude in burlesque views striptease as “not arty” and attributes the label *low other* to it (HARRIS 2013; ŁUKSZA 2016).

Women who performed early burlesque mostly came from the working class and could find a path to economic independence, sometimes even to fame. As Red Tremmel shows in his powerful documentary *Exotic World and the Burlesque Revival* (2012), for many burlesque performers in the US in the 1940s and 1950s who came from less privileged classes and had no money for college, the burlesque was a way of escaping from provincial narrowness, sometimes from violent families, and from the typical “housewife biography” of this time. It was a way of satisfying one’s hunger for the big world, glamour, and freedom – particularly for queer women, as performer Satan’s Angel explains in the film. And indeed, Tremmel’s documentary shows that burlesque offered liberation as well as a solid community for the performers of that time, a safe place where they could find refuge until the very end. Featured in the film is Dixie Evans (known as “the Marilyn Monroe of Burlesque”), who founded a museum with her social security checks to celebrate the women who had accompanied her

³ Also worth mentioning is the popularity of the many US mystery and horror series that take up the themes of “freak shows,” the circus world, and the side shows of the 19th century, such as the series *American Horror Story* (especially the fourth season, *Freak Show*) and the series *Carnivàle*, about the travelling circus world. See, for example, TYRRELL 2020.

in the burlesque in the 1940s and 1950s. Evens also conceived it as a house for aging burlesque performers. The museum, which at first was remotely located in the Mojave Desert in Nevada, is now known as the Burlesque Hall of Fame in Las Vegas, and is also the final resting place for some of the performers. The view of ash urns surrounded by boas and fairy lights in the documentary looks like a utopian temple of burlesque.

In the following, I will show that today's burlesque has revived the former gender transgression in the sense of the male impersonation performed by Thompson's troupe: Not only are there now burlesque performers who define themselves beyond the gender binary, but they also use different ways of bodily staging, which are always associated with the main characteristic of burlesque – humor.

3. HUMOROUS BODILY TRANSGRESSIONS

While the bodily transgression in the first burlesque period up to the 1920s was mainly done with the female-to-male cross-dressing, masquerade, and a pinch of nudity, the contemporary new burlesque uses eclectic ways of representing the body, combined with the elements associated with LGBTQ culture, such as drag and camp, but also with side shows, circus, clowning, or “freak shows.” Nevertheless, the most important element of new burlesque is the humor. Jacki Willson analyzes the contemporary feminist performances based on the example of the burlesque art and emphasizes how humor, especially tongue-in-cheek humor, works like carnivalesque laughter turning the world and norms upside down, making “nonsense of the normal” and “normal appear ridiculous” (WILLSON 2015: 5). According to Willson, humor has a political effect; it refers to the absurdity and ridiculousness of norms and politicizes the disagreements: “Playing the fool destabilizes clichés by juxtaposing the ‘*deviant*’ or the ‘*spoiled*’ in relation to the ‘*ideal*’ or the ‘*norm*’ thus exposing the way in which particular cultures and its people impose foolish rules” (2015: 10). Similar to what Eugène Ionesco (ESSLIN 2004) said regarding the *Theater of the Absurd*, the recognition of absurdity and ridiculousness already allows one to go beyond them; one can see the similar mechanism in the new burlesque, particularly regarding gender roles.

Nowadays, as the erotic performance of new burlesque “can be performed by anybody, and any body, regardless of shape, size, gender or ability” (BROWNIE 2017: 41), the ways of transgression of norms also go far beyond

the former female masquerade and *female-to-male* cross-dressing. Just as in the burlesque of the 19th century, when women in men's clothing were perceived as "aliens" in their scary "horrible prettiness," in contemporary burlesque, the performers intentionally and humorously turn themselves into genderless "aliens." As Claire Nally notes, drag and cross-dressing in burlesque are no longer about passing as a man or woman, but about questioning categorizations in relation to gender norms. She gives an example of a boylesque performer, a drag queen, who refuses to stage femininity and stylizes himself as genderless in order to ridicule gender roles. That is a reminder of what Gertrud Lehnert (1997) writes wrote about gender masquerade as the staging of gender, and an ongoing process in which not the reproduction of a gender, but rather the demonstration of different possibilities and meanings of the masquerade is the focus of attention. Destabilization, shaking, and questioning of binaries and deadlocked points of view is also what Efrat Tseëlon sees as the effect of the masquerade:

Masquerade unsettles and disrupts the fantasy of coherent, unitary, stable, mutually exclusive divisions. It replaces clarity with ambiguity, certainty with reflexivity, and phantasmic constructions of containment and closure with constructions that in reality are more messy, diverse, impure and imperfect. The masquerade, in short, provides a paradigmatic challenge not only to dualistic differences between essence and appearance. (TSEËLON 2001a: 3)

The masquerade in the new burlesque is connected to *camp*, which Susan Sontag read as exaggeration, artifice, and theatricality, and which I understand, according to Claire Nally and Moe Meyer and unlike Sontag, as a political practice, a "queer parody" producing new meanings (NALLY 2013: 117). The queer parody is particularly evident in new burlesque in drag, which is found in the new burlesque in several forms, such as *female-to-male* and *male-to-female* drag, but also as *female-to-female* drag. The complexity of drag in burlesque is also shown by the phenomenon of the so-called *draglesque*, a performance "[w]here burlesque and drag collide" (ALLAN 2018) and in the discussion over the last several years of whether a faux drag queen (or "bio-queen"), that is, a cis-woman who does campy, cartoonish make-up and performs as a drag queen, can really be a drag queen.⁴ Considering the aforementioned concepts of pleasurable queer

⁴ See, for example: SCRIVER 2016; VERMAN 2016.

spaces, one has to ask whether such drag-subcategories are significant, and whether burlesque as such can be regarded as a queering practice and a queer space of gender diversity.

Not only humorous gender stagings like drag, cross-dressing, and masquerade, but also the various representations of bodies allow for the recognition of absurdity and ridiculousness of body norms and for resistance against these norms (KLEIN 2014). The bodies of burlesque performers range from normative bodies corresponding to contemporary ideals of beauty to the so-called “bawdy” look, a look that eludes contemporary mainstream ideals of beauty. Millner and Moore (2015: 22) connect bawdy beauty with “street style, postmodernism, punk, goth, rockabilly and radical drag to embody a nonchalant play with double standards and mixed messages,” and see bawdy beauty as carnivalesque motifs in the style of Mikhail Bakhtin, because the non-conformist appearance reveals the binarity of the distinction between accepted and non-accepted sexiness. Bakhtin saw in carnival the possibility for people to distance themselves from the so-called high culture of the ruling elites. He combined his dichotomous approach of the parodistic degradation of the high (the above) by the below, that is, by the people, with the concept of grotesque bodies. For him, these bodies are to be understood topographically: genitals, belly, and bottom represent the bodily bottom, while the top is represented by the face and head. Bakhtin’s grotesque bodies are assigned to the material-bodily realm, like food or sexuality, and are stylized by exaggeration, hyperbole, or excess. In Bakhtin’s concept of the body, Mary Russo (1995) emphasizes the aspect of the processional, the unfinished and the changeable of the popular grotesque body, which is in opposition to the closed classical body of the bourgeoisie. In particular, she sees in the unfinished and changeable a space of “overlapping trajectories” that would create “fantastical connections between and within genders, bodies, costumes, subcultures, architectures, landscapes, and temporalities” (RUSSO 1995: 106; see also STAŚKIEWICZ 2018).

These “overlapping trajectories” can also be found in burlesque shows, because the different bodies of the performers are in the process of becoming and appear as unfinished, hyperbolic, and grotesque bodies. Annie Blanchette (2014: 174) also takes up Bakhtin and Russo and connects the grotesque in burlesque with the common association that burlesque has to do with “low”; the lower bodies in burlesque would then be non-ideal bodies, such as bodies that are “too fat,” “too ugly,” “too old,” or “too *passée*.” In

the performances, non-ideal bodies enable a distancing from the ideal and therefore have a subversive character. But normative bodies, too, which correspond to the current ideal of beauty and do not appear as grotesque bodies or “queer anti-normative” at first sight, are subversive and a form of drag (STAŚKIEWICZ 2018). Debra Ferreday (2008) points out, for example, that burlesque in which performers play with heteronormative notions of female sexuality and hyper-femininity is a *female-to-female* drag that shows that femininity is also performative and can be learned.

As already mentioned, in addition to the revival of burlesque, we can also see a nostalgia for other forms of popular entertainment, such as the circus, side shows, and “freak shows” – the display of people who do not conform to the norm, which was popular between 1840 and 1940 as a kind of “curiosity cabinet.” The connection of burlesque with circus elements and with “freak shows” was already there, as Allen shows, in the burlesque of the 19th century. Thus, Thompson and her troupe appeared on stage together with “Siamese twins, hermaphrodites, pinheads, and pickled fetuses” (ALLEN 1991: 232). Meanwhile, female sexual spectacle was seen at this time as a “freak show,” and aroused the same curiosity in the audience as something strange, other, and that one could not see at home. As Allen explains, following Leslie Fiedler and the connection he makes between the spectacle of bodily “abnormality” and sexual spectacle, a woman presenting a sexual spectacle like an erotic “cooch” dance was considered a “freak.” On the one hand, the performer seemed to the male audience like an “ordinary” woman, and, on the other hand, her expressive sexuality seemed exotic, as something that a man of that time could not experience at home (ALLEN 1991: 235). The contemporary new burlesque shows offer not only a play with seduction, but also a grotesque and titillating spectacle of circus art; as Jacki Willson (2008) emphasizes, many burlesque performers are also well trained in circus, artistic, or side shows. The elements of the early “freak shows” are also present, but, without the historical racist, inhumane attitude, it is rather a queer re-coding of these infamous shows with humor and ironic self-deprecation. The burlesque performers declare themselves ironically as “self-made ‘freaks’” (WILLSON 2008: 150), which Willson connects with the “desire to dream-like escapism” (p. 155): from conforming bodies, a conforming world, and conventional glamour.

That recalls the concept of *queer freak theory* by Renate Lorenz (2012), who taking into account the inhumane history of “freak shows,” develops a

queer approach in which she also gives a new meaning to the term “freak”: “‘Freak’ does not mark any *position* in the aside, but instead marks a *movement* of distantiation, of keeping distance from ideals of being-white, being heterosexual, being-normal, being-efficient” (LORENZ 2012: 28). The burlesque performers, as I will show next, not only destabilize and denormalize gender norms, beauty ideals, and norms about which bodies can be considered sexy, but they also question and deconstruct historical myths and comment on the current political situation with their body stagings, their drag, their pleasurable, bawdy look, and their self-irony combined with the celebration of erotic sensuality – all of which make the burlesque into liberating, distancing *queer freak art*.

4. EROTOHISTORIOGRAPHY OF NATIONAL DEMONS AND HUMOROUS ENCHANTMENT OF THE PRESENT

We are now about to leave the theoretical realm and enter a magical, fun, queer, almost utopian space, taking place in Warsaw at the beginning of 2018, in the cold winter months in the middle of the third year of the term under the right-wing conservative PIS party. At the end of 2017, *Madame Q* was opened in the middle of a block settlement in Warsaw. It is an alternative club that offers regular weekly burlesque by international and national performers. It was founded by Betty Q, a burlesque institution in Poland that established burlesque there in 2010. The large room with a small stage and a bar, furnished in a cozy vintage DIY look, has meanwhile become an established burlesque venue that offers not only burlesque shows and burlesque classes, but also academic and non-academic lectures, workshops, and discussions on gender and queer topics, such as the regular series *Let’s Talk about Drag*.

An interesting aspect of burlesque that I observed in Warsaw is the combination of elements from Anglo-American burlesque, such as retro and vintage stylings, with scripts from Polish history and especially national Catholic myths and their playful inversion. The recently deceased prominent Polish literary scholar Maria Janion conducted research on Polish Romanticism, focusing particularly on Polish historical traumas, as well as Polish “demons and vampires”, and she called for a paradigm shift in thought and a reinterpretation of Romanticist history – in a sense, a supplementation of this history in order to deal with the repressed, the *Other*,

and the marginalized in history (SUCHARSKI 2008; PANEK 2020). Janion criticizes the Polish martyrdom myth, which is full of inferiority complexes and positions Poland as a victim of history. She sees the origins of these inferiority complexes in pre-Christian Slavdom, which was suppressed in the collective memory by the loss of Slavic myths over the course of Christianization. Janion (2007) speaks here of “Slavic trauma,” which leads to a feeling of marginal significance, of belonging to the weak, forgotten, and humiliated. According to Janion, the Polish Romantics were aware of this trauma, this “uncanny Slavdom,” and were also captured by it. She writes, “The uncanny Slavdom – both foreign and close at the same time – is a sign of tearing, a shattered unconsciousness, a native, non-Latin side. The displaced Slavic religion may have appeared in the form of a secret ritual of contact between the people and the dead (as in Mickiewicz’s *Dziady*)” (JANION 2007: 28-29, translation author). Janion mentions here the poem *Dziady* (“Forefathers’ Eve”) (MICKIEWICZ 2016), by the Polish poet of Romanticism and a kind of national sanctuary, Adam Mickiewicz (1798-1855), more precisely its second part, which was written in 1823. This part of the poem is about a pagan autumnal ritual of celebrating the dead, in which the spirits of the deceased are called upon, on the one hand, to gain the affection of the spirits, and, on the other hand, to help the spirits find peace in the beyond (KOWALSKA-LEWICKA 1994).

This short introduction to the world of Polish Romantic literature is necessary to understand burlesque performance, which I saw at *Madame Q* in January 2018, performed by the Polish *boylesque* (male burlesque) performer and dedicated LGBTQ activist Gaşiu. The appearance of Gaşiu is marked by a combination of androgyny and glamour. His well trained and dance-shaped body and long platinum blonde hair is reminiscent of a rock glamour star, while his elegant movements and dance in high heels play with constructions of femininity. Gaşiu began his performance standing with his back turned to the audience, in a long, skirt-like robe.⁵ His androgynous body moved gently to a traditional regional Polish folk song. He slowly turned to the audience and used transparent fabric, previously tied to his skirt, as a kind of curtain, carried in front of his body. Behind this transparent curtain, with artificial flowers hanging on it, Gaşiu could be

⁵ Another recording of this burlesque act can be seen online: www.youtube.com/watch?v=r21It-GKgrWo.

seen from the front, wearing dark sunglasses, a tight tank top, short shorts, and high heels. Suddenly, the music changed, and, after the quiet Polish folk song, followed by an interlude of music box-like sounds, the song *Bring Me to Life*, by the alternative rock band *Evanescence*, chimed, and in that moment Gaşiu began to recite a passage from *Dziady*. What is remarkable is that Gaşiu quoted the passage about the ghost of Zosia, a beautiful shepherdess, who in her lifetime rejected the advances of young men. As punishment for those rejections, she was unable to find peace in the after-life. Gaşiu staged himself as the ghost of the girl, indicated by a wreath of flowers in his hair. Then he threw off the transparent curtain he had been holding in front of himself and started voguing to the song, interrupting his dance repeatedly to recite further passages from the poem.⁶ During the dance, he stripped off his sunglasses and t-shirt, baring his naked upper body, jeans shorts, high-heeled boots, and wreath of flowers on his head. He finished his performance, again with music-box sounds, quoting the famous Zosia's verses from *Dziady*: "S/he who has not touched the ground once / Can never be in heaven" (translation author), with a pose reminiscent of a crucified Jesus, especially as his wreath of flowers began to glow red, like a crown of bloody thorns.

What makes Gaşiu's performance so fascinating is not only that he uses a poem from the canon of Polish Romanticism, which almost every Pole knows from school, to tell the story of his burlesque show, but also, and especially, the way he reinterprets this work with body stagings. His drag in the female spirit of Zosia has both human and non-human traits. On the one hand, his props, the wreath of flowers on his head, seem to remind us of the former rural life of the young shepherdess and her innocent femininity; on the other hand, the use of bright contact lenses, which give him spiritual traits, reminds us that he represents a ghost. This masquerade, as well as his androgyny – which he underlines with the simultaneity of different characteristics of gender constructions, with high-heels and short men's shorts – brings these gender constructions into a fascinating construct of a being from beyond, all in a humorous way. This recalls the concepts of *cosgender* and *cosqueer*, a combination of the words *cosplay* (costume

⁶ The origins of the dance art of vogue can be found in the gay Latino and African American Ballroom scene of the 1960s in New York. Since the 1990s, vogue has enjoyed increasing popularity, especially in the LGBTQ community, underwent a mainstream process and became a popular campy dance style among the young urban population. See: Chatzipapatheodoridis, 2017.

play) with gender and queer, and terms where gender roles are confused by humorous disguise (MOUNTFORT *et al.* 2019). Cosplay is especially popular in fan culture, where fans transform themselves into their favorite characters from popular culture, like movies, anime, cartoons, manga, and so on (RAHMAN *et al.* 2012). Sometimes these characters are not human – they can be aliens, robots, animals, or other fantastic creatures. Cosplay as a genderless figure, or, as in the case of Gaşiu, the female figures of Zosia and her ghost, undercuts not only gender boundaries, but also boundaries between biological and non-biological bodies, and can therefore be interpreted as *posthumanist drag*, as Paul Mountfort, Adam Geczy, and Anne Peirson-Smith (2019) call it in their book on cosplay, in reference to, among others, Donna Haraway’s cyborg concept.

Renate Lorenz (2012: 29) also distinguishes between different types of drag that go beyond the human: *radical drag*, which transcends the binarity of woman and man; *transtemporal drag*, which distances itself from and questions established heterosexual concepts of time and stages of life (e.g., marriage and starting a family); and *abstract drag*, in which human bodies are represented by non-human objects. In the case of Gaşiu, it is his human body that represents the non-human, but in that moment he becomes a non-human object on the stage, and, through this abstractness, he transgresses the poem *Dziady*; his transgression is political. He challenges the pantheon of Catholic national myths, such as the myth of a victim nation mentioned by Janion. In *Dziady*, Mickiewicz develops his messianic concept of Poland as the “Christ of the nations.” Janion describes this messianic patriotic discourse as “a caricature of the Romantic paradigm” (2004: 150), based on the victim-myth of a country colonized by the historical neighbors Russia, Prussia, and Austria-Hungary. Janion reminds us that Poland was also a colonizer – of Ukraine – and pleads for Polish post-colonial discourse (2004: 151). Gaşiu’s closing of the performance by staging a crucified Jesus is reminiscent of the Romantic-messianic myth of suffering Poles and thus stimulates reflection on this myth. Such a playful interpretation of the canonical poem and religious conclusion of the erotic performance in times when conservative politics together with the church cling to these national-Catholic myths works as a pleasurable act of resistance.

Janion also pleads for a paradigm shift through the telling of “another history,” especially including the perspective of women: “This ‘other story’

should also become a women's story – who up to now have been trapped in the mother role of a 'Mother Poland,' without a voice of their own, or with a voice drowned out by the hustle and bustle of the fighters for 'God, Honor and Fatherland'" (2004: 151, translation author). In an earlier article, I argue that the burlesque art of Betty Q can be seen as such an "other story" told from the women's perspective, and with the help of humor and eroticism (STAŚKIEWICZ 2017). In her older shows and events, she took up the national myths, such as the famous myth of the self-sacrificing Mother Poland, who, like the Mother of God, sacrificed her son and sent him into the hopeless battle for Poland (Adam Mickiewicz also had a role in establishing this myth, about which he wrote in the poem *Ode To Mother Poland*). Alluding to this myth, Betty Q hosted the show *Niepodległość jest kobietą* (*Independence Is a Woman*) in 2013 on the occasion of Polish Independence Day, in which she presented an erotic performance that stylized the female figures of the "Mothers Poland" as seductive and powerful fighters.

Current political themes, such as the struggle of Polish women for reproductive rights, are explicitly taken up in the burlesque performances of Betty Q. In early January 2018, the Polish parliament rejected the civic project of the committee *Ratuj Kobiety 2017* (SAVE WOMEN 2017) on the liberalization of abortion, but accepted further work on the project of the Civic Committee *Stop Aborcji* (Stop Abortion), which tightens regulations, eliminating the possibility of legal termination of pregnancy due to severe defects in the fetus. This situation triggered protests by women's organizations and demonstrations (see, for example, Hussein *et al.*, 2018). In February 2018, in the middle of this political situation, Betty Q performed her act *Cycles* at Madame Q, which she explicitly dedicated to the Polish fight for women's rights.⁷ She appeared in the show dressed only in a white linen blanket, which she wore in the beginning wrapped as a short dress. At first, she looked like an innocent, carefree child on stage, until the moment when she bent down and suddenly took a red flower out of her lap. At first acting confused by this flower, she immediately tied it seductively into her hair as adornment. After that, she pulled the blanket so that it transformed into a long dress, which then looked like a wedding dress. In between, she completely removed the blanket and danced almost naked, apart from

⁷ Another recording of this burlesque act can be seen online at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=-FoS65aW-GRo

breast pasties and a G-string. Then she wrapped the blanket as if a little baby were swaddled in it and gently swung it from side to side. Then she played with the sheet as if it had been transformed into an ever-growing child that grew up and went away. After wiping her tears with the blanket, she picked up the red flower, removed it from her hair, and threw it to the floor. Then she dropped to the floor herself and covered herself with the blanket.

In this show, Betty Q embodied the life cycle of a woman, which is determined by biology to be from the first period to menopause to, finally, death. This strong link between women's lives and women's physiology, fertility, and motherhood could be understood as a critique of the state's policy on reproductive rights, which claims control over the bodies, sexuality, and reproduction of women. The connection between women's biological life cycles and the criticism of conservative state policies regarding abortion rights is reminiscent of what Julia Kristeva wrote in her essay *Women's Time* (1981): On the one hand, women are associated with cyclical time, with the nature and reproduction and limitedness of human life, and, on the other hand, with the monumental time of nations, redemption myths, and eternity. In her performance, Betty Q showed precisely this double temporal dimension of women, how their lives, their cyclical time, are controlled by the monumental time of the state, which makes the female body and the question of reproductive rights a national concern and not simply a personal matter for women.

Both Gaşiu and Betty Q provide, through their body stagings, their own interpretations of history, or rather, their own ways of dealing with the wounds of history and everyday political life. The erotic element of undressing and the theatrical playfulness relieve the national-Catholic myths of their severe weight of meaning, especially in Gaşiu's pastiche of Mickiewicz's *Dziady*. Betty Q's subtle, sensual, erotic staging contains a clear political message – it becomes a manifesto. Therefore, these performances show how burlesque can be a queer space as described in the beginning of this paper – a space that deals pleasurably and humorously with binarities, norms, and restrictions, a kind of escape from the confines of everyday life that has a de-hierarchizing, destabilizing effect on these restrictions. In addition, the burlesque also offers a pleasurable approach to historical traumas and myths that works like the aforementioned *erotohistoriography*, which, as Elizabeth Freeman explains, “admits that contact with historical

materials can be precipitated by particular bodily dispositions, and that these connections may elicit bodily responses, even pleasurable ones, that are themselves a form of understanding. It sees the body as a method, and historical consciousness as something intimately involved with corporeal sensations” (2010: 95-96).

Finally, I would like to mention another event with a similar queering *erotohistoriographic* effect that took place in Warsaw in the alternative club *Pogłos* at the end of February 2018 as the result of solidarity and cooperation among the LGBTQ community, the burlesque scene (in which many members are part of the LGBTQ community), and the alternative theater scene. This event, called *Queer Explosion – Post-Apocalypse Paradise*, was declared as a protest against the political situation in Poland and the feeling of powerlessness. The political message was already contained in the announcement, described by the organizers in the following:

The first episode takes place in the near future in a country ruled by His Impotence, the Gray Little Emperor. One boring day His Impotence prohibits all relations that do not lead to fertilization. But that’s not all... in fear of losing power, the grim politician decides to produce an army of humano-robo-drones, thanks to which he will win all the elections until the end of his days. Of course, on his way there will be economically frustrated scientists, teenagers abusing psycho-active substances, as well as glittery forms of life of extraterrestrial civilization.⁸

This event was not explicitly a burlesque event, although some burlesque performers took part, such as Gaşiu, but was an interesting, humorous, colorful fusion of theater, comedy, drag, and burlesque that was visually reminiscent of *Rocky Horror Picture Show*. In the show, the emperor’s plans to ban sexual relations not aimed at reproduction do not succeed; his “miracle weapon,” the human-robo-drons, eluded his power. Instead, a victory of love, pleasure, and joy was achieved, which spread throughout the country and was celebrated in the closing scene with the waving of rainbow flags. This fantasy-futuristic parody created a utopian, joyful queer space that was totally contrary to the political mood and growing homophobia in Poland – for a while, the confining world outside could be forgotten.

⁸ See the Facebook event page: www.facebook.com/events/pog%C5%82os/queer-explosion-post-apocalypse-paradise/1581064381942687/

5. NERDLESQUE, CLOWNERY, AND POLITICS

It is fascinating that the new burlesque as a pop cultural phenomenon has a worldwide presence but is nevertheless a situated phenomenon and reflects the sociopolitical situation of the place where it takes place. Besides the universal elements of burlesque, such as cross-dressing, drag, masquerade, and parody, the history of burlesque reflects the different characters of wherever it is situated and their “everyday wounds” or cultural fascinations. In New Orleans in 2015, I came into contact with the so-called *nerdlesque* for the first time, a burlesque art very popular in anglophone countries that parodies the scripts of pop culture. Similar to the pastiche of Shakespeare plays or classical myths in Thompson’s burlesque of the 19th century, in *nerdlesque*, the objects of pastiche are, for example, cult films like *Star Wars*, *Pulp Fiction*, *Batman*, and *Harry Potter*, or TV series like *Doctor Who* or *Game of Thrones*. In an earlier paper of mine (STAŚKIEWICZ 2018), I linked this American fascination with pop culture with cultural fetishism, which, according to Hartmut Böhme (2006), increased in the 1970s and turned more and more into “excessive consumerism,” especially in youth culture. This also includes “fetishistic travesties and performative identification games” (BÖHME 2006: 347), which brings us to one of the most important elements of *nerdlesque* – the cosplay, cosgender, and cosqueer, which I already mentioned in my analysis of Gaşiu’s performance. The performers of *nerdlesque* transform themselves into characters from superhero comics, US science fiction films and series, or Japanese cartoon characters, often playing with gender norms – through a “gender crossplay” that plays with gender-role images that go beyond essential attributions. Through cosplay, one cannot only transform into a “hero,” but “from a woman to a beautiful boy, from an ordinary person to a celebrity – this changing identity of performativity is a magic wand or time machine which can offer excitement, contentment, escapism, and empowerment” (RAHMAN *et al.* 2012: 334). Performers also transform into fictional figures beyond the gender binary, such as elves, aliens, or robots, in a *posthumanist drag*, as mentioned earlier.

Even if *nerdlesque* is a countrywide as well as worldwide burlesque phenomenon (the first international Nerdlesque Festival took place in New York in 2014), New Orleans is a very fruitful place for the development of this kind of burlesque, due to its history and carnival tradition. During the carnival season, New Orleans hosts not only the famous Mardi Gras

parades, but, since 2011, also the alternative *Chewbacchus* parade, a big celebration of “nerds” who perform their favorite characters in colorful costumes, using cosplay and homemade props. In 2014, Xena Zeit-Geist founded a nerdlesque group called *Society of Sin*, and has since produced regular *nerdlesque* shows, like the weekly *Talk Nerdy To Me*, and larger thematic events like the Disney-movie-themed *Once Upon a Tease: A Villainous Burlesque & Variety Show* (June 2018) and *Beam Me Up, Hottie!: A Star Trek Burlesque Show* (August 2018). These shows are characterized by a diversity of body shapes, genders, skin colors, and the aforementioned cosgender and cosqueer: Performers embody aliens, animal-like creatures, and futuristic figures, playing on temporal and spatial dimensions and creating a space of transgression, or a utopian place, as Michel Foucault describes it. Through the creation of such a utopian place, the *nerdlesque* causes a queer intervention in which the limits of hetero- and chrononormativity are temporarily lifted (STAŚKIEWICZ 2018).

As already demonstrated by examples from Poland, burlesque works as a political barometer by commenting on the current political situation and wounds of everyday life. During my stay in New Orleans in 2018, in the second year under Donald Trump’s government, I could observe that burlesque performers in New Orleans often used their shows as a political manifesto. This may also be due to the open character of the city and its myth of decadence, the “southern Babylon” (LONG 2005), as well as its openness towards sexual freedom, its strong LGBTQ community, and its celebration of said community. The entertainment scene in New Orleans around the burlesque, comedy, side shows, including circus performers, artists, and musicians, is also very liberal and committed to women’s reproductive rights, LGBTQ rights, the fight against racism, and so on, through benefit events. Unlike the metropolis of New York, New Orleans does not have many established theaters, but does have alternative theater venues and puppet theaters. A close collaboration among the new burlesque, circus, drag, LGBTQ, and alternative theater scene can be observed, for example, during the annual independent *InFringe Festival*, established in 2016 and produced by Michael Martin, who as an actor, burlesque/drag performer, LGBTQ activist, and promoter of the local cultural scene combines, through his own person, different milieus and entertainment arts.

In New Orleans, there is a special, alternative, queer space, almost a local institution, that consolidates these milieus from burlesque/drag

shows, clownery, comedy, music, and theater performances – *The AllWays Lounge*. Arranged similarly to Madame Q in Warsaw, in a cozy, campy way, with a small stage over which artificial clouds float and a larger event room in the back, *The AllWays Lounge*, off the beaten track from the touristy, crowded French Quarter, offers a perfectly charming place to escape from the everyday and to create a pleasurable queer space. They present not only the famous monthly burlesque/drag shows *Dirty Dime Peepshow* by Bella Blue and *Storyville Burlesque* (based on the legendary Red Light District of 1895-1917), but also the weekly *Bingo Burlesque* event, hosted by Lefty Lucy and Tsarina Hellfire. One of the shows I saw in September 2018, at the *Bingo Burlesque*, was an act performed on Lefty Lucy in which she took up the political discussion at the time around the appointing of the conservative Brett Kavanaugh, who was accused of sexual harassment, as Supreme Court judge. Lefty Lucy started her performance wearing a white dress, recalling Marilyn Monroe’s famous dress from *The Seven Year Itch*, a blonde wig, and high heels. At first, the show looked like a vintage/pin-up stylized burlesque, until Lefty Lucy took off her dress. She revealed her white underwear – not sexy lingerie, but pure white slips smeared with red blood-like paint. At the end of the show, she revealed her breasts totally, not with nipples covered with the usual pasties of burlesque. This connection of a white, innocent-looking dress, the imitation of blood on her slips, and her nakedness at the end evoked a feeling of being helpless and objectified; it became a powerful manifesto that could also be felt in the silence of the touched audience that lasted a few seconds before the applause started. Maybe instead of the word “nakedness” the word “undressing” is a better description of Lefty Lucy’s performance. As Barbara Brownie points out, “Undressing is a gesture – an active and purposeful event – whereas nakedness is a passive state of being. As an active gesture undressing can involve more agency than nakedness” (2017: 3). The act of undressing can, according to Brownie, “be a tool for protest as well as for pleasure, and a body exposed through undressing can become a sign of defiance, distraction, deception, revelation, pride, vulnerability, normalcy or otherness” (2017: 6). Lefty Lucy’s act of undressing showed a strong protest through vulnerability.

Another aspect of burlesque in New Orleans that I observed in 2018 is what I call the “clownish burlesque,” or better, *clownesque* (see also STAŚKIEWICZ 2021). In New Orleans, it is especially the performer Tsarina

Hellfire who performs this kind of burlesque, very often together with the clown Scabies the Clown. Tsarina Hellfire's clownesque is a mixture of striptease and pantomime, masquerade and the grotesque, creating an erotic, scary clown. I saw her performance in November 2018 in *The All-Ways Lounge* in the context of the *InFringe Festival* in New Orleans. Hellfire began her performance by slowly emerging from the darkness of the auditorium. She wore a scary clown mask, a woman's wig with blonde braids and several colorful bows, a child's bowling hat, striped stockings, a short corset-style blue dress, and high-heels. Arriving on stage, she took off the mask, screamed, and brought out a scornful laugh. Then she began to move pantomimically like a marionette or a coin-operated puppet to the sound of dark electronic music. She finished her performance by sitting on a chair with her legs spread, pleurably presenting her seductive, tattooed body (STAŚKIEWICZ 2021).

Tsarina Hellfire's creepy clown burlesque act is interesting because she combines her pleasurable, female sexuality with the script of a clown, or, to be more exact, with the "creepy clown," which is so well known in the US. The "creepy clown" is not usually associated with eroticism, and especially not with femininity, though she turns it into a sexy clown (STAŚKIEWICZ 2021). A sexy clown or a woman as a clown is still a rare phenomenon, as clowns, as Margaret Irving (2013) points out in her doctoral thesis, are still connoted as male or androgynous. Irving recalls that, in her training as a clown, she was taught to hide her femininity. But there is also a similarity between a woman and a fool figure, as Efrat Tseëlon explains in her essay:

Both embody a paradox: a synthesis of irreconcilable opposited; the impossibility of existing as one thing and its opposite [...]. Both are hideously attractive: they induce horror and fascination, approach and avoidance. Their intermediary position between order and chaos (like that of monster, mermaids etc.) – nonsense and wisdom – is expressed in the woman in the dynamic oscillation between contrasting modes of appearance and voice (Madonna/whore). They both play with fantasy. In addition to being figures of fun, the woman and the fool inhabit a position that anyone can fall into if caught off guarded. What is threatening about them is that we all recognise ourselves in them. We can all "make fool of ourselves" or "let ourselves" go. (TSEËLON 2001b: 169)

Nevertheless, Tseëlon also describes this similarity as a description of two different figures, the woman and the fool, which she refers to with the

pronoun “he,” – she, too, connotes the fool with masculinity. Tsarina Hellfire’s sexy clown not only overcomes this dualism, but, through the humorous, enjoyable way of “making a clown of yourself,” makes being a clown not a degradation to be afraid of. On the contrary, being a clown allows one, as already mentioned by Sheir Klein (2007), to rebel against the wounds of everyday life, to change the world in a magical circus, maybe even a queer circus, where boundaries and differences disappear for a while.

Tsarina Hellfire’s clownish burlesque leads me to the question of whether there are meaningful differences between clowning and burlesque at all; I consider burlesque as a whole as a kind of *clownesque*. As Yvonne Augustin (2018) writes in her book about the cultural role of clowns, the figure of a clown is a symbol of failing and failing again, of stumbling, being silly, being imperfect. But being a clown is a means of social criticism; it is a metaphor of failing and stumbling over social norms and rules. A clown holds a mirror up to us and how we are in the world. The failure of a clown and their parodistic neglect of suiting behavioral norms reveals the meaning and nonsense of such dead-locked and often reflected behaviors, rules and orders. Humor as the immanent element of burlesque uncovers the nonsense of these rules, as Jacki Willson points out: “[T]he wit works to make transparent, ridicule and politicize cultural paradoxes and discrimination” (2015: 5). One of the questions I wanted to explore with my burlesque research when I started was whether burlesque can be subversive and change meanings. Meanwhile I see the power of the burlesque especially in its humorous distantiation. Then what cannot be more distant from reality than humor, “a form of repetition with ironic critical distance, marking difference rather than similarity” (HUTCHEON 2000: *xii*)? In that way, burlesque has a cathartic function and works as a queer refuge from the world of “similarities” and as a clownish “escapism from the daily grind” (BLANCHETTE 2014: 160-161). This clownish escapism of the burlesque reminds of the concept of the circus as a small, magical version of the world. As the circus scholar Paul Bouissac puts it:

A circus performance tends to represent the totality of our popular system of the world, i.e., it actualizes in one way or another all the fundamental categories through which we perceive our universe as a meaningful system. According to this cosmological view of the circus, the constituents of the acts are symbols or tokens of their class, and their identification by the audience constitutes an

important part of the decoding process. A circus performance is easily understood because, in a way, it is redundant with respect to our culture; and it is gratifying because it enables us to grasp its totality in a limited time and space. (BOUISSAC 1976: 7)

However, unlike this description of the circus, the new burlesque not only allows a magical, smaller version of the whole to be captured in a limited time and space, but it also makes this smaller version a queer, better interpretation of a sometimes dreary reality. It is a circus in Jean Starobinski's sense, a "glittering oasis of magic" (cited in KLEIN 2007: 129). The burlesque is a *queer circus*.

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Raw as life

the Queer, the Goth and the Gothic in *Lost Souls*, by Poppy Z. Brite

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ABSTRACT: Goth subculture is marked by a performative distinctiveness relating to sexuality, body and gender, which functions as a background that supports the performing of queer identities. Poppy Z. Brite is one of the few authors who in fact relates Gothic literature to Goth Subculture, and such association adds interesting nuances to the critical reading of *Lost Souls* (1992) as we consider Nothing and his “death chic” or Zillah’s androgyny. The Goth scene background in *Lost Souls* seems to escape criticism, once its characters are usually referred to in a generic way as punks, alternative and so on. In this essay I analyze Nothing in terms of character development taking in consideration Judith Butler’s theory of gender and the aesthetics of the Goth scene.

KEYWORDS: literary criticism; contemporary US literature; gothic subculture; gender theory; gothic fiction.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 1992, the author Dunja Brill (2008) had her first contact with Goth Subculture. At Ballhaus, a venue at downtown Bonn, Germany, she remembers that she had listened to odd electric guitar sounds and hoarse and low vocals amidst the dry ice fog permeating the place. There were figures enveloped in velvet with elaborate makeup and flamboyant hairstyles on the dance floor. She mentions a lean girl in pale makeup and black lipstick dancing apparently alone. It took more than a minute for Brill to realize that *she* was actually *him*. This feeling of uncertainty regarding the androgynous figure on the dance floor motivated the author’s study about gender and sexuality on Goth Subculture, *Goth, Culture, Gender, Sexuality and Style* (2008). Brill’s study is one of my main references to

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this essay, since it offers the required support to the analysis I propose here. More important, Brill identifies herself with Goth Subculture, which is also my case. David Punter and Glennis Byron mention that Goth Subculture should be approached more frequently in Gothic studies, but the authors also comment that the scene can prove itself a difficult field of study and that “the problem will only be resolved for Gothic studies when more young scholars who are already positioned to some degree within the Gothic scene begin to do academic work” (2006: 62).

Poppy Z. Brite is a transgender author of Gothic fiction. His work flirts with horror and gore and his fictional landscape is commonly inhabited by gay or bisexual characters, and graphic descriptions of sex, death and violence are not uncommon. I approach Brite’s literature by the lens of the Gothic Studies, and I read it as Southern Gothic, a subgenre of American Gothic that may be characterized by some sort of disillusioned vision of the world (FRANÇA 2017). Southern Gothic became an exponential subgenre in North American literature since the second half of the 20th century, and works of this kind explores themes commonly attributed to the region – racism, violence, gender, class, and the decay of family lineages. Brite is one of the few authors who in fact relates Gothic literature to Goth Subculture; since Goth subculture is market by a performative distinctiveness, which is consonant with Judith Butler’s theory of gender (2019), this relation adds interesting nuances to the critical reading of *Lost souls* (1992) as we consider Nothing and his “death chic” or Zillah’s androgyny. At some levels, the Goth scene background in *Lost Souls* seems to escape the criticism, once its characters are usually referred to in a generic way as punks, alternative, trash punks and son on. In this essay I analyze Nothing in terms of character development taking in consideration Butler’s theory of gender and the aesthetics of the Goth scene.

2. THE “FANTASY OF GENDERLESSNESS”: GOTH SUBCULTURE AND GENDER AS PERFORMANCE

Goth subculture emerged amidst the cultural effervescence of the 1980s and 1990s from the post-punk scene, mostly in Great Britain (GUNN 1999). There is no concordance about when or why the term “Goth” – in some cases “Gothic” – was associated to the scene. Goth Subculture is a “music-based subculture” (BRILL 2008: 147), that is to say, grounded in the musical aesthetics of the bands; there are other relevant sources of (sub)cultural

capital an individual might explore, such as fashion, literature and cinema, but those are secondary. The primal Goth bands are as well post-punk bands such as Bauhaus, Siouxsie and The Banshees and Joy Division; those bands are characterized by a strong musical experimentation, by the relevance of the bass, by echoing sounds – which sometimes seems to flirt with dissonance – and profound vocals commonly low and hoarse (REYNOLDS 2019).

Brill mentions that “song lyrics revolved around the dark recesses of the human soul: death, suffering and destruction as well as unfulfilled romance and isolation, but also the more arcane, taboo aspects of magic and mythology (e.g. ancient rituals, vampires)” (BRILL 2008: 03). Even though “dark recesses of the human soul” is clarifying as a metaphor, I consider necessary to unfold this matter in order to exemplify the Goth aesthetics. Goth bands’ lyrics usually draw from literature and cinema, though not necessarily from Gothic fiction. The English band Joy Division is considered one of the precursors of Goth, and its lyrics have a strong relation to modern literature, the fragmentation as in the style of James Joyce and William Faulkner, and the fractured images of T.S. Eliot. Gothic fiction demonstrates a disposition for rendering social anxieties, which is also distinguishable in the aesthetics of Joy Division. The recognizable sensibility in sound and lyrics reveal a political point of view that rejects the values of late capitalist modernity, and Joy Division extensively explores themes such as alienation and isolation (JOY DIVISION 1979); the recurrent use of alien elements to music, such as the empty spray can on recording the track “She’s Lost Control” (1979: track 1, side two) as well as mix effects like reverb may be listened as metaphors to erasure of meaning and loneliness. As Punter and Byron (2006) points out, Ian Curtis’ lyrics not only explore the alienation from the self in a post-industrial England but suggest something distinctive to Gothic fiction: the numbing and fracturing of the self by facing the machinery of hegemonic society. This brief presentation of Joy Division gives a good example of the Goth Subculture’s aesthetic, its inclination for reflection upon self-assertion and self-awareness as well as the articulation of a political point of view.

Fashion as an element of integration and at the same time of individualization and self-assertion exerts notable relevance in the scene. Such authors as Elizabeth Wilson (1992) and Gwendolyn O’Neal (1999) mention that Goth aesthetics draws from post-punk movements, especially from the aesthetics of the late 1990s, and it is possible to distinguish features such as

extravagant hairstyles, teased hair dyed with colors like pink, green or blue; fishnets stocking; leather and velvet jackets; accessories such as pendants, crosses, rings, chokers and harnesses – the Christian iconography is predominant here, and these elements are essentially the same to any gender.

Punter and Byron (2004) question what the large-scale commercialization of Goth items and garment represents to a subculture that invests a lot (of cultural capital) in the notion of authenticity and individualization. Of course, the commercialization of products aligned to the aesthetics of the scene might raise other issues towards authenticity, making Goth a bit more palatable to the hegemonic culture. But the existence of “Goth goods” doesn’t imply that the scene’s members consume indiscriminately such products. The commercialization of a “Goth style” has begun with the dilution of the subculture’s borders, particularly in the turn to the 2000s, when a variety of analogous themes started being merged with the nascent Goth, such as electronic and industrial music, BDSM aesthetics and subgenres deriving from German music, such as EBM and Gothic metal – the latter not very well accepted in the subculture. There was wave of new influences relating to dress code: tight clothes with military aspect, accrue from EBM, electronic and industrial rock; leather, vinyl and PVC from BDSM aesthetics; velvet, lace, clothes with anachronistic cut and aesthetics, inspired on an idealized Victorian past and on romanticized mythical figures, such as the vampire. However, Goth aesthetics is still pervaded by a notion of “do it yourself” and of experimentation with clothing. That is why Brill mentions that it would be possible to state that Goth subculture is a “conglomerate of overlapping subgroups, which differ considerably in style and music despite displaying a relatively strong collective distinctiveness vis-à-vis general culture” (BRILL 2008: 04).

The scene’s distinctive practices are grounded on music and fashion. Selection of materials, creation, combination and exhibition of pieces – clothes, accessories, hairstyle variations – are a central activity in the scene. A good example of how those instances intertwined is “Bela Lugosi’s Dead” by Bauhaus. The song is considered a “Goth anthem” and addresses Bela Lugosi’s death, the actor who played Dracula in the 1931 silent movie. Lugosi had toured through Europe performing in a theatrical adaptation of Bran Stoker’s work, and had become a sensation due to his dark beauty and his singular performance. Punter and Byron mentioned that Lugosi has become a fundamental source figure concerning the clothing style and

aesthetics of the scene, and that the image of Dracula and of the actor seems to merge into his figure as if there was no distinction between them. This counterfeiting act permeates the whole subculture, and is one of the most approached subjects when someone intends to approximate Gothic fiction to Goth subculture.

Joanne Eicher and Mary Higgins (1993) suggest that Goth dress practices and codes may be read as “body modifications” in the case of tattoos, piercings, makeup and hairstyles, and “body supplements” in the case of clothes, jewelry, shoes, and accessories; both instances have equivalent importance to the maintenance of status within the scene’s micropolitics. Although clothing practices are mostly related to one’s experience on going to clubs (and nowadays also social media), it is common for Goths to use a softened version of this aesthetics in their daily routine. Brill describes these practices as it follows:

aestheticising and re-mystifying modern life. The aesthetic appropriation of everyday life and surroundings – e.g. through decorating one’s body, flat, car and favourite hangouts as elements of a sacred ‘dark microcosm’ – is set against the pragmatic and functional profanity of the modern world. (BRILL 2008: 10)

Such practices of “aestheticising and re-mystifying modern life”, by which an individual stylized their identity, are directly related to gender and sexuality. Goth’s dressing aesthetic is based on what is hegemonically considered “the feminine” – one of the interviewees of Brill’s ethnographic study even mentions that Goth Subculture is rooted into “the feminine” (BRILL 2008). Besides this, the scene generally demonstrates good acceptance of practices and themes considered taboo, such as BDSM, fetish and gender play; Goth subculture is also very accepting towards non-hegemonic sexualities, which might encompass a simple homoaffective flirt in clubs or social media or the consolidation of non-conforming genders. Moreover, eroticized gender performances are highly accepted in the subculture, since they are also sources of a distinctive amount of (sub)cultural capital. Of course, the relation between clothing and power is an intricate and conflicting one, and frequently contradictory. As Wilson mentions, clothing practices are “a powerful weapon of control and dominance... with simultaneously subversive qualities” (1992: 14). In general, the theories differ, but this dual aspect – clothing as control, and clothing as subversion – is

recurrent. While some authors state that fashion contributes to the maintenance of the capitalist regime through the admission of the clothing's political sphere into the sphere of consumerism (S. EWEN, E. EWEN 1992), there are others who see subversive potential in the specific appropriation of some elements of the mass or popular culture (O'NEAL 1999).

Such a "feminine" aesthetics pervades Goth subculture rhetoric, engendering what Brill calls "fantasy of genderlessness", a performative act directly associated to androgyny. This characteristic also appears associated to self-assertion and equality in the subculture. The "fantasy of genderlessness" is expressed through some sort of theatrical distinctiveness, and finds its foundation in the theory of gender proposed by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble*, published in 1990. Butler questions the maintenance of the notion of "woman" as the subject of feminism in order to approach a broader and variable conceptualization concerning identity construction. For the same reason she rejects the essentialist notion of identity, that is, of an internal truth to the subject, the existence of a coherent structure that would regulate sex, gender and sexuality; to her, the essentialist notion is a presumption born from the compulsory heterosexuality, a precept imposed by the institutions of power, that being the hegemonic discourses. For Butler, there is no natural prerogative to the body and the body is a construction receiving meaning through regulations and negotiation with institutions of power. For that reason, Butler conceives gender always in relation to the subject, to negotiated practices and values, in an attempt of not excluding any possibility of representation from the political field. Butler understands gender as a fiction; it is performed, it is always a state of becoming, and as a discursive practice it is always in a process of construction: "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal overtime to produce the appearance of substance" (BUTLER 2006: 45). Thus, there is no internal truth referring to gender; it is a counterfeit trait attributed to, but never limiting, the body; it is an endless and uninterrupted stylization, a product from a desire always in change. In this regard, "genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity" (BUTLER 2006: 186). The reality of gender, created as a performative act, suggests that the notion of a gender, of an essential or true masculinity and femininity is also a construction. Butler also remarks the pertinence of considering the political practice of the

theories of gender. In this sense, the counterfeiting quality of the “fantasy of genderlessness” featured in Goth subculture may offer a possibility for transgressive identities and representations to rise. Since there is no distinction between feminine and masculine practices of clothing, when we consider members of the Goth scene who perform a gender – sometimes trying to perform the absence of it by performing androgyny – we may read this performance as a fictional counterfeiting act of the body which may unbalance and disorient hegemonic notions of gender.

Teresa de Lauretis (1994) understands gender as something produced by various discourses, practices and social technologies like cinema and fashion; this favors a view of the media, fashion, music, social practices and discourse that constitutes Goth subculture as forces which accommodate and disorient, deconstruct and reconstruct discursively and contradictory the gender identity of the members of the scene. Lauretis sees the possibility of constructing different gender representations at the fringe of the hegemonic discourse, as long as these representations are established by micropolitical practices, exactly like Goth subculture. According to her, “these terms can also have a part in the construction of gender, and their effects are rather at the ‘local’ level of resistances, in subjectivity and self-representation (LAURETIS 1994: 18). It would be possible to argue that in Goth subculture the aestheticization of the body, the performative act, and the self-representation are rooted on a highly hyperbolic attitude. This becomes more evident when we draw a parallel between the subculture and the queer subject, which refers to “thinking and acting envisioning not the center nor desiring the center as reference; it is thinking and acting envisioning to defy the regulatory norms of society, accepting the discomfort relating to ambiguity” (LOURO 2016: 7).

Brill (2008) defines two general clothing styles seen in Goth subculture. Brill mentions she would like to escape binarism in dealing with gender, but because the data collected from her interviewees, the author ends up defining these styles from binary hegemonic notions of gender: masculine androgyny and hyperfemininity. Still, these notions are interesting, particularly her thoughts about androgyny. What is interesting to note is that the ideas regarding “femininity”: “femininity is highly valued in the aesthetic codes of the scene and, rather than claiming they are ‘genderless’ creatures, many male and female Goths explicitly align themselves with the feminine” (BRILL 2008: 38).

This performative act toward the “feminine” practiced by various subjects identified as Goth men, which the final goal would be to achieve via clothing and makeup an androgynous image, is also presented as a transgressive act, at least, compared to the dominant culture. “The androgynous male style codes of the subculture partly free Goth men from the shackles of traditional masculinity, enabling them to indulge in pleasures normally branded taboo or at least improper for men in our culture” (BRILL 2008: 78). This quasi-obsession with androgyny is, for Gunn (2007), one of the main characteristics of the subculture, and it appears associated to other notion: the “death chic”, a certain “death” aura, the cultivation of a lean pale fragile body. Brill considers that, in the scene, androgyny presents itself as a force “potentially liberating not only for men but also for women, because it can work to loosen up common gender stereotypes and to sever gendered sartorial signifiers from their rigid association with either femininity or masculinity” (BRILL 2008: 73).

3. GENDER PERFORMANCE AND GOTH AESTHETICS IN *LOST SOULS*

Lost Souls (1992) is Poppy Z. Brite’s first novel, a Southern Gothic narrative set partly in Missing Mile, a fictional city from North Carolina, and partly in the famous New Orleans, Louisiana. The work presents a complex plot, following the musicians Steve and Ghost, a troupe of wandering vampires constituted by Twig, Zillah and Molochai, and Nothing, the teenager protagonist who goes on a road trip to watch a *Lost Souls?* gig, Steve and Ghost’s band. Nothing’s narrative addresses identity, and his tale sets the novel’s common thread. The character runs across the vampire horde that travels through the United States in a black van, and this fact sheds light on his process of self-discovery, once Nothing finds out himself to be a vampire.

Brite rereads the vampire literary myth in a rather secular way: all mystical and religious elements are excluded from the fictional game; crosses, holy water, silver, sunlight, none of it has mystical effect on Brite’s vampires. The very fictional legacy seems to be relegated to a second role, since there are no mentions to blood heritage or vampire traditions, as in works like *Camilla* (1872) or *Dracula* (1897), or ethic-theological concerns in relation to the theme of evil as in *The Vampire Chronicles* (1974-present) by Anne Rice. In Brite’s novel, vampires are not created as a corruption of the human paradigm; they are a race apart, reproducing through heterosexual relations, which always leads to the death of the mother.

Hogle (2002) mentions that Gothic fiction is marked by some sort of exaggeration related to its own fictionally as well as by the reinterpretation and renovation of its own constitutive features inside the tradition. Punter and Byron approach this counterfeiting aesthetic feature to trace a parallel between Gothic fiction and Goth subculture: “the insistent artificiality of Goth style might seem to suggest a continuation of the counterfeiting tendency which has characterized Gothic since the eighteenth-century” (2004: 62). The authors agree with Hogle when mentioning that this process engenders an erasure of the past in order to produce a fictional repository into which modern questions are projected and abject. Punter and Byron (2004) even wonder if, somehow, Goth subculture represents a type of aesthetics reception of Gothic fiction. I do not intend to answer this question, but my reading of *Lost Souls* is inserted in this interstice.

Nothing is portrayed as a typical Goth boy regarding his appearance as well as the theatricality he invests in his self-representation. In the beginning of the novel, Nothing writes a letter in front of the window facing his own reflection: “[t]he boy in the window had the same long sheaf of dyed black hair, the same pointed chin, the same almond-shaped dark eyes – but his smile was colder, far colder” (BRITE 1992: 26). A moment later, “he pulled his quilt around his legs and touched his ribs and hipbones, liking how thin he was” (BRITE 1992: 27). Nothing has all the desired features praised in Goth scene: the dyed-black hair and the huge dark eyes, besides the “far colder” reflection, which suggests a type of cool or ice-cold poise cultivated in the subculture, something highly valuable concerning (sub) cultural capital. Moreover, the pointed chin and the fact that he is skinny and having salient hipbones and ribs suggest that androgyny, which is one of the features most invested by (sub)cultural capital, manifests itself almost inherently on Nothing.

He has a sense of isolation and a strong need for connection and belonging. The character knows he is adopted and had grown up with this uneasiness in his chest, but the situation escalates when he finds a note affirming that his name is not Jason, like his parents call him, but Nothing. We see the *motto* for his intimate feeling of isolation in the beginning of the novel. In front of the window, the young lad notices the inclemency of the arriving autumn; the cold night is coming closer and darkness lurks behind the trees afar. His thoughts culminate in solitude: “every tree was alone out there. The animals were alone, each in its hole, in its thin fur, and anything that

got hit on the road tonight would die alone. Before morning, he thought, its blood would freeze in the cracks of the asphalt” (BRITE 1992: 25). That is why he leaves his home in Maryland, in an attempt to find something more for himself in this world, and finding himself.

Brill (2008) remarks that, like androgyny, bisexuality has a high value (sub)cultural capital in Goth subculture. Indeed, the subject of androgyny, which represents the uneasiness about gender and sexuality in the scene, seems to be attached to the affirmation/performance of divergent sexualities. The author highlights that being seen and recognized as bisexual, whether from public demonstrations of affection or from bisocial relations, is actively related to the individuals’ performance of gender identity, and at the same time raising the individuals’ status in the micropolitics of the scene.

This matter can be exemplified through the relationships that constitutes Nothing’s social circle in Maryland. These young Goths use to gather at Laine’s after school to smoke pot – Laine’s bedroom, as well as Nothing’s, is a haven decorated with items attractive to the subculture, like Laine’s narguilé, inherited from his oldest brother, “an elaborate ceramic affair shaped like a skull with worms twining in and out of the empty eye sockets. You put your finger over one of the nostrils to hold the smoke in” (BRITE 1992: 31). In the scene:

He looked around the room. Several of the kids were groping each other ineptly, kissing each other with sloppy wet mouths. Veronica Aston had pulled Lily Hartung’s skirt up and had two fingers inside the elastic of Lily’s panties. Nothing stared at this for several minutes, dully interested. Bisexuality was much in vogue among this crowd. It was one of the few ways they could feel daring. Nothing himself had made out with several of these kids, but though he had tasted their mouths and touched their most tender parts, none of them really interested him. The thought made him sad, though he wasn’t sure why. (BRITE 1992: 31)

For Marjorie Garber (1999), bisexuality represents a realm of fluid desires that challenges and defeats any categorization. Such notion is similar to Maria Pramaggiore’s, for whom bisexuality is “a practice that refuses the restrictive formulas that define gender according to binary categories” (1996: 3), possessing the capacity to subvert gender defining social mechanisms. Of course, such a realm of fluid desires, seen as practice, may suggest a type of celebration of bisexuality as a manner of overcoming the binary matrix, something that is also discussed and rejected by Butler (2019). However,

what Brite produces is a type of accommodation of bisexuality, something that assumes the value of naturalization, but presents itself clearly counterfeited, because bisexuality is originated in the yearning for “feeling daring”. This accommodation does not mask the discussion about gender, and by “naturalizing” gender and sexuality Brite illustrates through narrative action how the characters *perform* their identity.

Such performative act exemplifies how the hegemonic discourse about sexuality is dismembered and displaced by Nothing and his friends; rooted on Goth subculture’s aesthetics, they desire and search for transgression, achieving it in bisexual and homosexual experimentations. But this process, as it denounces the power of discourse over sexuality, also conceals its counterfeiting origin, as Butler (1990) states. In the scene’s micropolitics with which Nothing identifies, the performance of sexuality, and consequently of gender identity, acquires the value of truth and value of naturalization, and although it may unbalance hegemonic notions of gender, it also hides itself specifically for possessing the value of truth and value of naturalization.

We also have a hint of free sexuality amongst the scene’s members, since “Nothing himself had made out with several of these kids”. However, Nothing was not able to establish a long-lasting connection, because “none of them really interested him”. The craving for connection and belonging is shattered against the concreteness of his own wishes and experiences which brands his spirit with melancholy: “[t]he thought made him sad, though he wasn’t sure why”. This does not stop him from experimenting with his free or unrestrained sexuality. In this same scene, with a background of post-punk music, Laine and his girlfriend give demonstrations of eroticism; and they make a performance out of it: “someone put a Bauhaus tape on and turned it all the way up. Laine and Julie rolled around on the bed, pretending to make out” (BRITE1992: 31). But Nothing doubts about how much Laine likes girls, commenting on the fascination that the boy feels for Robert Smith, lead singer of the English alternative rock band The Cure. Nothing mentions that “Julie wore her hair wildly teased in all directions, and she favored lots of black eyeliner and smudged red lipstick. Nothing suspected that Laine liked her mainly because of her superficial resemblance to Robert Smith” (BRITE 1992: 31). Besides the suggestion of Laine’s homosexuality, there is Julie’s androgyny, valued in the scene in aesthetic terms, adding to the performative act of identity.

When Julie leaves, Laine offers Nothing oral sex. Nothing questions him about his girlfriend, and Laine's answer suggests his acknowledgement of Nothing's status in the (local) scene: "'Julie doesn't turn me on much,' said Laine. 'I like you, though. I think you're really cool'" (BRITE 1992: 33). Laine says that Nothing is "cool", something related to his theatrical dignity, some sort of distant and at the same time affective poise cultivated as a source of (sub)cultural capital. Their dialogue culminates in a rather comic statement from Laine: "'Seriously,' he said. 'I haven't given you a blowjob since August. I want to'" (BRITE 1992: 31). Nothing sprawls on the bed and faces the poster of Robert Smith, entering into a homoerotic fantasy regarding the singer's mouth: "Nothing stared up at Robert Smith's magnified mouth. The singer's lush clotted voice surrounded him, making him feel again as if he were tumbling between those lips" (BRITE 1992: 33).

This type of character's development is not exclusive of Nothing. Teased hair and heavy makeup and leather and velvet clothes get coherence under an aesthetic spectrum that echoes the "fantasy of genderlessness" mentioned by Brill (2008). Christian, one of the novel's vampires, hunts in a Goth bar in New Orleans. The vampire himself could be identified as a member of the scene, once he relates to the same aesthetics: "Christian still wore a cloak, long and black and lined with silk, whenever he went out" (BRITE 1992: 62). The same thing may be said of the young people that the character sees in front of the innominate bar where he hunts; they are kids "with eyes smudged black and ripped black clothes, little ghosts, like photonegatives of the dusky dancers" (BRITE 1992: 62).

Christian remembers when that was still a Jazz bar, but soon enough he evokes the aesthetic of the scene by exploring nightly themes: "the music that drifted out of the doorway and up toward the moon was sparse and dark and strange, the anthem of all the lost children who began their lives at night, when the bars opened and the music began to play" (BRITE 1992: 63). They are figures dressing in black, wearing heavy makeup and peculiar hairstyle, besides the atmospheric evocations about "all the lost children who began their lives at night". Here, the band Bauhaus is again mentioned: "Right now it was sainted Bauhaus, the pale long-boned gods of this crowd, doing 'Bela Lugosi's Dead.' The eyeliner eyes glazed and the black lipstick lips moved in time with the words, and the children danced slowly" (BRITE 1992: 63-4). Christian ends up fleeing New Orleans and arriving at Missing Mile, where he finds the Sacred Yew, an alternative bar decorated

with posters and neon quotes on the walls, filled with the same “children in black” (BRITE 1992: 69).

It is noteworthy that there is a homoerotic feature in Christian’s feeding, which is related to queer sexualities present in the subculture. Christian leaves the bar in New Orleans accompanied by a lean and slightly androgynous boy. They walk through the dark streets on the margins of the Mississippi River, and then Christian feeds on the boy. The scene is evidently erotic, and such eroticism is frequently associated to blood and to the vampire in Gothic literature. When Christian kisses the boy, “their tongues melted together. The boy’s spit was as sour and sweet as wine. Christian sucked at the boy’s mouth, let the spit flow down his throat, warming him, awakening his hunger even more” (BRITE 1992: 66). The tongues melted and there is an erotic emphasis to fluids such as “spit” and “sweet”, which are compared to wine and to the night’s flavors of the French Quarter, something that culminates in a hunger for blood.

Following, “Christian held the boy close, cradled him, kissed his throat” (BRITE 1992: 66), and then the vampire finally penetrates his victim’s tender skin. The act of feeding here is not only metaphorically linked to sexual experience, they interconnect, since while he feeds, Christian “slipped one hand beneath the belt of the boy’s jeans and found molten trembling heat there. The boy’s back arched; he made a low gasping sound” (BRITE 1992: 66). The masturbatory act culminates in the victim’s orgasm, represented in the novel as a sort of aesthetic delight related to Gothic style conventions (FRANÇA 2017); this delight springs from the sublime communion between the pleasure of surrendering to the vampire, and the horror which arises from the awareness that this surrender is going to result in death.

The orgasm is rapturous also for Christian: “[t]he boy’s sperm flooded warm over Christian’s fingers. Christian brought his hand up to his lips and sucked at that too. The two tastes mingling in his mouth, creamy and delicate and bitter and salty, raw as life, were almost too exquisite to bear” (BRITE 1992: 67). When the vampire consumes the blood and the sperm, Brite grants materiality to the metaphor, or better yet, incarnates the metaphor that associates blood to life into bodily fluids. Pleasures of this type, “raw as life”, enraptures Christian and suggests that the vampire, in Brite’s novel, may be read as a creature that catalyzes bodily experience. Brite’s vampires still drink blood, as in the literary myth’s tradition; on the other hand, they may go out during daytime, and indeed there are no significant

limitations to their existence. On that account, Brite's vampires would not be an allegory to the queer subject, but rather the very queer subject rendered into strange bodies to the hegemonic discourses and points of view.

Blood and blood consumption are Nothing's obsessions. He perforates his wrist with a quill feather and uses his own blood to retrace a postcard. After contemplating the wound, "he licked the blood away. It smudged his lips sticky, and he smiled at himself in the window's reflection" (BRITE 1992: 26). There is an undeniable erotic relation to blood in such a scene, the blood which "smudged his lips sticky" and resonate Robert Smith's vibrant lips, that Nothing stares while he is given oral sex by Laine. His connection with blood makes him later devour Laine in company with Zillah, Twig and Molochai. This scene is represented in a visceral graphic manner – Nothing is seated on top of Laine, and surrounded by vampires he tears the boy's neck in a sloppy and feral bite, pouring blood inside the van. Despite being stricken with guilt, this scene marks a deep change in the character, and in sharing Laine's blood with his new family Nothing concludes that his loneliness has come to an end, once "he was actually drinking a life, swallowing it whole. He felt himself borne up by the mindless, agonized convulsions of the thin body beneath him and the churning guitar of the spiders from Mars" (BRITE 1992: 158); and finally, the statement that "the taste of blood meant the end of aloneness" (BRITE 1992: 158).

Nothing concludes that "they really are vampires, he thought. You've consigned yourself to a life of blood and murder, you can never rejoin the daytime world. And he answered himself: Fine. As long as I don't have to be alone again" (BRITE 1992: 171). However, this first glimpse of acceptance has a rather bitter aspect to it. "Fine", he thinks, wishing only not to be abandoned. At this point of the narrative, Nothing still cannot relate well with Zillah, the group's leader, a (almost) hundred-years-old vampire, androgynous, sometimes sweet, sometimes wicked – Christian even mentions that perhaps Zillah have gone mad with the passing decades.

Zillah introduces himself as a pertinent figure in the narrative. Since the first moment they meet, he becomes Nothing's lover. Later, we also find out he is Nothing's father. In the novel's prologue, their group of vampires gets to New Orleans during the Mardi Grass and burst into Christian's bar. While Molochai and Twig share blood and passion with Christian, Zillah spends the night with Jessy. He gets her pregnant, and she gives birth, at the cost of her life, to Nothing. Christian takes the baby away to Maryland

hoping he never really becomes a vampire, since Christian understands that it would be best for the boy that he would never get in touch with a “world of blood” (BRITE 1992: 228). But Nothing finds his way back, and when the group gets to the Sacred Yew, the bar where Christian works now, Christian reveals that Zillah is his father.

Zillah does not seem to pay much attention to the taboo of incest. He mentions “‘Well,’ said Zillah. He was paler than usual, but he held himself straight, and his eyes were fiercely happy. More than that, Christian realized. Zillah’s eyes were proud. ‘Well. That changes things, doesn’t it? That makes things even better. Lovely’” (BRITE 1992: 219). Nothing questions himself about the kinship, expending a furious train of thoughts about his relationship with Zillah. He states that “he had Zillah, his father, his lover. And he had Molochai and Twig and Christian. They would be there with him, alive” (BRITE 1992: 226), what suggests a notion of family not only nonconforming, but distant from any hegemonic moral sense. He accepts, in a first moment, Zillah as father and lover. In fact, he elects all the vampires as members of his nightly family. Then there is a scene that mirrors an initial one, in which Nothing stares at his own reflection and sees only loneliness. Here, however, the transformation in Nothing’s identity is clear:

He had looked at himself in the bathroom mirror, still able to meet his own eyes, and he had told himself: *For a week now you have been fucking your own father. His tongue has been in your mouth more times than you could count. You’ve sucked him off... you’ve swallowed stuff that could have been your brothers and sisters!* But he could not disgust himself. He could not make himself ashamed. He knew these were things he was supposed to feel, things the rational daylight world would expect him to feel. But he could not force himself to feel them. In a world of night, in a world of blood, what did such pallid rules matter? (BRITE 1992: 228).

His rupture with the hegemonic discourse becomes evident here, by the separation between the daily world and the nightly world. Moreover, he accepts to live a life at the fringe, and his decision relates to Laureti’s (1994) remark about the queer subject. From this moment on, Nothing takes over control of his own narrative; he embraces himself as a marginal figure, searching for meaning at the margin. In a first moment, the narrative suggests a reprehensible sense to the relationship between Zillah and Nothing, implicit in “his tongue has been in your mouth more times than you could count”. However, Nothing states that he could not demean or condemn

himself, and the key to his self-discovery is shown when he realizes that the world where he inhabits, a nightly world, has nothing to do with “the rational daylight world” and with the things that this world “would expect him to feel”. Nothing performs a queer identity, and by inhabiting the fringe of hegemonic culture this fact frees him.

As the plot unfolds, Zillah is wounded by Steve, and by a lustful wish for revenge, he seduces Steve’s ex-girlfriend and gets her pregnant. Ghost and Steve go to New Orleans with the intention to find and save Ann. They end up running into an exoteric store and into Arkady, a type of necromancer who possesses a remarkable amount of (very doubtful) information about vampires. Reluctantly they accept his help. Even so, Ann ends up dying giving birth to a stillborn. Steve is an irascible creature and this makes him mad. He goes out hunting vampires, which results in Zillah’s death. And this is another moment in which Nothing’s narrative changes.

It is also interesting to note that Zillah exerts social pressure aiming to reinforce his dominance toward the troupe. He uses his intimacy with Nothing as well as Nothing’s necessity for acceptance to manipulate him and having things as he pleases; he deliberately threatens Christian with exclusion if he doesn’t comply with his terms. The interesting question here is if Zillah is really a monster. The answer is clarifying concerning the Goth subculture and Nothing’s queer performativity. If Zillah is a monster, it isn’t because he is a vampire, but because he does not allow the others to have a safe place. In other words, he uses his access to Goth subculture to predate on the marginalized queer subjects that integrates the scene.

In spite of the union between Zillah and Nothing, Zillah seemed to merge cruelty and love in the same measure; indeed, passion perhaps is a keyword to understand Zillah’s representation, once everything he does, whether it is an act of compassion or of cruelty, is in the extreme limit of such feeling, spilling over with intensity. After the death of his father and lover, Nothing decides to leave with Molochai and Twig instead of seeking revenge; he takes over his father’s place as protector and leader of the vampire group, no more belonging to the group as an object, when he was Zillah’s object of pleasure, but taking over to him a role of protagonist. He is now able to constitute a family beside Molochai and Twig, or at least, “as much as a family as anyone could be, anywhere, ever” (BRITE 1992: 83). This completes his path of self-discovery, and thus inhabiting “in a world of night, in a world of blood” (BRITE 1992: 228) he sees himself as capable of tracing his own

ethical and moral set, living under the aegis of his own will.

4. CONCLUSIONS

In *Lost Souls*, the fact that Nothing is related to the Goth subculture influences his self-representation, mainly because Nothing has a queer identity. Goth subculture, as Brill (2008) mentions, is permeated by matters related to gender, body, style and sexuality; the scene is marked by performativity, sometimes manifested in a hyperbolic way, and by the tendency of accepting nonconforming identities; such characteristics may serve as a background for the rising of queer identities. Because he has inhabited a world at the fringe of the hegemonic culture, maybe this has prepared Nothing to search, also at the fringe, sense and resolution – or at least reconciliation – for his anguishes. Of course that the Goth scene is only one element in the Gothic machinery of Brite's work, and it deserves the due attention.

On the other hand, Brite's novel seems grounded on a homosocial dynamics. Practically all expressive characters are men, and female figures act, almost always, as an object of coherence for the male identities; this is Ann's case, Steve's ex-girlfriend, who assures him his hegemonic and safe role as a heterosexual man, protecting him from the erotic urgencies he feels toward his bandmate, Ghost. When the relationship ends, Steve's identity collapses. Furthermore, Zillah seduces and gets Ann pregnant by revenge. He does it solely because he knows the pregnancy will kill her. In Brite's novel, vampires are not created, but they are born from a heterosexual relationship. And this process always culminates with the death of the mother. Female vampires do not give consent to reproduce, so male vampires tend to turn to female humans as a valuable option. Brite inverts the notion that the vampire is a corruption from the human parading, such as in the works of Anne Rice or Bram Stoker, suggesting that it is the human blood which has been diluting the vampire blood. This allows the youngsters of vampires to drink, to eat, to have sex and to go out into the sun. Although Brite gave his vampires these features which would allow them to coexist with humans, they don't have the desire or the disposition to be absorbed into the hegemonic daylight world.

If we read the vampire as a metaphor for gender, Nothing's representation seems, at first glance, going against Butlers ideas (2019). In the beginning of the novel, the vampire nature seems to be presented as a type of essential identity (since it looks like there is something visceral that

motivates Nothing to flee home in search for truth, as well as Zillah's urges which impels him to madness and blood), what would suggest a type of essentialist notion to gender. We find some resolution to this matter in the connection that the vampire have with blood.

The thirst of Brite's vampires is associated with their libido. Besides, Nothing's libido is distributed amongst poetry, music and his poise, which is associated to the Goth subculture. We shall remind ourselves that Nothing makes use of a quill feather to penetrate his own skin, using blood to retrace the postcard he sends to Ghost – such a postcard that in a way represents his expectations for the future, as if Nothing had retraced his whole life with blood. This act clarifies the performative act of Nothing's gender identity, since it is a stylized act associated to the Goth scene.

When Christian takes baby Nothing away from New Orleans and leaves him at the door of strangers, he wonders that perhaps it would be possible for the baby to grow like a common child. That is, we could presume that even if someone is born to be a vampire, one becomes a vampire only if a determining identity frame is already an apprehensive constructed language mediating one's identity. On that account, how does one characterize Brite's vampire? Nothing becomes a vampire as he interacts and travels with Molochai, Twig and Zillah. It is from action, by a *performative act*, that he performs his gender identity. Consequently, the vampire does not present many distinctions of an individual belonging to the Goth scene. Here they have the same value. In fact, I would say that Brite's vampires are embodiment of queer subjects, and the Goth scene functions as a background which supports the performing of queer identities.

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WHAT

Themed section

Performance, subversion, relation:
tracing queer in BDSM

EVER

MUGUELTZINTA SOLÍS

Embodying the postcolonial perverse: mestizXXX sadomasochist performance methodologies

ABSTRACT: This paper is not intended as either a survey of performance and perversity nor as an argumentation for any particularly new theory of performance. Rather it is me offering my methodologies, influences and thoughts as a trans mestizXXX perverse performance artist living and working in an actively postcolonial moment. It is, in part, an act of resistance toward the move to commodify performance's important ephemerality and ineffability into institutionally digestible historicity and study-ability within academic institutional contexts. This paper will focus on some of my performance work which plays with ideas of power, bondage, land, colony, body and institution. I will also discuss the work of a few contemporary artists whom I identify not as important to notions of "the canon" but to *my* canon, artists whose queer and/or "of colour" perversities have influenced my work and self-formation. A work which combines personal narrative with critical analysis, this paper hopes to contextualize my performance practice from an intersectional and interdisciplinary perspective.

KEYWORDS: visual art; gender studies; performance; perversity; leather; postcolonial; queer studies; bdsm; biopolitics; land; landscape; place; Indigeneity; ritual; imaginaries; FTM; T4T; sexuality.

INTRODUCTION: CREATING RELATION TO LAND THROUGH BDSM

I don't want to begin with a dry summary of this paper, walking you through each section with details about what I am intending to do at every step. I know that is a practice that works for lots of people, but to me, in this context, that seems unerotic. This is not to say I don't have concern for your well-being as a reader. Once, I had sex with another transman, a stranger I had met hours before. In the middle of our fucking his face twisted in a way that alarmed me, prompting me to stop what I was doing and ask, "Are you ok?" He became furious, demanded, "Why would you ask me that?" I often look back on this as a red flag that tried to forewarn me of a relationship that would become fraught with poor communication and abusive habits. So, bearing that in mind, I'd like this paper to unfold organically, with both

of us understanding that we can stop at any time. I consider “BDSM” as a sensory, performative and aesthetic category which claims ideas of power, restriction, dominance and pain beyond our theaters of private desire, into collective, public and politicized erotic imaginaries. I feel it is the transmutative potential of “BDSM” being understood as performance and/or ritual which gives it this power. Much as Foucault’s experience of the gay leather scene informed his analyses of power, so can performative embodiments of the postcolonial perverse serve to bring to the surface our subconscious formations of race, class, gender, ethnicity and their relationships to the state body.

As introduction I will tell you about a performance persona project which I feel serves as an example of the particular tangle of ideas that this paper wants to discuss. While much of my performance work has dealt with notions of the perverse, I want to begin with a look at a body of work I created for my MFA thesis, *Landscape is my Sir* (SOLÍS 2019). I am an artist with underwhelming drafting skills, and so the sketch I brought to my supervisor of a leather daddy bound to a chair on a frozen pond was a poor one. Having spent the first year of my MFA program toying with various materials and concepts, I walked into my advisory meeting equipped with two desires: 1. I wanted to develop a deeper relationship with the Blackfoot territory on which I had arrived to be a guest and student and 2. I wanted to do it while dressed in leather. This would be the beginning of a performance person named Chico California, after a town in Northern California near the rural area in which I grew up. The idea was simple: I, a transmasculine homosexual guest in Blackfoot territory, wanted to develop a closer relationship to land through sensuality. I had started meeting people through Grindr, which had already helped me (un)map the territory beyond the confines of the University. But by pursuing the unanswerable question of *how does a stone, a tree, a hill want to be pleased?* I could point to the absurd, hilarious, horrifying and ecstatic processes of creating relation with place, processes which are often overlooked in non-dominant worldviews. The question of relation to land and the non-human had, for this project, roots in Indigenous ways of knowing, ways in practice since time immemorial but translated into academic language – and often rescinded *from* as an act of resistance to institutionalization – by scholars such as Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate Canada Research Chair, Kim TallBear,

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, who works from a Nishnaabeg worldview, Vine Deloria Jr. – Sioux – and Leroy Little Bear, working from Blackfoot ways of knowing.

My entry point into leather and BDSM as Chico California was one of imaginary and fantasy before it was one of practice. I was introduced to BDSM as an older teen, and it has been a significant aspect in several of my relationships, but never in an especially social way. I have never been part of any extensive BDSM or leather communities and have little interest in doing so. That being said I might argue that academia is one of the oldest BDSM communities, full of perverse rituals, SM relations, binding contracts and power roles, and I have been deeply embroiled in this community for most of my adult life. During my MFA work, I spent quite a bit of time thinking this over. This led to a slogan of which I have joked with my colleagues about making university t-shirts and hoodies: *the University of Lethbridge is My Sir*. The recipient of grants and scholarships, the “debt” I owe in exchange for my education is one narrativized as repayable only through gratitude, good behavior, productiveness and institutional loyalty, through being a good boy.

Power relationships unequivocally exist between people and place. Painter Kent Monkman, who I’ll talk more about in a bit, talks about the way in which landscape painting flattens colonial history (MONKMAN 2015). Building on Monkman’s reflection on landscape painting having a particular role in the material, visual and spiritual territorialization of the North American “West,” I attached the notion that a frame is a body harness around place, the word *landscape* itself an act of framing a site or place into a stricture: *this* is what is important in this site, *not* that. In *Landscape is my Sir*, the question *how does land want to be pleased?* brought with it other exciting questions that arose out of granting the “inanimate” the same agencies which non-Indigenous worldviews reserve only for humans. Does land have the ability to consent? If a landmark is photographed over and over by people, is it a slut or a porn star? Coloniality is a perverse undertaking. It is driven by theologies which find the conquering of “unused” land to be a moral obligation, where to *save* a person, a place, a commodity does not equate to its ethical treatment. The phrase “land use” itself is worth considering from the vantage of erotics and desire: when I ask a lover to “use me,” I am asking for mutually pleasurable reciprocal relation, not to be violently relieved of my resources or to have my body

irreparably damaged such that neither I nor other lovers can enjoy it again.

Bearing these questions and ideas in mind, *Landscape is my Sir* was challenging as a work of performance creation because I wanted to cast Chico California as both dominant and submissive to landscape. Dominance over territory, as performance, turned out to be a much more legible relation than submitting to it. It was easy enough to invoke this relation through performances of erotically flogging, smut-talking, fisting and spitting on the land, stones, trees, etc. I wanted to find ways to show site-specific dominances that were *sensual*, that demonstrated *a perverse care*, and not just a cavalier using of the land toward dominating gestures, or, for that matter, that carelessly used the land for my own ends as an art student. This included rituals of digging up masses of dirt, wrapping them in leather and then paddling them, fisting the hole the dirt came from, then burying my face in the earth once it had been paddled, and ending with carefully replacing the earth in the hole it came from. Chico California also flogged, spanked and whipped objects, such as a set of children's history textbooks from the 70s that told a glorified history of western expansion and industrialization of the prairies, as well as travelogues written by settler-explorers, punishing them for being "bad little books."

Chico California's *subbing* to land took much subtler forms, and required my surrender to gravity, to the elements, to river currents and to temperatures -15 degrees Celsius. As any good foray into BDSM, this project taught me about the limitations of the body as much as its capacities: I never did do the leather-daddy-on-ice performance because I came to understand how very difficult and dangerous such a performance would be. This *as a work which should not happen* in itself contains meaning, is an acknowledgement that Chico California submits to his limitations as a human, and to the boundaries set by the natural world, to physics, to the force of winter. I find this humbling, this perversity which can only exist in my imaginary, and it is my hope that, having shared it with you, it can exist in your imaginary too.

You ok? This paper will proceed with few citations, though this may change in the editing process. There exists a wealth of writing and thought about performance which has nurtured me, and I will include the occasional nod to these texts. However, I feel the value I have in this conversation is to supply first-person or primary-source-esque insight into performance, rather

than to spend a lot of time expressing a third hand re-view of performance studies, a task I leave to others, or to a me of a different time. The artists I've chosen are not explicitly considered to be BDSM-y artists, rather I highlight the ways in which their unique perversities play in their work. The artist pool I draw from are simply some artists who have mentored me in some way, whom I have met in passing or whom I follow on Instagram, and in those ways influence my day-to-day absorption of creativity. I write longer about some artists than others, though I could happily write a full paper, or better still a very long love letter, to any one of them. I've put a lot of stories in this paper, and it should be underscored that performance as an art form goes hand-in-hand – again not unlike BDSM practice – with storytelling. I feel one of the most effective ways of analysing art is to tell the sensory, relational and affective story of it. And so, in the next section I will narrate a Chico California performance story for you.

1. LANDSCAPE AND HISTORY ARE MY SIR

It's a cool day, windy. I'm hot, sweaty from carrying my materials to the place I've asked my committee to gather. My committee is gathered in a coulee, a small grassy valley that overlooks the river, the modernist concrete building that is the University behind them. I walk down from the building. I'm dressed as Chico California, wearing tall black leather boots over black jeans, a black leather jacket and black leather gloves. I'm carrying a large amateur painting of a landscape I've found in a thrift store, which shows a roughly painted mountain scene, a river of white and blue blots, a forest of green and brown gashes. I set it firmly into the grass near my committee. I face it toward the river and tell the painting it's nothing but a poor imitation. I tell it that that over there, that's a real landscape. I cuss at the painting and then I bind it. I have made a leather harness just for paintings, metal ring fitted at its center. I tell it to watch.

I've set up a little table between my committee and myself. I walk around the area and pickup river stones from between the prairie grass and set them in a row on the table. I serve the stones a glass of whiskey and put cigarettes under them. I welcome the stones and my committee, and give them whiskey, too. I tell them the history of whiskey in Alberta. I put on Lady Gaga's "Heavy Metal Lover" and do a strip tease until I am in just my boots and a pair of black short-shorts I had on under my pants, showing my ass and doing body rolls for the stones watching. When the

song reaches a crescendo, I put handcuffs on myself, hands behind my back, and I run away. I run, as a committee member describes later, away and out of the frame. I run high up the grassy side of the valley and stand for a moment before I dive onto my side and begin to roll downhill. It hurts and also feels exhilarating. I am scarcely in control of the roll, just enough to keep my head up and away from rocks and cacti. I have checked for rattlesnakes before the performance, but one never knows. I trundle through the grass until I come to standstill in the cup of the valley. The earth and sky continue spinning as I try to stand and fall. My sides and wrists are somewhat bruised and small scratches all over my torso are bleeding. I feel drunk and dizzied, my body full of sweet endorphins.

Here is the history of whiskey in the place this performance unfolded: in the mid 1800s American whiskey bootleggers, many of them displaced soldiers and civilians from the American Civil War, came to Alberta and began trading with the Blackfoot Confederacy for buffalo hides. They traded gunpowder, beads, tobacco, whiskey and other goods. The whiskey they traded was often laced with additives such as pepper, gunpowder and strychnine, and the buffalo hides they traded for fetched a far higher resale value than what they gave in exchange. Buffalo hides were wanted by settlers as robes, blankets and to use as driving belts in industrial steam-powered machinery. Members of the Blackfoot Confederacy quickly became addicted to whiskey, and, together with the decimation of the buffalo by American and Canadian military, police and vigilante forces, and various pandemics sweeping the region, the Blackfoot Confederacy had its economic and spiritual sovereignty eroded away on its own territory.

I stumble back to my committee and one of them un-cuffs me. After the performance my committee gathers inside the University for me to present my end of year progress review. I am sore, scratched, winded and slightly drunk. When I get home, I realize I've left the rest of the bottle of Alberta Premium whiskey in the coulee. I leave it there.

2. CONTACT ZONE PORN STARS

I grew up primarily in California, and it has not been until living outside that place for longer than 4 years that a true nostalgia, a simulacral twin which lives in my mind, has solidified into what is a self-identification as a *Californian*. I can now tell you with assuredness that I know what California is, how it smells and how it tastes. I can tell you the particular way in

which California hurts you and exactly how to hurt it back. What's more I have crystalized in my mind the particular kind *wild west* that California is by the simple virtue that it is the kind of *wild west* that California believes itself to be. I think of California as being an example of what Mary Louise Pratt identified as a *contact zone*, though it is possible that when I envision *contact zone* it is far queerer, far more *bad drag make-up* and *broken disco ball* than the blended aesthetic producing historical moment she initially had in mind (PRATT 1991). The contact zone that I, as a perverse performance artist, spend time performing into is atemporal, is a historical period that spans and erupts at any moment between the imaginal of any number of colonial first contacts and the imaginings that inspires my neighbors' bumper stickers: "Ram the Daughter, Dodge the Father," "I AM Alberta Oil," and one my mother saw recently, "I Didn't Own Slaves and You Never Picked Cotton." To this effect, Chico California is a *contact zone porn star*, appearing inwardly as a figment of westward expansion's past/present/future imagination, and expressing outwardly as a stripper for the land.

Early in my material research for Chico California, my supervisor brought two artists to my attention: Kent Monkman and Adrian Stimson. Kent Monkman's paintings have become a popular fixture in Canadian contemporary art, particularly those bringing attention to the history of the Residential School System and its repercussions for Indigenous communities past and present. But while such works bring awareness and voice to critical matters, for me, as a perverse artist, it was Monkman's work with Miss Chief Eagle Testickle which takes colonial history to task by fucking it that really struck me. Wearing a "war bonnet" inspired not so much from colonial photographer Edward Curtis's imaginary – where popular stereotypical imaging of Native people has origins – but from an appropriated headdress which Cher wore in her 1973 video for *Half Breed*. Miss Chief Eagle Testickle appears in paintings styled after classical landscape, historical and religious art, overseeing bears fucking bearded white men in leather gear and fucking unwitting cowboys whose erect cocks betray their enjoyment of the homoerotic coupling.

"Ah yes, Kent," says Blackfoot performance artist Adrian Stimson, when Monkman's name comes up in a lecture's q&a period which I attend. "Buffalo Boy was making the rounds years before Miss Chief was" (Stimson 2019.) This makes me consider the two performance personas created by these two artists, Monkman's Miss Chief as a hi-fi perversity, fucking

and politicking her way into hallowed halls, while Stimson’s Buffalo Boy delights in the expanses of southern deserts and northern prairies, horns and pearls shining, speaking prophesises and histories into the whipping wind of the “wild west.” Buffalo Boy is fashioned after the “Native” caricatures featured in the wild west shows that created the imaginary of the wild west that we know now, a force of imaging which continues to inform our racialized notions of territory, nation, resource extraction and rights to land use. Stimson’s other persona, the Shaman Exterminator, is a performance persona deployed to interrupt instances of fake shamans and other appropriations and dilutions of Indigenous spiritualities (STIMSON 2019).

While the audacity of Monkman’s paintings has made an impression on me, it is Stimson’s performance and Stimson *himself* who has moved me as a person engaging with perverse decolonial futurities. His pearl, fringe and fur adorned personas have directly influenced me such that I continually catch myself in Buffalo Boy drag without realizing it. Just today I bought a bullwhip for a project on sound and land, and now, as I revisit the landmark black and white photos of Buffalo Boy performing in the Nevada desert, I see a bullwhip there in Stimson’s hand. I take this as evidence of Stimson’s power to enter and influence the subconscious as an artist.

Stimson, a member of the Siksika Nation, accesses what is recognizable to me from my upbringing on the spiritual borderland between 1980s Californian Native American and Chicano revival spiritualities, as an Indigenous perversity, full of a humor and scared clowning that has a life and purpose beyond the task of toppling colony. In Stimson’s paintings and performance lies an important sense of *this is for us* that is very Indigenous and very queer – thought it might be argued that it is 2Spirit, not *queer*. In a recent painting series, *Naked Napi*, Stimson explores and re-queers the erotics of Napi, a wise-fool “trickster” figure from Niitsítapi stories whose antics have made marks on the land and hold important teachings (STIMSON 2019). What I just called “re-queering” is a re-inscription of Indigenous sexualities and sexual knowledge/cosmology/relation in the place where colonial projects to eradicate both the knowledge and the people who carried these ways of life for Niitsítapi society. Stimson engages with this decolonial project from a very personal place, being himself a survivor of the Residential School System, an institution which has worked hard to erase all non-binary, non-Christian notions of gender and sexuality from its Indigenous prisoners. In a recent installation of Stimson’s which appeared

in this year's 22nd Sydney Biennale, a table shows a diorama of small 3D printed model, Naked Napi, Buffalo Boy and The Shaman Exterminator appearing together, surrounded by tiny buffalo. Here, Naked Napi's iconic giant dick ejaculates a stream of thick, anticolonial jizz at a speeding miniature train in an act of land-defense against the railroad's mechanized industrial reach (STIMSON 2020).

Dayna Danger is another kickass 2Spirit artist making art toward decolonial Indigenous perver-futurities who has deeply influenced me. Danger, a self-identified hard femme, creates work rooted in an Indigi-queer decolonial feminist community-building. Danger's beaded BDSM masks – masks which they says have design origins in Mexican lucha libre wrestler masks, which I find to be a lovely cultural circularity – are a crystallization of this community, bringing together the world of queer BDSM and Indigenous beading as a tool for sustaining relationships through object-making (DANGER 2018). This perver-futurity is akin to Audre Lorde's erotic, whose distinction between pornography and eros lies in relation-creation and erotic exchanges of knowledge, a departure from production-related carnal satisfaction (LORDE 1978).

Danger's beaded masks are a kind of extended performance, where the process of beading the masks, a task shared among several community members, is as much part of the work as the modeling of the masks. Danger has relationships with the models, specifically picked and posed to express the empowerment of female bodies that are typically underrepresented or othered by mainstream image-making. Danger acknowledges the ways in which photography can be a kind of act of bondage and is conscientious about creating a relationship with the subject that is consensual and mutually pleasurable, recognizing the power dynamics a camera brings into any space. In Danger's portraiture work, they has used conventions of lighting and coloring that invoke the aesthetics of fashion photography and pornography, however the fierce gaze of the models staring back is in bold defiance to being read as consumable bodies. Danger's work proposes BDSM as a relational tool that can dethrone and decenter settler-colonial narratives of not only desire and sexuality, but also gender and power, a reclamation and reprioritization of complexly gendered systems of governance and community organization which the genocidal colonial project has sought to erase and undermine (DANGER 2017).

With these important influences in mind, Chico California has given way

to a new performance persona: Thirstin West. Having scratched the leather daddy itch, I turned to another long-time imaginal fixation of mine, the cowboy. I must emphasize here that I am a fake cowboy. I am afraid of horses and cows, having much preferred my younger-day experiences working with smaller livestock like sheep, goats and alpacas. The cowboy has been an important fantastical embodiment for me since it was an important proto-trans access point for moving from a butch dyke into a butch FTM queen and – in a few more years – daddy. What’s more, it is an important cultural link to a Mexican vaquero or charro imaginal, marked by a coming together of Indigenous and Iberian laboral cultures and technologies, to which I both lay claim to and – when I dare reject it – always seems to reclaim me as its culturally padlocked boy. A family (his)story I’ve been told *many* times by my grandmother brings together all these threads of land, conquest, sex, power and cowboys: My great-grandfather first saw my great-grandmother bathing in a river. One day, when my great-grandmother, the daughter of hacendados (land-owning ranchers,) was riding into town with her brothers, my great-grandfather, a man described derogatorily as being so dark and grizzled his legs appeared to made of wood, leap out from behind a nopalera (a cactus tree) on horseback. He took his knife and cut off my great-grandmother’s virginal hair braid, an act that rendered her unmarriable, sullied and unvirtuous. Told in my grandmother’s manner, this story reads to me as something straight out of a black and white or colorized Mexican western, where the stories of Indigenous/Colonial clashing are re-dramatized as titillating and sexualized encounters unfolding in the mountains, jungles, valleys and deserts of Mexico’s national mythology. Indeed, whether I like it or not, I am made not of the facts in this story but of the imaginaries it invokes.

In my particular take on the “contact zone porn star,” Thirstin West is an actual maker of porn. I’ve had a casual amateur porn practice for just over a year. I refer to this “hobby” as both a *material practice* and as *material research*. I upload my pornographic performances for camera to Pornhub, and in some senses I think of this commercial platform as a perverse contact zone: the boundary between public (free content) and private (premium content) is blurred, one can submit videos for free, but one will never see the return for their labour even as Pornhub makes money off of it. It is often hard to tell who on Pornhub is there as part of their livelihood and who uploads only from a desire to contribute to pornographic discourse and society. Though I’m not directly making money from my content, one

could still argue either way in my case.

An image of pink-red labia pulled open by two hands whose tattooed knuckles read “wild west” revealing a testosterone enlarged clitoris, a nude FTM body in a black cowboy hat bouncing up and down on a dildo strapped to a tooled and patinaed saddle strapped to a sawhorse, hand-painted landscape of mountains and prairie as backdrop: Thirstin West’s pornography is simple, campy and yearning. What I wanted to express with Thirstin West was the outward performative of *mestizXXX*, an auto-theoretical x-rated outgrowth (SOLÍS 2021) of Gloria Anzaldúa’s Chicana *mestiza* (ANZALDÚA 1987) that focuses on this racially mixed cultural positioning as being one born directly from perverse colonial and postcolonial encounters and experiences. Thirstin West is a kind of Mexican Buffalo Boy. But Thirstin West revels in an ethnic ambiguity which is the cornerstone of the *mestizx* experience. He is racially mixed beyond easy claim to or claim by any nation or race. He is both a *product* of and *producer* of colonial territorialization. He does not and may never have a *purpose*, other than to wander the atemporal contact zone that is the *imaginary* of the wild west, a denizen of claimed virtual lands such as *Pornhub* and an as-of-yet unnamed virtual “postcolonial theme park” I am currently in the process of designing in the theme park simulator game *Planet Coaster*. If *Pornhub* is an industrial settlement on the colonial frontier of virtual desires, then Thirstin West is neither/both conquered and conqueror, the prospector and the displaced. He, like me, is just passing through. The displaced? Well...

Excuse me here as I interrupt the temporality of this paper: between the initial submitting of the first draft and the subsequent revision process, American legislation known as SISEA, following in the tracks of FOSTA-SESTA which ended the era of both Craigslist personals and the Tumblr porn-verse, prompted *Pornhub* to dramatically reorganize its user base. (See Kelleher and Salonganisa 2021 for an overview of this complex topic which merits its own in-depth essay.) *Pornhub* said it would delete all content by unverified users as part of its compliance with the new law, a move which hugely altered the pornographic landscape for both queer sex-workers and queer porn-consumers. But in December 2020, “Thurston West,” a verified user, had all his videos deleted as well. Thirstin West has since moved to Twitter, but I know this is likely not a permanent solution, and feel deeply for the all the queer and gay sex-workers and performers whose legitimate and important livelihoods have been profoundly impacted. I do not rely

on the dissemination of my amateur pornography to pay my bills, yet my exile from Pornhub was a shocking blow to my erotic life and practice, and served as further proof of the instability, ephemerality and precarity that performance art made in a virtual contact zone experiences.

Recently I returned to the site of one of my Chico California performances, where I tied myself around the torso to tree in the dead of winter and let myself hang. I uncoiled myself and sat on a trunk and cried and cried and cried. I made a video of that performance and made a video, too, of myself returning to the same site one recent sunny, fall day. In the video I say, *I don't know why I came back here. I guess I just wanted some place to return to. I guess that's why I tied myself to that tree. I wanted to have the experience of being bound to a site, to a place.*

3. CONTRABAND PERVERSITIES

Here's another performance story. In mid-January of 2020, I was driving northbound on a prairie highway toward Lethbridge, Alberta, having taken a friend back to the train station in a small Montana town. Never one to be at ease at border crossings despite my American citizenship and Canadian student visa, I was unusually nervous this time around. I'd been detained on the way south, had been questioned by a young, aggressive, red-bearded US border agent who asked me if I "smoked drugs" and, when I said I studied art, mocked me when I said "painting" having misheard me as saying the word "something."

One can guess at why I was singled out to have my car searched: I looked like *someone*, I was wearing the wrong clothes, my car was dirty, I was alone. I collected myself and drove into the metal hanger that two white Canadian agents waved me into. I rolled down the window for a smiling, trim man in his 40s. He introduced himself and his younger colleague, leaning against a row of metal tables nearby. At his request I got out of the car and stood there. I was asked standard questions, was I bringing anything of value into Canada, drugs, firearms? The man was polite, dapper even, with his Québécois accent and tidy, black stubble. He was a sharp contrast to the doughy unkempt US agent who'd yelled and sneered at me. When I told him I studied art, that I was working on a film, this man nodded and said his cousin was an artist filmmaker.

"So!" he said, "Do you know how this works?" The other agent neared.

It was this moment that prickled my neck. While the US agent had made me feel terrible, had made me want to cry, had yelled at me, shamed me in front of my friend and mocked my career, I had not felt like this. It hadn't made me feel like I was in a pornographic film; it hadn't made me feel *perverse*.

It was the casual ordinariness of a ritual that was neither ordinary nor casual that felt perverse. It was the script the men followed and the cleanliness of everything. It was not so much about the men themselves, but my own imaginary of institutional horniness, of power flexed calmly, unexpectedly and without identifiable reason with total assurance of itself. The young US agent had borne the markers of a bad, inexperienced top: unnecessarily cruel and theatrical. But these men were *good* tops, excreting only as much power as they needed to, which was not much: they had trust in the inherent, wide-reaching power of the neo-liberal institution they represented.

I responded that I'd never been searched here. He explained the process, I gave him my keys and the other man showed me into a clean, cold waiting room. I was terrified, and relieved I was not being physically searched beyond a quick pat down. I don't know how long I waited. There wasn't much beyond a vending machine, some chairs and a fire extinguisher in the clean, industrial room. I sat there, containing my emotions about being detained twice in a day for reasons unnamed, wondering what I could have possibly done or said differently to be read as a more-proper citizen/non-citizen. And then I remembered about the pearl.

I had swallowed the pearl the evening before. It was part of a performance for the University of Lethbridge's staff and faculty show – a detail worth noting. I planned to shit out the small river pearl onto a golden decorative platter I had picked out at a thrift store, which depicted a colonial ship bearing a cross on its sails, charging across the sea. The pearl and platter were exhibited with pearl resting on a velvet cushion, platter sanitized and polished on the gallery wall, beside a video of my swallowing and retrieving the pearl in my bathroom at home. But these were just trace artifacts of what I now, in retrospect, consider the heart of the performance.

Sitting in that waiting room, thinking of this contraband pearl inside me, I thrilled at having a small secret, something that the men would not find, something neither legal nor illegal, a parallel, too, to the fact of my reading in appearance and on paper as a man, all while being in possession

of – what I often like to call – my pussy. It was this moment that *made* the performance, which transported the performance from being merely a metaphor for colony as a process of spiritualized resource extraction, to an act of using the body as a vessel for the transportation of a naturally made object of beauty. In a sense the performance unwittingly served to contextualize the terrifying-yet-banal institutional ritual (consider the term, “routine inspection”) as being *part of the performance* of which I was the co-creator, a way in which I, who had little true option to consent to being searched, could reclaim agency. To the pearl in my gut, the border meant nothing.

It’s interesting to think about consent here. Perverse performance frequently foists power relations upon the audience member that they may or may not have consented to. When one decides to attend a performance, this is generally understood. One accepts that one does not know what will happen exactly. And so, it could be asked if the border agents have consented to participating in a performance which involved my pooping out a pearl – certainly they have consented to participating in a performance in which they are searchers and I the searched. Indeed, one might counter-argue that we all are subject to being exposed to performances of power by institutions that we have not consented to. The repercussions for not consenting to any number of institutional requests, i.e. a search of personal property or body, do not really render them as true options. An institution benefits from the participation of the individual well beyond the time that an individual does, but we scarcely consent to that either. None of us consented to being born, socialized and enabled into the systems of inequity in which we find ourselves, yet here we are.

Stop. I need to clarify that I do not mean that performance should be tasked with some moralized responsibility to make *statements* or relate itself prescriptively and didactically toward specific political agendas. Such a logic is the fallacy that performance exists to serve or produce certain results, which erases its pluralistic potentials as being a catalyst, an intervention, a provocation or revelation of what already is. The belief that performance art enters the room fully knowing what it will *do* arrives from and serves only academic models of knowledge production, models which have classically suffered from their colonial inheritance of affectless, Eurocentric perceptive modes. Something that reveals itself here is that perversity in performance is *often* not about the act itself but what

the perverse act elicits, the, if you will, experiential pearls of wisdom that we sift out of the shit. I offer that performance, particularly perverse performance, be acknowledged for being an opportunity for subtext and subconscious to be brought to the surface. I offer that performance is itself the tool for expressing the act of interior becoming exterior, for not only the individual or the smaller one-on-one relation, but for the collective, the performer a provider of clarity and catalysis. I have contextualized or possibly justified my own work in the past by simply saying, *I did it so you didn't have to.*

4. PERVERSITY'S OPPOSITES

What *is* perversity's opposite? A goal, if this paper wanted to have one, might be to express perversity as *not* having an antithesis, an opposite, a binary flip-state. What are some possible opposites of perversity? Normalcy? Painlessness? Being turned off?

Normalcy and the domestic realm are highly perverse. Consider the work of Kat Toronto, whose Miss Meatface thrives in hyper-domestic crocheted-and-floral-print-festooned, animal printed home-scapes. Masked, clad in latex and vinyl clothing and accessories, Miss Meatface dominates *home sweet home*, sometimes sharing the frame with muscular male bodies bent and bound into pretty service, male furniture on whose arms are set delicate doilies or serving platters. Miss Meatface's installation-performances shine with a wetness only achieved by black plastic, that is both a compliment and a contrast to the knitted wooliness of the home-scape that surrounds the perversity in-frame.

Perhaps it would be more useful to think of perversity, and performed perversities, as one of many *on* (being turned on and being turned off, or, being turned on and being *not* turned on?) states that a person can inhabit, just as gender and sexuality have been slowly re-granted range to take any number of forms in any number of contexts. I feel it is important to consider seriously the possibility that the groping for perversity's opposite is a learned habit, a moralistic impulse trained into the mind and body. I suppose I bring up the question of perversity's opposite as a kind of trick question. Perversity has no opposite because perversity is not a fixed point on a moral compass. Rather perversity can be felt as a quality of being whose situation depends entirely on its own relation to any number of shifting realities and *givens*, be they discursive, imaginal or territorial.

5. MESTIZXXX, COLONIAL VOYEURISM AND OTHER SADOMASOCHISMS

mestizXXX, an outgrowth of the Chicana/Chicano *ni de aquí, ni de allá* (neither from here nor from there) mestizx ethos, is an identity matrix fed by both agency, targetship and victimhood in the racial power schemas which vary from nation to nation, continent to continent. mestizXXX must acknowledge the ongoing struggle between Indigenous sovereignty and colonial supremacy – while Gloria Anzaldúa’s work set the stage for important mobilization around a post-Mexico Indigenous reclamation, (ANZALDÚA 1987) the history of power embedded into the word *mestizo* has roots in the casta systems of New Spain where *Mestizos* bore rights of which other castas, such as *Indios*, were dispossessed. This hierarchy is alive and well today in both Mexican and American racial, economic and gender power structures, where anti-Indigenous and anti-Black discrimination feeds the racial axis upon which Mexican-as-racialized and Mexican-as-white swings.

mestizXXX, as not identity but methodology, hopes to capture the complexity of what is done to us, what we do to ourselves and what we do to others. The perversity which defines it has the potential to possess both an Indigiqueer futurity *and* the potential too fall into patterns of colonial sado-masochisms and voyeurisms. It feels a little *good* to be an exile, to self-position within an identity of racial and sexual targetship, even though one’s life – certainly mine – might be, relatively speaking, pretty damn comfortable.

I have in mind a very particular historical lineage of perverse narrative and power which has produced – and continues to produce – mestizXXX. Carvajal’s *Butterflies Will Burn* traces the political nuances and legal fabric that dictated the prosecution of sodomy in New Spain, a system that was deeply informed by not only sexuality but also race and class. Sigal, Torrici and Whitehead’s edited volume, *Ethno-Pornography* provides various narratives of the ways in which the colonial eye produced the very perversities it would go on to prosecute and use to justify the territorializing and conquest of “heathen” land. Stuart Hall often touches on imaginaries, imaging and the production of the *idea* colonized territory and body. Even if mestizXXX longs for some reclamation of pre-contact, pre-Colombian sexualities, how can history be trusted when so many codices detailing Indigenous life were written by agents of the mission-state?

mestizXXX suggests that these instances of rendering perverse happen within the same body through process of self-territorialization, self-exotification and self-victimization. This is a masochistic process, which, without my precisely qualifying it as either a *good* perversity or a *bad* perversity, formulates a very particular, and very fluid, positioning on the spectrum of colonizer and colonized. But rather than parse this further in theoretical terms I'll turn to some more performance artists who have informed this thought. Because I am more interested in mestizXXX as a methodology than as an identity, I ask that you think of these artists not as *being* mestizXXX but as *embodying* mestizXXX, as incorporating complex sadomasochisms into their work.

Rafa Esparza, possessed of many beautifully crossdisciplinary masteries, has a one particular work which has stuck with me because it is something that my body, too, has wanted. In *Xipe Totec: the flaying of man*, Esparza is tied around the legs and dragged behind a low rider muscle car through the southern California desert, and the leather jackets he wears become hides which tell the story of wounding the flesh would absorb. It has been my desire to do this too, including the wounding of the leather jacket, but I've desired in particular to be dragged behind a pick-up truck by a hot guy down a rural dirt and gravel road. Such a desire is difficult to explain. Is it some mashup of the anti-Mexican sentiments I grew up around, coupled with memories of my first BDSM experience where I was driven up a rural mountain road in a pickup, bent over a tailgate and flogged? The performative impulse lives in my mind as an imaginary of things both desired and feared, of homophobic and racist executions and maimings, and the ever-present question: how could anyone think to kill a person in this way? One desires answers; one desires.

Esparza and myself are not the only ones whose bodies desire to investigate this act which has been used as a form of execution and torture on both otherly-racialized and otherly-sexualized bodies. Another artist who has engaged with this gesture is Jose Villalobos, a Texas based Latinx artist who has taken the textural world of Tejano masculinity, and mercilessly, meticulously, deconstructed it. His installations suspend cowboy boots into fringed chandeliers of leather and rubber, show leather belts and cowboy hats with gay epithets tooled and embroidered into them. But Villalobos, still young in performance artist years – which are not comprised of *years* per se – shows his true vulnerability in his performance:

licking aloe vera spines, sewing/cutting the word *joto* into his hands, getting cowboy boot stich patterns tattooed onto the tops of his feet, being bound and dragged behind a horse, suspending himself from a noose and pulley. Villalobos describes his work as being a confrontation and negation of toxic masculinity, and I would add to that by saying that confrontation is complex, and requires more than saying no. *No* when seeking to unmake, unravel, deconstruct patriarchal-colonial structures, is a multistep process which requires a reconciling with the perversity the pervert has left within us. Villalobos's *no* to toxic masculinity makes homoerotic love to its own artifacts at the same time that it deconstructs them.

My perception of Regina Jose Galindo's smart, intense work is that she does not take masochistic pleasure in her orchestrations of harms done to her own body. She volunteers her body to be injured, tortured and mistreated in the way that the bodies of other Guatemalan and Central American women are treated, but it is the spectator who is the pervert. I suspect this is the thing she as an artist "enjoys," the knowing that an art audience must witness her being waterboarded, receiving a vaginoplasty, being bagged and tossed into a garbage truck. I include her here not because I feel what she does *is* perverse, but because it is the viewer who becomes the pervert for being willing to see her go through with the work without interfering.

Similar is the work of Carlos Martiel, whose performance, *Dark Corner*, I experienced in person. In his performance, Martiel staged himself inside a lightless gallery space, and viewers entered in groups of three holding between them a single flashlight. Those who entered were staged to confront their own fear and titillation over what waited in the dark: a naked black man. Martiel stood in a corner of the room and allowed himself to be found and examined by the beam of the flashlight. Who really held the power in this space? The racialized body "waiting" in the dark? Or the body bearing the light to blind Martiel's eyes and illuminate his bare flesh? Martiel's performance work frequently involves self-alteration, endurance and injury, but, like Galindo's, his presence is there to represent or manifest or embody the pain of others and to draw attention to our *own* attention, to the willingness to be a spectator, a voyeur.

6. TRANS COUNTER-INSTITUTIONAL PERFORMANCE AND T₄T RELATIONS AS MASOCHIST METHODOLOGY

You ok?

It's funny to think that BDSM still organizes itself into play communities, that there are still leather men hierarchies and competitions, when BDSM is so often an undiscussed, unspectacularly inherent part of homosexual sexuality. Choking and slapping seem to be ubiquitous aspects of fucking, and, in a way, I appreciate how these acts escape the formalization that the acronym *BDSM* implies. Is the "rough" in "liking it rough" a formalized sadomasochism or does it escape language, a fugitive desire both liberating and problematic, a place where consent becomes nebulous? Here we see two physical acts, choking and slapping as escaping that formalization, but what about emotional sadomasochism? What about the predator/prey relations that effervesce between queers and their complex relational out-workings? How is this informed by institutional involvement in the personal lives of transsexuals, the complex of pharmaceutical, capitalist, governmental surveillances of and investments in the trans body, what Paul B. Preciado names *pharmacopornography* (PRECIADO 2008).

The pharmacopornographic positioning of transsexuals makes institutional critique a natural place to create trans performance from. Many of my presentations for graduate level classes have included subversive performances that somehow went against my home institution's grain. I have backpacked my dirty dishes to school and washed them outside in a blizzard (Rich's *Politics of Location*), drunk my own pee (Kristeva's *Abjection*), handcuffed myself and performed on the large table of a "Socratic seminar" room (Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*), and invited my classmates to inject testosterone with me (Preciado's *Testo Junkie*) – an offer which one courageous and lovely classmate did indeed accept. Across institutions I've been chased by campus security, have sat in deans' offices and been the subject of intra-departmental debate, events which, while terrifying and rather traumatizing – even though I brought it upon myself – I saw as evidence that my performance work, half-intentional, half-impulsive, was *working*. It means something different for me to do these acts than say a cisgender white male counterpart. My medical and institutional transsexuality is

enmeshed in such a way with bureaucratic systems that sometimes these interventions feel like the only way I can still be a body apart.

Artist Joseph Liatela, who has the words *take care* tattooed onto his knuckles, whose Instagram feed I've been consuming with longing, is an interdisciplinary artist who considers the "somatic effect that institutions have on bodies" as he described in a recent guest artist appearance I attended virtually (LIATELA 2020). His interdisciplinary work, like Villalobos art, blends performance with a manufacturing of material objects, tools, sculptures and installations that are as brutal as they are elegant. Some of these objects are displayed as the performance trace of investigation into the effects of pharmaceuticals and architectural design on the flesh. Liatela has also staged self-suspensions, has made bondage contraptions that tangle performers with each other, their bodies asking questions of both violence and intimacy, and has marked himself. Liatela who creates from a trans experience, has also done kinky things to books, in one piece knotting his own body's weight's worth of DSM manuals in ornate shibari binding. While I have never interacted with Liatela, his work calls out to me, as Villalobos's does, my art twins asking the same questions with the same materials because our embodied experiences, our perversities, somehow mirror each other. In watching Liatela do a live virtual performance, I feel in me a particular perverse hunger for both the love and hate of other transmen, a feeling that makes my hands hurt such that I have at times wanted to cut them off.

I'm getting close.

In this final section I want consider a sadomasochistic methodology that, in metacontext, encapsulates this entire paper and even the process of writing this paper. It is also a methodology which I struggle to articulate because I know it's there and in play, even as I scarcely understand it. I don't even know what to call it. Trans affective sadomasochism? Sad tran theory? Transexual auto-wounding? Transsexuality is not a disease, but it is a temporal and affective dis-ease, an affliction. Transition is not definable, but it is often pursued and desired with the lovesick madness of something that *feels* definite, an ultimate state, a promise.

T4T relations are the coming together of bodies caught up in the momentum of these afflictions, in states of afflicted-ness. These relations can never

escape the promises made by the future and the past, by the pharmaceutical industry, by gender, by other trans. In T4T relations we fuck each other for research, to find out what has happened to the other and what might yet happen to ourselves. We self-afflict and self-inflict wounds into our psychic-bodies and into those of the trans around us because we are all collateral in each other's self-realization, sadomasochistic ouroboros martyrs, witting, unwitting. We do not choose to feel dysphoria, it is simply there. But to self-understand as trans is to invite in that body-state and all its accompanying discourse. And *this* is a masochism to which we are all perverts. It is in this way that masochism is a methodology, because to willfully engage with dysphoria is to feel its pain, and pain is always a series of questions, is the body asking not only *what* and *where* but also asking *why*?

To return to the question of my involvement with BDSM communities, I will underscore that the world of FTM T4T desire is in itself a community in which, while we may not all know each other, we all *know* each other. This homopositioning produces a truly *fucked*, perverted and deeply sadomasochistic sexual community whose dynamic is marked by an environment where it is very easy and pleasurable to hurt each other because we know exactly how to do it. It also means we are uniquely positioned to uplift each other, although I realize that, for me personally, this is less an observation of fact and more a howl into the night which awaits a reply.

Give me a second. Because in writing this last sentence I wound myself. It's not unexpected, it is the masochistic methodology that I committed to in writing this paper. To summon these affective ghosts of relation, to make myself think of sex, love, performance and BDSM now in this moment of physical isolation can only hurt and cause unspeakable longing. A surge in cases in the area where I write this clouds hopes of returning to either physically intimate performance – a thing I had only just been becoming comfortable with – or a life of casual sex with multiple partners – another thing I had only in the past several years started becoming comfortable with as well. Here in my masochistic cocoon, I problem solve. Devise ways to perform and create intimacy that do not need proximity, I reimagine proximity entirely, my body alive with the pain of wanting.

CONCLUSION: THE MARK AS TRACE AND FUTURE

I had the great honour of having Adrian Stimson himself as my external committee member for my MFA thesis defense, during which both he and my supervisor, Kanien'kehaka (Mohawk) artist Jackson 2bears, commented on Chico California's relationship to sacrifice, whether that be notions of Christian guilt and martyrdom or Indigenous practices of sacrifice through endurance and sometimes piercing such as the Sun Dance or – to return to suspension – the Voladores de Papantla I often saw as a child in Mexico. The thing I decided in that moment not to bring up, for fear of being misunderstood by others present who may have doubted my wellness, was the scar on my upper arm. Throughout the process of my MFA I made offerings of blood to the sites where I performed. While offering food and water, tobacco, sage or copal are practices I have been shown and taught, I have often offered a small cut's worth of blood as offering for materials taken or places used. I think this is linked to the state of mind the act puts me in, one of focus and intention, of pursuing a bodily bond with the site. Like suspension and binding, the number of cultural practices that include ritualized wounding are immense, and I will not be bothered to justify any of these practices in some anthropological sense.

Just before one of my final, more intense performances, I made a 1-2 inch cut in my upper arm, which has now scarred into a clean, pale, raised line. I wanted to make some offering that day, but also give myself a mark to remember that all the emotional pain I had undergone in the months towards the end of my thesis process carried with it important knowledge, and was a catalyst and energy source for the work I was creating. The scar tells a story of T4T wounding: I chose the location in a mimicry of a tattoo an ex had once shown me on his own upper arm, a single line his ex before me had tattooed onto him while he, my ex, was blindfolded, unknowing what the mark would be. I wanted to make visible that legacy of intra-trans emotional wounding, and how the strange research-relation we engaged in was not without its costs. The real sacrifice had already been offered well before I cut into my skin, this was only a mark, its trace.

The performance I did that day was one where I rapidly dug out a trench in the riverbank, then buried myself in the rocky clay while wearing leather. A burial for Chico California, I lay there for a while before rising and walking into the Old Man River and letting my own body float away. And so, my body bore a mark not unlike the mark the trowel and my body

made into the clay. In the months after completing my thesis work, I would choose to be marked in another way, getting the knuckle tattoos that read “Wild West,” in part for my anticipation of developing the Thirstin West persona, and in part because I wanted to mark myself as being inescapably wedded to that troubled imaginary and, importantly, to have those words as a promise and commitment to a perverse futurity. “Couldn’t you just draw the tattoo on?” asked a friend when I told him about the tattoos. It had not even occurred to me.

Did you come?

I have not until writing this paper, told anyone the truth behind the scar on my arm. It has been something I considered between myself and the place where I received the mark. But I give you the story now, a masochistic methodology that perhaps you can go and use elsewhere, elsetime. I wonder, as I finish this paper if I have made it clear how very much this paper is about BDSM. How, while I feel myself to never have been part of a community either virtually or in-the-flesh, the practice of BDSM is alive and influencing my day to day existence. A performance artist’s materials are time, gravity and the body. These are the same materials at the root of BDSM practices, as are the states that we pursue through them: pain, euphoria and a sense of both containment and expansion of our most perverse selves. They are tools for relation, for meaning-making and meaning-gifting, asking, summoning and bonding. BDSM lives in our institutions and in our national narratives, quotidian, subliminal and overt. BDSM, whether accessed in relation to people, place or the divine, is also a tool to better understand the self and desire toward future or parallel existences outside of institutional and colonial bondage.

Thanks for this. I had a nice time. Did you? I hope we can do it again. I should get going but before I get dressed and leave, let me tell you one more story – one more discursive kiss – a story I neither remembered nor retold until I was well into adulthood. It’s the story of my first perverse performance. In it I was not touched nor caused pain nor did I inflict pain on another, yet I feel strongly that it was the origin of my BDSM relationship to the audience, the camera and the eye. When I was a girl of twelve years or so, my family and I were staying in an odd hotel that had an outdoor

shower with a little courtyard. I was undressing to shower when I heard the unmistakable sound of a camera shutter clicking somewhere close by. I thought I was dreaming or imagining it, but as I continued undressing it came again. I paused and the sound did not come. I bent over and the sound came again. Could someone be taking naked pictures of me? I did not go tell my parents. Instead I did what seemed only logical: I began posing in what I thought would be provocative ways in order to prove that indeed the sound was a camera shutter. I put my ass in the air, spread my legs open, stuck out my chest and threw my hip to one side and, obediently, the camera shutter clicked. I was indeed being photographed by some hidden cameraman. Satisfied – feeling quite good, in fact – that I’d uncovered an important truth, I showered and forgot all about it.

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SOFIA TORRE

Critica della vittima masochista Il caso *Public Disgrace*

ENGLISH TITLE: Critique of the masochistic victim. The case of *Public Disgrace*

ABSTRACT: The paper aims to investigate the relation between the representation of the woman's body and the issue of female agency in the pornographic series *Public Disgrace*, one of the flagship products of Kink, the media giant of BDSM based in San Francisco. The most frequent criticism of BDSM concerns the commodification of the female body as a reading of a dynamic of sexuality characterized by dynamics of exchange, abandonment and momentary cession of female will. Is there a possibility of a representation of an "ethical" transfer of sexual power in the context of BDSM? What happens in terms of gender imbalances and dynamics in a context that mixes alternative practices and mainstream features? The analysis focuses on case studies starring pornographic models such as Penny Pax and Riley Reid, also known for non-BDSM productions, in submissive roles, and Princess Donna Dolore as mistress, director and producer of the series.

KEYWORDS: BDSM; feminist studies; alt porn; mainstream porn; porn studies.

INTRODUZIONE

Questo articolo si pone l'obiettivo di indagare il rapporto fra la rappresentazione del corpo della donna e la questione della agency femminile nella serie pornografica *Public Disgrace*, uno dei prodotti di punta della Kink, il colosso mediatico del BDSM con sede a San Francisco. La questione che si intende discutere è la possibile esistenza di una rappresentazione della cessione del potere sessuale "etica", o se le raffigurazioni di una sessualità caratterizzata da dinamiche di scambio, di abbandono e di momentanea e finzionale cessione dell'arbitrio femminile sul proprio corpo promuovano disequilibri in termini di dinamiche di genere; se le pratiche raffigurate sullo schermo della finzione pornografica siano destinate a riverberare nell'immaginario culturale e sociale collettivo riproducendo processi di "mercificazione", "oggettificazione" e "sfruttamento", parole che tuttora fanno parte della discussione femminista sul porno *tout court* e che grazie anche all'ultima ondata, attiva in maniera convergente su canali di comunicazione

come i social media e le riviste online¹, sono sempre più utilizzati anche nel linguaggio mainstream. L'indagine, operata attraverso i criteri metodologici della sociologia, dei celebrity studies e dei feminist studies, muove da una contestualizzazione delle categorie di porno mainstream e alternativo e mira alla descrizione di una modalità pornografica mista, in cui *sexual acts* tradizionalmente *underground*, portati in scena tradizionalmente per un pubblico appartenente a una subcultura, di nicchia, vengono proiettati e resi fruibili per una più ampia fascia di utenti da una società che gestisce 37 siti pornografici e che, come verrà argomentato, per modalità di presentazione dei contenuti non è dissimile da Pornhub, il maggiore sito porno esistente. L'analisi si focalizza su case studies con protagoniste modelle pornografiche note per produzioni non BDSM come Penny Pax e Riley Reid, in un ruolo da submissive, e Princess Donna Dolore, mistress originaria di San Francisco, regista e produttrice della serie.

KINK, *PUBLIC DISGRACE* E IL CONCETTO DI PORNO ALTERNATIVO

La Kink, fondata nel 1997 da Peter Acworth è una società di San Francisco che gestisce 37 siti pornografici quasi interamente dedicati alla pornografia alternativa, fetish e BDSM. La messa in scena degli atti sessuali e della consensualità delle attrici e degli attori suggerisce una presa di distanza dal noto sito di BDSM degli anni Novanta Insex.com, definito “esplicito orrore sessuale” e costretto alla chiusura dalle pressioni del governo statunitense. Questa piattaforma, attiva dal 1997 al 2005, è stata innovativa per la sua dimensione interattiva: offriva servizi di streaming prima della diffusione della banda larga e contemplava la partecipazione dei suoi utenti tramite una chat in grado di influenzare in tempo reale le performance delle modelle e le torture subite a scopo erotico e spettacolare.

Kink.com ribalta il paradigma di Insex.com²: a differenza di quest'ultimo, caratterizzato da scenografie cupe e angoscianti e dal focus sulla sofferenza delle performer, mostrate come vittime di soprusi quanto più

¹ Un esempio è il lavoro di divulgazione della storia e della teoria femminista della giornalista italiana Jennifer Guerra, classe 1995, attiva anche grazie alle sue pagine Facebook e Instagram. Guerra è nota soprattutto per la sua mappatura dei cimiteri dei bambini mai nati e per il reportage sul *World Congress of Families* sulla nota testata online *The Vision*.

² Si veda a questo proposito il documentario *Graphic Sexual Horror* (2009) di Anna Lorentzon e Barbara Bell, presentato al *Slamdance Film Festival* nel 2009. Il lavoro di Lorentzon e Bell ripercorre la storia di Insex.com, sottolineandone il rapporto con il pubblico e raccontando la controversia giudiziaria che lo portò alla chiusura definitiva.

possibili “reali”³, l’azienda di Acworth porta sulla scena BDSM canoni fisici e pratiche della cultura e del porno mainstream, avvicinando il grande pubblico alla pornografia alternativa. Se Insex.com, al fine di stabilire un’aura di autenticità, puntava al piacere scopofiliaco dell’eccesso, scegliendo, per esempio, di non tagliare le scene in cui le modelle chiedevano ai loro torturatori di fermarsi e mostrandone, quindi, il dolore non concordato, Kink.com punta su una strategia commerciale e visuale basata sulla trasparenza e sulla normalizzazione dei suoi prodotti, prediligendo un approccio “pop” e una grafica ammiccante, simile a quella di Pornhub. Sulla home page, oltre alla promozione dei video interni al sito, spicca la sezione dedicata allo *shop*: cliccando su icone non dissimili da quelle di siti di e-commerce generalisti, è possibile acquistare strumenti, accessori come quelli impiegati sui set dalle proprie star preferite e *sex toys* firmati Kink. Si tratta di una strategia commerciale non dissimile da quella applicata da Pornhub, che si estende anche a capi d’abbigliamento d’uso quotidiano, come, per esempio, t-shirt e tute da ginnastica, e alle sponsorizzazioni alle società sportive⁴.

Per circa 12 anni, dal 2006 al 2018, la sede del colosso pornografico è stata l’Armeria di San Francisco, suggestivo edificio neo-moresco costruito nel 1912 per conto della Guardia Nazionale. L’edificio, di enorme impatto visivo e ingente valore fondiario, ha a lungo costituito anche il logo dell’azienda, che, rivendicandone il valore storico e commerciale, lo utilizzava come principale set e come sede di incontri sportivi, fiere di artigianato e workshop dedicati al mondo del BDSM. Nonostante le numerose proteste dei cittadini residenti nei pressi dell’Armeria, indignati dall’utilizzo di un monumento storico da parte di uno studio pornografico, Peter Acworth si è sempre preoccupato di mantenere un buon rapporto con il vicinato, impegnandosi a conferire alle proprie attività un’aura di irrepreensibilità istituzionale tramite una strategia di marketing basata sulla trasparenza, come dimostrano le visite guidate gratuite organizzate per i cittadini, le demistificazioni dei

³ La questione della realtà nell’opera pornografica è ben argomentata da Giovanna Maina in “Piaceri identitari e (porno)subculture” (2011: 200). Secondo Maina, esistono due diversi significati dell’espressione “sesso reale”, uno collegato alla concretezza corporea, l’altro ai codici rappresentativi che operano congiuntamente per trasmettere lo spettacolo del sesso nella pornografia visuale.

⁴ Si veda Rodeschini, “New Standards of Respectability in Contemporary Pornography: Pornhub’s Corporate Communication” (2020: 83). Nel marzo 2018, ad esempio, Pornhub ha sponsorizzato il *Motor Sport Vision Racing Test*.

video porno e la cura a rimarcare l'importanza del consenso nella pornografia e negli atti sessuali in generale. Che l'attenzione alla salute dei propri impiegati sia soprattutto una questione imprenditoriale è stato esplicitato dalla minaccia di Acworth di spostare l'impresa in Nevada in vista della discussione da parte dello Stato della California di una legge per rendere obbligatorio l'utilizzo di profilattici nei video pornografici. Rinunciare al *money shot*⁵ avrebbe significato una cesura con il porno tradizionale e con un'ampia porzione di utenti, attratti dal connubio di pratiche estreme e di pratiche caratteristiche del versante mainstream, come modelle convenzionalmente attraenti, set ben illuminato e feticizzazione visiva dell'eiaculazione come parte fondamentale dell'azione sessuale (ZECCA 2011: 199).

Nel 2008 Princess Donna Dolore, una dominatrice di San Francisco impiegata da quattro anni alla Kink, crea la serie *Public Disgrace*, destinata a diventare uno dei prodotti di punta dell'azienda. La serie rimanda a una forma di pornografia online ispirata a "donne legate, spogliate e punite in pubblico". Come suggerisce il *claim*⁶, la strategia di marketing di *Public Disgrace* afferisce alla centralità dello sguardo femminile e rimarca l'attenzione al desiderio delle donne, assegnando ruoli centrali o, quando possibili, dominanti, a modelle. Inoltre, una simile attenzione alle dinamiche di genere e a questioni di etica della rappresentazione ben si lega a una delle prerogative fondamentali dell'*alt porn*⁷: in *Public Disgrace*, come, del resto, in tutti i video della Kink, prima e dopo il video pornografico vero e proprio gli utenti dispongono delle interviste alle modelle *submissive*, che spiegano come si sentono, confermano che ciò che si sta per vedere/si è visto è successo in un contesto consensuale e che, comunque, una ripresa fisica e psicologica è avvenuta poco dopo. Enfatizzare la consensualità alla base dei prodotti è la principale strategia del colosso del BDSM statunitense: le pratiche di inclusione dell'industria pornografica ne hanno infatti previsto l'estensione del controllo anche sul mercato BDSM, originariamente

⁵ Ossia rinunciare a mostrare l'eiaculazione maschile.

⁶ "We demistify and celebrate alternative sexuality by providing the most authentic kinky experiences" (<https://www.kink.com/>, ultima consultazione l'11/03/2021).

⁷ In "Cum on My Tattoo", Giovanna Maina analizza esempi di alternative alla produzione pornografica maggioritaria, evidenziando come la differenza si rifletta tanto nella scelta estetica e nelle pratiche portate in scena quanto nella politica aziendale. Un esempio fra gli altri è fornito dalla Pink&White, nota per incoraggiare pratiche produttive sostenibili e per garantire trattamenti equi e rispettosi, anche dal punto di vista strettamente economico, ai performer e al cast tecnico (MAINA 2018: 77-100).

subculturale o di nicchia, come avviene per una parte del porno amatoriale, sottoposto da Pornhub⁸ a un processo di formalizzazione economica⁹ e di normalizzazione. Nonostante la sua temporanea sospensione, avvenuta nel 2014 e giustificata da Acworth dal rischio di non far emergere a sufficienza l'effettiva consensualità delle pratiche rappresentate, il successo di *Public Disgrace* sottolinea il risultato di una precisa strategia comunicativa, basata sulla normalizzazione di una selezione di pratiche BDSM percepite come “meno estreme” e sul *rebranding* aziendale. La costruzione dell'immagine normalizzata della serie BDSM passa sia attraverso l'associazione fra pratiche sessuali e consenso che attraverso la normalizzazione degli elementi dell'industria pornografica meno esposti all'associazione diretta con gli atti sessuali, come la figura di Acworth, che ha sempre cura di raccontarsi come un uomo comune. Se è innegabile che Kink, come Pornhub, non possa nascondere la natura pornografica dei materiali che distribuisce, l'auto-narrazione scelta prevede una separazione dell'infrastruttura della distribuzione, ovvero della piattaforma in sé, dal suo contenuto, ancora esposto a uno stigma sociale (RODESCHINI 2021: 79). La Kink afferisce a dinamiche simili, per quanto precedenti sul piano temporale. Pornhub, che ospita al suo interno società che competono per aggiudicarsi quote di traffico nel mercato pornografico, funge da vetrina alla Kink, distribuendone estratti in un'ottica di *cross-promotion*.

In maniera più specifica, Pornhub incamera e traduce forme, modelli e contenuti un tempo ascrivibili esclusivamente alla galassia delle pornografie cosiddette alternative, avendo cura di svolgere una spiccata funzione di *gatekeeping* e presentandosi come ente deputato a operare una selezione dei materiali da mostrare in ottica mainstream. A dinamiche simili afferisce la Kink: grazie proprio alla sua selezione di un certo tipo di BDSM, rappresentato entro determinati canoni e pubblicizzato su un aggregatore Pornhub, Kink riesce a definirsi come pornografia alternativa lecita; se si sceglie, ad esempio, di confrontare i suoi materiali dedicati alla pratica della *gangbang*, ovvero *BoundGangbangs* e *Hardcoregangbangs* con un prodotto, precedente di circa dieci anni, come *The Violation Of* di JM Production, è possibile notare un accento diverso sulla consensualità, sia esplicito che

⁸ A questo proposito si veda “All you need is hand. I tubes pornografici e l'adult business nel web 2.0” di Giovanna Maina e Federico Zecca (2017: 189-212).

⁹ Per un approfondimento sulla sinergia distributiva di Pornhub con i produttori alternativi, minori e amatoriali si veda S. RODESCHINI e F. ZECCA 2019: 101-115.

implicito¹⁰.

Come scrivono infatti Zecca e Rodeschini, a monte del processo di standardizzazione dell'offerta pornografica sul mercato (2019: 113) è situata l'idea che anche in questo settore resti in vigore almeno una delle regole che valgono per tutti i settori industriali: qualità, professionalità e innovazione come elementi fondamentali per il successo. L'assimilazione al mercato pornografico mainstream di un settore originariamente subculturale come quello relativo al BDSM ne comporta la modifica dei codici rappresentativi, a favore di un dialogo più diffuso con istituzioni, leggi di mercato e regole del marketing. Se la morfologia e le situazioni narrative rimangono quelle del cosiddetto "sistema dell'eccesso" (WILLIAMS 1991: 24) infime in termini di stima culturale insieme al genere *gross-out horror* (WILLIAMS 1991: 3), la natura delle azioni mostrate, improntate a sottolinearne l'aspetto spettacolare e finzionale¹¹, subisce un deciso mutamento grazie al quale è possibile aprire una breccia nell'opinione pubblica generalista. Secondo Zecca e Rodeschini (2019: 113), esistono due vantaggi strategici dal punto di vista delle relazioni con le istituzioni e con la società nel suo complesso che potrebbero spiegare le ragioni della standardizzazione dell'industria pornografica: mettersi al riparo da eventuali cause legali per la distribuzione di materiale osceno e, nel lungo periodo, concorrere a modificare *in toto* il concetto di osceno, operando affinché i canoni della rispettabilità sociale inizino a tollerare, se non a includere, il consumo di pornografia. Questo processo di normalizzazione include nelle maglie del mercato mainstream pratiche e spazi pornografici alternativi come, per esempio, la pornografia BDSM, con una ridefinizione e un ampliamento del suo target di destinazione.

Ciò implica l'emersione di numerose contraddizioni perché il porno alternativo rimanda a strategie di posizionamento diverse da quelle destinate alla pornografia mainstream: ad essere caratterizzante per poter

¹⁰ Il prodotto di JM Production non presenta, infatti, lo scambio dialogico e verbale fra i performer che è invece il marchio di fabbrica di tutti i prodotti di Kink. A differenza di quanto avviene per *BoundGangbangs* e *Hardcoregangbangs*, *The Violation Of* non contempla la rappresentazione del rispetto dei limiti prestabiliti: manca, ad esempio, la demistificazione che precede l'azione sessuale.

¹¹ In questo senso risulta emblematico il ruolo assunto nel processo di normalizzazione e di promozione del *brand* dal documentario *Kink* (2013) di Christina Voros, prodotto da James Franco, in cui vengono svelati al pubblico alcuni trucchi di scena: come vengono colpiti i performer e le performer in modo da provocare meno dolore possibile, come avviene la selezione delle modelle, le preferenze personali di Peter Acworth in termini di estetica delle scenografie erotiche.

contrassegnare la produzione pornografica come *alt porn* è la sua particolare contro-estetica, ispirata a quella delle subculture a cui sarebbe primariamente destinato. Nel suo “Piaceri identitari e (porno)subculture”, Giovanna Maina sottolinea l’importanza della nota antagonista per alcune sfumature di porno alternativo che rivendicano esplicitamente l’attivismo politico, ponendosi come rappresentanti di una specifica comunità che non si riconosce nei valori estetici ed etici dominanti (2011: 207). Siti come BlueBlood.com o EroticBPM.com, scrive Maina, si presentano come *spontaneamente* generati da vere e proprie subculture dotate di una reale pregnanza sociale (2011: 207) con corrispondenze nell’universo underground dei raver, del punk e della *goth* culture. Un particolare genere di porno alternativo è quello rappresentato dal cosiddetto porno femminista, caratterizzato dall’aura di impegno sociale e politico evidente nel diverso ruolo delle donne e nella scelta stilistica delle riprese, che escludono il POV (“Point Of View”) maschile e il finale tradizionale con il *money shot*. Ne è esempio il lavoro della regista svedese Erika Lust, che si presenta come un’attivista femminista militante determinata a rendere il porno un oggetto culturale completamente nuovo, finalmente liberatorio¹². L’attivismo politico risulta, in quest’ottica, un fondamentale tratto distintivo: l’appello agli utenti risulta ancorato all’appartenenza a una comunità sociale piuttosto che a un semplice orientamento sessuale o a una preferenza personale, in quella che Maina definisce come “un’ossessione per la contiguità fra pornografia e vita” (2011: 208).

A escludere la Kink e *Public Disgrace* dalla definizione di sito di *alt porn* puro è, dal punto di vista infrastrutturale, proprio il rapporto di collaborazione integrata con un aggregatore mainstream come Pornhub, vicinanza che viene sottolineata anche dalla presenza delle stesse modelle, fra cui Riley Reid, per esempio¹³. Grazie alla sua strategia commerciale caratterizzata dal “Content Partner Program”, Pornhub offre alle *porn companies* con cui collabora la possibilità di aprire gratuitamente un canale video personalizzato al suo interno. Come scrivono Silvia Rodeschini e Federico Zecca, l’obiettivo di aziende minori, come la Kink, è quello di promuovere i propri

¹² Si veda a questo proposito il sito di Erika Lust, la cui homepage recita: “Together we are changing the rules of pornography” (<https://erikalust.com/>, ultima consultazione l’11/03/2021).

¹³ Secondo i dati della testata *Il Post* (<https://www.ilpost.it/2018/01/10/pornhub-2017/>, ultima consultazione l’11/03/2021), nel 2017 Riley Reid ottiene 549.853.831 visualizzazioni e risulta essere l’attrice più “cliccata” di Pornhub.

prodotti e di attirare verso le proprie piattaforme a pagamento una fetta dei milioni di utenti che visitano giornalmente Pornhub, che ottiene a sua volta dei vantaggi aumentando la quantità e la varietà della propria offerta e arricchendo il suo catalogo in funzione promozionale¹⁴. L'accesso a Kink.com tramite l'abbonamento a Pornhub Premium garantisce un collegamento in grado di veicolare una normalizzazione di una certa sessualità alternativa, esteticamente simile a quella mainstream. Nonostante l'abbigliamento dai richiami punk (come il cuoio nero), i capelli fluo richiamanti la cultura cyber e i tatuaggi di alcune performer, fra cui Princess Donna Dolore e Lorelei Lee in *Public Disgrace*, il sito della Kink presenta alcune fra quelle che Maina individua come le caratteristiche tipiche del più ordinario *corporate porn* (2011: 225)¹⁵. Le pratiche mostrate hanno una configurazione stilistico-formale che prevede un'abbondanza di *anal* (presente in tutti i video analizzati di *Public Disgrace*) e di gang bang, a cui è dedicato un altro prodotto di punta della Kink, *Bound Gangbangs*. L'aspetto canonicamente attraente delle modelle¹⁶ e l'accento su queste pratiche rendono il sito molto più vicino al gonzo che ai siti definiti da Maina come alternativi, BlueBlood.com, VegPorn o FurryGirl.com per esempio, anche se, come sottolinea Susanna Paasonen, è spesso impossibile separare con nettezza le due sfere nel reticolo della pornografia online contemporanea (PAASONEN 2011: 26).

BDSM E IMMAGINARIO MAINSTREAM: IL CASO DI *FIFTY SHADES OF GREY*

BDSM è un termine ombrello sotto al quale si raccolgono pratiche sessuali e parafilie talmente poliedriche da rendere complessa una definizione dai contorni netti e precisi. L'acronimo contiene al suo interno tre coppie di termini: BD, ossia Bondage Discipline, dove "Bondage" si riferisce all'atto di legare o immobilizzare il/i partner con corde o manette, mentre "Discipline" include pratiche come lo spanking; D/S (Dominance and Submission) e S&M (SADISM and Masochism). Nonostante la rappresentazione popolare si focalizzi quasi unicamente sul fattore del dolore, la componente principale

¹⁴ Per un approfondimento sulle strategie commerciali di Pornhub si veda di nuovo S. Rodeschini e F. Zecca "Pornflix, Pornhub e la normalizzazione dell'industria pornografica contemporanea" (2019: 189-212).

¹⁵ La studiosa individua le categorie qui applicate analizzando il sito *Burning Angel* (2011: 225).

¹⁶ Il porno alternativo si definisce come tale in termini estetici, poiché sfida le norme e le convenzioni del porno tradizionale rivolto al pubblico eterosessuale maschile.

delle pratiche BDSM, come emerge dagli studi di Shaun Miller (2017: 421), di Margot Weiss (2011: vii) e di Manolo Farci (2016: 107), è lo scambio consensuale di potere. Se casi letterari e cinematografici come la fortunata trilogia di *Fifty Shades of Grey* promulgano un modello addomesticato di BDSM, ovvero una finzione narrativa in cui viene promosso un modello di coppia eterosessuale con ruoli dom/sub tradizionalisti e rigidi nella dicotomia donna/vittima e uomo/carnefice, ne risulta innegabile la capacità, da un lato, di rivolgersi al pubblico femminile trattando di contenuti sessuali espliciti e, dall'altro, di mettere in evidenza determinate forme relazionali e sociali che rendono gli atti sessuali compiuti dalle donne descritte non eccessivamente "osceni" – si pensi, a tal proposito, al ruolo della monogamia e dell'eteronormatività in *Fifty Shades of Grey*, che fungono invece da caposaldo del desiderio femminile tanto da finire per diventare la moneta di scambio del rapporto fra Anastasia e Christian, destinati a sposarsi e ad avere figli (TSAROS 2013: 866).

L'opera di EL James scandisce il legame fra oscenità e ordine pubblico in termini di agentività delle figure tradizionali di genere, descrivendo il capitale erotico femminile come un potere che bisogna necessariamente cedere per riequilibrare il rapporto fra le parti tramite l'assunzione da parte della donna del ruolo sessuale del submissive. Il desiderio femminile, raccontato in maniera apologetica, risulta così essere solo una risposta alle pressioni erotiche della controparte maschile, che ne è l'unica fonte e causa, legittimata socialmente dai sentimenti amorosi e dal rapporto di monogamia. Nella narrativa BDSM mainstream, di cui *Fifty Shades Of Grey* è l'esempio più celebre, la dinamica relazionale, oltre che da collante per la trama, svolge una funzione di normalizzazione della sfera sessuale rappresentata, che finisce per ricalcare la meccanica in termini di distribuzione del potere decisionale e di liceità del piacere provato¹⁷. Questa rappresentazione, fondata su equilibri di genere tradizionale, riconduce al dibattito avviato NEL 1984 dall'antropologa e sociologa Gayle Rubin, che inizia a catalogare le gerarchie della sessualità definendo le pratiche e i gusti sessuali in base al loro livello di accettabilità sociale. Secondo Rubin, la sessualità "buona" e socialmente accettata è caratterizzata da un'essenza monogamica, da

¹⁷ Si veda ad esempio la sequenza in cui Anastasia subisce dal suo partner la coercizione a non raggiungere l'orgasmo (JAMES 2011: 306), in una rappresentazione che rimanda alle classiche dinamiche BDSM presenti anche in molti prodotti della serie *Public Disgrace*, come in *Property of Princess Donna* (2013), senza però il fondamentale elemento della richiesta del consenso.

istanze riproduttive e dalla completa assenza di qualsiasi fine commerciale. Il sesso che si trova all'interno del "Cerchio Incantato"¹⁸ di Rubin è eterosessuale, non contempla l'utilizzo di pornografia, l'esistenza di feticci e di pratiche inusuali, l'assunzione di ruoli esplicitamente finzionali o sovversivi in termini di dinamiche di genere. Inoltre, secondo l'antropologa, per mantenere l'ordine sociale sessuale è necessario che il sesso abbia luogo fra persone della stessa generazione o con una differenza d'età appena accennata, come accade ai protagonisti di *Fifty Shades Of Grey*, in cui la percezione degli indicatori sociali stabilisce dei confini precisi su come deve svolgersi un rapporto, con limiti che non hanno niente a che vedere con l'etica, dal momento che una morale sessuale davvero democratica (RUBIN 2012:168) dovrebbe giudicare gli atti sessuali dalla presenza o dall'assenza di coercizione e dalla quantità e dalla qualità del piacere fornito e ricevuto, a prescindere dall'orientamento degli atti sessuali, dal loro svolgimento in coppia o in gruppo, dalla natura commerciale o gratuita e, naturalmente, dal livello di rispetto e di considerazione tra i partner.

Secondo Tsaros, una delle principali differenze fra un classico della letteratura sadomasochista come *Histoire D'O* e il bestseller *Fifty Shades of Grey* è incarnata proprio dall'approccio al tema del consenso: se il lavoro di Jaeckin ruota intorno a dinamiche di sopruso e di costrizione, il cosiddetto "mommy porn"¹⁹ riesce nell'impresa di restituire una sensazione di compromesso, di raggiungimento di un'accettabilità condivisa, se non apertamente di una mutua soddisfazione delle parti. Se in alcuni passi del libro²⁰ le dinamiche descritte ricalcano in termini parodici la finzione erotica sadomasochista, decontestualizzandola fino a ricordare una relazione di abuso e violenza domestica, analizzando le dinamiche di genere in *Fifty Shades Of Grey* è possibile dedurre il merito di palesare la funzione sociale della narrativa in termini di mantenimento dello *status quo*. Come sottolinea anche Lisa Downing (2012: 94), descrivere la dinamica eterosessuale dominante

¹⁸ Nel lavoro di Rubin, il "Cerchio Incantato" rimanda alle questioni dell'accettazione e della stima sociale, intrinsecamente legate ai concetti di "casa", "famiglia" e "quotidianità" (2011: 175).

¹⁹ Si veda la definizione presente sui siti di *The Conversation*, *Abc* e *Forbes*: <https://theconversation.com/the-mommy-porn-myth-who-are-the-fifty-shades-of-grey-fans-37649>, <https://abcnews.go.com/Health/50-shades-grey-women-turnedsexualsubmission/story?id=16059118> e <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jennagoudreau/2012/03/19/will-fifty-shades-of-grey-make-mommy-porn-the-next-big-thing/> (ultima consultazione l'11/03/2021).

²⁰ Si pensi, ad esempio, alla sessione di *spanking* (JAMES 2011: 238-245) a cui Anastasia viene sottoposta nonostante non abbia ancora firmato il contratto e prestato il suo consenso al rapporto S/M propostole.

come benevola e sostenerla come un processo inevitabile ha il suo fulcro nella rappresentazione-cliché del seduttore seriale maschile, domato e condotto verso la retta via dalla controparte femminile; inoltre, ha una funzione di bilanciamento del racconto sessuale, il lato osceno dell'opera di James. Contrariamente a quanto avviene in *Histoire d'O*, dove l'iniziale devozione di O per il suo amante è destinata a lasciare il posto alla pura disciplina del dolore, la rappresentazione della sessualità funge da cornice al valore prescrittivo di cosa sia desiderabile e lecito in termini relazionali e sociali. Le interazioni non normative della sessualità sono trattate come una barriera o una minaccia ai ruoli di genere "corretti", rafforzando lo stereotipo psicoanalitico e sessuologico del "pervertito intrinsecamente inibito dall'intimità". Se nel romanzo vengono menzionate le relazioni avviate in età adulta dal protagonista maschile con donne consenzienti, che hanno immediatamente accettato il contratto sessuale loro proposto, manifestando attivamente il loro desiderio sessuale e le loro pulsioni, queste vengono immediatamente schernite e ridicolizzate dalla protagonista femminile, che ne fornisce un giudizio morale delegittimandole²¹. In *Fifty Shades of Grey*, le pratiche sessuali proposte vengono presentate come un preliminare al necessario rapporto genitale, escluso o non necessario, invece, in molte sessioni BDSM. Secondo Foucault (1976) le pratiche sadomaso generano una nuova verità erotica²² che, svincolata dall'identificazione invalidante del sé con il sesso-desiderio (o sesso-genitale), si fonda su un ritorno al corpo e ai suoi piaceri, dimensione assente in un contesto in cui atti sessuali peculiari sono presentati come gli effetti di una devianza psicologica e sono vissuti come un compromesso da chi li subisce e con senso di colpa da chi li impone²³. Al contrario, i partecipanti a una *session* BDSM negoziano

²¹ Come sottolinea Angelika Tsaros in "Consensual Non Consent: Comparing EL James's *Fifty Shades of Grey* and Pauline Réage's *Story of O*", Anastasia Steele, la protagonista femminile, è vergine al momento dell'incontro con Christian, suo oggetto del desiderio erotico e sentimentale (TSAROS 2013: 867). Il suo primo approccio alla sfera sessuale è orientato, non volontariamente, all'universo BDSM, la purezza dei sentimenti amorosi viene utilizzata per compensare la "depravazione" delle pratiche a cui decide di acconsentire (JAMES 2011: 108, 149, 164). Si ritengono emblematici, in questo senso, aggregatori pornografici tematici come *Spankingtube* (<https://www.spankingtube.com/>, ultima visita l'11/03/2021) o *Ballboostingtube* nei quali i contenuti disponibili per gli utenti rimandano quasi unicamente alle pratiche segnalate dal nome stesso dei siti.

²² Questa visione della sessualità BDSM viene discussa, fra gli altri, da B. PLANT in "Playing Games/Playing us: Foucault on Sadomasochism" (2007), da J. SAWICKI nel suo libro *Disciplining Foucault: Feminism, Power, and the Body* (2016) e da R. BYRNE in *Aesthetic Sexuality: A Literary History of Sadomasochism* (2013).

²³ L'universo BDSM contempla, per le sue pratiche, due quadri paradigmatici, contraddistinti da

preliminarmente le implicazioni delle attività sessuali intraprese, ne stabiliscono i limiti, fisici, verbali e psicologici, ne concordano i termini. Se il *porn movie* tradizionale mostra la penetrazione dei genitali (*meat shot*) durante l'atto sessuale e la successiva eiaculazione maschile (*money shot*), che ne decreta la fine, il termine di una sessione BDSM è sancito dalla fine dell'attività svolta o, in casi eccezionali, dalla pronuncia della *safeword* di una delle due parti, genericamente quella preposta a ricevere la pratica²⁴.

La rappresentazione dell'erotismo sadomasochistico di un canale come *Public Disgrace* opera in controtendenza rispetto alle dinamiche presenti in *Fifty Shades of Grey*, optando per un approccio non eteronormato in termini di dinamiche di potere e distribuzione dei ruoli. La strategia di marketing di Kink.com, improntata all'inclusione, almeno formale, delle minoranze, alla centralità del tema del consenso e alla contaminazione di generi diversi di porno, come l'*amateur* e l'*alt porn*, impone un modello lontano anche dai labirinti claustrofobici di Insex.com: a livello estetico, come viene evidenziato dopo ogni ripresa nelle interviste finali alle modelle, non compaiono ematomi, lividi, sangue o segni di torture esageratamente dolorose, ed eventuali lacrime e richieste di porre limite alle pratiche vengono visibilmente prese in considerazione dalle *mistress*, come sottolinea l'attenzione alle proprie sub di Princess Donna Dolore, responsabile della direzione, della produzione e della concezione della serie.

Public Disgrace, dunque, rappresenta un caso di studio particolarmente interessante soprattutto in relazione alla dicotomia mainstream-alternativo, che, come si vedrà nel prossimo capitolo, è oggetto di tensioni.

due acronimi: SSC ("Safe, Sane and Consensual") e RACK ("Risk-Aware Consensual Kink"), propedeutici alle modalità di definizione del contratto di consensualità nella discussione del rapporto fra le parti coinvolte nel gioco. Il modello SSC nasce in un momento di ricerca di legittimità del BDSM: attraverso la disposizione di una cornice teorica e metodologica, la comunità *kinky* indaga la possibilità di costruire e replicare una scena al di fuori degli spazi tradizionali tradizionalmente preposti, come le *dark rooms* e i *dungeons*. L'accento è posto sulla sicurezza (*safe*) delle pratiche proposte, in un tentativo di scavalcare l'aura di devianza che accompagna la coercizione simulata e di proporre un'idea di continuità con i *sexual acts* tradizionali. Il paradigma RACK calca invece sulla consensualità: se in presenza di costrizione, dolore e deprivazione sensoriale la completa incolumità fisica non può per definizione essere garantita, è allora necessario prestare un assenso quanto più possibile informato. Per una trattazione più esaustiva si vedano C. R. Dunkley, L.A. Brotto, "The Role of Consent in The Context of BDSM" (2019) e D. Pitagora, "Consent vs. Coercion: BDSM Interactions Highlight a Fine but Immutable Line" (2013).

²⁴ La pratica della *safeword* costituisce un dispositivo di sicurezza in casi eccezionali e non una prassi consueta per porre termine alle sessioni.

ESTETICA, RUOLI E AGENCY DELLE ATTRICI DI *PUBLIC DISGRACE*

Secondo Susanna Paasonen, il porno alternativo si contrassegna in netta separazione da quello mainstream in termini di politica (in quanto coinvolge l'emancipazione femminile, manifestazioni non normative e queer di atti e desideri sessuali), di etica (in quanto si distacca dalle pratiche lavorative potenzialmente oppressive dell'industria del porno) e di economia (come resistenza alle forme di merce standardizzate dell'industria).

Il tema dell'aspetto delle attrici della Kink è intrinsecamente legato alla questione dell'immagine pubblica dell'azienda e del suo obiettivo di proporre un prodotto che “demistifichi”²⁵ la sessualità alternativa, conferendole tutti gli effetti una dimensione di massa. Questo tentativo di trasportare la sessualità BDSM nella cultura pornografica mainstream è sottolineato dalla politica di trasparenza attuata dall'azienda, evidente, ad esempio, nel documentario *Kink* di Christina Voros (2013), prodotto da James Franco. Il film, presentato al *Sundance Film Festival* DEL 2013, oltre ad aver promosso e pubblicizzato il *brand* dell'azienda, le ha consentito, al contempo, di normalizzare le pratiche BDSM inscenate. Il *leitmotiv* delle interviste di Voros dipinge la Kink come un'azienda meritevole di aver incanalato desideri sessuali non normativi in un contesto sano, sicuro e consensuale. Nella cornice rassicurante e quotidiana creata da Peter Acworth, ripreso in blue jeans nel suo ufficio con in mano una tazza di caffè, la pornografia BDSM non è necessariamente sinonimo di eccentricità e di oscenità, ma può significare soddisfazione personale e successo imprenditoriale. Esattamente come avviene nel processo di normalizzazione di Pornhub, impegnato in cause socialmente utili per riformare il suo *brand*²⁶ (RODESCHINI 2021: 83), la costruzione dell'immagine di Kink passa attraverso la costruzione reputazionale delle sue personalità di spicco. È, ad esempio, il caso di Princess Donna Dolore, regista e ideatrice di *Public Disgrace*, che descrive il suo desiderio di sottomissione femminile come un impulso contro cui ha

²⁵ Si veda di nuovo il *claim* dell'azienda, presente sulla homepage del sito <https://www.kink.com/> (ultima consultazione l'11/03/2021).

²⁶ In questo senso risulta evidente il tentativo di Kink.com di seguire l'esempio di Pornhub, che, come scrive Silvia Rodeschini, ha supportato numerose cause benefiche al fine di trasformare l'immagine del consumo di pornografia. Emblematiche due campagne, quella per la raccolta di fondi per la lotta al cancro al seno NEL 2012 e quella a sostegno dell'impianto di nuovi alberi durante l'Arbor Day, per cui Pornhub ha promesso di donare, per un mese, un centesimo per ogni trenta visualizzazioni di video afferenti alle sue categorie “Big Tits” e “Small Tits” (RODESCHINI 2021: 82).

combattuto a lungo prima di accettarlo come naturale e potenzialmente utile ad altre persone.

Una simile oscillazione tra mainstream e alternativo investe direttamente anche l'aspetto delle attrici coinvolte nel progetto di *Public Disgrace*. Per esempio, Kaila Katesh Freas, in arte Penny Pax, che la giornalista Emily Witt nel suo *Future Sex* definisce “adatta ad un catalogo di abiti firmati JCPenney” (WITT 2017: 63), presenta tratti canonicamente regolari, una corporatura esile e capelli chiari, che ne rimarcano l'etnia caucasica. Come molte modelle della serie, fra cui Riley Reid, la cui figura verrà discussa più avanti, Pax non presta le sue performance soltanto in opere pornografiche di tipo fetish o BDSM: nel suo portfolio spicca la collaborazione con Brazzers, con Sweetheart Video (nota per il genere *lesbian*), in cui recita diretta anche dall'eccentrica regista e attrice porno femminista Dana Vespoli, e con la pornografia gonzo. La presenza di Pax fornisce a quella parte di pubblico che non consuma abitualmente porno BDSM una rassicurazione sulla convenzionalità del porno mostrato, grazie anche a tattiche di montaggio e regia che umanizzano e personalizzano il suo ruolo, soffermandosi sul viso, sulle sue espressioni e sui suoi connotati, in maniera non dissimile da quanto accade in *Anal Workout* (2015), classificato come *anal*, o in *Big Ass Toys* (2015), di tipo *lesbian*. Il rispetto dei canoni di bellezza standardizzati è evidenziato dall'iper-femminilizzazione del suo abbigliamento, che funge da nodo di raccordo con il porno mainstream e ne riverbera la distribuzione di potere. Secondo Angela McRobbie, la sessualità delle donne è stata riconfigurata nei dettami di una nuova femminilità; la produzione sociale e la costruzione del genere richiedono che venga inscenata una sessualità specifica, caratterizzata da una desiderabilità sempre visibile attraverso l'abbigliamento e un atteggiamento sempre ricettivo e performante, che permette di percepire il corpo femminile come “sempre pronto” (WELSH 2014: 67).

Tali concessioni all'orizzonte mainstream vengono tuttavia messe in crisi da alcune dinamiche di ribaltamento dei ruoli tipiche della dimensione alternativa. In *Public Disgrace*, per esempio, si prevede che la *submissive* sia un personaggio dall'identità narrativa forte. In *Penny Pax is Back!* (2013) le riprese che vedono Penny Pax al centro della scena, incorniciata dai partecipanti del pubblico nelle vesti di avventori di un locale e assalitori, suggeriscono che anche la sua passività ha un ruolo centrale, è un subire performativo. Il suo agire sottomettendosi alle pratiche che le vengono imposte

(*forced orgasms; double penetration; face-slapping; spanking e bukkake*) è in grado di condizionare il contesto e di caratterizzare l'intera scena: l'attenzione del pubblico, sia quello performante che quello a cui è rivolto il prodotto finale, è incentrata su di lei. Se si sceglie di assumere la categoria coniata da Manuel Billi in "Le affirmative porn narr/actions", si può affermare che il suo ruolo, che è costituente e favorisce la formulazione di un discorso in cui un personaggio si riconosce e si rende riconoscibile come parte di un gruppo, ha tendenza eterodialogico-poietica (BILLI 2011: 268)²⁷.

Inoltre, nei video di *Public Disgrace* ricorre il topos pornografico sado-masochistico della *walk of shame*²⁸: la "punita" è costretta a percorrere un tratto di terreno pubblico, come una strada, una via cittadina, un parco o un sentiero molto frequentato, indossando accessori come collare, guinzaglio, corde e manette che ne attestano il ruolo di sub agli occhi del pubblico, apparentemente ignaro di star assistendo a una finzione scenica. In *Blonde Worthless Cunt Fisted In Public*, dopo averla fatta sfilare in ginocchio davanti agli avventori del locale, apparentemente increduli, e averle fatto pronunciare "I'm a slut", la mistress Lorelei Lee conduce Pax al centro della scena. Qui ritroviamo uomini e donne che partecipano all'azione principale tramite incitazioni, scambi di battute e risate di scherno rivolte alla *submissive*. La comunicazione, non unicamente verbale e composta anche di partecipazione fisica all'umiliazione e alla sottomissione di Penny Pax, viene indirizzata da Lorelei Lee, che esplica il suo ruolo con ordini e avvertimenti, rivolti sia alla sub che al pubblico del locale. Protagonista della scena BDSM, Pax appare inequivocabilmente come la vittima di un supplizio erotico, in balia di tutti gli altri performer, dalla dom ufficiale al pubblico. I primi piani e la camera fissa su di lei la rendono l'oggetto dell'attenzione del pubblico, che la può recepire come materiale d'identificazione indiscussa (GIGLIOLI 2014: 11): in questo caso, l'"essere vittima dà luogo a un supplemento di sé" (GIGLIOLI 2014: 11), modificando il ruolo di Pax da apparentemente passivo a propulsore attivo dell'azione ripresa.

Se un sito come Insex.com aveva reso l'eccesso in termini di disparità di potere il suo marchio di fabbrica, attirandosi l'etichetta di osceno e

²⁷ A questa tendenza, scrive Billi, "sono riconducibili anche quei racconti che mirano non già o non solo a mettere in relazione ruoli socioculturali e a produrre un riconoscimento di tipo identitario, ma che utilizzano il medium per costruire e ad affermare l'identità" (BILLI 2011: 268).

²⁸ Come scrive Robin Bauer, l'intimità alternativa tende a celebrare la tensione erotica, l'eccesso, il rischio, lo squilibrio e l'estasi in uno spazio contenuto dalla discussione consensuale, seguendo un'etica alternativa all'eteronorma, dettata da altre dinamiche di potere (BAUER 2014: 4).

pericoloso, la visibile e costante comunicazione fra *dom* e *sub* rende *Public Disgrace* un prodotto rassicurante, in grado di stabilire un dialogo fra atti precedentemente assimilati al sesso estremo e orizzonte quotidiano. In *Blonde Worthless Cunt Fisted in Public*, la dinamica comunicativa e consensuale è sottolineata dalla voce di Lee, che si rivolge a Pax per annunciarle le pratiche a cui si appresta a sottoporla. La soddisfazione e l'eccitazione sessuale della performer *sub*, rese tramite gemiti ed espressioni facciali, trasportano l'esibizione della dinamica sessuale dal dominio della coercizione e della violenza, tipico delle rappresentazioni sadomasochistiche, a quello dell'appagamento e dell'eccitazione. La gerarchia dei ruoli è al contempo sottolineata e messa in crisi dalla dinamica di feedback, che appare unidirezionale ma che appartiene al campo del cosiddetto "consensual non-consent", l'illusione del consenso sospeso per facilitare la messa in scena erotica (TSAROS 2013: 866)²⁹.

Infine, è possibile notare come la selezione delle pratiche BDSM imposte a Pax e a Reed (*spanking, paddling, forced orgasm*) a favore del pubblico di *Public Disgrace* – selezione alternata ad atti sessuali appartenenti al registro pornografico mainstream (*anal gaping; blowjob; double penetration; anal penetration*) – faccia parte di quella categoria dell'osceno ritenuta lecita, come dimostra la sua categorizzazione e la sua facile reperibilità su una piattaforma generalista come Pornhub.

Secondo Margot Weiss (2006: 120), la progressiva acquisizione nel porno mainstream di alcune pratiche sadomasochistiche che apparentemente sembrano guadagnare accettazione e comprensione non può che esporre il BDSM al rischio di essere distinto in "buono" e "cattivo", minandone al contempo la rilevanza politica. L'assenza di pratiche come lo *scat* o il *cutting* sembra riflettere l'osservazione di Gayle Rubin per cui il sistema patriarcale accetta e promuove la sessualità non maschile ed eterosessuale solo quando corrisponde ai desideri convenzionali. La conformità al sistema eteronormativo è ricompensata da un'accettazione sessuale che si estende anche a pratiche altrimenti ritenute oscene, come, appunto, quelle sadomasochistiche meno estreme, eseguite da performer provenienti dal mercato del porno mainstream con una *fanbase* di riferimento. La partecipazione delle

²⁹ Mentre queste procedure sono diventate un luogo comune in ambito sottoculturale, la sessualità mainstream o *vanilla* "funziona secondo un rischioso principio d'esclusione, in base al quale cui finché il partecipante non ritira il suo consenso, tutte le azioni devono essere considerate consensuali" (TSAROS 2013: 873).

performer scelte per *Public Disgrace* anche a porno mainstream e la costruzione di una fanbase che si estende ben al di là del BDSM funge dunque da vero e proprio strumento per la costruzione dell'intero brand di Kink.com. Come avviene per il pubblico di Penny Pax, anche le performance di Riley Reid sembrano risentire di una simile dinamica. Ella, infatti, tende a proporre per la Kink atti sessuali non dissimili da quelli a cui la performer si dedica in contesti pornografici non BDSM: le scene di *bukkake* e di *gangbang* dirette da Chanel Preston in *Pretty Little Fuck Doll* (2013) richiamano le coreografie di gruppo che l'avevano resa popolare, ad esempio, in *Facial Fest 14* (2011) e in *Cock Sucking Challenge 12* (2011).

Altra questione, oltre al tema dei rapporti di genere e del loro ribaltamento, riguarda anche i processi di razzializzazione³⁰. Kink è stata infatti una delle prime industrie pornografiche di massa a includere nell'immaginario BDSM una modella porno afroamericana³¹; nella serie *Public Disgrace*, la scelta frequente di impiegare modelle dai connotati e dai tratti inequivocabilmente bianchi per ruoli da *submissive* non è casuale e riproduce la necessità di evitare accuse di feticizzare stereotipi razzisti. Mostrare performer di colore in un ruolo da sub potrebbe infatti comportare l'accusa di confermare rappresentazioni discriminanti, colpevoli di veicolare l'idea della pelle nera come sinonimo di impurità e di asservimento. La scelta di omettere descrizioni stereotipate, però, non lenisce la mancanza di un'aperta presa di posizione antirazzista né, tantomeno, di istanze di sovversione. Secondo Mireille Miller-Young, perché il porno BDSM possa vantare una componente etica in termini razziali, oltre a capovolgere il paradigma del lavoro pornografico come specchio del lavoro degli afroamericani in termini di retribuzione, deve scontrarsi con l'idea che le relazioni fra uomini e donne neri, come fra donne nere e uomini bianchi, siano intrinsecamente alienanti e oggettificanti, deve mostrare un ribaltamento delle aspettative razziali e di genere e, soprattutto, deve impegnarsi a rappresentare un piacere quanto più possibile reale (MILLER-YOUNG 2014: 292).

³⁰ Come scrive Robin Bauer, la razzializzazione interviene quando ad alcuni eterosessuali non vengono destinati i "privilegi" dell'eteronormatività; al contrario, la loro sessualità è costruita socialmente ed etichettata come deviante rispetto all'eteronorma. È il caso delle madri nere single negli Stati Uniti e delle donne thailandesi in contesti europei (BAUER 2014: 5).

³¹ Sinnaon Love, l'attrice in questione, si dichiara soddisfatta di questa operazione commerciale di inclusione e rivendica la sua scelta di partecipare a scene sadomasochistiche come atto di ribellione a secoli di falsa scelta imposta alle donne afroamericane fra matrimonio e famiglia e la libertà sessuale (TAORMINO 2013: 99).

Se *Public Disgrace* predilige una strategia narrativa improntata all'omissione del tema razziale, un esempio virtuoso di porno BDSM secondo Mireille Miller-Young (2014: 294) è rappresentato dall'opera di Vanessa Blue. Affrontando frontalmente la questione del potere e della sua razzializzazione, la regista si riappropria del desiderio di dominio e sottomissione, rendendo oggetti di piacere corde, catene, fruste, torce, morsetti, bavagli, imbracature e altri strumenti tradizionalmente associati alla mutilazione e alla punizione storica (e non consensuale) del corpo nero. Sempre secondo Miller-Young, nonostante la narrativa di Blue lasci intatte alcune convenzioni pornografiche, come i ruoli di genere tradizionali, e il "porno per coppie" della serie *Dark Confessions* sia rivolto a un pubblico eterosessuale, è innegabile la sua capacità di aprire nuove possibilità per il desiderio e l'intimità erotica nera grazie a interviste esteticamente curate e girate attraverso lunghe serie di campi medi in bianco e nero, che prevedono uomini e donne vicini e sullo stesso piano che "imparano l'uno dall'altra" anche in tema di BDSM (MILLER-YOUNG 2014: 295).

CRITICA DELLA VITTIMA MASOCHISTA

Come scrive Feona Attwood, le categorie di porno mainstream e di *alt porn*, come quelle di commerciale e non commerciale, "vengono utilizzate come strumento di catalogazione e di valutazione dei prodotti, proprio nel momento in cui i loro confini si dimostrano sempre più elastici" (ATTWOOD 2007: 453).

Non solo il porno mainstream è ricco di nicchie e di rappresentazioni di *kink* e parafilie, ma il suo stesso denominatore è diventato sempre più scivoloso: le novità, costantemente incorporate, mostrano atti precedentemente ritenuti rari ed estremi diventare sempre più comuni e riconoscibili. La continua ricerca di qualcosa di nuovo e diverso per cui gli utenti siano disposti a pagare ha reso sempre più labili i confini del porno eterosessuale commerciale: la doppia penetrazione è diventata la cifra standard nell'eteroporno, il *double anal* non è più una specialità rara, così come le coreografie di gruppo.

Il denominatore "alt" si riferisce a identificazioni sottoculturali, stili del corpo ed estetica che vengono contrassegnati come tali "per contrasto" rispetto alla maggior parte della pornografia tradizionale. Allo stesso tempo, il mainstream non è mai stato segnato da confini netti: all'interno dell'orizzonte del porno online contemporaneo risulta ancora più difficile inquadralo e definirlo.

La continua negoziazione di confini e limiti tra porno mainstream e *alt porn*, con la conseguente emersione di spazi estetici e concettuali altamente porosi, è rintracciabile anche nella caratteristica più evidente delle riprese di *Public Disgrace*, ovvero il loro essere aperte al pubblico³², che è invitato a partecipare sotto la guida della regista. L'effetto che si crea è quello di una folla spontanea e rumorosa a beneficio degli utenti paganti, che usufruiscono del prodotto finale sul sito della Kink. Il ruolo delle compare-pubblico, che agiscono come performers spontanei, restituisce un senso di autenticità e di spontaneità alla scena: tali fattori dialogano con la componente finzionale degli atti rappresentati, con la loro spettacolarizzazione e con un certo coefficiente di decostruzione dei ruoli, di genere e di potere. In particolare, se si riflette sulle dinamiche di negoziazione imposte da una simile decostruzione, ci si accorge che, nella serie *Public Disgrace*, il principale ruolo di potere, incarnato da una donna, non è infatti quello "performato" dalla *mistress*. Stabilire i limiti e, di conseguenza, le dinamiche spetta, nel BDSM, a chi le subisce: le performer sub, donne, detengono il controllo in quanto vittime apparenti.

Se la teoria e l'etica femminista (McKINNON 1989: 58) dichiarano che non è possibile identificarsi in un oggetto di abuso come fantasia erotica e che le fantasie di stupro³³ sono il prodotto dell'interiorizzazione della cultura patriarcale e del dominio dell'uomo sul corpo femminile, è particolarmente interessante osservare che cosa accade all'agency femminile quando la dinamica raffigurata non prevede il tradizionale binomio uomo/donna, bensì un'interpretazione da parte di donne dei due ruoli principali (*sub* e *dom*). L'aspetto di Lorelei Lee, che in *Penny Pax is Back!* indossa ciglia finte e tacchi alti che ne sottolineano otticamente il ruolo di potere, è simile a quello di Princess Donna in *Blonde Worthless Cunt Fisted In Public*, più aggressivo rispetto alle sembianze dell'attrice *sub*: i suoi corti e aderenti abiti di pelle nera, che lasciano le braccia tatuate in mostra, funzionano da contrasto ai vestiti dai colori pastello, più accollati, quotidiani e coprenti, indossati da Penny Pax. La borsa di pelle nera, dalla quale si intravedono le estremità di bacchette (*canes*), di fruste e di altri strumenti da supplizio, simboleggia un ulteriore elemento identitario, utile a decodificarne le intenzioni. Nell'apparenza inoffensiva, innocente e passiva delle modelle

³² Per garantire l'effetto novità, gli spettatori/partecipanti, reclutati tramite annunci su Internet, possono comparire al massimo in un film all'anno.

³³ Si veda un libro come *L'eunuco femmina* di Greere (1970).

sub risiede, invece, il nodo focale della messa in scena sadomasochistica, basata sul travestimento del vero ruolo di potere, disambiguato durante la demistificazione pre-scenica. Se è vero che la scena (*play*) sadomasochista è il risultato di una trattativa – un “contratto”, per usare le parole di *Fifty Shades Of Grey* –, è tuttavia innegabile che la dinamica non sia egualitaria; l’ultima parola spetta a chi subisce e si fa centro e luogo della rappresentazione: la *submissive*.

Il piacere può derivare dall’immedesimazione con entrambe, come da meccanismi di disidentificazione: l’estraniamento è una strategia che rende possibili nuove rappresentazioni. L’idea che alcune pratiche siano intrinsecamente degradanti è legata alla presunzione d’esistenza di uno scopo sessuale appropriato, che esclude la più ampia varietà di possibili pratiche sessuali e di immaginari relazionali ed erotici in nome dell’ideale di quello che Clarissa Smith e Feona Attwood definiscono “sesso sano” (Smith, ATTWOOD 2013: 50), lontano dall’industria, dalla commercializzazione e dalla raffigurazione mediale di massa. Mediazioni di qualsiasi tipo, scrivono Smith e Attwood, vengono guardate con sfiducia, quando non con aperto sospetto, perché si ritiene che una sessualità femminista debba necessariamente essere connessa a un senso di autenticità e all’attivismo politico, con un rigore tale per cui è possibile istituire in maniera netta un ordine gerarchico delle espressioni erotiche, che risulta funzionale solo se la non conformità del piacere sessuale di molte donne resta invisibile.

Questi elementi entrano in forte contraddizione con il BDSM, in relazione al quale Foucault parla di tensione eterotopica, asserendo che il sadomaso offre l’opportunità radicale di trattare l’identità alla stregua di un gioco, un procedimento per favorire rapporti basati sul piacere sessuale: non rapporti di identificazione, ma di differenziazione, creazione, innovazione. In altri termini, esso è la rivendicazione di una forma di cittadinanza sessuale a tutti gli effetti che, attraverso la riscoperta delle innumerevoli possibilità creative offerte dal corpo e dai suoi piaceri, prefiguri diverse modalità relazionali, nuove forme di amicizia, intimità e amore.

Il tradizionale discorso di genere, che si concentra sull’inclusione o sul ribaltamento di ruoli nel classico binomio, prevede un desiderio e una dinamica necessariamente gerarchici, che non contemplano un dialogo fra le parti: tali elementi sono invece il fulcro delle dinamiche BDSM, comprese quelle rappresentate in *Public Disgrace*. Nello scambio di potere inscenato è presente un capovolgimento di ruoli che non permette l’esistenza di un

meccanismo perfettamente repressivo; Princess Donna non violerà i limiti stabiliti dalle sue modelle: oltrepassare i confini, stabiliti durante i quindici minuti che precedono il film vero e proprio, comporterebbe un abuso fuori dalla scena, di cui gli spettatori sono al corrente. Insomma, in un contesto dichiaratamente finzionale come quello BDSM la femminilità, de-vittimizzata nella metanarrazione, presenta una forte carica propulsiva nella rinegoziazione degli equilibri “tradizionali” sia grazie alla messa in scena del “contratto” nel video che precede il film sia, in generale, grazie alla configurazione rappresentativa scelta.

CONCLUSIONI

Secondo Clarissa Smith (2014: 15-16), la nozione di porno alternativo contribuisce a conferire consistenza e dignità a quella di porno mainstream, perché la rende una sorta di categoria “neutra” che esiste “in contrapposizione” ad altre. La differenza estetica è riferita ai corpi protagonisti degli atti sessuali, che possono essere corpi femminili, corpi in transizione, con taglie e misure spesso molto diverse da quelle standardizzate.

Il caso della Kink dimostra, tuttavia, come questo processo non sia lineare. Spesso, infatti, anche il porno sadomasochistico fatica a distanziarsi dalla classica scopofilia della cultura del consumo, ricorrendo a standard estetici tipici del mainstream sia per quanto concerne i corpi mostrati, sia per quanto concerne i *sexual acts* ripresi. Ciò crea inevitabilmente tensioni lungo l’asse dicotomico mainstream-alternativo, contribuendo a modificare i caratteri dei due poli in discussione e fornendo riprova di un fatto: è impossibile pensare ai concetti di “porno mainstream” e di “porno alternativo” in termini assoluti; al contrario essi si collocano in costante dialettica, secondo una dinamica tale per cui si potrebbe formulare la tesi che esista solo il loro incessante confronto.

Una simile affermazione è avvalorata dal campione preso in analisi. Lo scenario del porno BDSM, anche nelle sue propaggini mainstream, dà prova di essere ben più variegato e ambivalente rispetto a quanto il sentire comune, esemplificato dal filone narrativo di *Fifty Shades of Grey*: se un prodotto come *Fifty Shades of Grey* contribuisce ad accreditare socialmente l’universo BDSM, il porno della Kink evidenzia la problematicità di un simile passaggio, rimarcando che il BDSM partecipa a quella creativa produzione di soggettività a cui rimanda Michel Foucault al di là di ogni normalizzazione eteronormativa. I prodotti dell’azienda di San Francisco,

infatti, grazie alla demistificazione delle dinamiche di potere, alle immediate prese di posizione nei casi di cattiva condotta dei propri dipendenti, alla centralità assunta dai personaggi femminili nei ruoli *dom* e *sub* (una centralità scopica, certo, ma anche performativa), sembrano invece essere capaci di occupare uno spazio del desiderio fino ad ora trascurato, o stigmatizzato negativamente, da certa critica.

È evidente, tuttavia, come in questa accortezza ideologica, prontamente pubblicizzata all'esterno e parte di una palese strategia di legittimazione culturale, vi sia una sostanziale componente di oculatezza commerciale in risposta alla temperie contemporanea, sempre più disposta a sdoganare la pornografia, ma anche a metterne in discussione i processi produttivi. In altri termini, i materiali della Kink contribuiscono certamente a rendere lo spettatore consapevole della complessità dell'universo BDSM; al contempo, tuttavia, lo fanno con un fine preciso: trarre beneficio economico da una nicchia di consumatori e allargarne le maglie attraverso prodotti che possano circolare su piattaforme di successo come Pornhub. Una simile capacità di penetrazione nell'industria pornografica impone una sorta di decalogo prescrittivo che limita non solo il processo di negoziazione tra *sub* e *dom*, ma l'immaginario complessivo che trae e dà forza alle pratiche BDSM. Si tratta, insomma, di un percorso di negoziazione in cui certamente si guadagna in visibilità e in capacità di incidere sull'immaginario sociale connesso alla sessualità e alla sua rappresentazione; al contempo, tuttavia, si rischia di vedere drasticamente ridimensionata la capacità decostruttiva e creativa del BDSM, inteso come insieme di pratiche grazie alle quali è possibile "pensare" un'altra sessualità.

Nondimeno, forse, con un moderato ottimismo, si può considerare l'operazione economica e culturale della Kink come un passo ancora insoddisfacente ma promettente verso un nuovo tipo di produzione al contempo mainstream e alternativa in grado non solo di rinegoziare la rappresentazione dei ruoli di genere, ma anche di imporre tale rinegoziazione al più ampio dominio dell'immaginario sociale.

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WHAT

Themed section

Meet the queer families:
A roadmap towards legal
recognition

ed. by Nausica Palazzo

EVER

NAUSICA PALAZZO

Editor's introduction

Meet the queer families: A roadmap towards legal recognition

'What is family?' is an impossible question. Singular definitions in the legal realm are predominant in the West. Such definitions are no longer tenable. The concept of family has been put under strain by both empirical and normative evolutions concerning the ways in which we do family. Empirically, many families are drifting away from the traditional model of family.¹ When it comes to what we define 'traditional family', on closer examination, modern arrangements resemble 'mosaic families' – that were historically prevalent in continental Europe due to high mortality rates – much more than they do resemble nuclear families.² They crumble, recouple, and reassemble by uniting various pre-existing nuclear families.

More generally, family arrangements have reached unusual levels of complexity. Queer families are slowly gaining social and, to a limited extent, legal visibility. By queer families I refer to all familiar bonds that eschew the paradigm of the archetypical marital family: one that is conjugal, nuclear, dyadic, exclusive, and based on a for-life commitment. This is consistent with a definition of 'queer' as being '... whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers' (HALPERIN 1995: 62).

¹ See e.g. in the United States, Pew Research Center, 'As Millennials Near 40, They're Approaching Family Life Differently Than Previous Generations' (May 2020) https://www.pew-socialtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2020/05/PDST_05.27.20_millennial.families_fullreport.pdf; I offer a primer on these evolutions at the level of family patterns in the Euro-American context in PALAZZO 2021: 7-10.

² Viktor Orbán's Ideal Family Wasn't The Norm Then, Nor Is It Now, in Hungarian Spectrum, 5 April 2021, <https://hungarianspectrum.org/2021/04/05/viktor-orbans-ideal-family-wasnt-the-norm-then-nor-is-it-now/>

‘What is family?’ is also a wrong question. It seems to suggest that family is an entity of its own with an essence, that family *is* something. By contrast, applying the key tenets of queer theories, the logical conclusion is that we (merely) perform practices that deserve the tag ‘familiar’ (see, e.g., CHAMBERS 2012; PLUMMER 2005). We *do* family instead and attach meaning to these practices. Queer theories would in fact help us denaturalize the notion, which has long been seen as a seemingly natural object. In my view, it would lead us to the conclusion that family should be rather linked ‘to a set of family functions, such as parenting or the formation of an economic unit between adults’ (PALAZZO 2021: 4; see SWENNEN & CROCE 2021).

‘What is family?’, however, is also a necessary question. It is the inevitable starting point for inquiries outlining how family arrangements are becoming increasingly varied and experiencing suffusion. Their increasing complexity has less to do with ontology than it has to do with epistemology and our ability to grasp it. Queer theories have had the welcome effect of exposing the multitude of ‘possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses, excesses of meanings when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender or anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or *can’t* be made) to signify monolithically’ (SEDGWICK 1993: 8). Likewise, they are unveiling how the contours of categories are also increasingly blurred. This is, for instance, visible when it comes to the distinction between friendship and family (PAHL & SPENCER 2004).

‘What is family?’ is hence a necessary question for navigating an ocean of practices that can be frightful to many. One must acknowledge that queer theories might generate a *horror vacui*, i.e. fear deriving from lacking reference points in a fast-paced world that leaves us constantly breathless. I shall provide examples regarding the need for retaining the question as a starting and reference point of this intellectual sailing. First of all, if suffusion is inherent to these affiliations, how do we distinguish familiar from non-familiar practices? Is the answer different if children come into the picture as opposed to only having adult-adult relationships? Can we stretch categories to the point of reshaping notions of death and overcoming the finiteness of our mortal bodies? Consider the issue of posthumous grandparenthood. Through this practice, grandparents seek to retrieve the sperm of the deceased son to have a grandchild from the surviving wife or third party. While being prohibited everywhere, not only is the practice allowed in Israel, but it is also leading to growing litigation when grandparents and

the surviving spouse have different ‘views’ about the decision of whether to pursue it (HASHILONI-DOLEV & TRIGER 2020).

Such evolutions pose unprecedented challenges for lawyers. Assuming that lawmakers feel the urge to regulate these affiliations, how can a lawyer grapple with anti-dogmatic needs and subjectivities potentially allergic to categorizations? How can she meaningfully grapple with that ‘horizon of possibilities’ that cannot be described in advance (HALPERIN 1995: 62)? To complicate matters further, while queer sociology as a discipline is now relatively established (see, e.g., SEIDMAN 1996; STEIN & PLUMMER 1996) queer legal theory is less developed (LECKEY 2014). Queer subjectivities have an ambivalent relationship with law. When browsing scholarship and interacting within queer groups on social networks, a lawyer is left wondering whether she is simply out of place. There is widespread skepticism towards law’s ability to regulate non-normative identities – and rightly so in many cases.

Some queer theorists would argue that those who do not align with dominant social and legal norms should eschew encounters with law. On this view, law is either unable to yield transformative effects and/or legal recognition is inherently dangerous. The danger would lay in its suffocating the vitality of the identity at stake (MARELLA 2017). By entering the realm of law, non-normative identities face the risk of normalization, civilization, and assimilation into the dominant paradigm (BARKER 2006: 249). An example in this regard is the rich literature on (or, more correctly, against) same-sex marriage (see e.g. FEINBERG 2013; ETTTELBRICK 2008; BERNSTEIN SYCAMORE 2008). Reference is made to the rich strand of scholarship warning against same-sex marriage becoming the target of LGBTQ activism (POLIKOFF 2009; on the limits of seeking ‘equality’ as a gateway to reinforcing dominant paradigms see FRANKE 2011: 1183; DELL’AVERSANO 2019: 13). These scholars suggest recalibrating the target to include the liberation of diverse, plural lifestyles (see, e.g., D’EMILIO 2006: 10). To sum up, queer thinkers have laid out an articulated and nuanced critique to law’s ability to recognize contemporary complex (‘queer’) identities.

Yet, ‘angrily he rattles the bars of the iron cage. But he has no plans or projects for tuning the cage into something more like a human home’: these are the words that Micheal Walzer directs to Foucault (1988: 209). Such words nicely capture the frustration at the theory’s penchant for

deconstructing without constructing. In the realm of law, the issue revolves around understanding whether there can be a queer approach to legal recognition. Many argue yes (as to Italy's emerging debate see LORENZETTI 2019: 396; MASTROMARTINO 2017). It is true that the key contribution of queer theories is to unveil the power structures beyond law's seemingly neutral categories as well as its disciplinary effects. Yet, deconstruction cannot exhaust the whole spectrum of possibilities. Some scholars believe that law can have a role in facilitating the expression of queer identities. For instance, aware of the shortcomings of marriage, queer scholarship has laid ground to the recognition of modern families through various non-marital regimes. Some scholars placed emphasis on domestic partnerships (REDDING 2011), others on special registration systems (CROCE & SWENNEN 2021; ALONI 2013), others yet on mixed systems of registration plus ascription of family status in courts (POLIKOFF 2009). In my view, this link between nonmarital regimes and queer families holds promise for the regulation of queer identities and must be consolidated further.

These scholarly developments are welcome. When browsing a popular Italian Facebook group on polyamory and relationship anarchy one can see that some members feel neglected by law.³ Tullia Della Moglie, an Italian poly activist, nicely expresses her unease with the current situation:

'Love is not only a more or less romantic or erotic feeling, love can also be bills coming in, daily routines, smelling feet at night, laundries, children to take care of, a Netflix subscription... It is not mandatory to plan to cohabit with each partner, but I don't like the idea that doing so it's impossible either. I don't like the idea that any "additional" relationship is doomed to be an Airbnb stay once a month'. (author's translation from Italian)

She then argues in favor of some form of legal recognition for this to become reality. An appetite for law especially arises whenever queer families encounter situations of vulnerability. These situations materialize anytime lack of legal recognition bars access to the services and privileges set forth in the law. Think of tenancy rights upon the death of a partner or the enjoyment of the protection against marital status discrimination in hiring, accessing services, etc. Lack of access to these resources bars the

³ The facebook group name is "Poliamore e anarchia relazionale_Gruppo di discussione sulle non monogamie".

enjoyment of equal status and respect in society compared to those people who check the boxes of the archetypical marital family.

This themed section has a double-barreled ambition. It first wishes to introduce queer families to the general public, especially in Italy, where this law journal has its headquarters. With some exceptions, the topic of the relationship between law and queer families is largely understudied (MARELLA 2017; FIORAMONTI 2017; GRANDE & PES 2018; LORENZETTI 2019; RIZZUTI 2020). The second aim of the themed section, therefore, is to offer reflections on the relationship between queer families and law.

The collection will look at the topic of queer families and the law from various angles. The attempt being made is to embrace instead of concealing the complexity of the questions surrounding the topic. The adopted approach is interdisciplinary and comparative. As to the former modifier, in this area, one should strive to establish a sustained dialogue among legal research and disciplines within social sciences and humanities – notably social philosophy, psychology, literature, and gender studies. This collection is based on the premise that not only can law draw empirical and conceptual nourishment from such disciplines, but that it also *needs* them to interpret the reality it is supposed to regulate. A second methodological choice is to look at the problem through a comparative lens. The thematic section glances over different geographical contexts. These include Italy, the space of the European Union and European Convention of Human Rights, and Canada. In so doing, it restricts its reach and findings to these territories. Ultimately, the section adopts three working languages – Italian, English, and French. It does so on the assumption that our relationship with reality is mediated by language (‘The limits of my language mean the limits of my world’, WITTGENSTEIN 1921: 5.62) and that multiplying languages can expand the scope of the perception of the reality we seek to speak.

All articles within this themed section engage with the topic of the law/queer families relationship. This topic should be nested within the larger framework of queer theories and their connection with law. To sum up, a recurring question is: ‘Is law a good idea?’. In turn, locating the question whether law is a good idea in the context of family is a useful resource to seek an answer, however plural, inconclusive, and tentative.

The issue begins with the article ‘How queer!? Canadian approaches to recognizing queer families in the law’ by Lois HARDER. In her article, Harder introduces us to a jurisdiction that is at the forefront in granting

legal recognition to queer parents, Canada. She offers a tale of success but also caution. Harder starts off by describing what from a queer perspective one could define a ‘success story’: in Canada, all provinces and territories allow the registration of an ‘other parent’ on birth registration certificates; more crucially, three provinces – Ontario, British Columbia, and Saskatchewan –, permit the legal recognition of three or more intentional parents. The issue is all the more relevant after on April 23, 2021, the Supreme Court of British Columbia recognized the third non-biological parent in a polyamorous relationship in addition to the two biological parents (*British Columbia Birth Registration No. 2018-XX-XX5815*, 2021 BCSC 767).

Yet, she also warns us of the limits of these reforms. Harder is especially concerned that, while it is undoubtable that multi-parenting challenges the dyadic, heterosexual model, it also ‘trade[s] on conjugality and biological relationship to a considerable extent’. In her observation that there are many more families eschewing even these queer family forms (what she dubs ‘queerer forms of non-normative family life’), she implicitly expresses unease with law being able to mirror the uncategorizable universe of queer families.

The second article, by Benjamin MORON-PUECH, takes a more positive stance towards legal recognition. Moron-Puech offers a thorough overview of the absent or insufficient legal recognition of what he dubs ‘familles MISSEG’ (‘MISSEG families’). By the term, he refers to all families that are minoritized on account of sex characteristics, gender identity or expression or sexual orientation. He adopts a new queer definition of family to encompass all familiar bonds that suffer from the non-recognition of law. These include inter alia families with trans* or intersex persons, and polyamorous relationships. Moron-Puech offers us an overview of the European landscape by looking at how both the European Court of Human Rights and Court of Justice of the European Union fail to fully recognize such affiliations. His work is ambitious in its assessing both the horizontal relationship of adults and the vertical parent-child relationship. In his analysis, Moron-Puech observes how the vertical relationships seem to attract more legal protection compared to adult-adult relationships. This is especially due to the gravitational pull of the best interest of the child.

Research on polyamory is the focus of the third and fourth contribution. This research is fascinating as it powerfully loosens the shackles of monogamy. Monogamy is so central to Western societies as to being heralded as the reason of a supposed economic and social superiority of the

West, compared to ‘Oriental’ societies (HENRICH, BOYD & RICHERSON 2012). Until relatively recently the monogamous paradigm was only challenged by polygamy, and particularly by the polygynous practices of Muslim and some Mormon communities that had settled in the West. These practices were largely seen as incompatible with egalitarian Western values, and thus dismissed on this account. They especially garnered criticism from scholars pointing to the patriarchal structures of power characterizing them (see e.g. MOLLER OKIN 1999; BALA 2009; STRASSBERG 2010). Similar objections are now overcome by the practice of polyamory. Unlike polygamy, polyamory is based on the egalitarian, ‘contractual’ values of continuous negotiation and consent as well as logics of personal satisfaction. This is why research on this point is seen as better suited to interrogate the monogamous paradigm engrafted in law (but see PALAZZO & REDDING *forthcoming* on both sides’ potential to challenge the paradigm).

Two authors engage with cutting-edge topics related to law and polyamory. Francesca MICCOLI looks at the topic of the institutionalization of plural marriage. Starting from arguments from the right that there will be a slide down the so-called slippery slope, Miccoli draws a comparison with the legal recognition of same-sex marriage. In so doing, she explicates the opportunities as well as obstacles for polyamorous unions to follow in the footsteps of same-sex couples. Miccoli doubts, as many queer theorists did, that marriage can accommodate these intimate affiliations. She is, by contrast, more open to the possibility of pursuing more flexible nonmarital regimes.

Aurelio CASTRO offers a much-needed psychosocial analysis of the legal recognition of polyamory. He foregrounds the centrality of psychosocial analysis to informing arguments aimed at legally recognizing same-sex couples. Research on non-monogamous lifestyles seeks to shed light on the ‘quality’ of the relationship as well as their suitability for parenting. In this regard, Castro rightly recalls how, despite heterosexual couples not being required to demonstrate their suitability for parenting, both same-sex and polyamorous families are called to demonstrate as much. He thus seeks to fill this gap in literature. Castro shows how these families present many challenges (as any other family unit). At the same time, however, polyamorous families also seem to offer many advantages and become a source of wellbeing for the parties involved. He ultimately shares a cautiously optimistic view of law, by framing legal recognition as a delicate ‘process-compromise’ (citing to GRANDE & PES 2018).

What this strand of scholarship does not challenge, however, is the romantic coupledness paradigm, what Robert Leckey dubs ‘compulsory romantic love’ (LECKEY 2014: 10). Alice PARRINELLO’s piece does as much. With her literary analysis of three narratives drawn from contemporary LGBTQ Italian literature, she casts a glance on non-conjugal families of relatives supporting each other in their adult life. These unions are also known as extended families. Empirical research suggests that the predominance of the extended family in the pre-industrialization era is largely a myth. By contrast, its influence nowadays is increasing. In Canada, for instance, so-called multi-generational households are the fastest growing household since 2001; in the US, Bengston also noted the increasing incidence of these households attributing it to the collapsing of the nuclear family and to higher longevity rates (BENGSTON 2001). Here, more than everywhere else,⁴ is visible the underlying tension between tradition and modernity in family arrangements. Stacey (1996) has indeed dubbed the popularity of the extended family as a movement ‘backward toward the postmodern family’.

There is something deeply radical (‘postmodern’) in a *decision* to (re) constitute this kind of familiar bond in one’s adult life. Parrinello compellingly illustrates this point. Not only does she deconstruct the romantic paradigm, but also the trope according to which queer persons must move to the city to find happiness. Parrinello links this pro-urban rhetoric to homonormative discourses still integral to the construction of the acceptable queer citizen. In so doing, she debunks the ineluctability of moving to the city/founding a family of choice as opposed to living in the countryside/being allegedly constrained by a biological family.

It is my hope that this section can become the wellspring of more reflections about queer families’ uncomfortable, yet likely necessary, encounters with law.

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⁴ Another area in which this tension is visible is also assisted reproductive technology (ART). When it comes to ART, modernity manifests itself in the technology required to help parents conceive their child, while tradition manifests itself in the unfaded attachment to biological parenthood and blood relations. See Hashiloni-Dolev & TRIGER 2020: 9.

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LOIS HARDER

How queer!?

Canadian approaches to recognizing queer families in the law

ABSTRACT: Canada is at the global forefront in providing legal recognition to queer parents. To date, three of its ten provinces (British Columbia, Ontario and Saskatchewan) will grant parental status to three or more intentional parents and enable their identification on birth registration. All provinces and territories permit the registration of an “other parent” on birth registration, and all jurisdictions enable queer couples to adopt. Notably, these legislative accomplishments have not attracted a great deal of political resistance. The relatively slow process of reforming parentage law to adapt to same-sex marriage and common law relationships, favourable court rulings and the combination of the need to address parentage in situations involving both assisted reproduction and queer families have been significant factors in the Canadian story. Moreover, the terms of the legal provisions continue to rely largely on conjugality and biology as the basis of parentage claims. These developments have clearly been important for some queer families, but they exist within fairly conventional parameters, begging the question as to how queer Canada’s parentage recognition really is.

KEYWORDS: Family law; LGBT studies; social theory; Canada.

Canada is at the global forefront in providing legal recognition to queer parents.¹ To date, three of its ten provinces (British Columbia, Ontario and Saskatchewan) will grant parental status to three or more intentional parents and enable their identification on birth registration. All provinces and territories permit the registration of an “other parent” on birth registration (in addition to the birth parent; or in cases of surrogacy, in place of the birth parent). And all jurisdictions enable queer couples to adopt. Nonetheless,

¹ Australia, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States all have provisions for a non-biological same-sex partner to be named a parent. Australia, New Zealand and the UK maintain a two-parent limit (on Australia see BUDIMSKI & NILOUDAKIS 2020; Law Commission of New Zealand 2005; UK *Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act* 2008). Some US jurisdictions have recognized three parents, but, to date, these determinations have not been part of a pre-conception agreement, or by operation of law (JACOBS 2016). Further, the Netherlands has legislation recognizing up to four parents, but they are differentiated, with biological parents having greater parental rights than ‘custodial’ parents (DIXON 2019; TRACHMAN 2019).

there are a number of inconsistencies and contradictions in the Canadian queer parentage landscape that complicate this rosy glow of progressiveness. Tellingly, these legislative accomplishments are *not* especially marked by the scars of bitter divisiveness, pitting homophobic and transphobic resistance and ardent fathers' rights advocates against queer families. Rather, the laws recognizing multiple parents have, in fact, encountered relatively little overt political resistance (KELLY 2014: 580; SNOW 2017: 341). Does the fact that Canadians are so blasé about multiple parents indicate an especially queer-inclusive political zeitgeist? Or, by contrast, does this lack of political ardour suggest that multiple parentage, as currently articulated in the law, isn't really so radical – so queer – after all?

Legal recognition of queer relationships and families is a quintessential paradox. Queer identities are queer precisely because they resist definition, challenging normative conceptions of how people are expected to represent themselves and relate to others. Queerness is an ongoing critical engagement with social intelligibility. It is unfixed. As Judith Butler has so captivatingly argued, if the term “queer” is to be a site of collective contestation... it will have to remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes” (1993: 312). Yet such fluidity is antithetical to law and to legal recognition; domains in which clear definition is regarded as essential for effective adjudication. Moreover, in the absence of clarity, judges work to insert it, constraining language and rules in the service of order, as much (or more) as justice. Meanwhile, queer families who seek the protection that legal recognition affords – people who “desire the state's desire” – are also pursuing a certain solidity and security (BUTLER 2004: 111). They desire “to vacate the lonely particularity of the nonratified relation and, perhaps above all, to gain both place and sanctification in that imagined relation to the state” (BUTLER 2004: 111). This is a difficult political space to inhabit, and, undoubtedly, queer parents and families inhabit it differently depending on their values and the conditions that enable and constrain their capacity for family life. Moreover, as the temporal qualification that opened this essay suggests, the contours of queer familial political space change over time, even within bounded national and sub-national jurisdictions.

In this paper, I examine the legal regimes that govern queer family recognition in Canada, arguing that despite the progressiveness (or

permissiveness) of Canadian approaches to recognizing non-normative families, legal parentage remains significantly circumscribed by genetics, biology and conjugality.² The fight for legal recognition of queer families has had some significant effects, obliging governments and legal challengers to reveal the taken-for-granted assumptions that have undergirded family law for centuries. These revelations have been fundamental to broadening the legal landscape of queer inclusion. Yet, to the extent that queer inclusion derives from liberal, privatized norms of familial relationality (whether biological or conjugal) and intentionality, the Canadian regime is less transgressive than it might first appear. Of course, this is a relative claim, and I do not wish to diminish the very real gains that queer parents have enjoyed, nor the distance they still have to travel in many Canadian provinces and territories. Yet the fact that many, indeed, the majority, of queer families, do not find their dynamic family forms represented in the law, reveals the degree to which legal recognition is still insufficiently inclusive in certain contexts, at least for those who seek or would benefit from such recognition. By contrast, for queer families who are politically disinclined to seek legal sanctification, these emerging regimes may be increasingly constraining and normalizing.

The paper proceeds by providing a broad outline of the development of parental status recognition in Canada, with particular emphasis on legal developments concerning reproductive technologies and queer parents. After outlining the historical context for parentage recognition and its recent developments in Canada, I turn to two illustrative cases in which courts in Ontario and Newfoundland and Labrador have seen fit to recognize three parents – a lesbian couple and their known donor; and a polyamorous heterosexual threesome. I then turn to legislative efforts in BC, Ontario and Saskatchewan to recognize three or more parents. The child’s best interests, the functional dimensions of care-giving, and the need to

² Comparative scholarship on reproductive technologies, parentage and queer inclusion describes legal and political regimes along a permissive-restrictive continuum, apparently, according to Snow, to avoid the normative claims associated with the language of conservative/liberal, traditional/non-traditional, and natural/unnatural (SNOW 2016: 7). Leibetseder and Griffin (2020), however, seem to eschew this concern to “avoid normative trappings” (SNOW 2016), mobilizing their comparative framework to reveal the various normative assumptions that underlie laws in Estonia, Austria and the UK with regard to queer access to parentage recognition and reproductive technologies. Since I argue from an openly normative position, I do not feel beholden to these terms of art, though I mobilize them when they are helpfully illuminating.

address parentage issues that arise from assisted reproduction have been critical to the political and legal traction of these reforms, suggesting that the state's interest in both recognizing the dynamics of contemporary family formation and facilitating privatized support may outweigh the symbolism of traditional, moral arguments about the monogamous, reproductive family.

PARENTAGE LAW IN CANADA

The state's interests in regulating the status of parents are articulated in the rights that flow from guardianship, inheritance and citizenship laws. These interests include:

- a. Assigning responsibility for care (emotional and physical nurturance; necessities of life; health care; education etc.)
- b. Conferring decision-making authority on behalf of a child
- c. Conferring support obligations in the event of divorce or relationship breakdown
- d. Granting the capacity to act in legal proceedings on behalf of the child
- e. Determining rights of inheritance
- f. Determining citizenship

While none of these activities inherently rely on a biological relationship to be fulfilled, families – based around presumptive biological relationships underpinned by the legal framework of marriage – provide the foundation from which these obligations flow. Thus, the state's interests in ensuring the care of children align with the state's governance of kinship – or who constitutes a family.

As alluded to above, in Canada, parentage determinations fall under provincial authority, while marriage and divorce are a federal jurisdiction. When Canada passed the *Civil Marriage Act* in 2005, marriage between same-sex partners became legal across the country. Provinces and territories were much slower, however, to adapt their parentage laws to this new reality. This disconnection is interesting for what it reveals about the relationship between marriage and parentage. Historically, of course, legal definitions of parents tracked marriage very closely.

In the English common law tradition and the French Civil Code – structures of legal ordering that, predictably, take heterosexism and gender binarism as a given – men are understood to maintain a paternal presumption

in which a husband is the father to any children of his marriage: *pater est quem nuptia demonstrant* (FREEMAN & RICHARDS 2006: 72; MYKITIUK 2001: 779). This presumption finds its origins in the indeterminacy of paternity and the certainty of birth from the mother. Since paternal certainty through DNA testing is a very recent development, the law's paternal presumption via marriage did the work of securing the relationship between father and children. Thus, a child born within the context of a marriage, but whose biological inheritance came from someone other than the husband, nonetheless was understood to be a son or daughter to the mother's husband. And while a man might attempt to rebut his paternity in such circumstances, such efforts were rare and courts were largely unpersuaded (BALA & ASHBOURNE 2012: 529-30).

Historically, the paternal presumption also distinguished between legitimate children, defined as those of the marriage, and illegitimate children, those produced outside of marital relations. A child born out of wedlock was rendered *filius nullius* (child of no one). Illegitimacy meant that an actually existing, living being could not command the status of a legal person nor could that non-person claim rights to lineage, to inherit or pass on their own wealth (MYKITIUK 2001: 782). While mothers could create bare life, only husband-fathers could confer full humanity and full entry into the social realm.

Today, most of Canada's various provincial and territorial family law (or child status) acts define fathers as, in the first instance, biological fathers.³ That declaration of parenthood is subsequently qualified by numerous provisions describing paternal/parental presumptions, provisions that have become considerably more extensive given the demise of the status of illegitimacy, the prevalence of cohabitation, and, slowly and unevenly, the recognition of same-sex partners as non-biological parents by virtue of a child being born within the context of the relationship and with their consent. These presumptions include (male) persons who were the spouses of, or cohabited with, women (persons) who gave birth during the course of the relationship, within 300 days of the relationship's end, or who married or

³ See, for example, Alberta Family Law Act S.A. 2003, c. F-4.5 [Alberta FLA], s. 8; British Columbia Family Law Act S.B.C. 2011, c.25 [BC FLA] s. 26; Manitoba Family Maintenance Act CCSM c F20 s. 23 [Manitoba FMA]; Ontario Children's Law Reform Act R.S.O. 1990, c. C. 12 [Ontario CLRA] s. 7; Art 525 Civil Code of Québec [CCQ]; Newfoundland and Labrador Children's Law Act RSNL 1990, c C-13 [NLCLA], s.10.

began cohabiting with the mother (birth parent) and acknowledge that they are the father (parent) of the child.⁴ These laws do not mandate DNA testing to ensure paternity within a family headed by a heterosexual couple. Rather, the admissibility of DNA tests is only contemplated when paternity is contested. Moreover, if paternity (parental status) is successfully contested, Canadian law declares that no person shall be presumed to be the child's father (parent).⁵ Fatherhood then, may be defined as biological, but that is the work of the law, rather than nature itself. More specifically, legal fatherhood is determined by the relative formality of the connection between men and mothers. In more updated legislation, this formal connection is expected between the birth parent and their spouse or conjugal partner.

Scientific advances have also troubled the certainty of maternity. Reproductive technologies have made it possible for three people to claim motherhood: the person who intends to care for a child, the person who contributes the genetic material, and the person who gestates the embryo and gives birth (BOYD 2007: 69; MYKITIUK 2001: 791). In Canadian jurisdictions, this complicated field of potential maternal claims has been resolved by identifying the gestational parent as the mother, or birth parent, in the first instance. In those provinces that include provisions for surrogacy and intentional parents, the birth parent is able to waive their parental rights in a relatively straightforward and expeditious process after the birth of the child, if the intended parent(s) and the birth parent have fulfilled various formalities in advance of the conception.⁶

⁴ See, for example, AB FLA, s. 8; BC FLA, s. 26; Manitoba FMA, s. 23; ON CLRA s. 7; Art 525 CCQ; NLCLA, s. 10. Since only Ontario and Saskatchewan use trans-inclusive language, and several other provinces rely on the heterosexual norm with exceptions framed as “other parent” in situations involving assisted reproduction, I have attempted to represent the range of language that appears in these statutes.

⁵ See, for example, Manitoba FMA s. 34; ON CLRA s.7(3). This rebuttable presumption also applies to same-sex partners who wish to dispute their consent to parent, or to clarify their lack of intention to be a parent. Yet while rebutting the presumption may block parental designation, it is less clear that it blocks “parent-like” obligation. In the case of *Doe v. Alberta* 2007 ABCA 50 (CanLII), for example, a woman in a heterosexual couple desired a child, while her male partner did not. They attempted to establish an agreement through which the male partner would be explicitly excluded from any responsibilities for the child. The judge held that such a contract was invalid, and that while the male partner could not be understood as a parent (the child was conceived with the assistance of an anonymous sperm donor and he clearly did not consent to be a parent), their shared residence and the relationship between the adults would necessarily create bonds between the man and the child.

⁶ In BC, this process is administrative (BC FLA s. 29, 31). In Alberta, Ontario, Nova Scotia and Saskatchewan, the process requires a declaration from the court. AB FLA 2003, s .8.2 ON CLRA

Most recently, Ontario and Saskatchewan have adopted trans inclusive language for their parentage provisions, dispensing with the designation of mother and father altogether. For example, both provinces declare the “birth parent of a child...to be a parent of the child”, and that if a child was conceived through sexual intercourse, “the person’s sperm [that] resulted in the conception of the child”, holds a rebuttable presumption of parenthood.⁷ As I discuss below, it was this removal of the status markers of “mother” and “father” that led to the most significant political contestation in the Ontario legislative reform process. The objection here was not about trans inclusion or multiple parent provisions, but rather the affront to the cultural meanings of these kinship designations (CROSS 2016).

Despite these technological developments and the extension of relationship recognition to include same-sex marriage, as well as cohabiting relationships for different and same-sex partners (presumptively monogamous), most Canadian provinces have, as noted, been remarkably slow to respond to their implications for parental status determination (Rogerson 2017 9192). The extension of a parental presumption to the same-sex partner of a birth parent has been hard fought and remains unavailable in child status law (even if it is possible to be registered as a child’s “other parent” on the birth registry) in four provinces and two territories.⁸ And, in the uneven recognition of surrogacy arrangements, gay male couples have also struggled to have their parenthood recognized. As Robert Leckey observes, the prohibition against surrogacy in Quebec means that gay men are required to use the adoption process to create families, regardless of genetic contribution (2009: 267). Further, situations in which people want to co-parent outside the dyadic model, involving various biological, genetic or otherwise interested parties, have only been addressed in British Columbia (2013), Ontario (2016) and Saskatchewan (2020), and largely constrained by

s. 10 (7); Nova Scotia, Birth Registration Regulations, NS Reg 390/2007, s. 3; Saskatchewan Children’s Law Act S.S. 2020, c. 2, s. 62(7) [SK CLA].

⁷ See Ontario, *Children’s Law Reform Act*, RSO 1990, c C.12,[Ontario CLRA] s. 6,7; Saskatchewan, *Children’s Law Act*, 2020, C-2. [Saskatchewan CLA] s. 58, 59.

⁸ Manitoba, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland and Labrador, NWT, and Nunavut. Note, however, that the Newfoundland and Labrador Supreme Court has recently used its *parens patriae* powers to recognize three parents to a child born within the context of a polyamorous relationship. *CC (Re)*, 2018 NLSC 71 (discussed below), and that the Manitoba court has held that the *Family Maintenance Act* is in violation of the equality protections of the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, and that the legislation must be in compliance by NOVEMBER 2021. See: *JAS and CMM et al v. (Manitoba) Attorney General* MBQB, 20-01-24769.

the bounds of conjugality and biological/genetic contribution. Otherwise, a two parent limit prevails in Canadian jurisdictions.⁹ How do we understand this hesitancy to recognize more varieties of parentage, how does that hesitancy relate to the purposes of parentage, and what happened in those jurisdictions that have, in fact, gone beyond the parental dyad? The remainder of the paper considers these questions, first, in the context of the family of liberal democracy and then turning to case law and legislation, demonstrating the possibilities and inferring the limits of queer inclusion within the laws of parental recognition.

THE LIBERAL DEMOCRATIC STATE AND FAMILY STATUS

In many respects, the relationship between the liberal rights that underpin contemporary democracy and the institution of the family has been extremely awkward. The family has long been understood as a site of privacy; a space beyond the reach of the state (qua: “the state has no place in the bedrooms of the nation,” as former Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau famously stated). In its historical formulation, the monogamous, heterosexual family supported the emotional needs of men under the model of *paterfamilias* and the doctrine of coverture, in which, through marriage, two would become one, and that one would be the husband (COTT 2000: 11-12). The sanctity of the hearth and home supported men’s rational deliberation and action in the public sphere of politics and commerce (FERGUSON 2012: 14, 22-24; PATEMAN 1988). Despite the clear power imbalances that such an arrangement relies upon, the family has, nonetheless, been understood as, “pre-political” or a space in which claims of rights and appeals to equality clash with intimate bonds of love and care (STEVENS 1999: 55-56).

As we know, from our current vantage, this tension between family privacy and democratic equality has been steadily challenged. Over the last 150 years, for example, women have fought to realize democracy’s promise of equality and freedom that this conception of family privacy had denied them. These triumphs have included married women’s property rights, the right to vote, the ability of married women to enter into contracts on their

⁹ Notably however, multiple parties may be designated as “standing in place of a parent” or as “guardians”. The first of these has arisen from situations of separation and divorce, in which a step-parent may desire a continued relationship with a child, or the state may impose support obligations on the basis of a finding of a “parent-like” relationship (*Chartier v. Chartier* 1999 1 SCR 242). Guardians have considerably more legal responsibilities, but their status generally ends when the child reaches the age of majority.

own behalf, and to divorce without fault. Technological developments such as contraception have enabled women to exercise control over their reproductive lives, the spacing of their children and the size of their families.

These struggles for equality within the family have extended to the concept of equality among families, and the fight by LGBTQ+ folks to have their families recognized in the law. From the decriminalization of homosexuality to protection against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity, to legal status for same-sex cohabiting and married couples, access to reproductive technologies and adoption for same-sex partners, parental registration and, increasingly, parental status designations by operation of law, LGBTQ+ Canadians have seen a steady improvement in their ability to form families under conditions of their choosing and to have them appropriately recognized.

One might note, here, that the efforts of women and sexual minorities to have their autonomous personhood and close personal relationships recognized has required a refashioning of the state's governance of the private realm, rather than an unprecedented incursion of the public into the private, as some conservative commentators have suggested (CERE & FARROW 2004). It is not a "natural fact" that a man should be the head of the household, or that households are "naturally" formed by monogamous heterosexual couples and their offspring. Instead, this family form was achieved through law and politics and actively reinforced through prohibitions on alternative family forms and on autonomy within the family. Efforts to redefine family roles and structures do require political will and legal reform, but it is inaccurate to define these efforts as an inappropriate incursion of the public into the private. Instead, the demand for equality within and between families is a desire for an extended access both to the benefits that accrued to the family patriarch as well as the dignity and autonomy that family status itself, conveys (BOYD 2013: 268).

Democratic values have also impacted families with regard to the status of children. The demise of illegitimacy, as already observed, was an important development in ensuring fundamental equality regardless of the circumstances of one's birth. Further, the advent of children's rights, notably in the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*, and the emergence of "child's best interests" as the appropriate standard for adjudicating issues of custody, adoption, support and access have established children as subjects with inherent rights, rather than subordinating them to the rights and

interests of parents.¹⁰ Of course, the question of how to determine a child's best interests presents its own set of challenges, often deeply entwined with normative conceptions of the functional family. The recognition that a child's best interests can be assured by loving parents, regardless of their gender identity, or the mode of the child's conception, has been fundamental to the ability of same-sex and queer parents to form families (KELLY 2009a). Yet, the inconsistency and difficulty of parentage determinations in situations involving conception through reproductive technologies, and especially when those situations involve queer partners undermines Canadians' access to equality in the realm of sexual orientation and family status. Moreover, children may face unequal treatment with regard to the security of their parentage and the obligations that flow from that status, depending on their mode of conception. In *Caron*, for example Canada's Ministry of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship denied citizenship to an infant on grounds that he was not genetically or gestationally related to his Canadian mother.¹¹ Born abroad with the assistance of reproductive technologies and in the context of a same-sex relationship, he was nonetheless denied Canadian citizenship because of a failure of the Canadian *Citizenship Act* to contemplate either queer parentage or the implications of reproductive technologies. In the summer of 2020, however, the parents succeeded in having this assessment overturned, and the Minister for Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship indicated his enthusiasm for expanding the definition of parent in the *Citizenship Act* to include queer couples, stating that "Canada is grateful to them for the courage and strength they have shown in righting this wrong" (Mendocino cited in BURNS 2020).

HESITANCY AND THE SLOW TRAIN OF RECOGNITION

I began this article with the observation that there has been relatively little overt, organized resistance to extending parental status to same-sex partners, and yet it has also been very slow in coming. Certainly, this lack of alacrity might be read as a kind of resistance in itself. However, as the complicated parental claims that emerge from the assisted reproduction scenarios combine with a desire for queer parenting, it is also evident that the task of legal codification is challenging. Canadian jurisdictions have

¹⁰ The Supreme Court's decision in *King v. Low* [1985] 1 S.C.R. definitively established child's best interests as the appropriate judicial standard.

¹¹ *Caron c. Attorney General of Canada* 2020 QCCS 2700 (CanLII)

landed on the determination that the person who gives birth is a parent in the first instance, regardless of their genetic relationship to the child or their conjugal relationship to the person who provided the sperm (WIEGERS 2012/13: 192-93). The birth parent can sign away their parentage – as in a surrogacy arrangement, but the surrogacy agreement is not recognized as a valid contract in any Canadian jurisdiction, and thus does not provide intentional parents with a legal claim to the child in the case of a dispute.¹² By now, most provinces have clarified the law surrounding the parentage claims of genetic donors. People are not considered parents by virtue of donation alone (WIEGERS 2012/13: 185-90).¹³ On one reading, considering the heterosexual context, this provision can be understood as a protection of the sanctity of the procreative family. Despite the use of donor sperm, the husband or male partner of the birth mother thus maintains his claim to paternity – at least so long as he agrees to the arrangement. In a more queer-friendly interpretation – if also a homonormative one – such provisions can be seen to protect lesbian couples from the unwanted intervention of a known donor into the familial scene (KELLY 2013: 3-4). As we have seen, the non-biological partner of a birth mother is increasingly recognized as the child's other parent, creating increased security for lesbian partners. Yet when it comes to the parentage of gay men, people without a dyadic conjugal connection to a birth parent, and people desiring to parent beyond the two parent framework, Canadian parentage provisions are much more diffuse, uneven and unhelpful.

As this brief summary indicates, the expansion of parentage recognition has been most readily achieved when the reforms have been fairly easily accommodated within the terms of existing legal regimes. Since many legal reforms have emerged from case law and legal arguments are constructed around analogies to existing practices, the echo of heterosexist practice in contemporary parentage norms is unsurprising. It is also true that queer

¹² The Canadian legal framework governing reproductive technologies is framed around the recommendations of a Royal Commission on Reproductive Technologies that reported IN 1993. Since reproductive technologies were a new phenomenon at the time, the Commission was extremely concerned that women be protected from exploitation. And while they did not recommend a complete prohibition of surrogacy, their distaste for the practice was strongly articulated. It is also true that surrogates very rarely renege on their agreements (NELSON 2018: 188 and 194).

¹³ At the time that Wiegiers' article was published, this claim was true in 5 of 10 provinces. Subsequently Ontario and Saskatchewan have added such provisions to their legislation and Manitoba seems set to act similarly.

folks who desire legal recognition are more likely to hew to the dyadic norm. Thus, parentage reforms have been most readily achieved when the demand aligns with the contemporary limits of the legal imagination.

CHILD'S BEST INTERESTS, PARENS PATRIAE, AND THREE-PARENT DECISIONS IN ONTARIO AND NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR

Another important element in the response to demands for recognition of expanded family forms is the normatively freighted assessment of a child's best interest. Canada's first foray into the prospect of a three parent family is instructive here. In the Ontario case of *AA v BB*, [2007] ONCA 2 [*AA v BB* 2007], a lesbian couple conceived with the help of a friend and all three parties to the arrangement felt that it would be in the child's best interests that they all be declared parents. According to Ontario law at the time, however, only the birth mother and the father were permitted to be parents. The non-biological co-mother would only be permitted to be recognized as a parent if one of the other parents reneged their parental status and she was permitted to adopt (*AA v BB* 2007, par 13). Importantly, the child's care was primarily conducted by her mothers, while the father, who was in a heterosexual relationship, had less frequent engagement with the child. Yet despite the functional operation of the family, the law placed primacy on the biological parents and wrote the non-biological mother out of the script entirely. While the trial judge was sympathetic to the claimants' argument, he ultimately felt constrained by the use of the definitive article "the" in the legislation, finding that the law "contemplates only one mother of a child... the use of the words 'the father' and 'the mother'...connoting a single father and a single mother" (*AA v BB* 2007, par 18). Moreover, the trial judge held that the limit of two parents was the express intent of the legislation, and thus, that he could not use the *parens patriae* jurisdiction to fill a gap in the legislation (*AA v BB* 2007, par 28).¹⁴ By contrast, the appeal court judge held that there was a gap in the legislation; that it would not have occurred to legislators at the time the act was passed that three parents were a possibility, and thus that he would indeed use the court's *parens patriae* jurisdiction to recognize three parents (*AA v BB* 2007, par 38). Since the motivation for the act had been to redress the harms of the status of illegitimacy and

¹⁴ *Parens patriae* refers to the court's inherent jurisdiction to protect a child from danger or to bridge a legislative gap (*AA v BB*, par 27).

to ensure the equality of children regardless of the circumstances of their birth, that logic could be extended to the child whose parentage was under consideration in this case (*AA v BB* 2007, par. 38).

AA v BB thus represents a very specific set of circumstances and was determined by a judge prepared to foreground the needs of the child and the actual operation of the family over more traditional, putatively biological, configurations of the family. Certainly, the traditional view made an appearance in the case, both in the form of the intervenor status of the Alliance for Marriage and Family, and in the two person, heterosexual limit on parentage inferred in the legislation by the trial court judge. This very specific ruling then, had limited applicability to future cases. Legislation would be required if queer families were to have more secure access to parentage recognition.

The issue of the “child’s best interests” is crucially important and much debated. In Canada, the “child’s best interests” is now the definitive standard for adjudicating issues of custody, adoption, support and access (*King v Low* [1985] 1 S.C.R. [King]).¹⁵ As Wanda Wieggers explains, the Supreme Court’s decision in *King* held that “although parental claims were entitled to serious consideration, they could be outweighed by an assessment of which party would best secure the ‘healthy growth, development and education of the child’” (2009: 23, citing *King*, par. f). Children were not to be regarded as chattel, but as “citizens in becoming” (DOBROWOLSKY & JENSON 2004) whose interests did not necessarily align with the beliefs and commitments of their parents – at least insofar as those beliefs and commitments might undermine their future capacity to be productive contributors to society.

Understanding children as autonomous beings is all well and good, of course, but the work of interpreting their best interests is hardly an objective exercise. Infants are obviously unable to articulate their own wishes with regard to the architecture of their families, and thus judges, parents and various interested parties necessarily fill the void. Fiona Kelly’s research has demonstrated, for example, that fathers’ rights activists have had impressive success in persuading judges that paternal presence is essential to a child’s best interests (KELLY 2011: 30-42; 2009). The Canadian judicial

¹⁵ The child’s best interest is referenced with regard to parentage determination, for example in Ontario’s CLRA 13(5) and Saskatchewan’s CLA 11, which state that the court shall not make a declaration of parentage unless that declaration is in the best interests of the child.

record is redolent with examples of judges “finding fathers” for lesbian and sole mother families over the express wishes of the mothers and their original agreements with known donors (KELLY 2009b; BOYD & ARNUP 1995). Thus, arguably, the fact that the parties to *AA v BB* were actively seeking a way to include both the co-mother and the father as legally recognized parents made their argument especially persuasive. Undoubtedly, it was also helpful that the family was as queerly proximate to the normative ideal as it is possible to be. The co-mothers were in a long-term monogamous relationship celebrated in a public ceremony and the father was involved in a long-term relationship with another woman (*AA v BB* [2003] CANLII 2139 ONSC [*AA v BB* 2003], par 2). They were all professionally successful and financially secure (*AA v BB* 2003, par 3-4). Tellingly, the lower court judge expressed his concerns about the precedent he might be setting by recognizing three parents for children “not before this court.” For one thing, he opined, this would open the door to stepparents and extended family who might be making their claims in “less harmonious circumstances” (*AA v BB* 2003, par 41). Furthermore, he queried, “if a child can have three parents, why not four or six or a dozen? What about all the adults in a commune or a religious organization or sect?” (*AA v BB* 2003, par 41). His concern with this proliferation of parents was, however, more about social policy issues and the havoc that such an arrangement would wreak for custody and access litigation, than for the child’s well-being (*AA v BB* 2003, par 41). The appeal court judge was less concerned about these implications, finding, as already noted, that contemporary developments in family form (same-sex parents) and reproductive technologies had outstripped that capacity of the legislation to provide the equal status for children that was its aim (*AA v BB* 2007).

An (arguably) more radical use of the court’s *parens patriae* jurisdiction to ensure a child’s best interests by recognizing three parents, played out in the recognition of a polyamorous family in Newfoundland and Labrador IN 2018.¹⁶ In *Re CC* [2018] NLSC 71 Carswell Nfld 110 [*Re CC*], Justice Fowler relied heavily on the reasoning in *AA v BB* 2007 to find that the child’s best interests would be best served by recognizing all three parents

¹⁶ Polygamy is a criminal offence in Canada. One important distinguishing feature of polygamy is a formal celebration of the marriage. By contrast, polyamory is not illegal, but neither is it recognized in law. Marriage and legally recognized cohabiting relationships are limited to two people.

in a situation involving a biological mother and her two male partners, both of whom had equal likelihood of being the child's father (*Re CC*, par 37). Indeed, as Justice Fowler noted, "the fact that the biological certainty of parentage is unknown seems to be the adhesive force which lends the paternal identity of both men as the fathers of A" (*Re CC*, par 34). In this familial arrangement, the mother had sexual relationships with both men, but the men did not have a sexual relationship with each other. As with *AA v BB*, provincial authorities opposed the recognition of a third parent on grounds that the *Children's Law Act* implied a two parent limit on families, as evident in the paternal presumption, provisions relating to paternity in cases involving artificial insemination, birth registration under the *Vital Statistics Act*, and definitions of parent and child in the *Family Law Act* (*Re CC* par 12-16). Justice Fowler held, however, that the law would not have contemplated the situation of a polyamorous family when it was originally drafted, three decades previous (*Re CC* par 30), that the best interests of the child were well served by recognizing as parents all three of the adults in his household, and that Justice Fowler had the authority to use the court's *parens patriae* jurisdiction to fill the gap in the law with regard to recognizing contemporary family forms and realizing the law's objective of ensuring the equality of children regardless of the circumstances of their birth (*Re CC*, par 33).

As noted in the earlier discussion of the traditional workings of paternal presumptions, in a case of disputed paternity, most provincial statutes provide that no party shall be presumed to be the child's father, creating a situation in which someone can petition the court to be named as the father (or parent).¹⁷ Given this situation, and reflecting Kelly's observations regarding the tendency of the court to "find fathers" for both sole mothers and lesbian partners, Justice Fowler's "best interests" argument for recognizing both of CC's fathers is telling. He stated: "I have no reason to believe that this relationship detracts from the best interests of the child. On the contrary, to deny the recognition of fatherhood (parentage) by the Applicants would deprive the child of having a legal paternal heritage with all the rights and privileges associated with that designation" (*Re CC*, par 35). Despite the abolishment of the status of illegitimacy, its shadow is evident in Fowler's observation, as is its patriarchal subtext.

¹⁷ See, for example, Newfoundland and Labrador's *Children's Law Act*, s. 10(2).

LEGISLATIVE RESPONSES: BRITISH COLUMBIA,
ONTARIO AND SASKATCHEWAN

As both *AA v BB* and *Re: CC* indicate, the courts can provide some relief for specific families in the presence of a sympathetic judge. Yet legal challenges are expensive, and their precedential impact is not assured. Moreover, as the legal concept of *parens patriae* itself indicates, these decisions were aimed at filling a legislative gap; to address social developments that were not contemplated by law makers at the time of a statute's initial passage, for example. It is hardly a stretch to infer from the court's use of *parens patriae*, the strong suggestion that the legislature take definitive action to fill the void. Nonetheless, it would take the Ontario legislature almost a decade after *AA v BB*, and the threat of a new *Charter of Rights* challenge, to reform the laws governing parental status. The province of Newfoundland and Labrador has yet to act. Elsewhere, however, Canada's most western province of British Columbia opted to recognize three (or possibly four) parents in ITS 2011 reform of the *Family Law Act*.¹⁸

Under the terms of the BC FLA, a child may have three (or possibly four) parents when conceived through assisted reproduction and with a written agreement involving all of the intended parents, prior to conception.¹⁹ Furthermore, the people who can be named parents include the birth mother, her partner and a donor or the intended parent or parents and the birth mother (BC FLA s. 30(1)(b)). As Kelly notes, "the scenario commonly envisaged...is one in which a couple conceives a child with the assistance of a sperm donor or surrogate with the shared pre-conception intention that the donor or surrogate be the child's third legal parent" (KELLY 2014: 567). She goes on to note that the legislative commentary "around the section clearly anticipated it being used primarily by lesbian and gay couples and their donors and surrogates" (KELLY 2014: 567). The law defines intended parents as people in a conjugal relationship with each other, but there is also an association between conjugality and parentage in the provisions relating to a person who is married or in a marriage-like relationship to the birth mother (BC FLA, s. 30). Thus, the BC law is quite conventional, envisaging the three parent model in situations

¹⁸ Although passed IN 2011, the Act did not come into effect UNTIL 2013.

¹⁹ BC FLA, s. 30. The conjugal partner of a donor may also be a parent, hence the possibility of a fourth parent.

of a monogamous relationship plus a donor or surrogate (KELLY 2014: 567; KOLINSKY 2015: 829).

Given the intensity of the debate surrounding LGBTQ rights in many parts of the world, and in Canada in various quarters as well, the fact that there was virtually no political resistance to the introduction of the three parent provisions is remarkable. In Kelly's analysis of the public consultation process that led to the legislative reforms – a process that unfolded over several years and that was designed to comprehensively overhaul the province's family law legislation – she also notes the curiosity of this lack of contention. Ultimately, she concludes,

One can only presume that the provisions were considered uncontroversial – simply a reflection of “the changing reality” of Canadian families – though it is also possible that they were overshadowed by the other substantial changes to BC family law that the FLA introduced. (KELLY 2014: 580)²⁰

While certainly path-breaking in both an historical and comparative sense, British Columbia's *Family Law Act* is in many ways, quite constrained, and potentially double-edged. Because the model continues to privilege biological parentage, its queer-inclusiveness is subtended, and may even assert a conservative understanding of the significance of gender binarism for a child's best interests. That said, it should also be noted that LGBTQ individuals and partners are not obliged to make use of the three parent provisions. And given the plethora of means for constituting families, the particular strictures of the BC FLA may not be especially helpful in any event. A more creative response would eventually emerge from Ontario.

Although the Ontario legislature was very slow to respond to the changing family dynamics that its courts were prepared to recognize, with the passage of the *All Families are Equal Act* – a set of reforms to the *Children's Law Reform Act*, the province implemented likely the world's most queer friendly legislation recognizing multi-parent families. Moreover, this legislation has become a model for other Canadian jurisdictions, with its multi-parent and trans inclusive language recently adopted by a socially conservative government in Saskatchewan, and with some potential to

²⁰ Those changes included the division of matrimonial property, the extension of property rights to common law couples, and the addition of “family violence” to the best interests of the child test (KELLY 2014: 580 fn 75).

be adopted in Manitoba as well.²¹ Ontario was eventually compelled to act when its Liberal government, headed by a openly queer Premier, was confronted by a constitutional challenge to both its parentage provisions and the *Vital Statistics Act* in the form of *Grand v (Ontario) Attorney General* [2016] ONSC 3434 [Grand]. The judgement in this decision primarily focuses on the provincial government's inability to sort out how to respond to the applicants' demands that their parentage be recognized in law. The case involved nine families, with seven children amongst them, of different family configurations, but all LGBTQ parents or intended parents (*Grand* par, 2). The case was resolved when the government agreed that it would amend at least some elements of its legislation to be compliant with the equality provisions of the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (*Grand* par, 15).

The *All Families are Equal Act* extends the presumption of parentage to the partner of the birth parent, and makes specific provisions for parentage in cases of surrogacy, including opportunities for "up to four intended parents". Donors are not parents simply by virtue of donation alone, and variations in family form that involve parents beyond the birth parent and their conjugal partner require carefully stipulated pre-conception agreements (ON CLRA, s.8 (2); 9). Biological parents and conjugal partners are clearly foregrounded here, but it is also possible for intentional parents to engage a surrogate and use donated gametes and thus have no biological relationship to the child or conjugal relationship to the birth parent.

The legislation attracted attention from conservative religious groups, media commentators and transphobic members of both the social conservative and gay community. Notably, however, the legislation passed unanimously, when the leader of the Progressive Conservative party (PCs), Patrick Brown, demanded that party members who did not support the bill absent themselves from the vote (CANADIAN PRESS 2016). He even went so far as to postpone the swearing into office of a recently elected PC member until after the vote on the legislation, in order to prevent the new Member of the Provincial Parliament from voicing his considerable objections to the reforms (CANADIAN PRESS 2016). In an attempt to embarrass the PCs

²¹ Manitoba was poised to overhaul its parentage legislation IN 2015, however a new Progressive Conservative government was elected before its passage (SNOW 2016: 15). In the Fall of 2020, however, a Manitoba superior court judge held that portions of the *Family Maintenance Act* that limited parentage to biological parents was unconstitutional and required the legislature to revise the legislation within one year (*JAS et al., v Attorney General (Manitoba)* File 20-01-24769).

for the homophobic and transphobic views of some of their members, the governing Liberals were willing to delay the vote in order to ensure that the new member could be in the legislature, but this tactic was unsuccessful (CANADIAN PRESS 2016).

The fact that all parties supported the reforms to the legislation meant that the bill's opponents had a very limited platform to air their views, although some sense of their objections can be gleaned from committee testimony and opinion pieces in the press. In an editorial in the *National Post*, for example, a lawyer for a group opposing the legislation voiced concerns about the lines of affiliation created between parents and children brought into relation through a pre-conception agreement (SIKKEMA 2016). He asked, "what is it that makes a child 'contemplated' by a 'pre-conception parentage agreement' or surrogacy agreement the intended parents' 'own kid', other than their signatures?" (SIKKEMA 2016). Given the degree of planning, coordination, negotiation and rationality required to form families through pre-conception agreements and, possibly, multiple-parent families, this is a rather curious position. If the law is prepared to designate hapless heterosexuals as parents by virtue of birth and their relationship to each other, and without resort to home visits and tests of suitability, as adoption requires, it is difficult to understand why planful, intentional parents should not also be granted parental status immediately upon the birth of their child. Indeed, the contrast in intention between these planful parents and any number of heterosexual couples who are suddenly surprised by a pregnancy cannot be overstated.

As noted earlier, the primary focus of objection, interestingly, was not the expansion of parental recognition beyond two people, but the replacement of the terms: "mother" and "father" with "parent". Familiar arguments opposing "social engineering", invoking the policies of totalitarian regimes, and the absent electoral mandate to deny biological sex made an appearance, as did the trivialization of the identities of "mother" and "father" (KAY 2016; CROSS 2016). And while the PCs did attempt to amend the legislation by permitting parents to choose "mother", "father", or "parent" when registering their child's birth, their motion was not supported by the Liberals or the New Democratic Party. The legislation now refers to "parents" generally and identifies their various roles in terms of birth parent, biological parent, person whose sperm is used to conceive a child, surrogate, birth parent's spouse, a person living in a conjugal relationship with a birth

parent and intended parent (CLRA s. 6-11). These are, of course, legal definitions that pertain in the context of birth registration and for other vital statistics purposes. How people represent themselves to the world and to their children remains very much a function of their own desires, social norms and perceived need for social intelligibility.

The most recent Canadian legislative development on queer parentage is that of amendments to the *Children's Law Act* of Saskatchewan. As noted above, the province effectively transposed the Ontario law to the Saskatchewan Act, clarifying parental standing for people forming families with the assistance of reproductive technologies and surrogacy, extending the paternal presumption to the spouse of a birth parent, and enabling up to four people to become parents on the basis of a pre-conception agreement.²² The act also used gender neutral terms for parents. This act passed with virtually no objection from either within the governing Saskatchewan Party – a conservative party that has been in power since 2007, nor, unsurprisingly, from the New Democratic Party – its social democratic opposition.²³ The passivity of this response is notable, not least because, unlike many other provinces, Saskatchewan has had a long-standing resistance even to the extension of the paternal presumption to the same-sex partner of a birth mother.

The case of record on this score was *PC v. SL* [2005] SKQB 502, (CanLII) [*PC v SL*]. The dispute involved the determination of parentage for a child born within a lesbian relationship. The parties disagreed as to whether the child was the product of a parental project or rather, as the biological mother argued, was the unintended result of casual sexual relations with a male friend. But both the province and the judge in this case cleaved to the association of biological relationship with paternal presumption. The Attorney General argued, and ultimately the judge held, that the Charter claim regarding the sex discrimination of paternal presumption caused no harm to the dignity of lesbian co-mothers. The presumption was rebuttable and evidentiary, thus conferring no parental rights (*PC v SL* par, 17). Moreover, the paternal presumption arose from the gender specificity of paternity; parentage was a matter of fact. A woman plainly could not have provided the seed (*PC v SL* par, 17). The court was willing to acknowledge

²² Sask CLA 2020 s. 58-62.

²³ See the record of legislative debate and committee consideration on the *Children's Law Act* in Saskatchewan, *Hansard*, 29th LEGISLATURE 2016-2020.

that parental rights were about more than biological connection (*PC v SL* par, 21), but nonetheless, paternal presumption was the issue at hand, and it was simply impossible for the court to “aspire to affect the fundamentals of biology that underlie the presumption purely in the interests of equal treatment before the law” (*PC v SL* par 20). The “fact” that paternal presumptions had created the legal fiction of a biologically related father was beside the point. A child was the issue of a mother and a father, even if not exactly that specific father (*HARDER & THOMARAT 2012: 76-77*).

IN 2009, Saskatchewan did revise its vital statistics legislation to allow an “other parent” to be listed on a child’s birth certificate. However, birth registration in itself only establishes a rebuttable presumption of parentage rather than conferring the legal status of parent in itself (*ROGERSON 2017: 96*). Thus, while other provinces slowly worked to address the inequities of parentage legislation, and the judicial record increasingly amassed victories for sexual orientation equality rights that stood in sharp contrast to the dignity claim in *PC v SL*, Saskatchewan’s legal regime fell further and further behind.

Ultimately, this situation could not hold. IN 2018, upon the request of an academic and a lawyer, the Saskatchewan Law Reform Commission undertook a consultation process on the province’s laws governing assisted reproduction and parentage. Certainly, queer families were understood to be included in its ambit, but the emphasis on assisted reproduction more broadly, meant that the specific recognition of queer parents was downplayed. The Commission’s report and, of course, Ontario’s example would become the basis for the revised *Children’s Law Act*. And while legislative debate did mention the advocacy of a queer couple as a central motivating force – indeed, one member of the couple, Nicole White, was a leading activist for same-sex marriage and ran, unsuccessfully, for the New Democratic party in the province’s 2016 election – the breadth of applicability to both straight and queer families, and its championing by the governing party, were likely the key factors in explaining the lack of conservative political resistance.

CONCLUSION

This paper has focused on the extent to which Canada’s approach to parentage recognition is, in fact, especially inclusive: especially queer. Comparatively speaking, this analysis is located in a space of impressive privilege.

Canadian jurisdictions offer real examples of positive recognition and continued development that justify the country's positive reputation for queer inclusion. Yet on closer inspection, it is also true that parentage law operates within some strong normative constraints. Perhaps the most preeminent of these limits of queer parentage recognition is the legal form itself. Codification and widespread applicability are the lifeblood of legislation, civil and common law. This foundation in generalizability is constitutively at odds with the creative and fluid forms of queer families. "If the expression *queer* is a proud form of manifesting difference, inasmuch as it can cause inversions in the chain of repetition that confers power to preexisting authoritarian practices," then Canada's emerging parentage regime qualifies (PEREIRA 2019: 418). But queer is a relative term. To the extent that queer families desire legal recognition, there is a required sacrifice to legal norms, even as those families push against established boundaries.

Canada's slow and piecemeal development of laws governing queer parentage offer some interesting points of comparison and strategic lessons for legal reformers both within and beyond provincial and national borders. The evidence suggests that legislatures may eventually be compelled to act if there are judicial decisions that are likely to cause constitutional and/or political difficulties for the governing party. On the basis of a "child's best interests", judges may be willing to use the court's *parens patriae* jurisdiction to address gaps in the law and extend recognition to a growing array of family forms.²⁴ That may be especially true when the terms of family law have fallen so far behind both evolving family forms and technological change that the injustice of the governing statutes can no longer be countenanced. And when the need for reform has reached such a state, resistance to change may be quite limited. In Canada, the combination of the need to respond to the parentage needs of legally recognized same-sex partners and the increasing use of reproductive technologies has created at least three situations in which provincial governments could extend recognition to queer families with virtually no political consequences for the governing party. In contemplating up to four (or possibly more) parents, these legislative

²⁴ Robert Leckey (2019) argues that, with the passage of parentage legislation, courts may be less inclined to use their *parens patriae* powers, since the legislature has recently had an opportunity to consider how it would address various situations and made its determinations. That said, he also notes examples in which, despite recent legislation, the court did feel prepared to identify a gap in the legislation.

developments certainly go well beyond the dyadic, heterosexual model. Yet they also demand considerable resources, the use of reproductive technologies, and a great deal of planning, and they trade on conjugality and biological relationship to a considerable extent. Such arrangements can certainly assist some categories of queer families, but there are many more that will continue to form and persist outside of these strictures. It is these queerer forms of non-normative family life where innovation and dynamism offer the next horizon for the creative potential of supportive intimate life.

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BENJAMIN MORON-PUECH

Des difficultés juridiques des familles MISSEG en Europe, dites aussi « familles arc-en-ciel »

ENGLISH TITLE: Legal difficulties for MISSEG (also called “rainbow”) families in Europe.

ABSTRACT: This text sums up the various legal difficulties that “rainbow families” do or may encounter in European countries nowadays. By “rainbow families” — a broader notion than same-sex couple — we mean families whose founding couple include one or more LGBTIQ individuals. This text deals with issues concerning both the relationship between the couple’s members (access to a form of legal union, protection of the couple’s patrimonial and extra-patrimonial interests) and the relationship between the couple and their child or children (ability to have children and to establish and maintain a relationship with them).

KEYWORDS: family law; sexual orientation; gender identity; sex characteristics; family life; discrimination.

À l’heure où l’Union européenne vient d’adopter une stratégie pour l’égalité à l’égard des personnes « LGBTIQ¹ » qui lui faisait défaut depuis longtemps et incluant en particulier un volet sur les « familles arc-en-ciel »², cette contribution se propose de faire le point sur les difficultés juridiques que ces familles rencontrent ou sont susceptibles de rencontrer aujourd’hui dans les pays européens. Les médias ou les institutions ont attiré l’attention du public sur certaines des difficultés juridiques rencontrées par ces familles, qu’il s’agisse de la difficulté pour les membres d’un couple à s’unir ou à demeurer ensemble lorsque les unions contractées dans un pays ne sont pas reconnues dans un autre État où la « famille arc-en-ciel » souhaite s’établir, ou encore des difficultés d’accès à la parenté, tant en fait (pour la procréation) qu’en droit (pour l’établissement de la filiation). Toutefois, restent quelques

¹ L’acronyme est ici mis entre guillemets, l’auteur lui préférant celui de MISSEG. V. *infra*, note 7 notamment.

² Commission européenne, *Union of Equality: LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020-2025*: 12 nov. 2020, COM(2020) 698 final.

angles morts que souhaite mettre à jour cette contribution³, en adoptant une approche systématique et globale⁴ des difficultés rencontrées par ces familles.

Cet article s'adresse à la fois aux actaires⁵ de la science du droit, soucieux* de s'informer sur les difficultés avérées ou prévisibles que rencontrent notamment en Europe les « familles arc-en-ciel », et aux actaires du droit positif (législateurs*, fonctionnaires, ONG militantes ou non) soucieux* d'assurer à ces familles une dignité égale à celle des familles dites traditionnelles.

Le texte commence par quelques propos introductifs précisant l'expression de « famille arc-en-ciel » (I). Passés ces prolégomènes, l'article passe en revue les difficultés rencontrées par ces familles en distinguant celles concernant le lien de couple – la famille horizontale – (II) de celles concernant les liens entre le couple et les enfants – la famille verticale (III).

1. PRÉCISIONS SUR L'EXPRESSION DE « FAMILLE ARC-EN-CIEL »

L'expression de « famille arc-en-ciel » n'est sans doute pas des plus précises juridiquement et a tendance, dans l'esprit du public, à renvoyer avant tout aux familles homoparentales, alors qu'elle recouvre également les familles transparentes et interparentales, ainsi que les familles dont les membres fondateurs* – le couple – peuvent être plus de deux (polyunions). En outre, cette expression apparaît quelque peu connotée du point de vue militant, ce qui rend son emploi délicat dans le contexte de la science du droit. Il est vrai cependant que cette expression présente l'avantage de la concision et permet assez simplement aux actaires du droit de faire comprendre à leur auditoire de quelles familles ils parlent, d'où l'emploi de cette notion dans certaines normes internationales⁶, même si persiste un certain flottement sur les familles concernées, réduites bien souvent dans l'esprit du public

³ On laissera donc de côté la question bien connue de la liberté de circulation des « familles arc-en-ciel », largement traitée par ailleurs en doctrine (en dernier lieu TRIFONIDOU et WINTEMUTE 2021) et dont il ne nous semble pas enfin qu'elle soit le meilleur moyen d'assurer une réelle inclusion de ces familles. V. en ce sens MORON-PUECH 2020.

⁴ Par opposition à une approche isolée, laquelle examinerait simplement par exemple les familles homoparentales.

⁵ Le présent texte s'efforce d'user d'un langage inclusif. Pour cela, il y est recouru à un genre commun, capable d'inclure tous les genres, en suivant les régularités proposées par ALPHERATZ 2018. Les premières occurrences des mots ainsi accordés sont précédées d'un astérisque. Pour cette même raison, l'expression « droits de l'homme » ne sera pas employée ou à tout le moins mise entre guillemets.

⁶ Commission européenne, préc. ou Assemblée parlementaire du Conseil de l'Europe, *Vie privée et familiale: parvenir à l'égalité quelle que soit l'orientation sexuelle*, résolution 2239 (2018), 10 oct. 2018, §4.5.

aux seules familles homoparentales. Dans cette contribution, même si l'expression de « famille arc-en-ciel » a été retenue entre guillemets dans l'intitulé de cet article (afin de permettre au lectorat de saisir immédiatement de quoi il allait être ici question), elle ne sera pas utilisée dans la suite de ce texte pour les deux raisons évoquées plus haut (imprécision et connotation militante). Lui a été préférée l'expression abrégée *familles MISSEG*⁷, désignant les familles minorisées à raison de l'orientation sexuelle, l'identité ou l'expression de genre et les caractéristiques sexuées d'un* ou plusieurs de leur membre fondateur⁸. En effet, cette dernière expression ne présente tout d'abord aucune des faiblesses de celle de « famille arc-en-ciel ». Ainsi, elle est à la fois plus précise, car couvrant explicitement l'ensemble du spectre des familles concernées, et moins connotée au niveau militant car renvoyant à des notions relativement établies en droit international des droits humains⁹. Ensuite cette expression permet d'insister sur l'origine des difficultés rencontrées par ces familles, à savoir un processus de minorisation liée à trois notions autrefois rassemblées derrière la notion unique de sexe : orientation sexuelle, identité et expression de genre et caractéristiques sexuées. Ce faisant, à l'instar de la démarche retenue par la Convention internationale des droits des personnes handicapées à propos de l'origine du handicap¹⁰, cette expression permet d'insister sur l'origine sociale de ces

⁷ MISSEG pour Minorités Sexuées, Sexuelles et de Genre.

⁸ Sont donc ici exclues du concept de famille MISSEG les familles composées d'un enfant appartenant aux MISSEG. Ces familles rencontrent en effet des difficultés d'un autre type, affectant non pas le lien entre les parents* et l'enfant, mais l'étendue de l'autorité parentale : dans quelle mesure et selon quelles modalités les parents peuvent-ils* décider des caractéristiques sexuées, de l'orientation sexuelle ou de l'identité de genre de leur enfant ? Sur cette question v. not. MORON-PUECH 2013.

⁹ Les notions d'orientation sexuelle, d'identité et d'expression de genre et enfin de caractéristiques sexuées sont ainsi reconnues dans différents instruments internationaux. V. pour l'Assemblée parlementaire du Conseil de l'Europe, les résolutions 1728 (2010), *Discrimination sur la base de l'orientation sexuelle et de l'identité de genre*, 29 avr. 2010 ; 2048 (2015), *La discrimination à l'encontre des personnes transgenres en Europe*, 22 avr. 2015 ; 2191 (2017), *Promouvoir les droits humains et éliminer les discriminations à l'égard des personnes intersexes*, 12 oct. 2017 ; 2239 (2018), *Vie privée et familiale : parvenir à l'égalité quelle que soit l'orientation sexuelle*, 10 oct. 2018. V. pour l'Union européenne : Parlement européen, *Résolution sur la feuille de route de l'UE contre l'homophobie et les discriminations fondées sur l'orientation sexuelle et l'identité de genre*, 4 févr. 2014, n° P7_TA(2014)0062 ; *Résolution sur les droits des personnes intersexuées*, 14 févr. 2019, n° 2018/2878(RSP). V. pour l'ONU, Conseil des droits de l'homme, *Résolution 17/19, Droits de l'homme, orientation sexuelle et identité de genre*, n° A/HRC/RES/17/19, 14 juill. 2011 ; *Résolution 32/2, Protection contre la violence et la discrimination en raison de l'orientation sexuelle et de l'identité de genre*, A/HRC/RES/32/2, 15 juill. 2016 et Haut-commissariat aux droits de l'homme, *Intersexe*, note d'information 2015.

¹⁰ V. le préambule, § e) : « e) *Reconnaissant* que la notion de handicap [...] résulte de l'interaction

difficultés, à rebours de l'idée selon laquelle ces difficultés proviendraient des personnes elles-mêmes. Soulignons également que l'expression permet d'insister sur le processus de minorisation qui, partant d'un* membre de la famille, est susceptible de rayonner vers les autres membres de celle-ci selon un dispositif semblable à celui à l'œuvre dans la discrimination par association, discrimination également bien identifiée dans le contexte du handicap¹¹. Enfin, relevons que l'usage de cette expression présuppose un concept de famille relativement ouvert. Si cette approche ouverte peut être contestée politiquement, religieusement, voire juridiquement – du moins au regard de certains droits nationaux d'Europe de l'Est¹² –, cette approche inclusive peut néanmoins être soutenue par des normes internationales reconnaissant à ces groupes de personnes la qualification de famille¹³.

2. LES DIFFICULTÉS CONCERNANT LES LIENS DE COUPLE

Les couples comprenant une ou plusieurs personnes appartenant aux minorités sexuées, sexuelles et de genre (ci-après *couples MISSEG*) sont susceptibles de rencontrer plusieurs difficultés. Après avoir évoqué ces difficultés (A.), l'on indiquera comment ces difficultés sont résolues ou pourraient l'être par les ordres juridiques (B.).

A. PRÉSENTATION DES DIFFICULTÉS

Les difficultés rencontrées par les couples MISSEG sont de deux ordres. Les unes tiennent à la non reconnaissance pure et simple de leur vie familiale, les autres à une reconnaissance diminuée. Dans le premier cas les couples MISSEG ne peuvent pas voir leur vie familiale reconnue, dans l'autre leur vie familiale est reconnue mais de manière dégradée.

entre des personnes présentant des incapacités et les barrières comportementales et environnementales qui font obstacle à leur pleine et effective participation à la société sur la base de l'égalité avec les autres ».

¹¹ ONU, Comité des droits des personnes handicapées, *Observations générales n° 6 sur l'égalité et la non-discrimination*, § 20.

¹² Voir en particulier la Pologne où se développe un discours politique hostile aux MISSEG, avec le soutien de l'Église et d'une partie de la société civile. Doit en particulier être mentionné le rôle de l'ONG *Ordo juris*, à l'origine de modèles de Chartes régionales des droits familiaux adoptée ensuite par nombre de municipalités.

¹³ Pour l'Union européenne, voir Commission européenne préc., ainsi que les normes produites par la Commission et le Parlement européens listées dans MORON-PUECH 2020. Rappr. CJUE [grande chambre], *Coman*, 5 juin 2018, C673/16, § 48. Pour le Conseil de l'Europe, v. la résolution 2238 (2018) précitée et CEDH, *Schalk et Kopf c/ Autriche*, 24 JUIN 2010, n° 30141/04.

1. S'agissant tout d'abord de la non-reconnaissance de leur vie familiale, les couples de MISSEG font face dans un certain nombre de pays européens à une impossibilité d'entrer dans une forme d'union juridiquement protégée. En effet, il est courant de réserver ces unions à des conditions qu'on peut qualifier de sociologiques et subordonnant celles-ci à un genre¹⁴ particulier des époux (un genre masculin et un genre féminin) ou encore à des couples comprenant un nombre limité de personnes (deux). Ces conditions, assises sur une conception naturalisante et reproductrice du couple, excluent un certain nombre de couples MISSEG, à savoir ceux composés de plus de deux personnes ou composés de deux personnes ayant des genres identiques ou dont l'un ou les deux membres du couple auraient un genre juridiquement reconnu autre que le masculin et le féminin. Pour tous ces couples résidant dans des pays retenant une conception dite traditionnelle¹⁵ du couple, il sera alors impossible d'accéder à une forme d'union reconnue par le droit et susceptible de protéger leurs liens familiaux.

Même lorsque ces couples parviennent à protéger juridiquement leur union dans un État plus ouvert, ils peuvent néanmoins être exposés à des difficultés en cas de séjour dans un État ne reconnaissant pas leur union. En particulier, l'un* des membres du couple non national de cet État risque de se voir priver du droit d'entrer ou de séjourner dans cet État¹⁶. Cette situation peut être rapprochée de celle où l'un des membres du couple est emprisonné et où l'autre membre de ce couple ne se verrait pas octroyer

¹⁴ Nombre de législations renvoient au terme de « sexe ». L'examen minutieux de la jurisprudence relative aux mariages d'une personne transgenre ou intersexuée révèle que bien souvent il est moins question de caractéristiques sexuées que d'expression ou d'identité de genre. Pour la France, cf. Cass. Ch. réun., 6 avr. 1903 : *D.*, 1904, I, p. 395 et s. 1^{re} civ. 4 mai 2017, n° 16-17.189, admettant l'union d'une femme avec une personne intersexuée perçue comme ayant un genre masculin. *Adde* pour le mariage de deux personnes transgenres ayant un sexe distinct à l'état civil mais paraissant du même genre : TGI Nanterre, 10 juin 2005, confirmé par CA, Versailles, 8 juill. 2005, n° 05/04694 : *D.*, 2006, p. 772. L'arrêt d'appel est fondé non pas directement sur la condition de différence de sexe/genre, mais sur l'absence d'intention conjugale, motif pris que les époux* poursuivraient un but militant de légalisation du mariage homosexuel. Pourtant, les époux avaient bien une intention conjugale, en parallèle de leur éventuel but militant qui ne pouvait pas être considéré comme le but exclusif de l'union (BONNET 2006). Dès lors, il est permis de penser qu'en dépit du visa de l'article 146 utilisé pour le défaut d'intention matrimoniale, c'est bien la prohibition des mariages entre personnes de même sexe – ou plutôt de même genre – qui sert de fondement à la décision.

¹⁵ Rapp. le vocabulaire utilisé par la Cour qui, après avoir paré de « concept traditionnel de mariage » (CEDH, *Schall et Kopf c. Autriche*, § 51), en est venue à user de l'expression « famille traditionnelle » (CEDH, *Taddeucci et McCall.*, § 92).

¹⁶ V. les faits de l'affaire *Coman* précitée.

les droits réservés au couple marié afin d'assurer la préservation du lien de couple¹⁷.

2. Une autre difficulté que peuvent rencontrer les couples MISSEG apparaît lorsqu'il leur est permis de bénéficier d'une reconnaissance juridique de leur union, mais avec des effets dégradés par rapport aux effets produits par l'union d'une famille dite traditionnelle. Tel est le cas des pays fermant le mariage aux couples MISSEG et ne leur ouvrant – encore que bien souvent cela ne soit ouvert qu'aux couples composés de deux personnes – que des unions produisant moins d'effets que ce dernier. Dans de tels pays, les couples MISSEG seront ainsi moins bien traités que les couples mariés, tant en matière personnelle que patrimoniale.

En matière personnelle, cette absence d'accès au mariage peut conduire à priver les couples MISSEG de certains dispositifs réservés aux couples mariés tant en droit civil qu'en droit pénal. En droit civil, les membres d'un couple marié se voient souvent réserver le bénéfice de règles leur permettant de porter le nom de famille de leur conjoint^{*18}, ce qui est de nature à faciliter la reconnaissance de leur union par les tiers*. Existente aussi des règles pour faciliter la représentation d'un conjoint par un autre qui ne serait plus en état de décider seul^{*}, ce qui est de nature à protéger le membre vulnérable du couple¹⁹. Des procédures simplifiées d'acquisition de la nationalité peuvent aussi être réservées aux personnes mariées²⁰. De même, en droit pénal, l'existence d'un couple peut avoir pour effet d'aggraver ou d'alléger la responsabilité dans un objectif de protection du couple ou de ses membres. Or, parfois, ces mécanismes ne sont prévus que pour les couples mariés, ce qui est alors susceptible d'exclure de ces dispositifs les couples MISSEG. Au titre des dispositifs d'allègement on peut mentionner la dispense de témoignage dont peut bénéficier un membre du couple dans les procédures concernant l'autre membre du couple²¹ ou encore l'absence d'incrimination pénale de vol, escroquerie et autres infractions aux biens au sein d'un couple marié²². Quant aux dispositifs d'aggravation, il s'agit

¹⁷ Rappr. CEDH, *Petrov c. Bulgarie*, 22 mai 2008, n° 15197/02, jugeant discriminatoire le refus des autorités bulgares d'accorder à une personne détenue le droit d'appeler téléphoniquement sa concubine.

¹⁸ Rappr. art. 225-1 c. civ. français réservé aux couples mariés.

¹⁹ Rappr. art. 217 c. civ. français réservé aux couples mariés.

²⁰ Rappr. art. 21-2 c. civ. français réservé aux couples mariés.

²¹ Rappr. §4.4.4. de la résolution 2238 (2018) précitée.

²² Rappr. art. 311-12, 312-9, 312-12, 313-3, 314-4 c. pénal français limité aux couples mariés.

des dispositifs réprimant les violences au sein d'un couple plus durement que les autres violences²³.

En matière patrimoniale, plusieurs dispositifs sont l'apanage habituellement des couples mariés tant du vivant des membres du couple qu'après la mort de l'un d'entre eux*. Du vivant du couple marié, nombre de règles œuvrent au rapprochement patrimonial du couple. Tel est le cas des règles de nature civile et fiscale facilitant la transmission de biens entre les membres du couple marié²⁴, de celles imposant une contribution de chacun* aux charges du ménage²⁵ ou encore de celles permettant l'association de l'époux à l'activité professionnelle du conjoint, au point parfois de pouvoir prendre part aux élections professionnelles de cet* dernier*²⁶. Doivent être également mentionnées les règles contribuant à la protection patrimoniale des membres du couple marié, telles celles sur l'obligation alimentaire²⁷, la pension alimentaire due en cas de séparation du couple²⁸, ou encore l'extension de droits sociaux, parmi lesquels le droit au logement ou le droit aux assurances de santé (tant le droit d'être couvert par l'assurance du conjoint, que le droit aux différents avantages accordés aux conjoints*, comme par exemple le congé pour maladie d'un proche)²⁹. Des dispositifs de protection

²³ Rappr. §4.4.4. de la résolution 2238 (2018) précitée. Comp. not. art. 222-13 c. pén. français bénéficiant à tous les couples.

²⁴ Rappr. art. 1527 al. 1^{er} c. civ. français disposant que les avantages résultant du régime matrimonial choisi par les époux ne constituent pas des donations, d'où la conséquence qu'ils échappent à toute fiscalité.

²⁵ Rappr. art. 215 et 515-4 c. civ. français limités aux couples mariés et unis par un pacte civil de solidarité.

²⁶ Rappr. art. 511-8 c. rural français ne mentionnant que le « conjoint » mais interprété par la Cour de cassation comme bénéficiant au concubin (Cass., 2^e civ., 15 juin 2001, n° 00-60.486). *Contra* pour les élections générales Cass., 2^e civ., 5 mars 2008, n° 07-60.229.

²⁷ Rappr. art. 212 c. civ. français évoquant le secours que se doivent mutuellement les époux*. Pour une exclusion de l'obligation alimentaire dans les unions autres que le mariage, v. Cass 1^{re} civ., 28 mars 2006, n° 04-10.684.

²⁸ Rappr. art. 270 c. civ. français pour les couples mariés et sans équivalent pour les autres unions.

²⁹ Rappr. la résolution 2238 (2018) précitée, appelant les États à ne pas discriminer les couples s'agissant du droit au bail (§4.3.2.) ou de l'accès aux droits liés aux assurances sociales (§4.3.3. et 4.4.2.). *Adde* CEDH, *P.B. et J.S. c. Autriche*, 22 juill. 2010, n° 18984/02 jugeant discriminatoire le refus de considérer le concubin homosexuel comme un ayant-droit susceptible de bénéficier de la couverture sociale de son concubin ou CJUE, *Frédéric Hay c. Crédit agricole mutuel de Charente-Maritime et des Deux-Sèvres*, 12 déc. 2013, C-267/12, jugeant discriminatoire sur le fondement de l'orientation sexuelle une convention collective n'ouvrant le bénéfice de jours de congés spéciaux qu'aux couples mariés et non aux autres couples qui n'avaient à cette date pas accès au mariage.

patrimoniale réservés aux couples mariés peuvent également exister en cas de décès d'un membre du couple, afin par exemple de permettre à l'autre membre de conserver le logement (*via* un droit d'occupation pris en charge par la succession³⁰ ou encore un droit à la transmission du bail vis-à-vis du propriétaire³¹) ou de bénéficier d'une pension de réversion³². D'autres dispositifs contribuent à poursuivre après la mort l'union patrimoniale, qu'on songe aux règles de droit des successions pouvant faire du seul conjoint marié* un héritier* de plein droit, exonéré* qui plus est en tout ou partie de fiscalité successorale et pouvant également bénéficier de l'attribution préférentielle de certains biens (logement, entreprise familiale). Peut enfin être rattachée à cette catégorie de droit, la possibilité parfois réservée au conjoint marié de voir indemnisé le préjudice lié à la mort du conjoint³³.

B. RÉOLUTION DES DIFFICULTÉS

Les couples confrontés aux difficultés du type de celles évoquées plus haut ne sont pas désarmés, ainsi que le prouve en Europe le contentieux national ou international fondé sur le principe de non-discrimination découlant en particulier des normes du droit de l'Union européenne³⁴ et du Conseil de l'Europe³⁵, éventuellement articulées avec le droit au respect de la vie privée et familiale³⁶. Pour que les couples MISSEG puissent se prévaloir d'une discrimination, plusieurs conditions doivent être réunies³⁷. Schéma-

³⁰ Rappr. art. 763 c. civ. français réservé aux couples mariés.

³¹ Rappr. CEDH, *Karner c. Autriche*, 24 juill. 2003, n° 40016/98 considérant comme discriminatoire une norme privant le membre d'un couple homosexuel d'un droit à la transmission du bail ouvert aux couples hétérosexuels.

³² Rappr. §4.4.6. de la résolution 2238 (2018) précitée appelant les États membres à ouvrir aux couples de MISSEG le bénéfice de pensions de réversion.

³³ Rappr. Cass., Crim., 13 févr. 1937 (3 arrêts) : *DP*, 1938: 1, p. 5, refusant à la concubine le droit d'agir en responsabilité civile.

³⁴ Articles 2 du Traité sur l'union européenne et 21 de la Charte des droits fondamentaux de l'Union européenne (CDFUE).

³⁵ Article 14 de la « Convention de sauvegarde des droits de l'homme et des libertés fondamentales » (CSDHFL).

³⁶ Il arrive parfois que la vie privée et familiale éclipse le problème de la discrimination, la Cour profitant d'une censure sur le terrain de l'article 8 pris isolément pour ne pas avoir à examiner l'argument de la discrimination. Pour une illustration v. CEDH, *Goodwin c. Royaume-Uni*, 11 juill. 2002, n° 28957/95, où la Cour n'examine pas le grief d'une personne transgenre tiré du refus discriminatoire de l'accès au mariage et aux droits liés à celui-ci. La Cour estime en effet qu'il lui suffit de constater une violation de l'article 8 résultant du refus des autorités du Royaume-Uni de reconnaître le changement de la mention du sexe à l'état civil de la personne requérante.

³⁷ V. not. CEDH, *Taddeucci et McCall c. Italie*, 30 JUIN 2016, n° 51362/09, § 87 ou CEDH [GC], *Molla Sali c. Grèce*, 19 déc. 2019, n° 20452/14, § 135-136. Pour le droit de l'Union européenne, les exigences

tiquement³⁸, il faut démontrer *primo* que des personnes placées dans une situation analogue font l'objet d'un traitement différent ou bien que des personnes placées dans une situation différente font l'objet d'un traitement comparable et, *secundo*, que ce traitement n'est fondé sur aucune justification objective et raisonnable, c'est-à-dire qu'il ne poursuit pas de but légitime ou qu'il n'existe pas de rapport raisonnable de proportionnalité entre les moyens employés et le but recherché.

Pour cette deuxième condition, il faut également tenir compte de la marge d'appréciation reconnue aux États, en particulier dans la jurisprudence de la Cour européenne des droits de l'homme (CEDH)³⁹. Une telle marge peut en effet conduire à un contrôle plus ou moins exigeant de la Cour selon que la marge soit restreinte ou au contraire large. Selon la Cour, cette marge d'appréciation est plus restreinte lorsque la discrimination repose sur « le sexe ou l'orientation sexuelle » ce qui, compte tenu de l'approche large de la notion traditionnelle de sexe, paraît devoir englober tant l'expression ou l'identité de genre que les caractéristiques sexuées⁴⁰. D'un autre côté, cependant, « la marge d'appréciation accordée à l'État au titre de la Convention est d'ordinaire ample lorsqu'il s'agit de prendre

sont proches ; sur la jurisprudence en général de la CJUE, v. HERNU 2020 et pour des illustrations à propos des familles MISSEG, voir les trois affaires *Maruko*, *Romer* et *Hay* citées *infra*.

³⁸ La seconde condition fait l'objet de certains aménagements, aux contours différents selon qu'il s'agit du droit de l'Union européenne ou de celui du Conseil de l'Europe. En droit de l'Union, en présence d'une discrimination directe, l'article 2, 5. de la directive 2000/78 sur l'égalité professionnelle limite les buts pouvant être mis en avant d'une part et fait de cette deuxième condition non une condition de l'action mais un moyen de défense que le gouvernement peut invoquer en présence d'une base légale d'autre part. Quant au droit issu de l'interprétation de l'article 14 de la CSDH par la CEDH, il a été jugé que lorsque la discrimination repose seulement sur l'orientation sexuelle, aucune justification ne peut être apportée d'une part et la deuxième condition constitue en réalité un moyen de défense que le gouvernement peut invoquer (CEDH, *Taddeucci et McCall*, préc., § 89-90).

³⁹ Le concept de marge nationale d'appréciation, bien que plus visible dans la jurisprudence de la CEDH, est pertinent également au regard de la CJUE qui, s'efforçant également de concevoir son action comme subsidiaire de celle des juges nationaux, emploie également des instruments équivalents (BARBOU DES PLACES et DEFFAINS 2015). Cela étant, pour le sujet nous occupant, il apparaît surtout formalisé dans la jurisprudence de la CEDH. Pour la Cour de Luxembourg, l'on verra plus simplement qu'après avoir confié aux États le soin de déterminer si les situations des familles dites traditionnelles étaient comparables à celles des familles MISSEG, elle a progressivement décidé de réaliser elle-même cette comparaison, ce qui pourrait se comprendre comme le passage d'une marge d'appréciation large à une marge d'appréciation restreinte, pour s'inspirer des notions développées par la CEDH.

⁴⁰ Pour une utilisation de cette règle de détermination de la marge d'appréciation à propos d'une personne transgenre, voir CEDH, *Hämäläinen c. Finlande*, 16 juill. 2014, n° 37359/09, §109.

des mesures d'ordre général en matière économique ou sociale », comme c'est le cas s'agissant de l'accès des couples MISSEG à des formes d'union juridiquement protégées. Dès lors, il semble bien que la marge d'appréciation dans de telles circonstances doivent être qualifiée de « normale », de sorte qu'elle ne devrait guère affecter le contrôle de proportionnalité qui nous semble pouvoir être opéré ici sans tenir compte de la marge d'appréciation, à l'instar de ce que fait par exemple la Cour interaméricaine des droits humains qui refuse d'importer ce concept européen de marge d'appréciation⁴¹. Ainsi, pour rechercher s'il existe ou non un traitement discriminatoire des couples MISSEG, on s'en tiendra ici aux seules deux conditions énoncées plus haut. Ces conditions seront vérifiées en distinguant selon que le principe de non-discrimination est invoqué pour obtenir l'ouverture aux couples MISSEG d'unions civiles (mariage ou autres formes d'union) (1.) ou seulement l'extension à ces couples d'avantages réservés aux couples mariés (2.).

1. L'argument selon lequel le principe de non-discrimination imposerait d'ouvrir aux couples MISSEG les unions civiles réservées aux couples dits traditionnels a été pour la première fois sérieusement examinée par la CEDH dans son arrêt *Schalk et Kopf c. Autriche* précité. Dans cet arrêt, la Cour a en effet pour la première fois jugé que la première condition d'application du principe de non-discrimination était remplie. Pour la Cour, « les couples homosexuels sont, tout comme les couples hétérosexuels, capables de s'engager dans des relations stables », de sorte qu'ils « se trouvent donc dans une situation comparable à celle d'un couple hétérosexuel pour ce qui est de leur besoin de reconnaissance juridique ». Affirmée à propos d'un couple homosexuel cisgenre et diadique⁴², cette affirmation paraît pouvoir être étendue aux couples comprenant une ou plusieurs personnes transgenres et/ou intersexuées, ainsi qu'aux couples comprenant plus de deux personnes et pour lesquels il n'existe à notre connaissance aucune donnée suggérant que les personnes s'y engageant seraient incapables de le faire de manière stable. En effet, pour justifier que les couples homosexuels (cisgenres et diadiques) étaient dans une situation comparable à celle des couples dits traditionnels la Cour s'est

⁴¹ A. A. Cançado Trindade, *El derecho internacional de los derechos humanos en el siglo XXI*, §390 2008 cité par FOLLESDAL 2017.

⁴² Par cisgenre, on entend désigner les personnes non transgenres, tout comme par diadique on entend désigner les personnes non intersexuées.

appuyée sur le fait que « les couples homosexuels sont, tout comme les couples hétérosexuels, capables de s’engager dans des relations stables ». Or, une telle prémisse est également transposable aux couples homosexuels comprenant une personne transgenre ou intersexuée⁴³, ceux-ci paraissant en effet, tout autant que les couples homosexuels, « capables de s’engager dans des relations stables ». Il est également permis de penser qu’elle est transposable aux couples composés de plus de deux personnes, même si, au-delà d’un certain nombre de membres, la stabilité risque d’être difficile à attendre. Dans ces conditions, l’on peut conclure que les couples MISSEG s’engageant dans des relations stables sont dans une situation comparable aux couples dits traditionnels s’agissant de l’accès à une union et du bénéfice de règles issues de cette union et destinées à leur protection. La première condition du principe de non-discrimination est donc remplie

S’agissant de la seconde condition, la position de la CEDH a évolué à son égard. Dans un premier temps, la CEDH a jugé cette condition non remplie et conclu que l’article 14, combiné avec les articles 8 ou 12, n’imposait nullement aux États (i) d’ouvrir le mariage aux couples MISSEG ou (ii) de créer pour eux des formes d’unions juridiquement protégées. Sur le premier point (i), la Cour a jugé que l’article 12 reconnaissant à l’homme et à la femme le droit de se marier ne saurait, compte tenu des méthodes d’interprétation retenues par la CEDH, lesquelles octroient un rôle important aux États membres pour statuer sur les questions sensibles, être interprété comme consacrant un droit au mariage pour les couples homosexuels⁴⁴, même si elle a dans cet arrêt accepté que ce texte puisse conférer d’autres droits à ces couples⁴⁵. En outre, adoptant une lecture systémique de la CSDH⁴⁶, la Cour a refusé, sur le terrain de l’article 8 combiné à l’article 14, de reconnaître aux couples homosexuels un droit au mariage qu’elle

⁴³ Il n’existe pas à ce jour de jurisprudence s’étant prononcée en détail sur l’application du principe de non-discrimination à ces couples. V. en particulier l’occasion manquée qu’aurait constitué l’arrêt *Goodwin* évoqué plus haut.

⁴⁴ CEDH, *Schalk et Kopf*, préc., §54-60. V. en dernier lieu CEDH, *Oliari c. Italie*, n^{os} 18766/11 et 36030/11, § 192 : « The Court notes that despite the gradual evolution of States on the matter (today there are eleven CoE states that have recognised same-sex marriage) the findings reached in the cases mentioned above remain pertinent. In consequence the Court reiterates that Article 12 of the Convention does not impose an obligation on the respondent Government to grant a same-sex couple like the applicants access to marriage. »

⁴⁵ Solution réaffirmée not. dans CEDH, *Orlandi et autres c. Italie*, 14 déc. 2017, n^{os} 26431/12 et al., §145.

⁴⁶ Pour une critique de cette lecture voir WILLEMS 2021.

leur refuse sur le terrain de l'article 12⁴⁷. De même, sur le second point (ii), la CEDH a refusé de reconnaître qu'un État membre aurait dû créer, plus tôt qu'il ne l'a fait, une forme d'union civile enregistrée⁴⁸. Ce faisant, elle a implicitement jugé que la seconde condition n'était pas remplie, en se dispensant de réaliser un contrôle de proportionnalité au motif (discutable) qu'il convenait de laisser sur cette question aux États membres une large marge nationale d'appréciation⁴⁹.

Dans un deuxième temps, toutefois, à partir de l'arrêt *Vallianatos* de 2014⁵⁰, la CEDH a accepté d'examiner sérieusement la seconde condition. Ainsi, dans cette dernière affaire, la Cour a conclu qu'était dépourvue de but légitime et de proportionnalité la législation grecque ayant réservé aux couples hétérosexuels une union civile produisant des effets dégradés par rapport au mariage. Autrement dit, la Cour a considéré que dès lors qu'un État décidait de créer une forme d'union civile autre que le mariage, il devait l'étendre aux couples homosexuels. L'année d'après, dans l'affaire *Oliari*, la Cour a franchi un cap supplémentaire dans une hypothèse où cette fois il n'existait aucune forme d'union civile autre que le mariage. Dans *Oliari*, la Cour a considéré que l'article 8 pouvait imposer à l'Italie une obligation de reconnaître aux couples homosexuels une forme d'union juridiquement protégée⁵¹.

La Cour l'a fait toutefois dans un contexte particulier, laissant planer quelque incertitudes sur l'extension de cette solution à d'autres contextes (WINTEMUTE 2020 : 184-185). En effet, la caractérisation de la discrimination a été réalisée à partir d'éléments ne se retrouvant pas dans la totalité des États membres, mais seulement en Italie, à savoir le fait que, en dépit de décisions des juridictions internes ayant enjoint au législateur de créer une

⁴⁷ CEDH, *Schalk et Kopf*, préc., § 101 où la Cour rappelle que « la Convention forme un tout, de sorte qu'il y a lieu de lire ses articles en harmonie les uns avec les autres [...]. Eu égard à sa conclusion ci-dessus, à savoir que l'article 12 n'impose pas aux États contractants l'obligation d'ouvrir le mariage aux couples homosexuels, l'article 14 combiné avec l'article 8, dont le but et la portée sont plus généraux, ne sauraient être compris comme imposant une telle obligation ».

⁴⁸ *Idem*, §106

⁴⁹ Pour une critique de cette utilisation de la marge nationale d'appréciation, en tant que technique alternative au contrôle de proportionnalité, voir MORON-PUECH 2017a §54 et s.

⁵⁰ CEDH [GC], *Vallianatos et autres c. Grèce*, 7 nov. 2013, n^{os} 29381/09 et 32684/09.

⁵¹ CEDH, *Oliari*, préc., §185. L'argumentation est fondée sur le seul article 8, alors même qu'un grief distinct était articulé sur une violation de l'article 14 combiné avec l'article 8. La Cour n'a toutefois pas jugé utile d'examiner ce grief, estimant que sa censure sur le fondement de l'article 8 suffisait.

forme d'union civile pour les couples homosexuels, ce dernier ne s'était pas exécuté. Or, pour la Cour, ce défaut de respect d'une décision de justice constituait *ipso facto* un défaut de but légitime⁵².

Cela étant, il est permis de penser que la Cour a par la suite généralisé cette solution. C'est ce qui nous semble pouvoir être inféré de la lecture de l'arrêt *Taddeucci et McCall c. Italie* de 2016⁵³. Bien que cet arrêt ne porte pas sur la question du caractère discriminatoire de l'absence d'union civile ouverte aux couples MISSEG⁵⁴, il contient une proposition laissant penser que les magistrats de la Cour sont prêts à admettre que pèserait sur les États une obligation positive de reconnaître les couples de même sexe. C'est en ce sens que nous comprenons les propos de la Cour selon lesquels « [m]ême à supposer qu'à l'époque des faits [2004 ou 2009] la Convention n'imposait pas au Gouvernement [italien] de légiférer pour ouvrir une union civile ou un partenariat enregistré aux couples de même sexe engagés dans une relation durable, afin de reconnaître leur statut de leur garantir certains droits essentiels, cela ne change rien au fait que [...] ». En présentant comme peu probable l'absence d'une telle obligation positive en 2004 ou 2009, la Cour ne laisse planer aucun doute sur sa conviction qu'une telle obligation existerait bien à la date où elle rend l'arrêt *Taddeucci et McCall c. Italie*. Cela n'a rien de surprenant lorsqu'on se rappelle le contrôle très rigoureux de la légitimité du but et de la proportionnalité de la mesure réalisé dans *Vallianatos* et dont on voit mal comment, appliqué à la situation d'un État ne reconnaissant aucune forme d'union, il pourrait aboutir à un constat de non violation du principe de non-discrimination. Au demeurant, l'on relèvera qu'un an après l'arrêt *Taddeucci et McCall*, la Cour va rendre une décision confortant cette interprétation. En effet, dans l'affaire *Orlandi c. Italie*, pour juger contraire au droit au respect de la vie privée garanti par l'article 8 le refus des autorités italiennes de transcrire en union civile un mariage contracté à l'étranger par deux personnes homosexuelles, la CEDH va se fonder uniquement sur l'absence de but légitime invoqué par les autorités italiennes, sans mentionner l'existence de décisions de juges nationaux obligeant ces autorités à créer une forme d'union civile⁵⁵. Certes

⁵² *Idem*, § 184.

⁵³ CEDH, *Taddeucci et McCall c. Italie*, préc.

⁵⁴ Il s'agissait de statuer sur le caractère discriminatoire d'une disposition réservant aux couples MISSEG un droit particulier (en l'espèce un droit de séjour).

⁵⁵ CEDH, *Orlandi*, préc., § 209.

l'affaire concerne encore l'Italie, mais la motivation est désormais aisément généralisable à d'autres États.

Dans ces conditions, il est permis de penser que DEPUIS 2016, c'est-à-dire la date de l'arrêt *Taddeucci et McCall* – voire plus tôt –, il existe en droit européen une obligation d'offrir aux couples homosexuels et, par extension, aux couples MISSEG une forme d'union reconnaissant pleinement qu'ils forment une famille. En revanche, cette forme d'union n'a pas à être un mariage, celui-ci continuant à être considéré, même EN 2017 dans l'arrêt *Orlandi*⁵⁶, comme pouvant être réservé aux couples d'homme et de femme. Est-ce à dire, ces unions étant formellement différentes, qu'elles peuvent être également substantiellement différentes, de sorte qu'il serait permis de priver les couples MISSEG de certains avantages réservés aux couples hétérosexuels mariés ? Au premier abord, l'on pourrait être tenté de répondre par l'affirmative, la CEDH ayant considéré à plusieurs reprises que la forme juridiquement reconnue ouverte aux couples MISSEG n'avait pas à produire les mêmes effets que le mariage⁵⁷. En réalité les choses sont plus complexes, la CEDH et la CJUE se montrant disposées, dans des affaires concernant non plus l'absence d'égal accès aux unions juridiquement protégées mais l'absence d'égal accès à un avantage donné, à appliquer le principe de non-discrimination.

2. L'application du principe de non-discrimination aux avantages réservés aux couples dits traditionnels pose des difficultés différentes de celles rencontrées plus haut. Cette fois ce n'est pas la première condition (la comparabilité ou différence des situations) qui pose problème, mais la seconde (la justification objective et raisonnable). En effet, la jurisprudence n'a guère eu l'occasion d'examiner en détail cette seconde condition. En particulier elle n'a pas eu à examiner sa seconde composante, à savoir la « justification raisonnable », dont on a indiqué plus haut qu'elle reposait sur un contrôle de proportionnalité. Ainsi, les affaires examinées par la CJUE concernaient des cas de discrimination directe⁵⁸ où cette deuxième

⁵⁶ *Idem*, § 192.

⁵⁷ CEDH, *Schalk et Kopf c. Autriche*, préc., § 108 ; *Chapin et Charpentier c. France*, 9 juin 2016, n° 40183/07.

⁵⁸ La qualification de « discrimination directe » dans ces affaires a été discutée en doctrine et plusieurs explications ont été proposées de cette interprétation audacieuse de la notion de discrimination directe à propos de règles formulées d'une manière neutre à l'orientation sexuelle (CALVÈS 2020 : 109).

condition n'a pas à être prouvée pour que la discrimination soit caractérisée⁵⁹. Quant à la CEDH, dans les quatre affaires où il était argué d'une discrimination dans l'octroi d'avantages aux seuls couples dits traditionnels, elle n'a pas eu non plus à examiner cette seconde condition. Cela s'explique soit parce que la première condition de la discrimination n'étant pas remplie, la Cour n'a pas eu à mener plus loin le contrôle de conventionnalité⁶⁰, soit parce que, amenée à se prononcer sur la seconde condition, elle a pu constater une absence de but légitime à la différence de traitement ce qui l'a conduit à considérer qu'elle n'avait pas en outre à mener un contrôle de proportionnalité, qu'elle n'avait peut-être par ailleurs pas envie de mener⁶¹ ! Ainsi, dans l'affaire *Taddeucci et McCall*, elle a considéré que le but invoqué par le gouvernement italien – la protection de la famille dite traditionnelle – ne pouvait pas être invoqué à propos du permis. De la comparaison avec l'arrêt *Vallianatos*, où un tel but avait été accepté par la Cour dès lors que l'avantage en question avait trait aux enfants, il est permis de penser que toutes les fois où le problème concerne le seul couple, la protection de la famille traditionnelle ne pourra pas constituer un but légitime, autrement dit une justification raisonnable. Dans la mesure où aucun autre but n'a été invoqué dans toutes ces affaires jugées par la CEDH (et la CJUE) et dans la mesure où l'on peine à envisager lequel pourrait l'être, il est permis de penser que cette deuxième condition pourra aisément être caractérisée dès lors que l'avantage en cause concernera le seul couple, indépendamment des enfants.

Cette facilité à caractériser la deuxième condition ne se retrouve pas en revanche pour la première condition, à savoir l'existence d'une différence de traitements pour des couples situés dans une situation analogue ou bien

⁵⁹ Dans ces hypothèses il appartient au gouvernement de prouver qu'existe une justification objective et raisonnable, ce qu'aucun gouvernement n'a pour l'instant cherché à faire.

⁶⁰ Voir les affaires *Courten c. France*, *Manenc c. France* et *Aldeguez Tomás c. Espagne* évoquées plus bas.

⁶¹ Comp. CEDH, *Y.Y. c. Turquie*, 10 mars 2015, n° 14793/08 où la Cour, dans un contentieux relatif à l'état civil d'une personne transgenre, où était invoqué le seul article 8, accepte de réaliser un contrôle de proportionnalité *stricto sensu*, quand bien même elle avait déjà constaté l'absence de but légitime à l'ingérence de l'État turc dans les droits de la personne transgenre. La Cour accepte ici de poursuivre son contrôle car elle a un message progressiste à faire passer : l'annonce d'un revirement de jurisprudence quant à la marge d'appréciation des États en matière de changement de la mention du sexe à l'état civil (MORON-PUECH 2015). Le revirement surviendra effectivement dans l'arrêt *AP, Garçon et Nicot*, deux ans plus tard (MORON-PUECH 2017a). Ici, à propos des familles MISSEG, la Cour n'était semble-t-il pas prête à faire passer un tel message progressiste.

l'existence d'un traitement comparable pour des couples placés dans une situation différentes. En effet, l'opération de comparaison des situations ou des différences de traitement offre aux juges une importante marge de manœuvre pour bloquer ou activer le principe de non-discrimination, moins pour des raisons structurelles qu'en raison de la tolérance croissante de la société vis-à-vis des couples MISSEG. Ceci s'observe tant lorsque le juge compare la situation d'un couple MISSEG à celle d'un couple dit traditionnel bénéficiant de certains avantages, en se demandant si le premier est dans une situation comparable au second (*a.*), que lorsque le juge compare la situation de deux couples non mariés (l'un homosexuel et l'autre hétérosexuel), traités identiquement, et en recherchant s'il s'agit de situations différentes (*b.*).

a. S'agissant tout d'abord de rechercher si un couple MISSEG est dans une situation comparable à celle d'un couple dit traditionnel bénéficiant de certains avantages, les choses peuvent paraître simples à la lecture de l'arrêt *Schalk et Kopf* déjà mentionné. En effet, dans cet arrêt, la CEDH ne se contente pas de juger que les couples homosexuels – et par extension les couples MISSEG⁶² – « se trouvent dans une situation comparable à celle de personnes hétérosexuelles pour ce qui est de leur besoin de reconnaissance juridique », elle ajoute que cette similarité concerne également le besoin « de protection de leur relation de couple »⁶³. Cependant, cette affirmation ne couvre pas la totalité des avantages découlant d'une union juridiquement reconnue. Comme cela a été rappelé plus haut, à côté des règles ayant pour but la protection du couple ou de ses membres (telles celles sur les violences conjugales) ou de celles facilitant l'identification du couple (telles celles sur le nom), il en est d'autres qui tendent au rapprochement des membres du couple. Or, l'arrêt *Schalk et Kopf* ne dit rien de ces règles. Faut-il en déduire *a contrario* que la première condition du principe de non-discrimination serait à leur égard écartée ? Non, il faut bien davantage y voir une volonté de la Cour de ne pas se prononcer sur ces règles dans cet arrêt, ce que confirme au demeurant un autre passage de l'arrêt où la Cour se refuse, en l'absence de grief précisément formulé par les requérants, à confronter au principe de non-discrimination chacun des avantages réservés aux couples dits traditionnels⁶⁴. Certes, EN 2008, dans

⁶² Pour cette généralisation voir *supra* A.1.

⁶³ CEDH, *Schalk et Kopf c. Autriche*, 24 juin 2010, n° 30141/04, §93-94.

⁶⁴ *Idem*, § 109.

l'arrêt *Courten c. Royaume-Uni* concernant le refus d'octroyer le bénéfice d'exemption fiscale au membre survivant d'un couple homosexuel, la Cour a semblé accepter d'une manière générale que les couples mariés et non mariés ne soient en principe pas dans une situation comparable dès lors que « le mariage demeure une institution dont il est largement accepté qu'elle confère un statut particulier à celles et ceux qui le concluent »⁶⁵ (notre traduction). Cependant, deux ans plus tard, dans l'arrêt *Manenc c. France*, la CEDH a accepté la possibilité que ces couples puissent être dans une situation comparable au regard de règles visant à rapprocher les patrimoines du couple, en l'espèce une pension de réversion⁶⁶. Si la CEDH a finalement considéré que ces couples n'étaient pas dans une même situation, elle en a décidé ainsi en s'appuyant non sur une considération générale, mais sur une considération propre à l'affaire, à savoir l'absence de solidarité des couples homosexuels – contrairement aux couples hétérosexuels – quant aux dettes liées aux cotisations sociales ouvrant droit à pension de réversion. La Cour a repris cette même approche casuistique six ans plus tard, dans une affaire *Aldeguer Tomás*, où elle a conclu à nouveau à l'absence de similarité en s'appuyant sur des considérations propres à l'espèce⁶⁷. Dans ces conditions, la question de savoir si et à quelles conditions les couples MISSEG peuvent, au regard de l'article 14 de la CSDHLF, être jugés dans une situation comparable à celles des couples dits traditionnels ne connaît pas dans la jurisprudence actuelle de la CEDH de réponse claire et générale pour les règles œuvrant à un rapprochement des membres du couple. La première condition paraît donc pouvoir être jugée remplie mais sans qu'on ne puisse à ce jour savoir selon quels critères.

En revanche, une indication nette des critères à mettre en œuvre pour décider si des couples homosexuels et hétérosexuels sont ou non dans des situations comparables peut être trouvée dans des arrêts de la CJUE rendus postérieurement aux arrêts *Schalk et Kopf* et *Manenc* de la CEDH⁶⁸. Certes, dans un premier temps, par sa décision *Maruko* de 2008, la CJUE s'est montré prudente dans son appréciation de la comparabilité des situations

⁶⁵ CEDH, *Courten c. Royaume-Uni*, 4 nov. 2008, n° 4479/06.

⁶⁶ CEDH, *Manenc c. France*, 21 septembre 2010, n° 66686/09.

⁶⁷ CEDH, *Aldeguer Tomás c. Espagne*, 14 juin 2016, n° 35214/09, § 87.

⁶⁸ Les deux juridictions s'efforcent en effet d'aligner leurs standards, dans un contexte d'affirmation de principe de l'équivalence de protection des droits humains octroyée par les deux ordres juridiques européens (V. CEDH [GC], *Bosphorus*, 30 juin 2005, n° 45036/98 et art. 52, § 3 CDFUE).

(PALAZZO 2020), cela alors même que par le passé elle s'était montrée très soucieuse d'empêcher toute discrimination dans les couples transgenres quant au versement des pensions de réversion⁶⁹. La CJUE en effet, un peu à l'image de la CEDH dans l'arrêt *Courten*, a renvoyé au juge national le soin de statuer sur ce point, en lui laissant une grande marge de manœuvre puisqu'elle ne lui a donné aucune indication méthodologique⁷⁰. Cependant, dans un deuxième temps, alors que la CEDH venait d'indiquer qu'elle pourrait juger les situations des couples hétérosexuels et homosexuels comparables, la CJUE, tout en continuant à déléguer la tâche de comparaison au juge national, a fixé dans l'affaire *Romer* DE 2011 les critères à suivre pour réaliser cette comparaison⁷¹. Pour la CJUE « la comparaison des situations doit être fondée sur une analyse focalisée sur les droits et les obligations des époux mariés et des partenaires de vie enregistrés, tels qu'ils résultent des dispositions internes applicables, qui sont pertinents compte tenu de l'objet et des conditions d'octroi de la prestation en cause au principal, et non pas consister à vérifier si le droit national a opéré une assimilation juridique générale et complète du partenariat de vie enregistré au mariage »⁷². Enfin, dans un troisième temps, la Cour a accepté de réaliser elle-même ce contrôle, contribuant ainsi à une meilleure effectivité du droit européen de la non-discrimination. Ainsi, dans une affaire *Hay* DE 2013, la CJUE a jugé la situation d'un couple hétérosexuel comparable à celle d'un couple homosexuel pour l'octroi d'un congé lié à la conclusion de ces unions. Pour la CJUE, dès lors en effet que cette prestation avait pour objet d'octroyer

⁶⁹ CJCE, *K.B. c. National Health Service Pensions Agency et Secretary of State for Health*, 7 janv. 2004, n° C-117/01. Arrêt rendu toutefois en application non pas de la directive discrimination citée *supra* note 38, mais de l'article 141 du traité sur les communautés européennes d'une part et de la directive 75/117/CEE du Conseil, du 10 février 1975, concernant le rapprochement des législations des États membres relatives à l'application du principe de l'égalité des rémunérations entre les travailleurs masculins et les travailleurs féminins d'autre part.

⁷⁰ CJUE, *Tadao Maruko c. Versorgungsanstalt der deutschen Bühnen [Maruko]*, 1^{er} avr. 2008, C-267/06, § 73 : « Il incombe à la juridiction de renvoi de vérifier si un partenaire de vie survivant est dans une situation comparable à celle d'un époux bénéficiaire de la prestation de survie prévue par le régime de prévoyance professionnelle géré par la VdB. »

⁷¹ CJUE [GC], *Jürgen Römer c. Freie und Hansestadt Hamburg [Romer]*, 10 mai 2011, C-147/08, § 52 : « L'appréciation de la comparabilité relève de la compétence de la juridiction de renvoi et doit être focalisée sur les droits et obligations respectifs des époux et des personnes engagées dans un partenariat de vie, tels qu'ils sont régis dans le cadre des institutions correspondantes, qui sont pertinents compte tenu de l'objet et des conditions d'octroi de la prestation en question. »

⁷² CJUE, *Frédéric Hay c. Crédit agricole mutuel de Charente-Maritime et des Deux-Sèvres [Hay]*, 12 déc. 2013, C-267/12, §34 où elle réécrit de manière explicite le raisonnement suivi dans l'arrêt *Romer*.

des jours de congés aux personnes s'unissant civilement d'une part et était subordonnée à la conclusion d'une telle union d'autre part, il fallait l'ouvrir aux couples homosexuels s'unissant par un PACS, lequel était à la date des faits la seule forme d'union juridiquement reconnue ouverte aux personnes homosexuelles. Dans ces conditions, il est désormais permis de conclure que, pour les règles œuvrant au rapprochement des membres du couple, les couples MISSEG *peuvent* se trouver dans une situation comparable à celle des autres couples. Pour qu'il en soit ainsi il faut que l'objet et les conditions de la règle en cause permettent son extension aux couples MISSEG.

b. S'agissant ensuite de rechercher si sont placés dans une situation différente deux couples non mariés, l'un homosexuel et l'autre hétérosexuel, traités de manière comparable, la Cour a initialement aussi répondu par la négative. Ainsi, EN 2012, dans l'affaire *Gas et Dubois*⁷³ – qui concernait une question qui sera examinée plus loin – la Cour a considéré que, vis-à-vis des couples hétérosexuels non mariés, les couples homosexuels non mariés étaient dans une situation similaire, de sorte qu'ils ne pouvaient se plaindre d'aucune discrimination dans le fait d'être traités d'une manière similaire à ces couples. Le constat de cette identité de situation n'était cependant aucunement argumenté⁷⁴ et pouvait laisser penser que la décision n'était pas dépourvue d'un certain arbitraire. Finalement, quatre ans plus tard, dans l'affaire *Taddeucci et McCall* précitée, la Cour va faire l'effort d'argumenter et parvenir cette fois à une conclusion inverse, motif pris que les couples homosexuels, contrairement aux couples hétérosexuels, n'ont pas la possibilité d'accéder au mariage et rencontrent de ce fait un obstacle irrésistible pour accéder aux avantages réservés aux couples mariés⁷⁵. Compte tenu de cette motivation, il est permis de conclure que, en l'état actuel de la jurisprudence de la CEDH, toutes les fois où un couple homosexuel – et par extension un couple MISSEG – se trouve empêché de manière insurmontable d'accéder à un avantage ouvert aux couples dits traditionnels se mariant, une discrimination peut être caractérisée. On le voit, dans nombre de situations, il sera désormais possible de caractériser la première condition d'une discrimination soit en comparant le couple MISSEG avec un couple marié traité différemment, soit en le comparant avec un couple non marié traité identiquement. Dès lors, compte tenu de la relative facilité

⁷³ CEDH, *Gas et Dubois*, 15 mars 2012, n° 25951/07.

⁷⁴ *Idem*, § 69.

⁷⁵ CEDH, *Taddeucci et McCall*, § 83.

évoquée plus haut à caractériser la seconde condition de l'existence d'une discrimination, il nous semble possible de conclure que le principe de non-discrimination constitue un instrument efficace pour qu'à l'avenir⁷⁶ soit étendus aux couples MISSEG les avantages concernant les rapports entre les membres du couple aus-mêmes. Une conclusion assez différente peut être tirée à propos de l'application du principe de non-discrimination aux règles gouvernant non plus les rapports horizontaux entre les membres du couple, mais les rapports verticaux entre le couple et le ou les enfants⁷⁷.

3. LES DIFFICULTÉS CONCERNANT LE LIEN ENTRE LE COUPLE ET L'ENFANT

Comme précédemment, seront d'abord évoquées les difficultés affectant le lien entre le couple et l'enfant (A.), puis l'on s'intéressera à la résolution de ces difficultés (B.)

A. PRÉSENTATION DES DIFFICULTÉS

Les difficultés rencontrées par les couples MISSEG dans l'établissement d'un lien avec l'enfant peuvent être de deux ordres. Il peut s'agir d'abord de difficultés tenant à l'impossibilité *d'établir un lien biologique* avec un enfant engendré (1.). Il peut s'agir ensuite de difficultés affectant le *lien juridique*, qu'il s'agisse de l'établissement de ce lien ou de son maintien (2.).

1. La difficulté la plus radicale à laquelle peuvent être confrontés les couples MISSEG résulte de l'impossibilité d'engendrer et d'établir un lien biologique avec un enfant. Cette impossibilité résulte à la fois de contraintes matérielles et juridiques.

S'agissant des contraintes matérielles, les membres d'un couple MISSEG peuvent avoir perdu leurs facultés procréatrices à la suite de traitements hormonaux ou chirurgicaux non pleinement consentis. Si ces traitements paraissent avoir disparu s'agissant des personnes homosexuelles

⁷⁶ Pour une application rétroactive le principe de non-discrimination risque en revanche de se montrer insuffisant ; v. l'affaire *Aldeguer Tomás c. Espagne* précitée. Bien que l'affaire ait été rendue à une époque où l'on se serait attendue à ce que le principe de non-discrimination triomphe, tel n'a pas été le cas, en grande partie car il s'agissait d'étendre de manière rétroactive, avant 2007, des avantages jusqu'alors réservés aux couples de même sexe.

⁷⁷ Rappr. WINTEMUTE 2020, qui s'appuyant sur l'affaire *Oliari* trace une ligne de partage entre les « droits essentiels » (*core rights* dit la CEDH) et les « droits supplémentaires » (*supplementary rights* dit la CEDH), sans toutefois préciser quel critère pourrait être utilisé pour classer un droit dans l'une de ces deux catégories.

susceptibles hier d'être soumises à des traitements de castration chimique – parfois à titre de sanction pénale –, ils demeurent encore dans plusieurs pays européens pour les personnes transgenres et intersexuées (SCHNEIDER 2012 ; SCHERPE 2015, 2017). Les premières, afin d'obtenir le droit de modifier leur marqueur de sexe/genre à l'état civil puisque, trop souvent, un tel changement est subordonné à la perte des facultés procréatrices⁷⁸. Les secondes, pour pouvoir « rentrer » dans un état civil, leur corps « indéterminé » empêchant prétendument de les rattacher à l'une des deux catégories de sexe ou de genre reconnues : le masculin et le féminin⁷⁹.

Quant aux obstacles juridiques, il s'agit des règles réservant aux couples dits traditionnels la possibilité de bénéficier des techniques d'assistance médicale à la procréation (y compris la gestation pour autrui et la greffe d'utérus). Ces techniques sont en effet souvent réservées aux couples dits traditionnels, au motif que l'infertilité y serait pathologique et mériterait une prise en charge.

2. Outre ces difficultés concernant l'établissement d'un lien biologique, les couples MISSEG connaissent davantage encore des difficultés à établir ou maintenir un lien juridique avec un enfant. S'agissant de l'établissement du lien, on songe en premier lieu aux difficultés rencontrées par les couples MISSEG ayant recours à l'étranger à des techniques d'assistance à la procréation (y compris la gestation pour autrui) et qui se heurtent, de retour dans leur pays, à un refus des États de reconnaître les liens de filiation régulièrement établis à l'étranger. Si ces difficultés concernent toutes les gestations pour autrui, elles affectent cependant plus durablement les familles MISSEG. Des difficultés se posent également quant à l'adoption de l'enfant du conjoint, l'adoption conjointe étant souvent réservée aux couples mariés et donc, dans certains pays européens, aux couples dits traditionnels.

Enfin, peuvent se poser des difficultés quant au maintien du lien de filiation ou à tout le moins de l'autorité parentale qui en découle. En effet, à l'occasion de séparation des membres du couple ou de décès de l'un d'entre eux, les autorités nationales peuvent décider de priver lu parenx MISSEG de

⁷⁸ V. CEDH, *AP, Garçon et Nicot c. France*, 6 avr. 2017, n^{os} 79885/12 *et al.*, sanctionnant un courant jurisprudentiel imposant une stérilisation pour l'accès au changement de genre. Rappr. CEDH, *Y.Y. c. Turquie*, 10 mars 2015, n^o 14793/08, sanctionnant une législation imposant la stérilisation comme prérequis à la chirurgie de réassignation, elle-même préalable au changement d'état civil.

⁷⁹ V. en France la Circulaire du 28 oct. 2011 relative aux règles particulières à divers actes de l'état civil relatifs à la naissance et à la filiation, § 55.

ses droits sur l'enfant au motif qu'al n'en serait pas lu parenx biologique⁸⁰ ou encore qu'en raison de son orientation sexuelle ou de son identité de genre, al serait inapte à s'occuper de l'enfant.

B. RÉOLUTION DES DIFFICULTÉS

Différentes normes peuvent être utilisées pour traiter les difficultés rencontrées par les familles MISSEG concernant les liens entre les membres du couple et l'enfant. Il s'agit d'une part des normes protégeant l'intégrité des personnes (1.) et d'autre part de celles prohibant les discriminations en lien avec le droit au respect de la vie privée et familiale (2.), l'application des premières posant moins de difficultés que les secondes.

1. Le droit à l'intégrité des personnes constitue un moyen pour dépasser les obstacles matériels auxquels sont confrontés les couples MISSEG pour établir un lien biologique. En effet, les traitements médicaux auxquels ces personnes sont soumises, allant parfois jusqu'à la stérilisation, semblent difficilement compatibles avec la prohibition des actes de torture et des traitements inhumains et dégradants⁸¹ ou même simplement avec le droit au respect de la vie privée, lequel inclut un droit à l'autonomie personnelle peu compatible avec des stérilisations non consenties ou à tout le moins consenties sous la contrainte ou sans consentement éclairé⁸². À se limiter aux affaires jugées par la Cour européenne des droits de l'homme, cette dernière a pu considérer dans l'affaire *A.P., Garçon et Nicot* DE 2017 que la stérilisation ne pouvait pas constituer une condition d'accès au changement d'état civil, en ce qu'elle plaçait les personnes transgenres face à un dilemme insoluble entre leur droit à l'intégrité physique et leur droit au respect de leur identité de genre, tous deux garantis par l'article 8⁸³. Par analogie cette décision paraît également pouvoir s'appliquer à l'hypothèse où la personne s'oppose à la stérilisation en invoquant également son droit au respect de ses décisions de devenir parent *via* ses propres gamètes⁸⁴. Pour en revenir à l'arrêt *A.P., Garçon et Nicot*, la Cour y a bien souligné qu'elle n'entendait pas se contenter d'une approche strictement formelle du consentement. La Cour affirme ainsi dans cet arrêt qu'un « traitement médical n'est pas

⁸⁰ Rappr., Cass., 1^{re} civ., 18 mai 2005, n° 02-16.336 : *Aj Famille*, 2005, p. 321, note Fr. Chénéde.

⁸¹ CEDH, *M c. France*, n° 42821/18, affaire communiquée le 22 septembre 2020.

⁸² Rappr. CEDH, *V.C. c. Slovaquie*, 8 nov. 2011, retenant une violation de l'article 3 en présence d'une stérilisation pour laquelle le consentement donné n'a pas été jugé éclairé par la CEDH.

⁸³ CEDH, *A.P., Nicot et Garçon*, 6 avr. 2017, n°s 79885/12, 52471/13 et 52596/13, §132.

⁸⁴ Rappr. CEDH, *Evans c. Royaume-Uni*, 6 avr. 2007, n° 6339/05, § 71.

véritablement consenti lorsque le fait pour l'intéressé de ne pas s'y plier a pour conséquence de le priver du plein exercice de son droit à l'identité sexuelle et à l'épanouissement personnel ». Le même raisonnement nous paraît par analogie pouvoir s'appliquer aux personnes intersexuées faisant l'objet de stérilisation, sans leur consentement personnel, mais avec le consentement peu éclairé de leurs parents (ceux-ci consentant sur la base d'indication médicale selon lesquelles leur enfant sain serait prétendument atteint d'une pathologie). Par ailleurs, pour ces stérilisations, à l'argument du défaut de consentement, s'ajoute l'absence de nécessité médicale⁸⁵ qui paraît faire obstacle à toute opération non consentie directement par l'enfant⁸⁶.

2. Les normes garantissant le droit au respect de la vie privée et familiale, combinées le cas échéant avec les principes de non-discrimination et d'intérêt supérieur de l'enfant, permettent également de résoudre certaines des difficultés concernant l'accès à la procréation, l'établissement du lien de filiation ou encore le maintien de ce lien. Pour ces dernières, précisons qu'au vu de la jurisprudence de la Cour européenne des droits de l'homme, c'est bien la composante « vie familiale » de l'article 8 de la CSDHLE qui protégera les familles MISSEG lorsqu'il s'agira d'établir ou de maintenir un lien biologique de filiation à l'égard d'un enfant déjà rattaché *en fait* au couple. En revanche, ce sera la composante « vie privée » de ce texte qui s'appliquera lorsqu'il s'agira de donner au couple le droit d'établir un lien de fait et de droit avec un enfant désiré. En effet, la Cour considère que le droit au respect de la vie familiale ne confère pas le droit à fonder une famille et notamment pas celui d'« avoir » des enfants *via* les techniques d'assistance à la procréation (y compris la GPA) ou encore l'adoption⁸⁷. Pour la Cour, ce droit permet seulement de protéger des liens (biologiques ou juridiques) déjà existants. Cela étant, dans plusieurs arrêts, la Cour a pallié cette lacune *via* la composante « vie privée » de l'article 8. Elle a ainsi jugé que la vie privée comprenait le droit au respect du projet parental⁸⁸. Cette différence de fondement a son importance car ce ne seront pas les mêmes raisonnements qui seront mobilisés pour protéger les familles MISSEG au stade de la création d'une famille verticale (*a.*) ou à celui de sa

⁸⁵ Sur la démonstration de l'absence de nécessité médicale, voir. MORON-PUECH 2017*b*.

⁸⁶ Rapp. CEDH, *Jalloh c. Allemagne*, 11 juill. 2006, n° 54810/00, § 69.

⁸⁷ Pour l'adoption, voir not. CEDH, GC, *X. et a. c. Autriche*, 19 févr. 2013, n° 19010/07, § 135.

⁸⁸ CEDH, *Evans* préc. ou, plus récemment, GC, *Paradiso et Campanelli c. Italie*, 24 janv. 2017, n° 25358/12, § 163

protection (b.).

a. S'agissant tout d'abord de la création d'une famille verticale, même s'il n'existe pas de « droit à l'enfant » qui enjoindrait aux États une obligation positive d'aider les couples MISSEG à devenir parents, la Cour a estimé que, lorsque ce droit était ouvert, il devait l'être sans discrimination⁸⁹. La question se pose alors de savoir si est ou non discriminatoire un dispositif qui ferme l'adoption ou les techniques d'aide à la procréation (y compris gestation pour autrui et greffe d'utérus) à une personne seule ou à un couple à raison de leur appartenance à la catégorie des MISSEG. La Cour a eu à cet égard des positions contrastées, en semblant distinguer l'adoption des techniques d'aide à la procréation.

S'agissant premièrement de l'adoption, la Cour a fini par accepter EN 2008, dans l'arrêt *E. B. c. France*, que lorsqu'une différence de traitement de situations comparables était fondée sur l'orientation sexuelle, celle-ci ne pouvait en aucun cas reposer sur une justification légitime⁹⁰, de sorte qu'elle était inconstitutionnelle. Auparavant, en 1997, la Cour avait jugé qu'il était loisible au gouvernement d'invoquer l'orientation sexuelle et d'autres buts pour justifier la différence de traitement. Toutefois, l'affirmation à partir DE 1999 qu'une telle discrimination, « nonobstant tout argument contraire possible », ne saurait être « tolér[ée] »⁹¹ a changé la donne et a conduit au revirement DE 2008. Bien que rendue à propos des seules minorités homosexuelles, cette affirmation nous paraît devoir être étendue à tous les couples MISSEG. Peut-elle également être étendue en dehors de l'adoption, c'est-à-dire aux techniques d'aide à la procréation ? S'il n'existe pas de décision de la CEDH portant, sur le fond⁹², spécifiquement sur cette question, on peut, à l'image du Conseil d'État français (2018 : p. 49), avoir quelque doute sur l'existence d'une discrimination, compte tenu des propos tenus par la CEDH dans l'arrêt *Gas et Dubois*. Dans celui-ci, la CEDH a en effet considéré qu'au regard de l'insémination artificielle avec tiers donneur, les couples de même sexe ne se trouvaient pas dans une situation comparable

⁸⁹ CEDH, GC, *E. B. c. France*, 22 janv. 2008, n° 43546/02, § 135.

⁹⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁹¹ CEDH, *Salgueiro da Silva Mouta c. Portugal*, 21 déc. 1999, n° 33290/96, qui transpose à l'orientation sexuelle un raisonnement déjà tenu pour la religion dans CEDH, *Hoffmann c. Autriche*, 23 juin 1993, n° 12875/87.

⁹² Pour une décision portant sur la recevabilité, voir CEDH, *Charron et Merle-Montet*, 16 janv. 2018, n° 22612/15.

aux couples de sexe différent⁹³, compte tenu dans ce dernier cas du caractère pathologique de l'infertilité. Affirmée EN 2012, au détour d'un arrêt qui ne portait pas sur la question de l'IAD, cette phrase nous paraît discutable. En effet, médicalement, l'IAD ne constitue pas un soin thérapeutique – le couple n'est pas guéri de son infertilité – mais un soin palliatif. Dès lors, au regard de l'acte médical en cause, invoquer le caractère pathologique de l'infertilité apparaît sans intérêt et relève très largement d'une construction sociale destinée à légitimer *a posteriori* la fermeture de l'IAD aux couples de même sexe. D'ailleurs, la Cour constitutionnelle autrichienne ne s'y est pas trompée. Ainsi, lorsqu'elle a eu à examiner minutieusement le caractère discriminatoire d'une législation réservant l'IAD aux couples de sexe différent, elle n'a aucunement considéré qu'il y avait là des situations différentes ne pouvant pas être comparées. Pour elle, ces situations étaient évidemment comparables⁹⁴, ce qui l'a alors conduit à examiner les justifications de ces différences de traitement et, en l'absence d'un tel but, à les déclarer contraire aux articles 8 et 14 de la Convention (intégrée par la Cour autrichienne à son « bloc de constitutionalité »)⁹⁵. Est-il possible de considérer également que cette analyse, décidée à propos de l'IAD, puisse être appliquée aux autres techniques? Selon nous, tant que les couples sont au regard de ces techniques dans des situations comparables, rien ne l'empêche. Voilà pourquoi, du point de vue de la création d'une famille verticale, les familles MISSEG devraient pouvoir bénéficier des droits reconnus toutes les fois où ce droit est ouvert aux couples de sexe différent.

b. Concernant ensuite la protection de la famille verticale, il faut distinguer ici la question de la reconnaissance d'une famille de fait, de celle du maintien d'un lien déjà établi. Sur le second cas, il est possible d'être bref en relevant que, à propos de couples homosexuels, la CEDH a considéré comme discriminatoire le fait de décider de la garde d'un enfant en tenant compte de l'homosexualité d'un des parents⁹⁶. La solution peut aisément être reproduite à toutes les autres décisions attentatoires aux droits parentaux et fondées sur la *seule* orientation sexuelle, voire l'identité et l'expression de genre ou encore les caractéristiques sexuées du requérant. Sur le premier cas (reconnaissance d'une famille MISSEG verticale de fait), il faut

⁹³ CEDH, *Gas et Dubois*, 15 mars 2012, n° 25951/07.

⁹⁴ Cela lui est tellement évident qu'elle ne prend pas même la peine de le vérifier.

⁹⁵ VfGH, 12 oct. 2013, n° G 16/2013-16, §2.6. et s.

⁹⁶ *Salgueiro da Silva Mouta*, préc.

distinguer les hypothèses de discrimination directe de celles de discriminations indirectes, beaucoup plus fréquentes. S’agissant de la différence de traitement fondée directement sur l’orientation sexuelle, elle se rencontre par exemple dans l’affaire *X. et a. c. Autriche*⁹⁷, où il a été jugé que la différence de traitement ne pouvait être justifiée que par des motifs impérieux, ce qui n’était pas le cas en l’espèce. À l’inverse, lorsque ce motif discriminatoire n’apparaît pas⁹⁸ et donc que la discrimination n’est qu’indirecte, alors la Cour a tendance à juger que l’État peut avancer un but tiré de la protection de la famille traditionnelle et que l’atteinte portée au droit au respect de la vie familiale des membres de couple est proportionnée, ainsi qu’elle l’a fait dans *X. Y. et Z. c. Royaume-Uni* à propos d’une famille transparente ou de *Gas et Dubois* à propos d’une famille homoparentale. Faut-il alors en déduire qu’en présence d’un refus de reconnaître une famille MISSEG, aucun lien de filiation ne pourra être établi ? Nullement. En effet, qu’il s’agisse des arrêts *Paradisio et Campanelli* ou *Menesson*, il y a été jugé, sur le fondement cette fois du droit au respect de vie privée, qu’un lien de filiation (ou d’adoption) devrait toujours être établi sur le fondement de l’intérêt supérieur de l’enfant.

Où l’on voit comment, par différents leviers, les droits des familles MISSEG relativement aux liens entre le couple et ses enfants se trouvent aujourd’hui correctement protégés. À certains égards, si l’on s’en tient à la question de la reconnaissance des couples, l’état du droit paraît plus protecteur des liens enfant/couples que des liens entre les membres du couple eux-mêmes cela en raison du principe d’intérêt supérieur de l’enfant.

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⁹⁷ CEDH, *X. et a. c. Autriche*

⁹⁸ Par exemple la raison du non accès tient au fait que l’adoption ou la PMA serait réservée dans un couple de même sexe.

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Legal recognition of polyamory: Notes on its feasibility

ABSTRACT: This paper aims to analyse legal recognition of polyamorous relationships and to examine the main obstacles to its feasibility in the short run. Preliminarily, I shall make a few notes on the state of the art in the matter of polyamory, discuss relevant terminology issues, and enumerate some of the main features of polyamorous relationships with a view to framing the debate on their legal recognition. Polyamorous relationships are then contextualized in the light of the radical changes which the traditional family has undergone since the second half of the 20th century. It is my claim that polyamorous relationships can be considered only the latest stage in that process of transformation, and that they will enjoy legal recognition at a sooner or later date. However, I shall acknowledge that this will probably not occur in the short term, and I shall analyse the main reasons why. My concluding argument is, nevertheless, that legal recognition of such relationships may be hailed as desirable.

KEYWORDS: polyamory; plural marriage; unconventional families; legal recognition; mononormativity; sociology of law; political philosophy; philosophy of law.

INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of the 20th century, the nuclear, heterosexual, monogamic family has undergone a disruptive process of transformation in Western liberal democratic states (BUDGEON & ROSENEIL 2004; COGSWELL 1975; CUTAS 2019). Starting from the improvement of gender equality within the family, this process of transformation paved the way for the spread and recognition of several unconventional kinds of nonmarital relationships, and it reached its peak with legal recognition of same-sex marriage, or marriage-like institutions like civil unions, in most North American and European countries. Two of the main pillars of the traditional nuclear heterosexual family have been eroded. These are gender inequality (OKIN 1989) and heteronormativity (FOLGERØ 2008), undermined by feminists and LGBT+¹ movements calling for gender equality and same-sex marriage.

¹ The acronym LGBT stands for lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgender minorities. The '+' at the end of the acronym serves the purpose of including other sexual minorities, such as queer,

However, until the last decade, the pillar of mononormativity² (PIEPER & BAUER 2005) still seemed to remain inherent in all kinds of family, from traditional to less conventional ones. At this point, though, even mononormativity is starting to be questioned by the increasing spread and visibility of a particular kind of intimate relationship: the polyamorous relationship.

My claim is that the increasing prevalence and visibility of polyamorous relationships should be considered an integral part of the process of transformation affecting the traditional nuclear family. For this reason, we can expect that a future step in this process of transformation may be legal recognition of polyamorous families (PALAZZO 2018: 234). Having said that, I acknowledge that the recognition of such families will probably not occur very soon, not least because of contingent obstacles to its feasibility. Yet, there are strong reasons to believe that sooner or later this development will be included in the political agenda. I also claim that the feasibility and desirability of recognition for polyamorous families are issues that should be addressed separately. Indeed, legal recognition of polyamorous families by a liberal democratic state would always be desirable for two main reasons: to protect the vulnerable partners, and to provide fair treatment to anyone choosing unconventional relational styles.

This paper aims to provide an overview of the debate on the feasibility of legal recognition for polyamorous relationships, especially in the form of plural marriage. Firstly, I shall make a few notes on the state of the art of the sociological, legal and philosophical literature in Italian and English in the matter of polyamory and of legal recognition of polyamorous relationships. I shall also discuss the controversy surrounding the term polyamory, suggest a different label and emphasise the differences between polyamory and traditional polygamy. This will help to remove

intersexual and asexual people. Whether polyamorists could be considered a sexual minority is debatable because it remains controversial whether polyamory is a sexual orientation or not (Emens 2004; Den Otter 2015). Thus, even if the LGBT+ and the polyamorous community sometimes overlap (polyamorists can be gay, lesbian, transgender etc.), I shall keep considering them as separate communities for reasons that will be developed later.

² Mononormativity is a term coined by Pieper and Bauer (2005) to refer to “the forms of power which help establish the monogamous couple bond as an idealized and normative model” (GUSMANO & MOTTERLE 2019: 352). In other words, monogamy is usually considered the norm in intimate relationships, and this is a powerful assumption as long as every relationship that deviates from this alleged norm is stigmatized and marginalized. Mononormativity is closely linked to heteronormativity; the latter claims that heterosexuality is the norm in intimate relationships, thus establishing a hierarchy between heterosexual and non-heterosexual kinds of relationships.

one of the main obstacles to widespread social acceptance of polyamorous relationships. I shall subsequently give a brief account of the main features of polyamorous relationships. In so doing, I shall underline how fluidity, heterogeneity and non-conformity are crucial for polyamorists, providing a convincing reason to resist all attempts at normalization and assimilation into the normative model of the monogamous heterosexual family. This aspect is key: fluidity, after all, has a strong bearing on whether polyamory should be recognized at all.

Secondly, I shall contextualize polyamorous relationship in the light of the radical changes which the traditional family has undergone since the second half of the 20th century. I shall present polyamory as the most recent step in the process of transformation affecting the notion of family. In fact, polyamorous relationships represent one of the most radical challenges to the idea of the traditional heterosexual family based on monogamous heterosexual marriage, and they have significant potential for deconstructing the pillar of mononormativity. This is part of a continuum encompassing the deconstruction of other pillars of the traditional family, notably heteronormativity, undermined by recognition of same-sex unions. Thus, I shall claim that, along the lines of what happened with same-sex couples, we should expect recognition of polyamorous relationships to become a relevant issue at a sooner or later date.

Finally, I shall claim that legal recognition of polyamorous families will not probably occur in the short run, and I will analyse some contingent obstacles to its feasibility. Specifically, I shall foreground the obstacles to the institutionalization of plural marriage, addressing four main issues: (i) The lack of social acceptance and solid alliances, caused by the limited visibility of polyamory in the “society at large” (SHEFF 2011), a hostile attitude of society towards polyamory when confused with inegalitarian forms of polygamy (BROOKS 2009), and a suspicious attitude by the LGBT+ community towards legal recognition of polyamorous relationships (CALHOUN 2005). (ii) The lack of strong and unanimous calls for recognition coming from the polyamorous community itself (AVIRAM 2008). (iii) The difficulties involved in finding a common regulatory framework due to diversity and intrinsic fluidity among polyamorous relationships. (iv) Concrete problems that governments would face when called upon to reshape pre-existing legal systems in an effort to legalize multiple marriage (AVIRAM & LEACHMAN 2015). In conclusion, I will briefly argue for the desirability of

legal recognition of polyamorous relationships, preferably in such a way as to secure rights for individuals in polyamorous relationships, but without constraining the transformative potential of this kind of relationships within an excessively rigid legal institution.

1. DEFINITION AND MAIN FEATURES OF POLYAMOROUS RELATIONSHIPS

The phenomenon of polyamory started to arouse academic interest at the beginning of the 21st century (BARKER & LANGDRIDGE 2010), but most of the research has been conducted in the fields of sociology and psychology (ANAPOL 2010; BARKER 2005; CONLEY *et al.* 2015; MOORS *et al.* 2017). From a sociological perspective, there is only one recent quantitative study about polyamorous relationships³. It took place in 2016 thanks to the Canadian Research Institute for Law and the Family and investigated the perceptions of polyamory in Canada. Its purpose was “to obtain demographic and attitudinal information about Canadians involved in non-dyadic relationships, better understand how they see themselves and how they believe the general public sees them, and expand our knowledge of the frequency and nature of non-dyadic relationships” (BOYD 2017: XVI). However, being among the first pieces of relevant quantitative research so far, it has many limits and does not provide information about non-polyamorists’ perception of polyamorous families. Scarce interest in quantitative research on polyamory might probably reflect the marginality and invisibility (SHEFF 2011) of this kind of intimate relationships until the last decade.

Sociological research on polyamory points to an important issue concerning its geographical limits: the few qualitative studies available in English almost always refer to the situation in the United States and Canada. Polyamory in European countries and especially in Italy is all but neglected. Crucial contributions in North America concern polyamorists’ different approaches to recognition of polyamorous relationships and multiple marriage (AVIRAM 2008); the debate on multiple marriage (SHEFF

³ Other two quantitative studies were conducted in the United States in the late 1990s. In 1999 Jasmine Walston delivered a survey through a mailing list; she received 430 responses and she discussed the results at the Building Bridges Conference of the Institute for Twenty-First Century Relationships in Seattle. Her paper is titled “Polyamory: An Exploratory Study of Responsible Multi-Partnering”. Some data was also collected from 1000 people who attended polyamorous conferences in the late 1990s, and the results were published by the magazine “Loving more” in 2002. The article, written by Adam Weber, is titled “Survey Results: Who Are We?” (Anapol, 2010).

2011); the classification of polyamory within the broader discourse on ethical non-monogamies (BARKER & LANGRIDGE 2010) and multi-parenting (Sheff 2010; GOLDFEDER & SHEFF 2013; PALLOTTA-CHIAROLLI *et al.* 2020). The little systematic sociological research done in Europe about polyamorous relationships, published in English and Italian, comprises the works of Christian Klesse (2006; 2017; 2019) – who focused on several aspects of polyamory, like the meaning of the term *polyamory*, polyamorous parenting, gay male and bisexual non-monogamists in United Kingdom – and the European project ‘INTIMATE – Citizenship, Care and Choice: The Micropolitics of Intimacy in Southern Europe’⁴. However, of fifty publications, only two refer explicitly to polyamory, namely Gusmano (2018) and Pérez Navarro (2017), and Pérez Navarro himself is not directly concerned with polyamory, focusing on a theoretical investigation of monogamy “as a constitutive element of marriage-like institutions” (Pérez Navarro 2017: 441) from the standpoint of Spanish law. Thus, only Gusmano investigates polyamory, consensual non-monogamies and other forms of multiple intimate relationships by accounting for the Italian polyamorous community through interviews and a survey of the main websites and forums.

If the sociological research lacks systematic qualitative research, and quantitative research is almost missing, works in political philosophy and law do not get us much further. Very few legal scholars address the topic of legal recognition of polyamorous families in liberal democratic states: Emens (2004), who sketchily advocates the repeal of the adultery laws in the United States at the end of a broader talk about polyamory in general; Aviram and Leachman (2015) in their work on polyamorous marriage in the United States; Palazzo (2018), who mainly focuses on legal recognition of non-conjugal families in the United States and Canada, but also refers to polyamorous relationships as potentially “the next frontier of family law in U.S. and Canada” (234); an Italian volume edited by Grande and Pes (2018) with some insights about the possibility of legal recognition of polyamorous families in Italy. As far as political philosophy is concerned, only a couple of recent contributions by Brake (2014) and Den Otter (2015; 2018) directly investigate the philosophical underpinnings of recognition and

⁴ INTIMATE is a comparative qualitative study which “addresses intimacy from the perspective of those on the margins of social, legal and policy concerns in Southern Europe (Portugal, Spain, Italy) – lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and transgendered people”. The first strand of this project (the micropolitics of partnering) investigated, among other topics, polyamory.

regulation of polyamorous relationships from a liberal perspective. These works are accompanied by a number of works on the related topic of recognition of polygamous relationships and plural marriage (CALHOUN 2005; DE MARNEFFE 2016; MACEDO 2015; March 2011). Indeed, to some extent recognition of polygamy and polyamory are intersecting issues, notwithstanding the difference between the two kinds of relationships, which will be discussed later.

Regarding terminology, when I talk about polyamory I refer to the practice of engaging in multiple romantic and potentially sexual relationships with the awareness and consent of all the partners involved. However, the terminology referring to non-monogamous relationships and especially polyamory is still very fuzzy, probably as a result of gaps in visibility and knowledge, of stigma, and of social hostility towards non-monogamy. First of all, the practice of engaging in multiple relationships with the consent of all the partners involved, which I call polyamory, is often referred to interchangeably as ‘consensual’ or ‘responsible’ or ‘ethical’ non-monogamy (BARKER & LANGRIDGE 2010), or as a ‘multi-partner relationship’ (KLESSE 2017). However, the term polyamory was specifically coined in 1990 to replace ‘responsible’ non-monogamy (AVIRAM & LEACHMAN 2015), with a view, I believe, to stopping framing the practice of engaging in responsible multiple relationships only in opposition to the monogamous norm. Thus, I avoid the use of ‘responsible’ or ‘consensual’ or ‘ethic’ non-monogamy in the place of polyamory in order to respect the will of the polyamorous community to be identified for itself as such.

The second issue concerns the meaning of the term ‘polyamory’. The word ‘polyamory’ was included in the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 2006 with the following meaning: “the practice of engaging in multiple sexual relationships with the consent of all the people involved”. However, it is not clear whether polyamory necessarily involves sexual relationships (EMENS 2004), as scholars and many polyamorists (AVRIAM 2015) stress the fact that not sex but “love, intimacy and friendship” are central to polyamorous discourse (KLESSE 2006). Moreover, polyamory is considered a different practice in respect to other kinds of consensual non-monogamies, such as open relationships, casual sex and swinging (BARKER & LANGRIDGE 2010), which are instead “sex- or pleasure-centred” (KLESSE 2006: 565). I believe that what emerges from this discussion is the centrality of the romantic bond in qualifying an intimate relationship in polyamorous terms, whether

sex occurs or not. This is the reason why I refer to polyamory as the custom of consensually and simultaneously engaging in different romantic *and potentially* sexual relationships.

The third concern regards mixing the concept of polyamory with the one of traditional polygamy⁵. When I refer to traditional polygamy, I mean the custom of having more than one spouse, mostly practised within religious or ethnic communities. The only form of traditional polygamy practised consistently throughout history has been polygyny. Both polyamory and traditional polygamy are non-monogamous kinds of relationships and are consequently often mistaken for each other. However, they do differ in some key features. In fact, polyamory is an egalitarian form of non-monogamy, for it allows both men and women to engage in multiple relationships, and it is gender-neutral because it “allows participants to have same-sex relationships too” (GOLDFEDER & SHEFF 2010: 157). In other words, “the versatility of genders, sexual orientations and sexual identities distinguishes the polyamorous community from other groups that practice nonmonogamy as a part of religion or ethnic tradition” (AVIRAM & LEACHMAN 2015: 299). Traditional forms of polygamy are instead clearly not gender-neutral, for they are heterocentric kinds of relationships (GOLDFEDER & SHEFF 2010), and they are inegalitarian in both their polygynous and polyandrous forms, for they allow only the male or female partner to engage with other partners.

Notwithstanding the remarks above, I am not assuming that every traditional polygamous relationship is intrinsically inegalitarian, nor that every polygynous relationship is necessarily bad for women. Moreover, I am aware that many criticisms about traditional polygamy are influenced by a Western-centric anthropological approach to intimate relationships. However, it is not the purpose of the present work to ascertain whether or not we should dismiss our Western-centred anthropological lens and open a debate on the decriminalization and recognition of traditional kinds of polygamy – even if we probably should. My purpose here is to build on the debate on recognition of polyamorous relationships in Western countries.

⁵ The term ‘polygamy’ “refers to the state of having more than one spouse at the same time. It includes both polygyny and polyandry. Polygyny is the practice of a male having multiple female spouses. Polyandry is the converse, a female with multiple male spouses” (see <https://www.bccourts.ca/jdb-txt/SC/11/15/2011BCSC1588.htm>). However, the term ‘polygamy’ is often used regardless of whether state legislation sanctions the relationship.

Thus, due to the stigma and social hostility directed at traditional forms of polygamy, I believe that underlining the differences between egalitarian and non-egalitarian forms of polygamy is crucial if we want to broaden social acceptance of polyamorous relationships. The terms polyamory and even ‘multi-partner relationship’ do not help to make this distinction clear to the less informed. For this reason, I suggest introducing a label such as ‘egalitarian and gender-neutral polygamy’ to stress these specific features of the relationship. This label also has the advantage of keeping legal issues separate from sentimental ones by erasing any direct reference to love in its name.

Polyamorous relationships are heterogeneous in their structure, and very few studies analyse the demographic composition of the polyamorous community. Therefore, I shall only give a few hints which are crucial to framing the debate on recognition of polyamorous relationships. According to Sheff, the polyamorous community is mostly composed of “white, middle-class, well-educated, liberal adults” (2011: 497), and we find similar remarks in Gusmano when she describes her sample of polyamorous respondents as holding a “high relational and cultural capital”⁶ (2018: 64). This is also in line with the findings of the quantitative research paper ‘Perceptions of Polyamory in Canada’ (BOYD 2017), where the vast majority of respondents were white and showed higher levels of education and income compared with the general population in Canada.

Even though the composition of the polyamorous community appears homogeneous, the possible configurations of polyamorous relationships are limitless, as the number of partners is theoretically unlimited (EMENS 2004). Hence, there may or may not be a hierarchical structure with a primary relationship, and the partners may or may not be required to be faithful to the other members of the group (EMENS 2004). What polyamorous relationships have in common is their commitment to a few foundational principles: “self-knowledge, radical honesty, consent, self-possession, and privileging love and sex over other emotions and activities such as jealousy” (EMENS 2004: 283). It is evident that fluidity, non-conformity, heterogeneity, formalization issues and resistance to the assimilation into a mononormative and heterocentric family model are essential features of polyamorous relationships. Moreover, polyamorous relationships have great potential

⁶ My translation from Italian.

for deconstructing the traditional family as they question the paradigm of mononormativity. On the one hand, these two remarks show why it is hard to imagine how polyamorous relationships might be institutionalized in the form of a rigid legal institution. On the other, they make any attempt at recognizing polyamorous families even worthier, because this attempt would pave the way for more flexible regulations benefiting many other kinds of more or less conventional intimate relationships.

2. LEGAL RECOGNITION OF POLYAMOROUS FAMILIES

2.1 POLYAMOROUS RELATIONSHIPS IN CHANGING FAMILIES

Before assessing the feasibility of legal recognition for polyamorous relationships, it is crucial to contextualize recognition of these families in the light of the larger empirical transformation of the family unit. My claim is indeed that the increased visibility of polyamorous families should be considered a recent step in that process of transformation; thus, we should expect such families to be recognized at some point in future. As already mentioned in the introduction, we can observe that the nuclear, heterosexual, monogamic family has undergone a disruptive process of transformation in Western countries since the beginning of the 20th century. The changes include the enhancement of gender equality within the family (COGSWELL 1975; BENGSTON 2001; MACEDO 2015); higher divorce rates (FURSTENBERG 1987; ROSENEIL & BUDGEON 2004); many more polynuclear blended families or stepfamilies (FURSTENBERG 1987; BENGSTON 2001); voluntary singlehood or single-person households (BARKER & LANGRIDGE 2010; ROSENEIL & BUDGEON 2004); serial monogamy⁷ (BARKER & LANGRIDGE 2010; JAMIESON 2004); cohabitations and *de facto* unions⁸ (BLUMBERG 2004; BUDGEON & ROSENEIL 2004; LEVIN 2004); out-of-wedlock births and more children being raised by single parents (PAROLIN & PERROTTA 2012; ROSENEIL & BUDGEON 2004); couples “living apart together”⁹ (LEVIN 2004) and same-sex unions. If we look at the number and complexity of all these different family forms, it becomes clear that the family cannot be

⁷ ‘Serial-monogamy’ is the custom of having a number of sexual or romantic relationships one after another (but never more than one at a time), sometimes dissolving a previous marriage and initiating a new one.

⁸ A *de facto* union is a legal status sanctioning a relationship in which partners live in an arrangement of cohabitation without being married.

⁹ ‘Living apart together’ is a kind of relationship where the individuals involved do not share a home but perceive themselves as partners.

considered an immutable entity. The constellations of family relationships are indeed so variegated that we can no longer talk of the family in the singular, but of *families* (BUDGEON & ROSENEIL 2004). Families are indeed social phenomena that “reshape themselves in response to shifting social conditions” (SHEFF 2011: 491), and most of them have finally abandoned the idea of the traditional heterosexual nuclear family (BUDGEON & ROSENEIL 2004; CUTAS 2019).

As far back as in 1975 Cogswell claimed the “rejection of the myth of the idealized traditional nuclear family”, because the nuclear family was seen as “inadequate, restrictive, and counterproductive in meeting individual goals, aspirations and desired lifestyles” (392). Cogswell also reported the presence of ‘variant family forms’, referring to any deviation from the traditional nuclear family – including single parents, three-generation families, cohabiting couples and homosexual unions –, thus opposing the idea of the sole existence and relevance of the heterosexual nuclear family. Moreover, since divorce became legal in most of the Western countries, traditional relationships based on life-long marriage have been challenged. The increased rate of divorce (FURSTENBERG 1987) and single parenting (PAROLIN & PERROTTA 2012), and the predominance of extra-marital relationships (JAMIESON 2004) and ‘serial monogamy’ habits (BARKER & LANGDRIDGE 2010; JAMIESON 2004), show that the institution of marriage has been radically undermined and that its key role in disciplining intimate relationships between adults (and even between adults and children) has gradually waned.

The process of deconstruction of the traditional nuclear family started with the erosion of its patriarchal structure due to the improvement of gender equality (COGSWELL 1975; BENGSTON 2001; MACEDO 2015). The feminist movements played a pivotal role in this sense, but also many cultural, political, economic and technological advancements contributed to the achievement of this goal, e.g. higher levels of education, the welfare state, the development of hormonal contraception and legal improvements in protecting women and children’s rights. Meanwhile, the institution of marriage, too, was challenged for two main reasons: the weakening of the myth of life-long commitments in intimate relationships, and the spread and visibility of many forms of nonmarital relationships. On the one hand, when the divorce rate started to increase, marriage proved to be a very fragile institution (FURSTENBERG 1987). On the other, the erstwhile moral censure

of sexual intercourse outside marriage now seems widely overcome, while marriage itself has often been replaced by “long-term arrangements outside marriage” (JAMIESON 2004) involving cohabitation and child-rearing. Nowadays, many countries provide specific legal tools for recognition and regulation of these different kinds of nonmarital families (CIRINNÀ 2016; BLUMBERG 2004; PALAZZO 2018); consequently, “marriage has no longer the monopoly as the ideal state for adult life” (JAMIESON 2004: 35).

At the end of the 20th century, another of the main pillars of the traditional family started to be eroded, i.e. heteronormativity. Indeed, a landmark event in the path leading to less conventional family relationships is represented by the spread and greater visibility of same-sex relationships during the last thirty years (BLUMBERG 2004; MILLBANK 2008; NUSSBAUM 2009; STACEY 1996). This process of evolution reached unprecedented heights when the same-sex family started being broadly institutionalized in Western countries through legal recognition of same-sex marriage or marriage-like institutions like civil unions¹⁰. Recognition of same-sex marriage radically challenged the conservative claim regarding the social and legal predominance of the ‘natural’ heterosexual family (FOLGERØ 2008).

According to Blumberg (2004), legal regulation of nonmarital relationships and legal recognition of same-sex families are different but very closely related trends. I claim that the emergence of polyamorous families should be considered the most recent development in that same trend. In other words, I claim that the rising visibility of polyamorous relationships represents only the latest stage in a process of transformation affecting the family, which started with the erosion of gender roles between spouses, saw the institutionalization of many different forms of unconventional nonmarital relationships and culminated in the questioning of heteronormativity through recognition of same-sex unions. For this reason, we can very well hazard that the erosion of mononormativity through legal

¹⁰ According to the Human Rights Campaign Foundation, same-sex marriage is currently recognized in twenty-nine countries, including Australia, Canada, the United States of America, New Zealand, as well as seventeen European countries: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom (Human Rights Campaign Foundation, Marriage Equality Around the World, retrievable at <https://www.hrc.org/resources/marriage-equality-around-the-world>). European countries which instead only recognize civil unions include Croatia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Liechtenstein and Slovenia.

recognition of polyamorous relationships will be the next step in this series of sea changes affecting our notion of family.

However, we cannot forget that polyamory is still “invisible to society at large” (SHEFF 2011) and that mononormativity still seems to inform the vast majority of family configurations, from the traditional heterosexual family to many nonmarital family forms and even same-sex relationships. In addition, as we shall see in the next section, social stigma towards polygamy, limited awareness about polyamory, lack of vindication of the polyamorous community and a shortage of alliances are clear signs that recognition of polyamorous relationships will not come to pass very soon. But if it is true that recognition of polyamorous relationships will probably not occur within the next couple of decades, this does not mean that polyamorous relationships will *never* be recognized. Polyamorous relationships are indeed becoming more visible to society and, at least in Canada and the United States, the political arena is starting to be aware of the existence and needs of polyamorists: in 2020 and 2021 for the first time two US cities, Somerville and Cambridge (both in Massachusetts), recognized a polyamorous domestic partnership. Moreover, now that same-sex marriage has been institutionalized in most Western countries, there is the leeway to strive for recognition of other unconventional kinds of relationship, especially the polyamorous one, and also scope for an alliance between the polyamorous and LGBT+ communities, even if it is just the side of the latter which is most concerned with same-sex marriage.

In my opinion, the main difference between the path towards recognition of same-sex relationships and the one leading to recognition of polyamorous families will be their result. Unlike same-sex relationships, polyamorous relationships are very diverse in their structure and it is hard to make them all fit a single model, because fluidity in the interaction and freedom to shape non-normative kinds of intimate relationships are essential features of the polyamorous community. Thus, I doubt that mere recognition of institutions like plural marriage might be desirable or even feasible. However, this should not represent an obstacle to recognition of polyamorous relationships, but a great chance to radically rethink our way of regulating intimate relationships in the first place. That way, public institutions will become more inclusive towards all kinds of unconventional families, even those that do not conform to the monogamous norm.

2.2 LEGAL RECOGNITION OF POLYAMOROUS RELATIONSHIPS:

A FEASIBILITY ASSESSMENT

I claimed above that the increasing visibility of polyamorous relationships represents the most recent step in the process of transformation of the family, following the institutionalization of same-sex unions. Thus, the path towards vindication of same-sex marriage ideally represents the privileged term of comparison for a possible path towards recognition of polyamorous relationships. Indeed, recognition of same-sex marriage could be seen as a sign that the time is ripe to question mononormativity and institutionalize polyamorous relationships. According to Aviram and Leachman (2015), the mobilization of the LGBT+ community for legal recognition of same-sex marriage “has created greater traction for legal arguments to expand marriage to poly relationships” (278). As a result, the LGBT+ campaign for marriage equality clearly has important implications for the polyamorous community, which turns out to be affected by the debate on marriage equality and by the subsequent recognition of same-sex marriage.

The issue of recognition of multi-partner relationships is considered so closely related to that of recognition of same-sex unions that the ‘slippery slope’ argument is one of the most frequently invoked against recognition of the latter (AVIRAM & LEACHMAN 2015; BALTZLY 2012; SHEFF 2011). Once the process of recognition of same-sex marriage in the United States came to an end, conservative advocates of the traditional family alerted public opinion that, according to the ‘slippery slope’ argument, multiple marriages would only be the next step, followed by “adultery, prostitutions, masturbation, bigamy, fornication, incest, paedophilia, bestiality, and ultimately the deconstruction of monogamous marriage itself” (SHEFF 2011: 494). For their part, LGBT+ advocates of same-sex marriage usually resist this claim by rejecting the analogy between same-sex and polygamous marriage (CALHOUN 2005). The reason for this political choice is that “social hostility to polygamy is invoked [by conservative opponents of same-sex marriage] as a reason not to permit same-sex marriage” (CALHOUN 2005: 1026). It is clear, then, why LGBT+ advocates of same-sex marriage strategically refuse to link their struggle with endeavours to have plural marriage recognized.

Another reason why the institutionalization of same-sex unions influences the debate on polyamorous relationships is that these two kinds of intimate relationships are to some extent considered similar. First of all, polyamorists and LGBT+ minorities are marginalized groups which had

to develop similar ‘adaptive strategies’ in response to analogous social circumstances so as to resist social stigma and a hostile social environment (SHEFF 2011). In other words, polyamorists are stigmatized and marginalized for their sexual and relational style, just as much as homosexual, bisexual and other sexual minorities are discriminated against for their sexual orientation. In each of these cases, stigma and discrimination are largely connected with social and political institutions “that define and regulate sexuality” (AVIRAM & LEACHMAN 2015: 307). Secondly, both groups tend to show flexible approaches to family and intimate relationships, which might “provide positive role models for other groups in society and thus merit legal recognition as legitimate families” (SHEFF 2011: 489). Finally, the LGBT+ and polyamorous communities tend to overlap (BOYD 2017; SHEFF 2011). The quantitative study conducted in Canada (BOYD 2017) shows that 37.3% of polyamorous respondents describe themselves as heterosexual, while 31.7% of respondents identify as bisexuals, 24.4% as pansexuals, 12.7% as polysexuals, 4.2% as homosexuals, 2.1% as queer, 1.9% as asexuals and 3.5% as other.

However, notwithstanding the various similarities between the LGBT+ and the polyamorous community, I claim that the discussion on the feasibility of legal recognition for polyamorous relationships in the near future should be kept separate from the debate on same-sex marriage. Even if the struggle for recognition of same-sex marriage stands out as a benchmark and a starting point for the discussion on legal recognition of polyamorous families, some fundamental differences still deserve attention. It is important to map out the different path towards vindication of the polyamorous community and to acknowledge the desirability of legal tools other than plural marriage. More precisely, in opposition to the frequently invoked ‘slippery slope’ argument, I claim that we cannot take it for granted that legal recognition of same-sex relationships will automatically open the way for any kind of institutionalization of polyamorous relationships in the short run, and especially not in the form of plural marriage, for at least three reasons.

To begin with, the polyamorous community cannot, as of now, count on widespread social recognition and acceptance, nor on strong alliances with other marginalized sexual minorities. As I mentioned earlier, polyamorous relationships remain “virtually invisible to society at large” (SHEFF 2011: 489). This is remarkably different from the situation of the gay and

lesbian minorities, as almost everyone is already aware of their existence. And even if more visibility sometimes means more stigma, it also makes for more widespread interest, knowledge and debate. However, when polyamorists come out, they are surrounded by social stigma and hostility, too, especially because polyamory is often associated with traditional and inequalitarian forms of polygamy (BROOKS 2009; CALHOUN 2005). Moreover, they can barely count on the support of that part of the LGBT+ community which is more committed to marriage equality because, as mentioned above, it tends to strategically resist the ‘slippery slope’ argument, thus implicitly downplaying the significance of potential recognition of multiple marriage or equivalent institutions. The polyamorous community is therefore deprived of a powerful ally, and I venture that this will further slow the process leading to legal recognition of polyamorous relationships.

It is not even true that same-sex marriage, viewed as a challenge to heteronormativity, clears the way for the challenge that plural marriage would represent for mononormativity. And that is because same-sex marriage could be seen as an institution not only reinforcing the monogamous norm, but even reproducing a homonormative¹¹ family model, thus erasing non-normative relationships like the polyamorous one (FOLGERØ 2008; WARNER 1999). In other words, laws on marriage, and even on same-sex marriage, uphold “a traditional model of how the family *ought* to be formed, particularly through its privileging of marriage/civil partnerships, the two-parent model and binary constructions of both homosexual/heterosexual and male/female” (GARWOOD 2016: 6). This also negatively impacts the chances of polyamorous relationships being recognized, for this kind of relationship would preferably require far more flexible legal institutions than plural marriage.

However, I assume that both the relative invisibility of polyamory and the attitude of the LGBT+ community towards it will soon shift. As mentioned above, the political debate is slowly becoming more aware of the existence and needs of polyamorists, and in 2020 the polyamorous domestic partnership was recognized by a municipal ordinance of the city of Somerville, Massachusetts, for the first time in history, followed in 2021 by the city of Cambridge, Massachusetts. In addition, it is important to

¹¹ Homonormativity means the normalisation and hierarchisation of some forms of homosexuality over others, privileging (but not limited to) the gay or lesbian, cisgender, middle-class, white, monogamous, married couple.

remark that the most radical fringe of the LGBT+ community, which is sceptical about recognition of same-sex marriage, represents a natural ally for the polyamorous community (CALHOUN 2005; ETTTELBRICK 1997). However, even the section of the LGBT+ movement that is more committed to marriage equality may probably become more supportive of polyamorists, now that same-sex marriage has been broadly institutionalized.

The second obstacle to recognition of polyamorous relationships in the near future is that the polyamorous community itself is not yet striving for recognition. It particularly opposes legal recognition in the form of “mere inclusion in traditionally oppressive institutions (such as marriage)” (Pérez NAVARRO 2017: 454). Indeed, there is unrelenting and widespread unwillingness to give up fluidity and the freedom to arrange intimate relationships in favour of the constraint within the rigid and formalized legal institution of, say, multiple marriage (AVIRAM 2008; GUSMANO 2018; SHEFF 2011). There are at least two key explanations for the polyamorous community’s negative attitude towards marriage.

The first specific reason is addressed by Sheff when she argues that the race and class privileges of polyamorous individuals, compared with members of the LGBT+ community, provide a ‘buffer against discrimination’ (2015). In other words, polyamorists’ socioeconomic status and cultural level provide a kind of security that “is scarce for lesbigay and/or working class people” (SHEFF 2015: 503). This intuition is strictly connected with the demographic composition of the polyamorous community, which, as mentioned above, mainly consists of white, middle-class, well-educated and wealthy individuals (BOYD 2017). Hence, most polyamorists have many social privileges, and this allows them to discount the struggle for the right to marry (SHEFF 2011). This does not hold true for the LGBT+ community, whose composition is much more diverse, thus making the right to marry important for its less privileged members (SHEFF 2011). Moreover, being well-educated and wealthy, polyamorists can easily access different forms of legal protection of their intimate relationships, like private arrangements and contracts. And we must not forget that polyamorous individuals can even access heterosexual dyadic marriage, thus having a wider range of options as to how they choose to manage their polyamorous relationships, and this might be another reason for the weakening of their wish to access multiple marriage. In addition, access to heterosexual marriage represents a chance to dissimulate their unconventional way of living intimate

relationships, since heterosexual dyadic marriages “make them socially intelligible as heterosexual couples with ‘close friends’” (SHEFF 2011: 502).

The second reason is that polyamorists strongly oppose marriage as an oppressive, rigid and too formalized institution. In opposition to supporters of same-sex marriage, they see plural marriage as a despicable form of assimilation and normalization (AVIRAM 2008). Moreover, they do not seem eager to give up the freedom to arrange their private, intimate, family relationships in many different and flexible ways in exchange for public protection through such a rigid and formalized legal institution as plural marriage. Polyamorists have showed not to be politically or personally committed to plural marriage (SHEFF 2011), and most of them expressed great individualism and, as a result, a dislike for any governmental interference in their intimate life (AVIRAM 2008).

However, it bears repeating that neither does the LGBT+ community unanimously agree on the desirability of recognition of same-sex marriage (ETTELBRICK 1997; WARNER 1999). A very large share of the community remains ambivalent in this regard, advocating more flexible alternatives to marriage in order to “redistribute privileges and benefits independently from marital status” (SHEFF 2011: 493). This group strongly opposes assimilation and homonormativity and claims the equal worth and dignity of all kinds of families. Due to the similarities between the two communities and their paths towards recognition, it could be the case that a part of the polyamorous community will at some point become more committed to recognition of plural marriage. According to Barker and Langridge, there is a concrete possibility of some non-monogamous relationships reproducing and bolstering heteronormativity and mononormativity rather than undermining them (2010). Thus, future calls for plural marriage are still not to be excluded. Moreover, polyamorists’ refusal of plural marriage does not mean a total rejection of any kind of regulation. Polyamorous individuals are inclined to more flexible forms of recognition so as to retain the freedom to arrange their intimate lives and to avoid assimilation into the heteronormative and mononormative family model (AVIRAM & LEACHMAN 2015). However, the multiplicity of partners involved and the heterogeneity and fluidity of polyamorous relationships make it especially hard to find a common regulatory framework that may not only be apt to discipline all specific kinds of intimate arrangements but also be legally viable.

Finally, the third obstacle to the feasibility of recognition for polyamorous

relationships in the short term is closely connected with the difficulty of finding a suitable regulatory framework. Indeed, even when all forms of opposition to recognition of polyamorous relationships are somehow overcome, the concrete implementation of a plural marriage model, or even of some different and flexible regulatory measures, would require great adaptive efforts on the part of pre-existing legal and administrative public structures and procedures. This concern was not shared by the LGBT+ community, for recognizing the dyadic same-sex relationship “was hardly a radical move” (AVIRAM & LEACHMAN 2015). The legal structures and administrative processes proceeding from dyadic marriage were already in place when same-sex marriage was recognized, and the only change that legal systems had to make had to do with gender. Plural marriage, instead, would necessarily cause a rethinking of taxation, immigration laws and healthcare, to mention but a few, and this might represent a significant challenge for governments, especially in the short term. However, this effort is undoubtedly worth pursuing, and among the most interesting philosophical approaches already suggested is Brake’s ‘minimal marriage’ (2014), introducing radical reforms of marriage with a view to including non-normative and multiple relationships like polyamorous ones, as well as relevant care networks and networks of friends. Even if not altogether feasible right now, the provision of at least some flexible forms of regulation for polyamorous relationships is both desirable and urgent. A still better measure would be the introduction of flexible forms of regulation *and* of plural marriage to finally protect polyamorists’ fundamental freedom of choice as regards their intimate lives. The time has come for governments to start providing fair treatment to all individuals living in same-sex, polyamorous and every other non-oppressive form of intimate relationships, on grounds of equality, dignity and freedom.

CONCLUSION

Problems with the feasibility of recognition for polyamorous relationships do not imply that polyamorous relationships *should not* be recognized. The lack of vindication or support, along with all the other obstacles mentioned above, do not rule out a considerable public interest in recognizing polyamorous families and every other kind of unconventional family with a similar aim. Indeed, as with any other intimate relationships of care, polyamorous relationships deserve recognition for at least

two fundamental reasons: to protect the rights and interests of vulnerable partners in the relationship; and to provide fair treatment to everyone who chose unconventional relational styles.

In addition, polyamorous relationships have the potential to deconstruct a traditional institution like marriage from the inside. They can even help build radically new and more flexible forms of interaction between the law and the sphere of intimate relationships (PÉREZ NAVARRO 2017). I claim that this potential must be enhanced and not repressed, and that for this reason, if recognition of polyamorous relationships is not yet on the political agenda, we should strive for it to be included. We urgently need policies that may add value to difference and fluidity in every kind of unconventional family and radically question normative kinds of intimate relationships. Recognition of polyamorous relationships would definitely be a fundamental step in that direction, hopefully followed by a more radical deconstruction of the hierarchy of intimate relationships and by the recognition of non-amatonormative¹² relationships of care, like networks of friends. In other words, we need polyamory “to put into crisis the monogamous legal paradigm in such a way that, along with its untreatable inner heterogeneity, it may force a radical restructuring of the relationship between the state and the intimate sphere” (PÉREZ NAVARRO 2017: 453). Thus, we should keep the issue of the feasibility of recognition for polyamorous families separate from that of its desirability. Even if recognition is not feasible right now, it will probably become in future, and its desirability is not in question regardless.

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¹² Amatonormativity is a term coined by Brake (2012) which means that “a central, exclusive, amorous relationship is normal for humans, is a universally shared goal, and that such a relationship is normative, in that it should be aimed at in preference to other relationship type” (89).

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AURELIO CASTRO

Costruire dei villaggi

Riflessioni e studi sulla qualità relazionale nel riconoscimento delle polifamiglie non-monogame

ABSTRACT: the following paper aims to contribute to the Italian literature on non-monogamy with a psychosocial interpretation towards the future of the political and legal recognition requests of non-monogamous and queer relationships, as well as of their families. Starting with a reflection on how normativities position those who are outside the binaries as noises to be ignored or cancelled, the paper then provides a critique of the concept of evaluation as a tool for acquiring rights (as it does not find a counterpart in the different-gender relationships). Psychosocial studies on the relationship quality of non-monogamous people should be used to strengthen the demands for the legal recognitions of non-monogamous relationships, families and multi-parenting. In fact, the available international literature has given voice and confirmed what the many polyfamilies experience in everyday life: that these families (non-monogamous, open, poly, extended, childless * or not) are a social reality with their positive characteristics and criticalities. Starting from examples on the erasure of bisexualities and ame-gender families recognition – the paper discuss how including these types of psychosocial research can improve our struggle for the recognition and legal rights of non-monogamous agreements and relationships.

KEYWORDS: family law; non-monogamies; bisexuality; legal recognition; polyamory; relationship quality;

Nel corso degli ultimi dieci anni, le relazioni non esclusive hanno assunto senza dubbio un posto di primo piano. Lo si deduce dalla mole di articoli divulgativi, dai trend social nella ricerca accademica, ma anche e soprattutto delle rappresentazioni mainstream di serie TV e film (da *Euphoria*, *Shes'gotta have it* a *You, Me, Her*, *Dr. Marston and the Wonder Women*). Quando socialmente costruite nei discorsi condivisi, le non-monogamie sono tendenzialmente valutate su due livelli tematici: quello della stabilità relazionale (ad es., quando viene detto che “non funzionano”, “non durano”, “rovina la relazione”, “non mi adatterei mai”, “vuol dire che manca qualcosa”, “c’è troppa gelosia”) e quello della morale (ad es. dire che “è solo una scusa per tradire”, “è indecente”, “è una perversione”, “non mi potrei mai fidare”).

Sia il senso comune che le scienze sociali – psicologia inclusa – hanno contribuito a plasmare questa mononormatività in un mondo di vasti orientamenti relazionali, e allo stesso tempo hanno rinforzato il binarismo di genere e dell’orientamento sessuale (EISNER 2013). Contrariamente a questi paradigmi e pregiudizi, adottare degli stili relazionali non-monogami costituisce una scelta legittima e “adeguata” a livello relazionale, con specifiche caratteristiche e criticità come ogni altra forma relazionale (MOORS *et al.* 2017). Infatti, nonostante le pretese delle scienze psicologiche e delle discipline mediche di voler misurare il sessuale in modo oggettivo (CASTRO 2017), sappiamo che non esistono prospettive politicamente neutre quando si fa ricerca sul sessuale, come per qualsiasi altro fenomeno.

Il presente articolo vuole fornire un contributo alla letteratura scientifica italiana sulle non-monogamie. Attraverso un’analisi di tipo psicosociale, ci si può interrogare sul futuro delle domande di riconoscimento – politiche e giuridiche – delle relazioni non-monogame e queer, e dei loro legami familiari, siano essi di famiglie allargate, biologiche e/o elettive. Partendo da una riflessione sulle domande di riconoscimento per l’omogenitorialità e le famiglie con genitori dello stesso genere, nei primi paragrafi sarà presentata una breve *review* di studi psicologici che hanno confrontato, e spesso moralmente giudicato, gli *outcome* relazionali di persone monogame e non-monogame. Attraverso la critica del concetto di valutazione come strumento per acquisire diritti (in quanto non trova un corrispettivo nelle relazioni di persone con generi diversi o percepiti come “eterosessuali”), si vuole sottolineare come a livello giuridico e politico le ricerche sulle qualità relazionali e la poligenitorialità possano rafforzare le domande di riconoscimento familiari come diritto che va tutelato. Di fatto, la letteratura internazionale disponibile ha dato voce alle pratiche quotidiane e al vissuto delle numerose forme di non-monogamie. Tali nuclei e famiglie (non-monogame, aperte, poly, allargate, con figli* o meno) sono una realtà sociale con stabilità relazionale, equilibrati, con delle potenzialità e criticità specifiche che possono essere rappresentate giuridicamente al pari delle altre forme familiari.

Quando discutiamo del sessuale, dobbiamo tenere conto di come atteggiamenti, rappresentazioni e giudizi siano legati al modo in cui esso viene socialmente situato e messo in scena (GAGNON & SIMON 1986). Secondo Meg-John Barker (BARKER 2005), la costruzione dominante delle relazioni prescrive l’ideale di coppia eteronormata come l’unica forma di relazione

legittima: ovvero un rapporto “deve” essere 1) monogamo, 2) eterosessuale tra un uomo e una donna e 3) dove alla donna spetta un ruolo passivo mentre all’uomo uno attivo (BARKER 2005). Le forme relazionali che non aderiscono a questa struttura vengono categorizzate e rese identificabili nella dimensione pubblica del sé come devianti (KLESSE 2007), quindi da condannare moralmente e/o da valutare come stili relazionali negativi, problematici, mostruosi, demonizzati, promiscui, instabili e senza alcuna fiducia condivisa tra le parti (KLESSE 2007; BARKER 2010; MOORS *et al.* 2017). Quando parliamo di relazioni e delle sessualità dovremmo quindi tenere in considerazione come il costrutto stesso di orientamento sessuale sia stato plasmato seguendo un binarismo del desiderio sessuale/romantico, del genere, del sesso e dell’esclusività. Le società eteronormate creano dei binarismi e, costantemente, cancellano o assimilano tutto ciò che si muove fuori da questi binari (YOSHINO 2000). Nonostante queste dicotomie non rappresentino affatto l’esperienza umana del sessuale, esse sono egemonicamente proscribed a livello epistemico, sia per il sessuale che per il genere, e le società così normate fanno di tutto per mantenere l’illusione di un mondo binario (BUTLER 2013; YOSHINO 2000; CONNELL & MESSERSCHIMDT 2005).

In opposizione a questi binarismi, un numero crescente di voci ha contribuito alla decostruzione delle categorie sessuali, come nel caso delle richieste di tutela dei corpi e diritti delle persone intersex (BALOCCHI 2019). Ancor più efficacemente, è stato inaugurato un importante dibattito sulla legittimazione delle molteplici identità di genere, presenti e culturalmente definite (RICHARDS, BOUMAN & BARKER 2017), fino alla riaffermazione degli orientamenti sessuali bisex e non-esclusivi, che provano come sia possibile provare attrazioni verso più sessi e/o generi (BARKER *et al.* 2012) e che le persone con orientamento Bi+¹ sono la maggioranza della popolazione LGBTQIA+ (DIAMOND 2016). Da tempo, ed è bene ribadirlo, sappiamo che i modelli binari per comprendere il sessuale non sono mai stati adeguati o sufficienti per comprendere le variabilità delle esperienze umane, ed è

¹ Il termine-ombrello Bi+ (BARKER *et al.* 2012) include sotto di sé tutte le sessualità non esclusive e che provano attrazione verso più di un genere come la bisessualità, la pansessualità, il biromanticismo e anche l’orientamento di chi critica l’idea che ci siano solo uno o più generi; come tutti gli orientamenti sessuali è culturalmente definito e può assumere forme o repertori discorsivi non centrati sulla costruzione occidentale dell’orientamento. La scelta di usare il plurale per le bisessualità nasce quindi da molteplici discorsi sia scientifici che politici sulle *bisexual politics* e la necessità per le scienze sociali, e non solo, di abbandonare visioni binarie degli orientamenti e della bisessualità già discusse dagli ANNI 2000 (HEMMINGS 2000; BARKER *et al.* 2012; EISNER 2013)

necessario che questo cambiamento di paradigma entri nella giurisprudenza (MARCUS 2018).

NAVIGARE LE NON-MONOGAMIE

Con il termine-ombrello non-monogamie ci si riferisce a un insieme di stili o accordi relazionali, romantici e/o sessuali, tramite cui tutte le persone coinvolte acconsentono a strutturare una relazione in modo non esclusivo tra due, tre o più partner. L'essere, preferire o l'adottare una identità non-monogama² è una caratteristica della persona, a prescindere dal suo essere coinvolta o meno in una relazione. Per fare alcuni esempi: una persona non-monogama può instaurare una relazione monogama mantenendo la propria identità relazionale; le persone single non-monogame non hanno bisogno di una o più relazioni per definirsi tali e, per alcune identità non-monogame, non esiste un vero stato di "solitudine relazionale" (BARKER 2010). Nonostante sia stato concepito contrapposizione al paradigma monogamo del sessuale, il termine non-monogamie indica degli stili e accordi relazionali validi; dove con validità si intende sia l'esistenza fattuale di persone in relazioni non monogame consensuali, una variabilità di posizioni presenti nel termine non-monogamie, l'affermarsi nella sfera pubblica e privata anche grazie a un insieme di domande di riconoscimento.

Se provassimo a definire tutte le relazioni come accordi o "regole" accettate dai partner, esplicitamente o implicitamente (MOORS *et al.* 2017), allora la monogamia sarebbe definita dalla regola dell'esclusività sessuale e romantica delle due persone coinvolte. Data la varietà delle esperienze e degli accordi interpersonali risulta difficile fornire delle definizioni univoche e onnicomprensive di poliamore, anarchia relazionale (NORDGREN 2006), lo scambismo (in inglese *swinging*), o altro. Il punto centrale delle non-monogamie è il consenso, il quale ci permette di distinguere le non monogamie consensuali dall'infedeltà sessuale (ovvero avere rapporti all'esterno della relazione senza il consenso di tutte le parti) che rende un rapporto non monogamo, nei fatti, *non consensuale* (MOORS *et al.* 2017). Diversamente, tra le più frequenti pluralità di non-monogamie e accordi relazionali troviamo

² La scelta di distinguere tra essere, preferire o adottare un'identità deriva dal fatto che non sappiamo ancora con plausibilità se il provare desiderio verso e/o avere relazioni con più persone sia legato a fattori biologici, personali, sociali o, più plausibilmente, un insieme tra questi (DIAMOND 2008).

il poliamore, *swinging*, le relazioni aperte (*open relationships*), l'anarchia relazionale e le relazioni "monogamish" (coppie monogame che per trasgressione fanno sesso a tre; SAVAGE 2012).

Sotto l'ombrello delle non-monogamie sono presenti, in linea generale, sia partner che meta-partner, che consensualmente accettano la possibilità di intrattenere più relazioni romantiche e/o sessuali contemporaneamente (CONLEY, ZIEGLER *et al.* 2013), ma non è necessario che ciascun partner abbia più relazioni allo stesso tempo. In altri accordi, eventuali partner potrebbero intrattenere rapporti sessuali ma non romantici con soggetti terzi o, viceversa, accettare solo rapporti romantici con altre persone non acconsentendo a rapporti sessuali esterni (accettando al limite solo alcune pratiche sessuali). La capacità di comunicare e di comprendere le proprie preferenze e i propri bisogni sono quindi passaggi fondamentali in questo insieme di stili relazionali.

Frequentemente, vengono creati anche degli "accordi" o "regole" (sebbene ci sia spesso rigetto verso questo termine) per esplicitare e anticipare come vivere il sessuale con le parti coinvolte, in modo da non investire troppo nell'idea che basti la comunicazione a fare da panacea nei rapporti interpersonali (CASTRO 2021). Per esempio, nel poliamore ci si focalizza sul coinvolgimento con più partner (KLESSE 2006) – anche romantico e non necessariamente sessuale – facendo rientrare in questo stile relazionale anche relazioni solo affettive e intime, come nel caso dell'asessualità (si veda SCHERRER 2010).

All'interno dei repertori discorsivi e degli spazi non-monogami si investe molto tempo e risorse psicologiche nel costruire e condividere sia una decostruzione della gelosia (MOORS *et al.* 2017) che la riaffermazione della necessità di dover "comunicare". Verso la gelosia si alternano prospettive diverse, un insieme di sfumature tra il voler idealisticamente eliminarla o valorizzarne l'assenza, fino a creare informalmente un continuo supporto comunitario alla sua gestione (GUSMANO 2018). Ciò spesso porta al "consacrare" l'emozione della compersione – costruita come l'opposto della gelosia e che indica la felicità di vedere una persona significativa o partner innamorarsi di un'altra persona (MOORS *et al.* 2017; BARKER & LANGDRIDGE 2010). Alcune tipiche relazioni poliamorose (BARKER 2005) includono uno o più partner "primari" (spesso in una relazione considerata principale o che va avanti da più tempo) e altri/e partner "secondari", delle triadi (tre persone coinvolte reciprocamente) o dei quartetti (quattro persone coinvolte reciprocamente).

Non necessariamente queste relazioni poliamorose sono aperte a chiunque, in quanto possono essere presenti dei requisiti di fedeltà, chiamata polifidelità o *polifidelity*, che delimita i vincoli relazionali tra le parti.

Oltre modelli tassonomici di classificazione – che non necessariamente corrispondono a una migliore comprensione del fenomeno – l’obiettivo degli studi sociali resta di comprendere le forme, i significati e le esperienze delle non-monogamie. Un obiettivo che va di pari passo con il contrasto delle discriminazioni: studi mostrano che un quarto delle persone in relazioni non monogame ha affrontato uno stigma e pregiudizi (Cox, FLECKENSTEIN & BERGSTRAND 2013). Di conseguenza, soggetti coinvolti in CNM (*consensual non-monogamies*) si impegnano non solo nella gestione della relazione in sé, ma anche della sua comunicazione con l’esterno, che deve essere condotta in modo strategico (PALLOTTA-CHIAROLLI 2010) e non solo nel “mondo etero”.

QUESTIONI GIURIDICHE RICONOSCIMENTI LGBTQIA+ E NON-MONOGAMIE

La cultura giuridica – intesa nell’insieme delle pratiche e dei discorsi creati dalla giurisprudenza – tende ad agire con difficoltà, quando non con intenzionale ostruzionismo, di fronte alle pluralità della sfera sessuale – ad es. orientamenti sessuali e protezione internazionale, leggi contro le discriminazioni, relazioni plurali, generi non binari – rinforzando visioni normative e cancellando le forme non esclusive del sessuale, considerandole “interferenze” o “rumore” (YOSHINO 2000). Un esempio interessante di cancellazione giuridica riguarda le bisessualità e le sessualità non esclusive, ovvero tutti gli orientamenti sessuali che provano desiderio sessuale e/o romantico verso più di un genere (BARKER *et al* 2012; MARCUS 2018) e che troviamo sotto l’ombrello Bi+: persone bisessuali, pansessuali (attratte da tutti i generi o a prescindere dal genere), biromantiche, panromantiche, sessualmente fluide. Date le loro caratteristiche non-monosessuali, le soggettività Bi+ affrontano in modo costante la cancellazione del loro orientamento sessuale dentro e fuori gli spazi e le rivendicazioni LGBTQIA+ (GALUPO 2008; WELZER-LANG 2008; CASTRO & CARNASSALE 2019). Nella cultura giuridica le bisessualità sono ignorate, rese invisibili o considerate un “ibrido”, caratteristica che condividono con le non-monogamie, in quanto la loro queerness disfa l’assunto binario del sessuale come solo etero o omosessuale (GALUPO 2008; GREENESMITH 2010; MARCUS 2018).

Questa mononormatività del sessuale emerge chiaramente nel considerare in modo intercambiabile i termini “coppie gay” o “coppie lesbiche” per identificare relazioni di cui conosciamo solo il genere di chi le costruisce, e non l’orientamento³. Di conseguenza, ogni relazione o coppia donna-uomo viene resa implicitamente eterosessuale anche se le persone al loro interno possono “tranquillamente”, e orgogliosamente, essere Bi+ e fare famiglia con un passing⁴ eterosessuale (BOWLEG 2013), volontario o involontario. Nella loro fluidità, le bisessualità sfidano quel principio di immutabilità delle identità sessuali a cui si rifà, errando, la giurisprudenza (MARCUS 2018).

La validità delle bisessualità, quando non cancellata, viene a ogni modo messa in discussione (GREENESMITH 2010; BARKER *et al.* 2012) facendo riemergere, nella definizione della famiglia socialmente e giuridicamente riconosciuta, un giudizio costantemente incardinato sui concetti di “moralità” e “stabilità” (GALUPO 2008). Di fatto, le persone Bi+ sono considerate instabili e inadatte per l’affido genitoriale o l’adozione (MARCUS 2018): fare coming-out Bi+ o subire outing in ambienti ostili diventa una fonte di *minority stress*⁵ (KATZ-WISE *et al.* 2017). Inoltre, le domande di protezione internazionale delle persone Bi+ sono rifiutate più spesso rispetto a quelle richieste da persone gay e lesbiche (39% vs 60% in Canada; 5% vs 17% negli USA) e considerate anche in Italia come false richieste o tentativi di frode (COLKER 1996; MARCUS 2018).

La costruzione del concetto di sessualità a livello legale incide sulle vite delle persone Bi+, perché si tratta di un contesto in cui si fa largo uso di retoriche legate a instabilità, indecisione, avidità o promiscuità (KLESSE 2007) che non si addicono a quei “buoni omosessuali” che confermano l’eterosessualità come norma. Questa cancellazione è alimentata da falsi miti sulle

³ Una tipica forma di cancellazione riguarda le persone in una relazione altro-genere o stesso-genere e il dare per scontato il loro orientamento, essendo ancora poco diffusa la dicitura di coppia o relazione a orientamento misto; il termine altro-genere viene teorizzato come migliore e rappresentativo, in quanto i generi maschile e femminile non sono opposti (DIAMOND 2008). Come discusso anche in letteratura e nella critica politica bisessuale (HEMMINGS 2002) una coppia tra due donne bisessuali sposate non corrisponde a un matrimonio lesbico (LANNUTTI 2008).

⁴ Con passing si intende il processo di attribuzione di un’identità diversa da quella delle soggettività a cui ci si riferisce, a cui viene attribuito un tipo di alterità che ha, per esempio, dei diversi rapporti intergruppi o diversi pregiudizi; per esempio, quando una persona omosessuale molto mascolina o che segue dei copioni di genere tradizionali viene percepita, intenzionalmente o meno, come eterosessuale nella sfera pubblica e/o privato.

⁵ Il modello dello stress minoritario di Meyer (2003).

bisessualità che hanno l'obiettivo di rimuoverla dal “qui ed ora” per non rendere possibile o immaginabile l'essere bisex (YOSHINO 2000, CASTRO 2021). Per esempio, creando il requisito di una “bisessualità pura” e/o androgina con attrazioni 50/50, o dicendo che tutte le persone sono bisessuali alla nascita (ma che successivamente si “stabilizzano” come omosessuali o etero) o che tutte le persone saranno bisessuali nel futuro di una società ideale, ma che non possono esserlo adesso. Ci sono le eccezioni, come il caso italiano della sentenza Oliari (MARCUS 2018), in cui la Corte Europea dei diritti umani ha riconosciuto come il diritto di protezione riguardi le numerose persone omosessuali e bisessuali del nostro paese, nonostante la causa fosse incentrata sui soli “diritti degli omosessuali” (ivi). Quando le identità non-esclusive sono invisibili per legge, ne pagherà il prezzo chi è fuori dal binarismo e dalla monosessualità (YOSHINO 2000).

Il contesto familista italiano ha influito in innumerevoli modi sulle domande di riconoscimento delle unioni civili tra persone dello stesso genere, con la conseguente opera di ostruzionismo nei confronti del matrimonio egualitario (LASIO & SERRI 2019). Le famiglie con genitori stesso-genero⁶ vivono ancora con difficoltà le relazioni con le famiglie allargate e le reti sociali a causa dello stigma nella maggior parte delle reti sociali (BASTIANONI *et al.* 2015). Infatti, molte ricerche psicosociali hanno mostrato che i minori in queste famiglie stanno bene, hanno un ottimo sviluppo emotivo e relazionale, a cui si aggiungono anche migliori strategie di *coping* e comunicazione in famiglia (GOLOMBOCK 2016). Restano tuttavia evidenti le conseguenze dello stigma connesso alle famiglie di cui fanno parte e la discriminazione istituzionale del loro mancato riconoscimento con gli strumenti previsti, tra cui la *step-child adoption* (LASIO & SERRI 2019). Di rimando, la spinta familista nelle esperienze quotidiane omogenitoriali può avere dei riscontri inaspettati nel nucleo familiare, pur non bilanciando assolutamente il peso e lo stress minoritario che causa alle vite LGBTQIA+.

⁶ L'uso del termine genitori dello stesso genere è preferibile rispetto al “genitori gay o lesbiche” in quanto di una famiglia omogenitoriale sappiamo solo il genere dei genitori e non il loro orientamento sessuale (o il loro sesso assegnato alla nascita); in una famiglia omogenitoriale possono essere presenti partner Bi+, il che rende la loro coppia o relazione a orientamento misto e non monosessuale (gay o lesbica). Ciò vale anche per le coppie o le relazioni che apparentemente potremmo definire “eterosessuali” quando invece sono a orientamento misto per la presenza di una o più persone Bi+ (bisessuali, pansessuali, biromantiche, etc. etc.) all'interno di tale relazione. Le persone Bi+ in relazioni con persone monosessuali (gay, etero e lesbiche) hanno delle esperienze specifiche non riconducibili a quelle monosessuali (LANNUTTI 2008; Pallotta-CHIAROLLI 2016).

Questo familismo emerge, per esempio, quando le famiglie omogenitoriali trovano più accettazione nelle reti familiari solo dopo aver stipulato un'unione civile e/o quando iniziano un percorso di genitorialità con la procreazione assistita o la genitorialità assistita (TIANO & TRAPPOLIN 2019). La spinta delle reti familiari a volere, o voler percepire, la famiglia omogenitoriale come “famiglia normale” in alcuni casi riduce i pregiudizi. Non stupisce come in uno studio italiano (TIANO & TRAPPOLIN 2019) l'atteggiamento di nonni e nonne migliori dopo l'arrivo di nipotine e nipotini, per cui la spinta familista può generare, pagando un prezzo normativo, una forma di supporto sociale e avere risvolti positivi nel costruire un'identità comune per cui lottare (anche se spesso spinta da motivazioni individuali).

Dal punto di vista giuridico, il riconoscimento di relazioni non-monogame è tutt'ora un campo aperto e, spesso, legato alle rivendicazioni dei diritti LGBT+ con precedenti ambigui. Per esempio, gruppi poliamorosi negli USA hanno in precedenza evitato rivendicazioni civili per timore di ripercussioni sulla richiesta del matrimonio egualitario (AVIRAM 2008) mentre, in altre occasioni, dei gruppi di attivismo LGBTQIA+ hanno escluso comunità o gruppi poliamorosi per evitare di essere associati alle richieste di persone non-monogame (CARDOSO 2014). Si tratta di argomentazioni formulate nel tentativo di bloccare anticipatamente le retoriche reazionarie e conservatrici sul matrimonio egualitario o sulle unioni civili rappresentate come “piano inclinato” (GRANDE E PES 2018) verso poligamia, incesto e zoofilia (accuse infondate presenti anche nel dibattito italiano sulle unioni civili, si veda per esempio LASIO e SERRI 2019); ad esempio, si ricordi il dibattito civile statunitense in cui l'avvocato Ted Olson (il quale ha rappresentato le coppie stesso genere nel caso *Hollingsworth v. Perry*) ha apertamente rassicurato i componenti della corte sul fatto che il matrimonio egualitario non condurrà a matrimoni poli (AVIRAM & LEACHMAN 2015).

Questioni di riconoscimento giuridico sono presenti anche nel panorama italiano (MARELLA 2012; RIZZUTI 2016; LORENZETTI 2018; PALAZZO 2018) e forniscono una fotografia delle problematiche di riconoscimento e di possibili strategie per ottenerlo (GRANDE e PES 2018), anche includendo o cercando alleanze con gruppi familisti per riconoscere le polifamiglie (PALAZZO 2018). Sono inoltre presenti (AVIRAM & LEACHMAN 2015; Den OTTER 2015) delle “mappe legali” internazionali su come seguire questo percorso, tenendo comunque conto che il riconoscimento giuridico è una richiesta avanzata soltanto da una parte della comunità delle

non-monogamie consensuali, in quanto alcuni stili relazionali – come l’anarchia relazionale – segue principi e posizionamenti politici spesso diversi (BARKER & LANGDRIDGE 2010).

STUDIARE LA QUALITÀ DELLE RELAZIONI NON-MONOGAME

Come per gli studi sull’omogenitorialità, ovvero nuclei familiari composti da partner dello stesso genere, le ricerche psicosociali si sono concentrate sul “dimostrare” la qualità e la validità relazionale del crescere in una famiglia LGBTQIA+ (GOLOMBOCK 2016; BASTIANONI & BAIAMONTE 2015). Sebbene alle persone eterosessuali, o con passing eterosessuale, non venga richiesto di dimostrare le proprie competenze genitoriali, ciò viene sempre preteso per le famiglie dello stesso-genere o non-monogame (PALLOTTA-CHIAROLLI 2010; SHEFF 2015; TIANO & TRAPPOLIN 2019).

C’è accordo nella letteratura internazionale (MOORS *et al.*, 2017, RUBEL & BOGAERT 2015; WHITTON *et al.* 2015) su come la non-esclusività relazionale, romantica o sessuale delle relazioni non-monogame consensuali non incida sulla qualità della relazione stessa o, a ogni modo, non presenti sostanziali differenze rispetto alle relazioni monogame. Le scienze sociali e gli studi femministi hanno fornito diverse indicazioni sul come si decostruisce l’assunto monogamo ed eteronormativo del sessuale (HEMMINGS 2002; BUTLER 2013; EISNER 2013), mostrando come una matrice di genere sia inscindibile dall’analisi di fenomeni sociali e della struttura stessa della società. Il principio di valutazione relazionale viene quindi situato nel più ampio concetto di norma e devianza sociale: su chi può vedere riconosciuto il proprio capitale familiare e chi no. Prima di ragionare in un’ottica – comunque assimilatoria – di criteri di “qualità della relazione” o “sufficientemente buona” (generalmente usati nelle valutazioni psicologiche) va riconosciuto che la migliore rappresentazione e analisi (politica e sociale) non viene dal dato quantitativo ma dalle raccolte di esperienze e storie con metodo longitudinale (SHEFF 2015) e dal mettere in discussione gli assunti mononormativi nel panorama politico-sociale italiano (GUSMANO 2018; BRAIDA 2020).

In generale, la presenza di più partner che contribuiscono all’appagamento dei bisogni non incide sulle qualità delle singole relazioni, in quanto esse funzionano in modo indipendente tra loro (Mitchell, Bartholomew, and COBB 2014), in contrapposizione al pregiudizio secondo cui una persona cerca altri partner oltre quello primario perché sente che “manca qualcosa”

o per poca soddisfazione dei bisogni personali o relazionali – esperienza molto simile a quella delle persone Bi+ in relazioni monosessuali (CASTRO & CARNASSALE 2019). Rispetto a donne e persone eterosessuali, la letteratura indica che sono gli uomini e le minoranze sessuali a intrattenere più frequentemente stili relazionali non monogami nelle loro vite (AVIRAM 2008; HAUPERT *et al.* 2016). Se da un lato ricerche condotte su campioni minori hanno rilevato che le persone non monogame, soprattutto quelle poliamorose, rientrano nel profilo demografico *upper-class*, bianco e con alta scolarizzazione (KLESSE 2006; 2014; WOSIK-COREA 2010), dall'altro studi condotti su campioni più ampi di popolazione (però nel contesto statunitense) non mostrano differenze per quanto riguarda il gruppo nazionale, il colore della pelle, la scolarizzazione, l'età, l'area geografica o l'affiliazione politica (ivi).

L'ideale per cui sia necessario un villaggio per crescere e accudire dei minori (HOMONOFF *et al.* 2014) è un copione culturale che si concretizza all'interno dei nuclei familiari non-esclusivi, nelle polifamiglie e, in generale, nelle relazioni non-monogame in cui ci si prende cura di uno o più minori (Pallotta-CHIAROLLI 2010; SHEFF 2010). Le polifamiglie – che potremmo chiamare anche famiglie non esclusive, aperte o non-monogame in assenza di un termine condiviso – esistono già, e da molto tempo le persone non-monogame costruiscono nuclei familiari allargati. Data la complessità e gli intrecci che si creano nelle reti sociali di una relazione non-monogama sarebbe complesso, e probabilmente controproducente, provare a tracciare una tassonomia di queste polifamiglie. Poiché, al loro interno possiamo trovare partner, meta-partner, figli e persone conviventi nel nucleo polifamiliare e che condividono legami, tempi, spazi e risorse. Queste peculiarità complicano gli aspetti di tutela e riconoscimento, sia per le increspature che possono creare nel diritto (si veda MARELLA 2012; LORENZETTI 2018) che per una comprovata reticenza di matrice individualista – e di diffidenza verso le rigidità governative – di molte persone non-monogame, preoccupate che l'interferenza statale possa decidere chi escludere e chi proteggere (AVIRAM 2008).

Uno degli studi fondamentali nella letteratura sulle polifamiglie è una ricerca longitudinale di Elizabeth Sheff (2015), condotta DAL 1996 AL 2012, nella quale la ricercatrice ha seguito più di 500 componenti di famiglie non-monogame e ha intervistato 131 minori (dai 5 anni in su). Dal suo lavoro è emerso che i minori in famiglie poliamorose mostravano eloquenza,

intelligenza, fiducia in sé ed equilibrio (SHEFF 2015:134). Colpisce come i minori in queste polifamiglie non problematizzassero le loro forme familiari e le identificavano come la norma invece della minoranza, processo confermato da altri studi (PALLOTTA-CHIAROLLI 2010). Tra gli “svantaggi” o le criticità discusse negli studi sulle famiglie poly o non-monogame troviamo l’attaccamento verso persone che escono dalla vita familiare a causa di conflitti o fine della relazioni, in modo simile alle esperienze di genitori single che praticano una monogamia seriale (SHEFF 2010). A prescindere dallo stile relazionale, una separazione familiare incide sull’attaccamento di una persona giovane e l’elaborazione della perdita di relazioni significative e di supporto (SHEFF 2010). Nonostante le relazioni non-monogame maschili dello stesso genere (ad es. con partner bisex, gay o pansex) sembrano durare più di quelle monogame (WHITTON, WEITBRECHT & KURYLUK 2015), non abbiamo abbastanza informazioni sulla loro qualità, sulla tendenza alla durata di una relazione in generale (non solo nel contesto italiano) e sulla possibilità di considerare, concretamente, la durata di una relazione come indice di qualità relazionale. Eppure, quando le relazioni hanno fine per bisogni diversi o a causa i cambiamenti nelle vite delle persone ciò rappresenta anche un momento positivo, soprattutto se questi momenti marcano la fine di relazioni tossiche o abusanti, sia in relazioni altro-genere (Turell, BROWN & HERMANN 2018) che stesso-genere (KIMMES *et al.* 2019). Le strategie spesso adottate dalle polifamiglie e dalle famiglie Bi+ per gestire lo stigma, ad esempio nei contesti educativi e nelle scuole, sono connesse alla cancellazione e all’invisibilità del relazionarsi con la sfera pubblica (PALLOTTA-CHIAROLLI 2006). Queste famiglie sono silenziate, secondo Pallotta-Chiarolli, perché “si ritrovano tra le polarità del matrimonio monogamo eterosessuale e la crescente attenzione verso le famiglie dello stesso-sesso” (Ita. tr. 2006:49). Ciò può essere contrastato tramite tre strategie di gestione dello stigma, per esempio: fare “passing” e restare “nell’armadio” con la rete sociale esterna alla famiglia e, occasionalmente, con i minori del nucleo familiare; restare al confine in modo selettivo a seconda del grado di accettazione trovato negli spazi pubblici e privati; oppure, infine, scegliere di “contaminare” il mondo scolastico rifiutando l’invisibilità (PALLOTTA-CHIAROLLI 2010). Dalle ricerche di Sheff (2015) emerge come nelle polifamiglie siano presenti una maggiore attenzione alla comunicazione e consapevolezza degli stati emotivi (favorita anche dall’enfatizzare il bisogno di più comunicazione e negoziazione),

una maggiore condivisione delle risorse, più tempo per chi è genitore di dedicarsi ad attività personali, fornire diversi ruoli genitoriali e maggiori attenzioni ai minori (SHEFF 2015). Quest'ultimo punto si collega a un beneficio delle relazioni non-monogame, quello di poter offrire la disponibilità di più persone nell'appagamento dei bisogni e nella presa in cura dei minori appartenenti al nucleo, in modo simile alle famiglie allargate monogame. Gli studi sull'attaccamento ci informano che più adulti supportivi e di riferimento ha un minore, più facilmente evita l'uso di alcolici, sviluppa un maggiore senso di solidarietà con le sue comunità e presenta maggiori *outcome* positivi di salute (SHEFF 2010; SHEFF 2015)

Per riassumere, la letteratura disponibile ci mostra che non è necessaria una relazione monogama per vivere un rapporto stabile, con progettualità, al cui interno crescere una prole in una relazione soddisfacente, di mutuo e reciproco supporto (RUBEL & BOGAERT 2015). Sappiamo che l'esclusività relazionale, sessuale o romantica non è dunque fondamentale per la qualità della relazione: il consenso e il rispetto degli accordi relazionali incidono in maggior misura sulla qualità e la durata delle stesse (CONLEY *et al.* 2013).

CARATTERISTICHE, BISOGNI E PUNTI CRITICI NELLE NON-MONOGAMIE CONSENSUALI

Le relazioni non-monogame offrono dei benefici e delle criticità specifiche rispetto alle relazioni monogame. In una *review* di studi (MOORS *et al.* 2017) viene argomentato come all'interno delle non-monogamie consensuali siano presenti dei benefici specifici rispetto alle relazioni monogame (CONLEY *et al.* 2013) e le non-monogamie non consensuali (ad es. tradimento). Esplorare queste specificità ci aiuta a comprendere in modo più esaustivo questi stili relazionali. Nel lavoro di Moors e del loro gruppo di ricerca, sono emersi due temi legati unicamente alle monogamie come aspetto fondante del loro stile relazionale rispetto alle non-monogamie: la moralità e la salute. La valutazione morale è indubbiamente connessa a come le relazioni sono rappresentate e costruite nelle società. Rispetto alle non-monogamie, la moralità viene considerata un beneficio esclusivamente attribuito alla monogamia e viene legato a uno standard morale intrinseco spesso connesso alla religiosità (CONLEY *et al.* 2013). Eppure, non mancano copioni culturali per giustificare l'infedeltà nella monogamia. Si giustifica l'infedeltà sessuale maschile nella coppia eteronormata e il cercare rapporti sessuali extraconiugali senza eccessive conseguenze (BELLASSAI 2011): come,

per esempio, giustificando pulsioni sessuali o l'infedeltà come naturale nel maschio per motivi biologici o il machismo associato alla frequentazione di bordelli e case chiuse (ivi). La questione morale emerge anche nei dibattiti accademici sulle non-monogamie: pensiamo all'uso che è stato fatto del termine "etico" per rafforzare la posizione del poliamore in contrapposizione alle altre non-monogamie (WILKINSON 2010) o all'uso generico del termine "non-monogamie etiche" come forma intrinsecamente positiva da contrapporre al tradimento monogamo. Pur restando comprensibile il voler controbilanciare lo stigma affrontato in quanto persone non-monogame, c'è da tenere in considerazione che l'aver relazioni non-monogame non porta automaticamente a seguire principi radicali, queer o meno, contro le normatività (SHEFF 2006). L'essere passate al termine "non-monogamie consensuali" dentro le comunità non monogame e negli studi sociali ha spostato il focus dalla morale e dall'etica – che si ricollega all'idea dei "buoni omosessuali" (KLESSE 2007) – per spostarlo su un concetto più significativo, ma anche radicale, di consenso. Invece di adeguare le relazioni non-monogame a una questione morale/etica tipica della società eteronormata (EISNER 2013) ci si è concentrate sull'importanza della consensualità e dell'accordo tra persone, evitando anche di alimentare delle competizioni di moralità tra non-monogamie (ovvero poliamore contro non-monogamie sessualmente "cariche").

Quando si discute dei vantaggi delle relazioni monogame, una tematica che emerge, e spesso considerata come una delle caratteristiche uniche della monogamia, è la migliore salute sessuale (MOORS *et al.* 2017). Dobbiamo però chiederci se questa attribuzione sia in grado di rispecchiare le esperienze delle persone non-monogame. La monogamia può essere considerata una strategia sessualmente sicura, se entrambe le persone coinvolte non attuano pratiche a rischio durante rapporti sessuali all'interno della coppia, se prima di formare la coppia non hanno precedenti malattie sessualmente trasmissibili e se rimangono sessualmente "fedeli" all'interno della relazione (MOORS *et al.* 2017). Una strategia di comunicazione, questa, adottata anche nei programmi per la salute sessuale, dove si propone alle coppie di essere sessualmente esclusive o di ricorrere all'astinenza per ridurre il rischio di contrarre MST (CONLEY *et al.* 2013). Eppure, dati empirici suggeriscono che un quarto e più di partecipanti adulti riportano infedeltà sessuale in una relazione monogama (CONLEY *et al.* 2013), mettendo in discussione la "facilità" di un accordo relazionale monogamo o che questo sia automaticamente

adatto a chiunque. Non è raro, infatti, che una persona definisca la propria relazione come monogama anche se i partner sono sessualmente infedeli, concettualizzando la monogamia come un principio che riguarda più la fedeltà emotiva che sessuale (SWAN & THOMPSON 2016). Inoltre, all'interno di una relazione monogama è molto comune evitare l'uso del preservativo una volta che la relazione sia stabile, comportamento che vuole assumere il significato di impegno e intimità ma che può, nei fatti, aumentare il rischio di esposizioni a malattie veneree e sessualmente trasmissibili (soprattutto in caso di infedeltà sessuale non discussa tra partner).

Quello che sappiamo sulle relazioni non-monogame è che, rispetto a persone monogame infedeli, commettono meno errori nell'uso dei contraccettivi, discutono più apertamente di MST (malattie sessualmente trasmissibili) con nuovi partner o partner primari e dichiarano di aver avuto rapporti sessuali all'esterno della coppia (CONLEY *et al.* 2012; MOORS *et al.* 2017). Infine, anche se chi intrattiene stili relazionali non-monogami riporta un numero di partner maggiore rispetto a persone monogame, non sono presenti differenze nel numero di diagnosi di MST (ad es. clamidia, gonorrea, herpes e HIV) in studi epidemiologici (LEHMILLER 2015). Una ricerca su persone poliamorose ha mostrato come la quasi totalità dei partecipanti (91%) adottò regole esplicite sul sesso sicuro, con il coinvolgimento di ogni partner in test per MST di routine (soprattutto quando si incontrano o includono nuovi partner) e l'adozione di barriere protettive (WOSICK-CORREA 2010). Persone non-monogame, rispetto a persone monogame infedeli, usano più frequentemente il preservativo per sesso anale e vaginale, e barriere protettive per sex-toys con partner primari e secondari (CONLEY *et al.* 2012). Possiamo quindi decostruire il beneficio di una maggiore salute sessuale e associarlo non alla monogamia, seriale o meno, ma a quanto siano proscritte pratiche e discorsi sulla salute sessuale, l'educazione affettiva e la comunicazione sui rischi: il fattore più compromettente sono le pratiche sessuali a rischio e la mancanza di accordo su barriere anti-MST. Il praticare uno stile relazionale monogamo come forma di protezione da MST comporta una "fallacia protettiva" (SWAN & THOMPSON 2006) poiché non è lo stile relazionale a ridurre i rischi di MST, ma l'attuare o l'esporsi a comportamenti a rischio per la salute sessuale (LEHMILLER 2015; RICHARDS & BARKER 2013). I principi di negoziazione e trasparenza nella comunicazione tra partner, presenti nelle non-monogamie consensuali, possono invece rivelarsi strumenti utili per la promozione della salute sessuale (MOORS *et al.* 2017).

Tra i benefici frequentemente associati in modo esclusivo alle relazioni non-monogame troviamo la capacità di soddisfare bisogni diversi, l'ampia varietà di attività (sessuali e non sessuali) e le opportunità di crescita/sviluppo personale (MOORS *et al.* 2017). La soddisfazione di diversi bisogni, secondo Moors e il suo gruppo di ricerca, è un tema centrale nelle relazioni non-monogame e porta a vedere multiple relazioni sentimentali e/o sessuali come un modo per distribuire dei bisogni che, tipicamente, sarebbero soddisfatti (o meno) da un singolo partner in una relazione monogama. Questo aspetto può essere saliente nelle relazioni non-monogame, perché contrapposto alla norma culturale occidentale, nella quale un partner “deve” soddisfare la maggior parte dei bisogni dell'altro, se non tutti (FINKEL *et al.* 2014). Alti livelli di aspettative nei confronti di un partner rischiano di soffocare la relazione o di aumentare le possibilità di conflitto, soprattutto considerando che investire nella relazione richiede tempo, che viene dedicato sempre di meno alla coppia (FINKEL *et al.* 2014). Nel loro paper, Finkel e il suo gruppo di ricerca discutono di come nelle relazioni monogame all'interno di un matrimonio – nel contesto statunitense – ci siano troppe aspettative e richieste nei confronti dei partner di soddisfare al meglio dei bisogni individuali – fisiologici, di sicurezza, di appartenenza, autostima e autorealizzazione. Adottare dei principi, o ridiscutere la relazione prendendo spunto dalle non-monogamie, potrebbe facilitare il processo di negoziazione nella coppia e fornire degli strumenti per discutere tali aspettative e bisogni (FINKEL *et al.* 2014). Suggerimento fornito anche da Conley e Moors (2014), secondo cui adottare alcuni “principi” delle non-monogamie potrebbe potenziare le relazioni monogame nel corso del tempo, per esempio aumentando il capitale sociale, fornire strategie per gestire le attrazioni verso altre persone, migliorare la comunicazione di coppia o l'organizzazione nel nucleo familiare.

Altri stereotipi legati alle non-monogamie portano a giudizi di promiscuità, edonismo, e all'accusa di incapacità nel mantenere relazioni stabili e durature (KLESSE 2007). I potenziali “benefici” sessuali non sono invece tra i temi considerati propri delle monogamie, rispetto alla varietà di attività non sessuali che si possono intrattenere con i/le potenziali partner. Persone in relazioni non-monogame potrebbero esperire maggiori occasioni di provare nuove attività (ad es. nel caso in cui una dei partner non condivide con l'altro una passione) tramite le multiple relazioni o le reti

sociali ampliate a disposizione (MOORS *et al.* 2017). Se da un lato è documentato in letteratura che nelle relazioni monogame ci siano fenomeni di “ritiro diadico” (*dyadic withdrawal*, KALMIJIN 2003), ovvero l’allontanarsi dalle reti sociali di conoscenti e amici una volta che una coppia diventa più intima o convive, è ancora una domanda empirica comprendere se un accordo non-monogamo riduca questa tendenza, dato il numero potenzialmente elevato di stimoli e possibilità sociali (MOORS *et al.* 2017). Nelle non-monogamie potrebbe esserci maggiore flessibilità e ampiezza nel gestire con chi fare esperienze nuove e come spendere il tempo tra persone coinvolte. Anche se è possibile ottenere benefici simili tramite la rete di amicizie, il coinvolgimento emotivo e più occasioni di contatto fisico contribuiscono a esiti positivi della relazione. Uno spunto di riflessione arriva ad esempio dalle comunità egalitarie condivise, dove in una ricerca di Aguilar (2013) è emerso come forme di contatto fisico non esplicitamente sessuale, manifestazioni di affetto e “appartenenza” come abbracci o vicinanza fisica sono interpretate come segno di relazioni positive, piacevoli e ricercate. Secondo Aguilar (2013) la stessa vicinanza fisica in attività non sessuali può essere un pilastro rilevante del cercare o preferire relazioni non-monogame rispetto a quelle monogame. Il focus sull’aspetto non sessuale non vuole cancellare o considerare secondarie le esperienze fisicamente sessuali all’interno di relazioni, a prescindere dal fatto che siano monogame o meno, ma viene messo in campo per riflettere su come uno stile relazionale sia collegato a una più ampia esperienza tra attori sociali, soprattutto in contrapposizione al pregiudizio di promiscuità che circonda queste condotte relazionali.

Ma quali sono i “pilastri” delle relazioni non-monogame? Secondo Peabody (1982) consistono nella comunicazione onesta, in una gestione equa del potere nei rapporti, nella fiducia e nella cura della privacy, in un maggiore sviluppo personale e interpersonale rispetto a relazioni monogame. Crescita e sviluppo personale sono quindi dei presupposti rilevanti in questi stili relazionali, tanto da essere sia motivazioni per adottare queste relazioni che esito da raggiungere all’interno delle stesse (AGUILAR 2013). La percezione di autonomia è un esito rilevante nelle relazioni interpersonali, romantiche e/o sessuali, sia come bisogno da raggiungere che come principio da seguire: una maggiore autonomia relazionale, conferma la letteratura, è presente in chi ha relazioni non-monogame (MITCHELL *et al.* 2014).

Nonostante il numero di ricerche sulle non-monogamie sia aumentato, e continui a crescere, molti studi risalgono anche agli anni '60 del secolo scorso. Per esempio, una delle prime ricerche qualitative sui matrimoni aperti (KNAPP 1976) ha mostrato come i partner all'interno di queste relazioni intendano il rapporto come fonte di senso di libertà e sicurezza allo stesso tempo, sensazione che non avevano nel rapporto monogamico (KNAPP 1976). La gestione delle aspettative e della gelosia sono anche parte delle strategie di negoziazione nelle non-monogamie, in quanto si tratta di una delle tematiche più discusse e problematiche della monogamia e delle relazioni intime (BARKER & LANGRIDGE 2010). Le aspettative e l'assunto della gelosia sono aspetti che richiedono elevati livelli di processualità e lavoro ideologico, per decostruire i pilastri della normatività monogama nelle proprie relazioni tramite la messa in discussione (CASTRO 2021). Ad esempio, la ricerca di Aguilar (2013) sulle comuni (comunità dove persone vivono insieme e che spesso promuovono relazioni non-monogame) mostra come si tengano degli incontri di gruppo regolari per discutere l'insorgere di possessività e gelosia all'interno delle relazioni: questo processo di negoziazione e confronto promuove la "crescita personale" e viene considerato "gratificante" (AGUILAR 2013). Promuovere libertà e autonomia diventa quindi un principio adottato all'interno di questa prospettiva, evitando anche termini che possano indicare o sottintendere forme di controllo su partner coinvolti. In una ricerca, il 39% di partecipanti che intrattengono relazioni poliamorose evitano apertamente termini come "permettere", "limitare" o "regole" perché considerate come forme sottese di controllo, lontane dai principi di non-monogamie etiche (WOSICK-CORREA 2010). Il principio di libertà relazionale e, soprattutto, di definizione libera degli accordi relazionali restano i punti centrali per comprendere le relazioni non-monogame e le loro tutele giuridiche (si veda GRANDE e PES 2018).

EGEMONIE E CRITICITÀ DELLE RELAZIONI NON-MONOGAME

Per evitare una visione solo celebrativa, in favore di una più critica, è necessario considerare che le relazioni e gli spazi sociali (offline e online) delle non-monogamie non sono esenti da dinamiche di potere, disuguaglianze, discorsi e pratiche egemoni (KLESSE 2007; SHEFF 2006). Come discusso in precedenza, rigettare la monogamia non coincide necessariamente con il rigettare la mononormatività (WILKINSON 2010) e non tutte le relazioni decostruiscono queste norme in modo politico – che ci spinge a riflettere

anche su cosa significhi il termine “politico” come potere legittimo in spazi politici e di attivismo che non sono esenti da egemonie, gerarchie identitarie e disuguaglianze di potere⁷.

Un esempio di poliegemonie viene discusso da Sheff (2006) nella sua ricerca sulle maschilità poliamorose, mostrandoci come siano creati e riprodotti specifici rapporti di potere dentro relazioni e coppie aperte, una gerarchia di genere a sfavore di generi non maschili. Tra gli esempi forniti troviamo la tendenza a porre dei vincoli relazionali solo a favore maschile: sul chi e come si possono avere rapporti occasionali o stabili nella coppia (ad es. un solo uomo e più donne), sull’inclusione di ulteriori partner esclusivamente femminili (detta anche *one penis policy*) nella relazione principale, sulla ricerca di una “*Hot Bi Babe*”, ovvero una partner donna bisex che soddisfi la coppia – che poi se ne disferà per non “turbare” la relazione principale (definito nelle comunità online come “caccia all’unicorno” o *unicorn hunting*) – o, infine, sulla tendenza a lasciare la partner donna che non acconsente a tali richieste. In generale, queste pratiche egemoni seguono i copioni culturali (GAGNON & SIMON 1986) del desiderio maschile, l’avanzare cioè la pretesa di intrattenere rapporti esclusivi con più partner donne. Il sessismo e i sentimenti antifemminili sono storicamente presenti anche nel mondo gay e bisex maschile, che possono proscrivere seguendo – implicitamente o meno – un immaginario egemone di “attrazione per uomini veri”, riproducendo così un meccanismo di oppressione (CONNEL & MESSERSCHMIDT 2005; KLESSE 2007; CASTRO 2021).

Nonostante le potenzialità del decostruire l’eteronormatività – come altri assi di discriminazione strutturale – negli spazi sociali e nelle relazioni CNM ci sono pregiudizi sessuali verso specifici generi (ad es. donne e uomini trans, persone non-binarie) e orientamenti sessuali (ad es. omolesbobiacefobia). Sono presenti, inoltre, dinamiche di potere il cui intento è dare una norma alla costruzione delle relazioni delle persone queer, dando un’idea di come i copioni egemoni eteronormativi sono messi in scena in tali relazioni. Ne sono esempi la feticizzazione e il pregiudizio

⁷ Disuguaglianze all’interno di comunità che dovrebbero essere alleate sono ben note a chi occupa spazi fuori dai binari sessuali e di genere. Le persone asessuali, Bi+, non-binarie e trans* affrontano spesso pregiudizi sessuali all’interno della loro stessa comunità, generati da una norma omosessuale che cancella altre identità a favore di essere solo “gay e lesbiche”. Sulle storiche difficoltà delle lotte queer e omosessuali negli altri movimenti politici, quello dei lavoratori e comunista, o del sessismo dentro di esse si rimanda al libro “I movimenti omosessuali di liberazione” di Spolato (2019[1972]).

verso le persone Bi+: in cui le donne Bi+ sono trattate come una fantasia sessuale per soddisfare i gusti di una coppia uomo-donna generalmente eterosessuale; o quando gli uomini Bi+ affrontano bifobia e cancellazione (SCHRIMSHAW *et al.* 2018; CASTRO & CARNASSALE 2019) quando vengono considerati gay repressi od opportunisti traditori (ad es. accusandoli di essere gay “velati” che tradiscono le mogli o opportunisti).

Questi repertori discorsivi egemoni (SHEFF 2006; KLESSE 2007) si intersecano con altri assi intersezionali come il genere, la classe, la provenienza geografica, il colore della pelle, l’età, la disabilità e molte altre. L’affrontare criticamente questioni relazionali resta, come detto in precedenza, un potenziale delle relazioni non-monogame, che non sono esenti da dinamiche di potere e disequilibrio. Per esempio, Cascais e Cardoso (2013) hanno evidenziato come nei discorsi di persone “nuove” alle non-monogamie siano spesso presenti repertori discorsivi intrisi di sessismo e assunti patriarcali legati al possesso e al potere, quindi nel passaggio da relazioni monogame a quelle non-monogame. Altre questioni sono sollevate da Christian Klesse (2007) su come le gerarchie nelle relazioni non-monogame possono essere fonte di conflitti, insieme alla presenza di prole, proprietà immobiliari o capitale sociale (ad es. chi sta investendo di più o di meno nella relazione), età (come il timore che altri partner abbiano più accesso al “mercato sessuale” e investano di meno nella relazione pensando di potersi rifare una vita). Christian Klesse (2007) in *The Spectre of Promiscuity* individua nelle storie di chi partecipa alla ricerca varie forme di disuguaglianza nelle relazioni non-monogame.

Nelle polifamiglie la disponibilità economica può incidere sulla distribuzione dei beni, sulla scelta del luogo in cui abitare, sull’organizzazione degli spazi domestici o, in generale, sull’inclusione nella reciprocità economica dentro una relazione (KLESSE 2007). Vanno inclusi inoltre fenomeni come la feticizzazione del colore della pelle o della provenienza nazionale (CASTRO & CARNASSALE 2019), l’età e il capitale sociale, quando si definisce una relazione (KLESSE 2007). Tale disponibilità di capitale sociale può aver influenzato anche la spinta di singole persone non-monogame o della comunità a puntare su strategie individuali di tutela giuridica (per esempio tramite atto notarile) invece che su strategie collettive (AVIRAM 2008). Pur avendo una preferenza condivisa, tramite copioni culturali, per la fluidità nei rapporti esiste comunque una differenza tra chi può permettersi delle tutele individuali e chi no. Secondo Aviram (2008), il

background culturale delle persone non-monogame, nel contesto statunitense, ha un impatto sulla ricerca di riconoscimento giuridico, promuovendo contemporaneamente una visione utopistica del futuro (dove ogni persona potrà avere relazioni libere e non oppressive) e un individualismo di fondo che resta ottimo per trovare il proprio modo di vivere le relazioni, ma è poco efficace per strategie collettive (ivi).

Il contesto italiano ha le sue caratteristiche specifiche (GRANDE e PES 2018; GUSMANO 2018; CASTRO 2021), eppure chi scrive ritiene che la grande eterogeneità e una preferenza per strategie individuali di gestione della discriminazione – sia nelle comunità non-monogame che in quelle Bi+ – potrebbero spiegare le difficoltà nel creare dei movimenti di riconoscimento condivisi. Le relazioni non-monogame possono essere o restare radicali nel loro navigare in una società monosessuale ed eteronormata, continuando a valorizzare i loro principi fondanti (comunicazione, comprensione, consenso e apertura) – soprattutto considerando che di questi principi le non-monogamie hanno mostrato maggiore riflessività e buone pratiche rispetto alle monogamie seriali. Le domande di riconoscimento giuridico e il loro incontro potranno tutelare enormemente le polifamiglie e chi ne fa parte, senza necessariamente cedere la componente radicale e la componente queer delle famiglie LGBTQIA+ a un'assimilazione identitaria che non sia individualista, o alimenti le disuguaglianze già presenti nella società e nelle relazioni, trovando infine un equilibrio tra cosa possiamo ottenere e cosa vale la pena cedere al copione normativo delle relazioni regolamentate.

DISCUSSIONE

Questo contributo aveva l'obiettivo di discutere come il riconoscimento giuridico delle relazioni non-monogame possa essere rafforzato dagli studi psicologici sulla qualità relazionale, sui bisogni e le genitorialità non-monogame. In modo simile al percorso giuridico delle unioni fra persone dello stesso genere (GALUPO 2008; LASIO & SERRI 2019; FRANCHI & SELMI 2020), il riconoscimento passa da un bilanciamento tra radicalità – e la *queerness* – delle relazioni non-monogame, da un lato, e dall'assimilazione per ottenere più diritti dall'altro. Un processo-compromesso profondamente delicato quanto complesso, ma fortunatamente esplorato nel contesto italiano (GRANDE e PES 2018). Chi scrive suggerisce di focalizzarsi sul supporto che gli studi psicologici e sociali possono offrire alle

domande di riconoscimento, in quanto sono più i diritti umani a spingere a livello legale rispetto a una controproducente essenzializzazione sia dell'orientamento sessuale che degli stili relazionali non-monogami (AVIRAM 2008; EISNER 2013; DIAMOND 2019). Poiché un focus essenzialista, biologico o culturale, non è in grado di dimostrare che lo stile relazionale non-monogamo sia innato, né che questa sua possibile "essenza" possa giustificare un riconoscimento giuridico. In generale, gli studi evolutivi non forniscono rilevanti contributi né al conseguimento di diritti sociali né alla conversazione condivisa sullo spazio sociopolitico delle non-monogamie. Far parte di una minoranza sessuale discriminata può essere rivoluzionario, ma resta evolutivamente non conveniente, posto che negli studi sull'evoluzione c'è più egemonia che rivoluzione.

Portare l'esempio delle bisessualità e delle famiglie omogenitoriali ci ricorda che le società eteronormate tendono ad assimilare ciò che vive fuori dai binarismi, tentando di appropriarsene e "addomesticare" le identità non conformi (KLESSE 2007; GALUPO 2008; SANTOS 2013; CASTRO 2021). D'altronde, la ricerca psicologica e sociale ha avuto un ruolo significativo nel costruire la coppia diadica come ideale e con stili di attaccamento adeguati a relazioni durature (COORS *et al.* 2015). L'esempio lampante è presente negli studi sull'attaccamento dove tale costruito e quello di amore sono sovrapposti al "legame di coppia" (MOORS *et al.* 2015). Questa sovrapposizione ci permette di comprendere quanto decenni di studi sull'attaccamento non abbiano approfondito le relazioni da prospettive non-esclusive: se l'attaccamento diventa solo esclusività sessuale o romantica allora saremo più inclini a ritenere la diade come la forma di relazione più "naturale, sana e romantica" (MOORS *et al.* 2015).

Ciò nonostante, le persone che praticano relazioni non-monogame possono attivamente affrontare e resistere a standard normativi legati ai rapporti di genere, alle relazioni intime e all'ampio spettro delle sessualità, poiché sfidano l'assetto normativo delle relazioni tipico nelle società occidentali, dove i rapporti "devono" essere tra un uomo e una donna, eterosessuali e apparentemente monogami (BARKER 2005). Al contrario, riflettere e adottare principi non-monogami, quindi ingaggiare l'alterità rispetto alla monogamia, porta a evidenziare quali principi regolano il "contratto monogamo" della società. In una review critica (ZIEGLER *et al.* 2014) viene discusso di come l'*endorsement* della monogamia, soprattutto in modo acritico, sia controproducente e impatti negativamente sulla vita

delle donne. L'assunto socioculturale della monogamia incatena l'identità delle donne, prescrivendo e giustificando la presenza della gelosia nei loro confronti, e soprattutto riducendo l'autonomia femminile in virtù della gelosia. La struttura della monogamia stessa rende problematico il riconoscimento di queste difficoltà e dei copioni normativi che coinvolgono la questione femminile, rinforzando il sistema patriarcale eteronormato (ZIEGLER *et al.* 2014). Robinson esprime questo concetto affermando che la monogamia privilegia attivamente “*gli interessi sia degli uomini che del capitalismo, agendo tramite il meccanismo dell'esclusività, possessività e gelosia, tutte filtrate attraverso le lenti tinte di rosa del romanticismo*” (Ita. tr. 1997:144; ma si veda anche RITCHIE & BARKER 2006).

Le relazioni non-monogame permettono a chi le pratica di esplorare dinamiche di genere e di desiderio sessuale poco attuabili in una relazione monogama – come, ad esempio, la presenza di partner stesso-genere e/o queer – e di entrare in contatto con espressioni di genere e sessualità diverse dalla propria (Manley, Diamond and van ANDERS 2015). Ciò può fornire uno spazio in cui potenzialmente una persona può sradicare quei binarismi, costruiti come dicotomie polarizzate del sessuale, in una prospettiva più fluida, contrastando quella sensazione – molto comune nelle esperienze Bi+ di sentirsi “tirate tra due mondi” (CASTRO & CARNASSALE 2019; CASTRO 2021). Come precedentemente discusso, impegnarsi in relazioni non-monogame non influisce negativamente sulla qualità di tali relazioni, certo non in misura maggiore rispetto alla monogamia: i valori peggiori di qualità della relazione sono presenti nelle relazioni dove si rompono gli accordi relazionali e dove manca il consenso di tutte le parti a tenere una relazione non-monogama (MOORS *et al.* 2017). Anche se per alcune persone il passare da uno stile relazionale monogamo ad accordi consensuali non-monogami può essere inteso come un modo plausibile per gestire le attrazioni per più persone allo stesso tempo (KLESSE 2007), non necessariamente questo processo psicologico permette di criticare o distaccarsi in toto dall'egemonia mononormativa (ZIEGLER *et al.* 2014). Eppure, per le persone Bi +, ovvero attratte da più generi, le relazioni non-monogame possono essere un modo per esplorare le attrazioni bisessuali per più di un genere (BARKER 2010; MANLEY *et al.* 2015) e trovare più sensibilità Bi+ all'interno degli spazi non-monogami, poiché hanno già decostruito il presupposto della mononormatività (GUSMANO 2019). Frequentemente le persone Bi+ (ad es. bisex, pansex, biromantiche) adottano delle etichette che

mettono in discussione l'idea stessa di monogamia o del dover etichettare le proprie sessualità, sostenendo che queste non siano in grado di "catturare" le loro esperienze e desideri quotidiani (KLESSE 2007). Avere accesso a comunità non monogame è un passo importante verso l'accettazione e la contestazione degli assunti monogami della società, poiché la condivisione di esperienze, sentimenti e strategie per negoziare relazioni è una forma di supporto sociale per persone non-monogame (BAUER 2014). Per questo motivo, le ricerche future potrebbero esplorare come la carenza di informazioni o il non fruire degli spazi online o offline di confronto sulle non-monogamie consensuali possa influire sul rischio di conflitti e un disequilibrio del lavoro emotivo nella relazione, tenendo conto delle specificità di chi, in tale relazione, ha uno stile non-monogamo e chi no (KLESSE 2007). Avere spazi sicuri per vedere riconosciuto ed esprimere liberamente il proprio orientamento sessuale e relazionale è fondamentale per le persone Bi+ e non-monogame, a fronte anche di una consolidata mancanza di contatti positivi e di fiducia nelle relazioni eteronormative e negli spazi LG a causa di precedenti esperienze di bifobia e cancellazione o di pregiudizio verso il loro stile relazionale (BARKER *et al.* 2012; BAUER 2014).

CONCLUSIONI

La pluralità della sfera relazionale e sessuale deve portarci a riconsiderare, sia a livello identitario che nel diritto, i concetti di relazione, famiglia e famiglie. L'assunto mononormato delle relazioni diadiche come forma migliore di una relazione non è così supportato quando sono incluse nelle ricerche le relazioni non-monogame (RUBEL & BOGAERT 2015; Whitton, WEITBRECHT & KURYLUK 2015). Sebbene non esenti da criticità, le non-monogamie consensuali possono essere una fonte di relazioni positive e stabilità sia relazionale che familiare. Come qualsiasi struttura relazionale richiedono apertura, reattività, gestione del tempo, trasparenza all'interno della relazione e negoziazioni rispettose (ANAPOL 2010; BARKER 2010) che sono rese molto più problematizzate (ma anche esplicitamente discusse e valorizzate) rispetto a chi vive una relazione monogama – negli accordi o nei fatti. Tenendo conto delle specifiche egemonie, bisogna però riconoscere che, nonostante la difficoltà del dover costruire "modi nuovi" di fare relazione (preoccupazioni, gestire la relazione, stabilire dei limiti per quanto riguarda la trasparenza dei desideri), queste relazioni sono significate come un viaggio passo-passo per venire

a patti con sentimenti e legami significativi già presenti (ANAPOL 2010; GUSMANO 2018). Questi legami dovrebbero avere, per chi lo richiede, un giusto riconoscimento, diritti e tutele nel più ampio discorso politico sulle famiglie come nuclei-villaggi che ci rendono società.

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ALICE PARRINELLO

No country(side) for young queers. Three contemporary Italian urban-rural narratives

ABSTRACT: The paper presents an overview of three Italian takes on the queer rural-to-urban flight, by analysing *Generations of Love* (1999) by Matteo B. Bianchi, *La Generazione* (2015) by Flavia Biondi, and *Febbre* (2019) by Jonathan Bazzi. In most LGBTQ+ narratives moving to a big city is central, as it is associated with finding an accepting 'chosen' family. However, the move has recently acquired homonormative connotations: it is embedded into narratives of economic success and the individuals moving are usually white, cisgender, non-disabled, gay men. In the texts, the main characters correspond to the type. However, by analysing their relationships to their hometowns and their biological families, this paper argues that the characters find ways of challenging the homonormative paradigm through a spatial in-betweenness and non-conjugal bonds not reflected by laws. The main theoretical frameworks are the homonormativity definition by Lisa Duggan, the work on Italian queerness by Antonia Anna Ferrante, and the study on queer orientations by Sara Ahmed. This paper is inscribed into a larger trend of studies around the rural-to-urban move but sheds light on the Italian landscape.

KEYWORDS: queer anti-urbanism; queer phenomenology; queer Italian studies; contemporary Italian literature; homonormativity.

E crebbe così a ridosso di altri amori, di storie che non sarebbero mai state la 'sua storia,' ma che, in un certo senso, lui era in grado di elaborare per gli altri

(TONDELLI 2019: 133)¹

1. INTRODUCTION

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a queer person in search for happiness, must move to the next big city. It is one of the most popular tropes in LGBTQ+ narratives, be it in cultural products or real-life events. The metrosexual narrative, as it has been defined by Jack J. Halberstam, states that moving from a small (minded) town to a big and accepting city

¹ And so he grew up next to other loves, to other stories that would never be 'his story,' but that, in a way, he was able to elaborate for others (this and the other citations in the paper have been translated from Italian to English by the author).

often embodies a queer person's coming out (2005: 36-37). Similarly, Kath Weston charted the phenomenon in her sociological studies, arguing that the formation of a gay collective imaginary developed spatially in connection to the city life (1995: 282). Its formation was reinforced by a process of othering of the countryside, seen as the city's intolerant other (WESTON 1995: 274). This narrative has been widely adopted by the majority of the LGBTQ+ community, as Weston stated, "For not only did the rural-born claim that they needed to make the journey to the city to 'be gay': the urban-born voiced relief at having avoided the fate of coming out in rural areas where they believed homophobia to be rampant and 'like' others impossible to find" (1995: 282).

The pro-urban rhetoric can be seen as another facet of the homonormative process that is central to queer discourses today, as argued by Scott Herring (2010: 11). Homonormativity, the process of normalisation of the LGBTQ+ community, aims at the removal of queerness' most disruptive features in favour of a polished and neoliberal version of queer life (DUGGAN 2003: 50). Homonormativity involves mostly white gay (assumably, cisgender, non-disabled, and middle-class) men and turns the gay civil rights movement into a fight solely for marriage equality and military service (DUGGAN 2003: 45). According to Halberstam, queerness used to fail to align to the heteronormative paradigm of capitalist accumulation, advancement, and family (2011: 89). However, these are now goals and key pillars of homonormative gay life, and urban gay life in particular.

While the vast majority of literature around urban-rural queer narratives maps displacements in the United States (HERRING 2010; JOHNSON 2013; GRAY *et al.* 2016), this paper investigates the depiction of the urban-rural divide in contemporary Italian works of fiction. In order to uncover how characters engage with and complicate the link between homonormativity and rural-to-urban narratives, this textual analysis confronts works that have a white gay man as the main character. The paper's analysis is twofold and acts as a magnifying glass: starting from the macro, such as the cities and the small towns cited in the works, and moving on to the micro, thus, focusing on the characters' family bonds and objects. While the former are analysed in contrast to the pro-urban gay imaginary, the latter are investigated through the lenses of Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenology (2006).

The core texts analysed here are three contemporary Italian narratives of rural-to-urban flight. *Generations of Love* (1999) by Matteo B. Bianchi is

an autobiographical account of growing up gay in an Italian rural small town and of refusing to move to Milan as soon as possible. The graphic novel *La Generazione* (2015, *Generations*) by Flavia Biondi offers a twist to the trope, as it tells the story of a homecoming to the countryside, after the main character has lived for several years in Milan. Finally, the autobiographical *Febbre* (2019, *Fever*) by Jonathan Bazzi seemingly follows the urban narrative, as the author moved from Milan's hinterland to the city centre, only to challenge the move's unidirectionality.

Alongside an analysis of the spaces and the characters' trajectories, the paper's core analytical method is to trace their relations to their biological families. Such an investigation of the non-conjugal bonds in the novels is not only necessary due to the prominence they have in each of the works, but it is essential given the key role it plays in rural-to-urban narratives: living in the city meant being able to live queerly and finding a community – a new and larger chosen family – that would often replace the biological family (WESTON 1997: 52). Additionally, non-conjugal bonds are investigated because they might allow for a new take on homonormativity through legal recognition or its lack thereof. Indeed, homonormativity promotes marriage equality by favouring dyadic relations and excluding all other types of relationality. Therefore, non-conjugal bonds prompt to question the exceptionalism and legal benefits associated to conjugal relations, their contribution to (homo)normativity, and whether a new legal recognition is needed.

Moreover, the core texts are examined not only through Anglo-American queer theory, but also according to the “mostre terrone femminelle” perspective² by Antonia Anna Ferrante, which is “la possibilità di provincializzare l'idea di queer, dunque, di riscrivere queste storie escluse dalla Storia per tessere dei legami affettivi e di complicità che somigliano a quelli di altre geografie che la linea retta non conosce”³ (FERRANTE 2019:49). Fer-

² Ferrante's monstrous perspective is connected to both '*terrone*,' an Italian slur indicating people from the South, and '*femminelle*,' a Neapolitan dialectal term that refers to homosexuals with a female gender expression. The words are reclaimed by Ferrante, much like the word 'queer' has been reclaimed by the LGBTQ+ community, in order to open up new ways of relationality, progress, and nation by bringing to the forefront those who live at the margins. While the perspective is rooted in the traditions of the South of Italy and the core texts are all set in the North, they are connected by their challenge to homonormativity.

³ The possibility of provincializing the idea of queer, therefore, to rewrite those stories excluded from History to weave affective and complicity connections that seem like those of other geographies that a straight line does not know (FERRANTE 2019: 49).

rante's theory was developed to reclaim a local specificity, and as a challenge to homonormativity and the queer Anglo-American tendency to homogenise different experiences (FERRANTE 2019: 48). Therefore, the perspective seems fitting to this paper's aim of exploring Italian rural-to-urban narratives. Hence, the paper answers the following questions: how do the texts relate to the rural-to-urban imaginary? How do they complicate the homonormative paradigm associated with it? What is the role played by the main characters' trajectories and non-conjugal family bonds? Do the works provincialize the idea of queer and bring to the forefront often-excluded affective connections?

2. SMALL TOWN BOYS

The works by Bazzi, Bianchi, and Biondi are all deeply connected to specific places, either real or fictional. Therefore, it is necessary to locate in space the three narrations and to chart the characters' movements, as they all offer a different version of the rural-to-urban migration. Each of the narratives gets more distant from the metrosexual paradigm, especially when the storyline appears to be the closest to normativity. Indeed, at a first glance, Bazzi's *Febbre* seems a canonical rural-to-urban story: following the author's biography, the novel accounts for his childhood in Rozzano, a satellite town near Milan, and his life as an adult in the city, in particular his coming to terms with his HIV-positive status. The structure of the novel, in which chapters about his childhood are interwoven with a present-tense narration, exemplifies the dualistic nature of the novel and of the author's locational attachments. However, even if at the core of the narration there is HIV, Rozzano has an undoubted prominence. Right from the beginning, Bazzi sets the precise coordinates that delimit his life, "Sono cresciuto a Rozzano, cap 20089, un paese piccolo ma neanche poi tanto, all'estrema periferia sud di Milano, costruito in mezzo alla campagna che costeggia il Naviglio, in direzione Pavia. [...] Poco meno di 43.000 abitanti a Rozzano, stretti a ridosso della tangenziale Ovest"⁴ (BAZZI 2019:24). Rozzano is presented as a dangerous, lower-class environment, and conservative regarding gender roles: boys are supposed to only like football, motorbikes, while girls have to have other

⁴ I grew up in Rozzano, zip code 20089, it is a small town, but not even that small, in the farthest outskirts of Milan, built in the middle out the countryside that runs alongside the Naviglio canal towards Pavia [...] Rozzano has less than 43,000 inhabitants, all packed next to the West highway.

interests (BAZZI 2019: 27). This system is forcefully imposed on everyone, everywhere (BAZZI 2019: 28). Only when Bazzi gets older, is he confident enough to present in public in a less stereotypical way. For instance, he dyes his hair green and blue, or wears light blue tartan trousers “da gay”,⁵ which make him the target of bullies (BAZZI 2019: 147). They forcefully try to place him back within a socially accepted role (BAZZI 2019: 147).

On the other hand, Milan is presented as the promised land throughout the novel. As a kid, Bazzi idealised the city as merely a place imbued with freedom (BAZZI 2019: 90). As a teenager studying there, Bazzi values Milan for its gay-friendly-ness. In his high school class in the city, “Quasi tutte ragazze – quattro i maschi, più me – e una percentuale di gay, lesbiche e bisessuali da circolo LGBT. Questa è Milano. Essere queer va di moda, certe mie compagne sono lesbiche solo per una stagione. Gli etero decisi – non possibilisti – sono una minoranza”⁶ (BAZZI 2019: 278). As the stereotypical big city, Milan stands up to its reputation by offering a polar-opposite environment to the one presented by Rozzano – Bazzi is free to be who he is, and he even eventually moves in with his partner there. In a canonical rural-to-urban narrative, the move to Milan and his queer domesticity would have coincided with a happy ending. However, Bazzi’s HIV-positive diagnosis disrupts a canonical narrative, allowing Rozzano to regain prominence in the work. While in a severe depressive state, a specific fear fills his mind: the need to move back to Rozzano, should he become too debilitated by HIV (BAZZI 2019: 219). Such thinking progresses to the point that Bazzi ponders whether his boyfriend would bury him in Milano or in Rozzano (BAZZI 2019: 251). Rozzano haunts him, as exemplified by his thoughts after the diagnosis:

[...] Ancora oggi io ho paura che Rozzano rivendichi il suo dominio, che si riprenda ciò che le spetta. Che sbuchi fuori all’improvviso da qualche parte, dai documenti, dai miei tratti del viso marcati, dalla sciatteria nel vestire e che mi costringa quindi a tornare di nuovo al confino, tra le sue vie coi nomi dei fiori. [...]

Ho Rozzano incastrata nel nome, se parlo di me devo parlare di lei.

Me ne sono andato, ma è tutta ancora qui. (BAZZI 2019: 32)⁷

⁵ That only a gay person would wear.

⁶ They were mostly girls – four boys and me – and a percentage of gays, lesbians, and bisexuals worth of an LGBT society. This is Milan. Being queer is fashionable, some of my classmates are lesbians just for a season. The strict heterosexuals – not curious – are a minority.

⁷ Up to this day, I am afraid that Rozzano will claim its control, that it will take what is right-

However, the diagnosis enables Bazzi to eventually re-evaluate his roots. At the end of the work, Rozzano is compared to the hospital where Bazzi goes for his medical check-ups (BAZZI 2019: 318-319). Both places have challenged him at first, as Rozzano has tried to impose on him strict gender stereotypes and as the hospital is connected to HIV-related prejudices (BAZZI 2019: 319). However, Rozzano has a double nature that fortified Bazzi, his town helped him develop a thick skin that is now invaluable, “Se oggi lo stigma non mi imbriglia poi molto, forse è proprio perché sono cresciuto in quel posto. Rozzano il veleno e l’antidoto”⁸ (BAZZI 2019: 320). Rozzano as a *pharmakon* places itself within the disidentification paradigm used by Scott Herring to describe anti-urban spaces (2010: 114). ‘Disidentification’ has originally been coined by José Esteban Muñoz as “a mode of dealing with dominant ideology [...] that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology” (1999: 11). Bazzi does not reject nor assimilate to Rozzano, but he values the way the town shaped him. Rozzano has been invaluable for him, arguably even more than Milan.

Biondi’s *La Generazione* offers a different approach to the rural-to-urban literature. First of all, it presents a different take than the one in *Febbre*, as the main character’s small town is not located in Milan’s hinterland, but in the fictional Pontecesello in Tuscany’s countryside. Hence, it engages with a more defined rural-urban divide.

It is precisely a view of the countryside that introduces the narrative, showing Matteo travelling back by train to his hometown. The main emotion that imbues the panel⁹ is the sense of dread that he feels about moving back; he feels empty, in a temporal limbo between his past life and his future (BIONDI 2015: 5). He has failed at conducting a successful life in Milan – not being able to be independent or having a career, he merely depended on his (now ex) boyfriend (BIONDI 2015: 28). Now, he feels deeply humiliated,

fully its. I am afraid that it will suddenly stand out, from my papers, from my pronounced facial features, from the sloppiness of my clothes, and that it will force me to go back to my confinement, in its flower-named streets. I have Rozzano framed in my name, if I talk about myself, I need to talk about it. I have left, but it is still here.

⁸ Today, if the stigma does not harness me that much, maybe it is exactly because I grew up in that place. Rozzano is the poison and the antidote.

⁹ I do not remember much about the journey. When the train left Milan behind, I felt empty. Vaporised. In a limbo between yesterday and tomorrow. I just remember that the sun came out after it had rained a bit in the morning. The green of the sunlit countryside filled my sight. It was tremendously painful.

Non ricordo
molto del viaggio.

Quando il treno ha lasciato
Milano dietro di sé, mi sono
sentito annullato. Dissolto.

In un limbo fra
ieri e domani.

Rammento che era uscito
un po' di sole dopo la
pioggia della mattina.

Il verde della campagna
baciata dalla luce mi
riempiva gli occhi.

Faceva maledet-
tamente male.

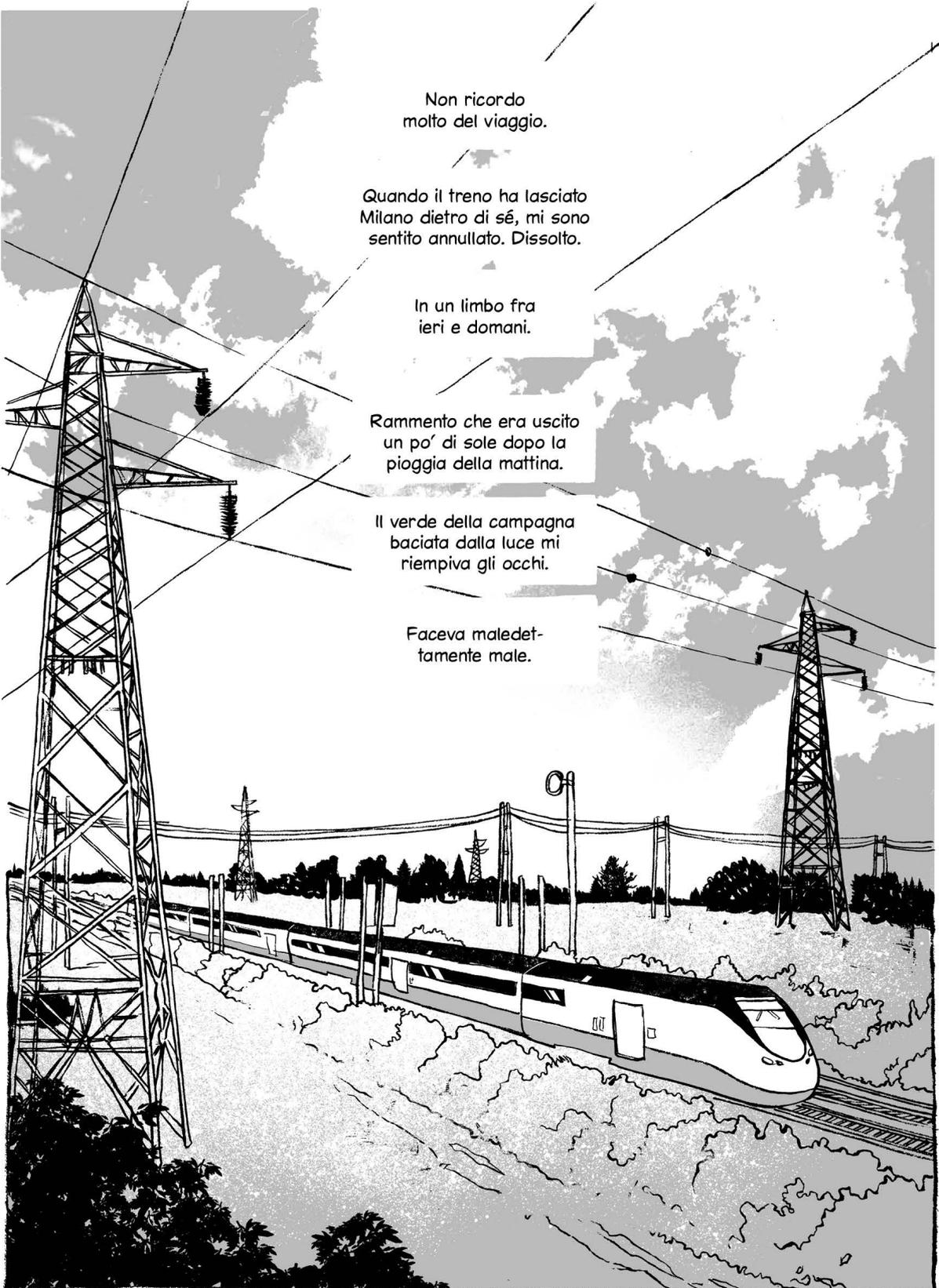


PHOTO © Flavia Biondi 2015, courtesy of Bao Publishing

as he needs to move in with his family since he has no resources (BIONDI 2015: 17). His feelings can be associated with a neoliberal idea of accomplishment, which implies an ascendent financial success.

However, Matteo's attitude towards his hometown starts to change when he befriends Francesco, his grandmother's nurse. Francesco becomes his confidant, and he challenges Matteo's internalised biases, which make him see all country people as backward homophobes. Francesco says:

Non capisco perché trovi così terribile il tuo rientro. Lo dici come se vivere qui fosse una condanna. [...] Io ti sto inseguendo con un forcone, per caso? Non sono tutti così. Ovvio, se prendi come campione la vecchia generazione è un altro discorso. (BIONDI 2015: 54)¹⁰

Francesco contests the view of rural people as close-minded homophobes. The conversation shows that Matteo had embraced the gay imaginary defined by Kath Weston, in which the city is a beacon of tolerance, while the country is instead a place of persecution (1995: 282). Before moving to Milan, he had not explored the reality around him, he merely adjusted his narrative to the canonical rural-to-urban flight and refused to look back. For this reason, Francesco argues that Matteo ran away to Milan in order to avoid coming out to his family and in particular to his father, preferring to believe that he would find acceptance in the big city rather than in Ponteceseello (BIONDI 2015: 54).

When Matteo goes back to Milan to see his (now no longer ex) boyfriend, he finally disrupts any possibility of the graphic novel to align to a canonical rural-to-urban narrative. Matteo decides not to move back to the city just yet, but to stay in his hometown for a while longer (BIONDI 2015: 110-113). He does not reject the city nor the countryside, rather he embraces an in-between life (BIONDI 2015: 111). Not choosing stability, he lives between spaces. Living in the liminality encapsulates queer disruptiveness, as it unsettles the spatial binary. Even if his story started on different tracks, he was able to deviate from a neoliberal paradigm and rejoice in his small-town living.

While Bazzi and Biondi's works find ways to be disruptive, they still partially align themselves with the rural-to-urban flight. Instead, Matteo

¹⁰ I do not understand why you find your homecoming so terrible. You say it as if living here was a sentence. [...] Am I chasing you with a pitchfork? Not everyone is like that. I mean, obviously, if you take into consideration the older generation things might change.

B. Bianchi's *Generations of Love* is radically different. The novel is immediately localised in the fictional Lentate Trovanti, the typical "Provincia Tranquilla"¹¹ (2016: 16). Its capitalisation exemplifies the author's awareness of grand narratives and the collocation of his hometown within them. Moreover, it is not just related to literary narrations or the gay imaginary, the rural-to-urban flight is also part of Bianchi's life, as it concerns most of his friends but not himself:

Ho assistito a una vera e propria diaspora. Frotte di amici hanno cominciato a muoversi, trasferirsi, emigrare. Io, che predico costantemente il movimento come condizione essenziale di vita, forse sono l'unico che non si è mosso di un passo. Alberto ha lasciato la sua famiglia per trasferirsi in città, Marco ha conosciuto un americano, si è innamorato e l'ha seguito a New York, Claudio, letteralmente da un giorno all'altro, ha annunciato che sarebbe andato a Londra ("A ballare sui cubi!", per la precisione) e l'ha fatto. [...] Mi sento un provinciale dell'immobilismo. (BIANCHI 2016: 123)¹²

The novel is the autobiographical account of Bianchi's childhood and early adulthood in Lentate, as he only moves to Milan at the end of the novel. However, the move is not meant to free him from the small town's close-mindedness. Bianchi was already an out and proud gay at home. Bianchi's provincial life differentiates itself from Bazzi and Biondi's narratives, as, for once, the author does not move to Milan as soon as there's an opportunity. Instead of finding close-mindedness in the countryside, Bianchi finds it in the city, where a group of 'city gays' embody the homonormative stereotype. Bianchi meets them at the local gay centre while attending a talk given by a mayoral candidate, who, for once, is interested in the LGBTQ+ community (BIANCHI 2016: 147). However, the group is only interested in appearances to the point that one of them says he will vote for a right-wing politician only because of his good looks. Overall, they are described as a typical product of neoliberal consumerism, as their distinctive features are a Dolce & Gabbana shirt and their 'lobotomy-worthy' comments (BIANCHI 2016: 148).

¹¹ Quiet province.

¹² I witnessed a real diaspora. Hordes of friends started leaving, moving away, emigrating. It is possible that I am the only one that has not moved at all, I, who constantly preach movement as the essential condition of life. Alberto left his family to move to the city, Marco met an American, fell in love with him, and followed him to New York, Claudio, literally from one day to the next, announced he was going to London ("to dance on tables," more precisely) and he did it. I feel like an immobility provincial.

Bianchi's deep connection to the countryside is evident even from his description of dialect as his "lingua degli affetti"¹³ (BIANCHI 2016: 135-136). It is the language that his parents speak and that now affects his relationships (BIANCHI 2016: 136). Such a deep connection to his land is probably the reason why Bianchi feels able to live openly, even in Lentate Trovanti, in his relationship with his partner, Alessandro, who uses dialectal words as well (BIANCHI 2016: 135). Their connection to the countryside strays both of them from being represented as homonormative gay men – not a single Dolce & Gabbana t-shirt in sight.

The peculiarity of the novel is that it is not merely the author's actions that are disruptive to the rural-to-urban paradigm, but also various queer events that happen in Lentate Trovanti. For instance, as a child Bianchi used to attend the town's Mardi Gras parade. The event could have easily been the set of enforced gender roles, such as Rozzano. Instead, it features the first instance of queerness of the novel: Bianchi recounts how another boy defied gender norms by dressing up as 'Spring,' thus, wearing a flowery skirt, a veiled hat, and carrying an embroidered umbrella (2016: 25-26). The event went unnoticed by the rest of the town people, as they believed the boy to be a girl, but it was a watershed in Bianchi's life, "A noi, quel mascheramento da altro sesso, così ricercato e convinto, così privo di ironia, ci ha folgorato. [...] Avremo sì e no, dieci anni. Il camp lo inventiamo noi quella sera"¹⁴ (BIANCHI 2016: 26). Seeing a boy in a girl's dress prompts the author to reclaim the invention of camp. The narrative overturns the trope that sees the city as more advanced and, instead, places Lentate Trovanti front and centre of a queer aesthetic development.

Additionally, Bianchi's novel disrupts the idea often held by LGBTQ+ people of being the only ones in their small towns (WESTON 1995: 281). For instance, he meets a gay man at the local polling station (BIANCHI 2016: 122). During the same election night, Bianchi is also approached by a straight-presenting lawyer who introduces him to Lentate Trovanti's cruising area (BIANCHI 2016: 128) and even outs the polling station president, who is married with kids but has had various affairs with men (BIANCHI 2016: 126). While the closeted fathers might have corresponded to the stereotypes on small towns' people, the presence of a cruising area in the

¹³ The language of affections.

¹⁴ We were dazzled by that other-sex-costume, so sophisticated and committed, so devoid of any irony. We must have been more or less 10-years-old. We invent camp that night.

“Provincia Tranquilla” (BIANCHI 2016: 16) strongly disrupts the urban-rural binary. Bianchi’s *Lentate Trovanti* shows that reality cannot be easily categorised into grand narratives and that the countryside and the city have a lot in common.

Overall, the texts by Bazzi, Bianchi, and Biondi all complicate in different ways the canonical rural-to-urban narrative. Indeed, they quite literally “provincialize the idea of queer” (FERRANTE 2019: 49) by providing a nuanced picture of the small towns and the characters’ relationships to them. Most importantly, their movements are not characterised by a rejection of either the city or of the small towns. Hence, they queerly blur rigid spatial binaries and take new paths that are in line with a “mostre terrone femminile” perspective (FERRANTE 2019: 49).

3. TELEVISION, PHOTOGRAPHS, AND TOYS

The three main characters in the works are not only defined by their connection to their roots but by their attachment to their biological families. Exploring iterations of care in relation to the rural-urban divide might provide ways of challenging the homonormative paradigm. The goal is not to undermine the long history of chosen families that characterises the LGBTQ+ community, but to investigate non-conjugal attachments as sources of disruptiveness. These bonds are analysed in connection to various objects, which arguably reflect the family care. Indeed, in *Queer Phenomenology* (2006), Sara Ahmed linked sexual orientation with the spatial orientation, in particular with the disposition of material objects inside a home (2006: 1-9). Heterosexuality has been normalised as the correct orientation (AHMED 2006: 70) and, as such, it has influenced the way objects are arranged within a household (AHMED 2006: 87). The objects need to reflect the good life of the family, which means having achieved certain goals throughout life – marriage, children, and so on (AHMED 2006: 21). According to this perspective, the queer subject is a deviant (AHMED 2006: 21) and “to make things queer is certainly to disturb the order of things” (AHMED 2006: 161). Therefore, an analysis of the different objects is the springboard to question how the family relations dis-orient, how they are themselves dis-oriented, and how the family care disrupts homonormativity.

As previously discussed, *Febbre* offers a dual overview of the author’s life, covering both his childhood and present life. In the present tense narrative, the author lives with his partner and two cats in a house in Milan

(BAZZI 2019: 20). However, analysing Bazzi's childhood home(s) and its objects is equally stimulating to understand how Bazzi was able to deviate from normativity. Right from the beginning, all of the houses in which Bazzi has lived are positively connected to the women in his life – either his mother, grandmothers, or other figures. They offered him a safe haven both through their actions and through the objects that they surrounded him with. The toys in particular were a controversial topic in his household, as his father wanted him to have 'boys' toys' such as a motorbike or a Ferrari jumpsuit and not 'female and pink toys,' complaining that his wife was raising a 'faggot' (BAZZI 2019: 61). Instead, his grandmother's friends gave him 'girls toys' that no one else wanted to buy him (BAZZI 2019: 91). The presents actively disrupted the compulsory heterosexuality that was imposed on the author by his father and queered the family orientation.

Another object that is part of Bazzi's queer phenomenology is the television. The object is deeply connected to Bazzi's mythography, as his mother named him after a TV show character (BAZZI 2019: 43). The television is essential in most households and is now at the core of the new domestic ritual, as argued Tiziana Terranova (FERRANTE 2019: 7). Given its centrality in domestic lives, it should reinforce the heteronormative orientation of the family, borrowing Ahmed's words. Indeed, Bazzi spent a significant part of his childhood and adolescence watching telenovelas and an Italian dating show hosted by Maria de Filippi with his grandmother (BAZZI 2019: 74, 196). It should be noted that one of the most famous de Filippi shows is the heteronormative dating reality show 'Uomini e Donne'.¹⁵ At the same time, Bazzi also watched by himself what are generally considered 'girls' cartoons' and, by dressing up as the female characters, he dis-oriented the family medium (BAZZI 2019: 77-78). By dressing up, Bazzi simultaneously challenged the virile image promoted by homonormativity and heterosexual gender norms. In order to do so, Bazzi found once again support in a female figure, as his grandmother recorded for him his favourite TV shows, such as the Wonder Woman show (BAZZI 2019: 117).

Furthermore, the television reflects family care in the present-day narrative of the work. After the HIV diagnosis, Bazzi suffers from anxiety and

¹⁵ Indeed, the show is called 'Men and Women' and is a dating contest in which a group of men or women has to seduce a member of the opposite sex. It is interesting to notice that after the legalization of same-sex unions in Italy, De Filippi has produced a male gay version of the show, whose homonormative traits have already been documented (FERRANTE 2019: 27-29).

depression, and his mother starts visiting him daily to help him. Bazzi was already outside of the homonormative paradigm due to his status, but it is his mother's care that reinforces his divergence:

Stiamo sul divano a vedere la televisione. Io sdraiato, senza più smanie di fare, andare, diventare o ottenere qualcosa. Senza slanci, interessi, senza più tutte le cose che mi separano, mi hanno separato, da lei. Mia madre seduta di fianco a me, ha messo la sua vita in stand-by. Madre e figlio, in un ritaglio di tempo e di spazio isolato dal resto e da tutto quello che è stato. (BAZZI 2019: 280)¹⁶

Her care is connected to a seemingly unproductive way of life. It is a lifestyle that takes place outside of the capitalist mechanism, and, in this void, Bazzi and his mother are able to find a new connection. By merely enjoying spending time together, they are actively practicing what Ferrante described as a micropolitics of resistance through affections (2019: 25). The television re-orientates Bazzi, placing front and centre the importance of care and not productivity. Bazzi was (en)abled to queer the family objects and dis-orient them through the care of various non-conjugal bonds: his mother's and grandmothers' affection allowed him to defy homonormativity by challenging gender norms and neoliberalism. While Rozzano is described as backward, the care that surrounded Bazzi is definitely queer, and it allowed him to write a different story for himself. He did not need to move to Milan to find a support network, as he already had one in his mother and grandmothers.

In a similar fashion, *La Generazione* offers a re-orientation of Matteo and his family through different objects. Photographs are used to tell the family history and to orient it, "in the conventional family home what appears requires following a certain line, the family line that directs our gaze. The heterosexual couple becomes a 'point' along this line, which is given to the child as its inheritance or background" (AHMED 2006: 90). At the beginning of the graphic novel, Matteo positions himself in opposition to the rest of the family, as he is not smiling in most of the family photographs the readers are shown (BIONDI 2015: 40).

Matteo is pictured as a boy surrounded by his father and aunts. However, his attitude is creating cracks in the pictures that are supposed to portray

¹⁶ We are on the couch watching tv. I am lying down, without the mania to do things, to go places, to get something. Without energy, hobbies, without all of the things that separate and used to separate me from her. My mum sitting next to me, she put her whole life on pause. Mother and son, in a clipping of time and space isolated from the rest and from all that has been.



PHOTO © Flavia Biondi 2015, courtesy of Bao Publishing.

a perfectly happy heterosexual family. As a queer subject, he disturbs the family order (AHMED 2006: 161). The impression is reinforced by Matteo's thoughts of alienation in the present-tense narration.¹⁷ He comes to terms with the isolation he had imposed on himself from the rest of his family, as a result of his inability to come out to them (BIONDI 2015: 40-41). They had not supported him as a gay man, because he had decided to hide from them and their stories (BIONDI 2015: 40-41). However, family care slowly allows Matteo to re-orient himself and his self-worth, as it is exemplified by another object: a wheelchair. As soon as Matteo returns to his hometown, he feels deeply humiliated by the situation. At first, he spends weeks not doing anything (BIONDI 2015: 21).

During this period, his depression worsens, as his inactivity is portrayed in a series of strips that depict him staring into nothingness while he keeps repeating himself that he will act "tomorrow" (BIONDI 2015: 19-21).

¹⁷ There was a thought that kept me up at night. Realising that I spent twenty years in a family, whose history I have deliberately ignored.

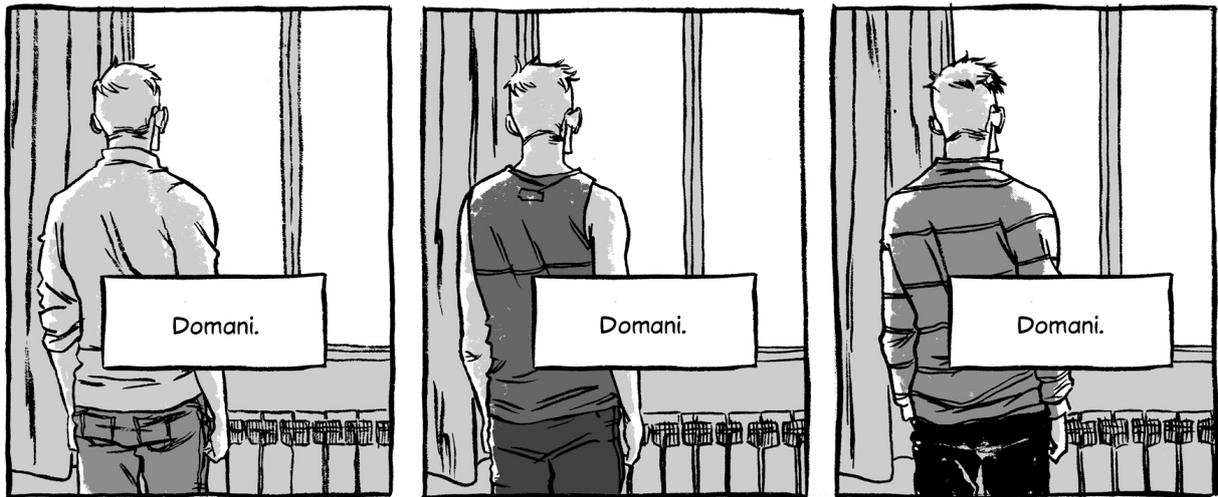


PHOTO © Flavia Biondi 2015, courtesy of Bao Publishing.

In *Febbre*, the moments of inactivity are positive, while Matteo's empty days bring no positive change. The situation takes a different turn when his aunt threatens to throw Matteo out because he is not contributing to the family's income (BIONDI 2015: 33). To stay and earn his place, the family decides he will be the new caregiver of his grandmother (BIONDI 2015: 34-35). Matteo learns from his aunts various nursing practices how to do daily domestic chores (BIONDI 2015: 42-44, 59). The wheelchair that Matteo uses to help his grandmother is exemplary of his care and growth. At first, he is ashamed of being seen pushing her grandmother through town (BIONDI 2015: 45-47). However, after a while, Matteo starts to see the value in his care towards his grandmother and such change is positively reflected in his own self-worth (BIONDI 2015: 60). He is finally proud of himself (BIONDI 2015: 60). The care is mutual; by helping his grandmother, Matteo is helped to grow. It is a truly revolutionary act in a neoliberal society and for a young man to appreciate the teachings of a group of unemployed middle-aged women (the antithesis of productivity) and, most importantly, to take care of them.

Another object that disrupts the norm is, once again, the television. Soon after his family has discovered Matteo's sexual orientation, they gather in the living room to watch 'Uomini e Donne,' the dating tv show hosted by Maria De Filippi.¹⁸ They start discussing which male contestant on the show is more attractive and they include Matteo, who professes liking dark-haired guys more, and his family silently accepts him (BIONDI

¹⁸ The show's presence in *Febbre* as well (BAZZI 2019: 196) is a clear indicator of its mainstream status and as a key part of the Italian imaginary.

2015: 92-95). The scene's strength is in how Matteo queers 'Uomini e Donne,' a show that embodies heteronormativity. However, it is significant that it is his aunt who prompts Matteo to speak of his preferences. Her care for him has dis-oriented the scene in the first place, invalidating his own prejudice of countryside backwardness.

By the end of the graphic novel and after Matteo's coming out, the readers are presented with more photographs in an enlarged view of the same set depicted at the beginning of the work. This time the readers are shown a more complete image of the family wall; there are various pictures of the family through the years and also one in which Matteo is smiling (BIONDI 2015: 128-129). Matteo's coming out has deviated the orientation of the whole family and queered their image, a disruption that has been enabled by their mutual care and the family's acceptance.

Generations of Love's disruptiveness to homonormativity and canonical rural-to-urban narratives, exemplified by the text's location in Lentate Trovanti, is enhanced by the care of Bianchi's sister, Caterina. She supported him long before his coming out by often challenging their father's homophobic views and becoming an LGBTQ+ activist in their household:

Una sera, a cena, mio padre se ne uscì con la frase: "Quello lì è un culattone", riferendosi a un qualsiasi renatozero televisivo. Mia sorella si alzò da tavola urlando: "Non voglio sentire un linguaggio del genere. Per tua informazione e regola si dice omosessuale e non quei termini che usi tu, e poi gli omosessuali sono persone degne del più grande rispetto." E via che gli spiattella una lista di esime personalità del mondo dell'arte, della cultura, della storia, della musica, passando da Leonardo da Vinci ai Village People con una competenza stupefacente, lasciando mio padre senza parole, se non quelle di scusa, e lasciando soprattutto me in pieno sbalordimento. (BIANCHI 2016: 34)¹⁹

Moreover, Caterina re-oriented the family and actively supported Bianchi by recommending and handing him various LGBTQ+ novels (BIANCHI 2016: 36). These objects mirror her care, and they queer the family

¹⁹ One time, at dinner my dad said. "That one is a faggot," talking about a flamboyant man on tv. My sister rose up screaming, "I do not want to hear that type of talk. For your information, you should say 'homosexual' and not use those terms, moreover, homosexuals are people worthy of the highest respect." And then she started listing various eminent figures from the art world, from history, and from the music scene, going from Leonardo da Vinci to the Village People, with an impressive expertise, leaving my dad almost speechless, if only with words of apology, and especially leaving me in complete bewilderment.

home. The novels allowed Bianchi to know he was supported even before he himself came to terms with his sexuality. This non-conjugal relationship positively influenced Bianchi, to the point that he tried to subtly hint at this sexuality to his parents in a similar way, through books and articles. After his father reacts negatively to this coming out (BIANCHI 2016: 157-160), Bianchi looks back at the hints he had dropped throughout the years to ease his future coming out:

Io che in tutti questi anni ho cercato di condurre una politica silenziosa di indottrinamento, fatta di articoli di giornale lasciati strategicamente aperti sul comodino, di romanzi consigliati dalla critica “inter” e nazionale, di programmi dell’accesso e di dibattiti televisivi che fingevo di captare casualmente con saltelli misuratisimi di telecomando, mi credevo un laureato in educazione subliminale. [...] Passando loro libri da leggere, indicando loro film da vedere, e soprattutto sforzandomi disperatamente di dimostrarmi tranquillo, sereno, soddisfatto della vita che stavo conducendo, cercavo di preparare il terreno proprio in previsione di questo momento cruciale, il momento in cui avrebbero dovuto capire che un figlio frocio non coincide con un fallimento. (BIANCHI 2016: 159)²⁰

The various objects described by Bianchi constitute his queer phenomenology, as they deviate his family’s heteronormative orientation. Even if subtly, Bianchi disrupted the assumed heteronormativity of his parents while still living with them; he did not wait to be far away to do so, and his sister’s support undoubtedly enabled him to challenge the norm.

By focusing on the importance of non-conjugal relations, Bazzi, Bianchi and Biondi have unknowingly employed the “mostre terrone femminelle” perspective theorised by Ferrante (2019: 49). They have brought to the forefront a type of relationship that is often overlooked in favour of a dyadic and conjugal one. The affective micropolitics of resistance against homonormativity (FERRANTE 2019: 25) is enacted by mothers, grandmothers, aunts, and sisters. They create networks of care that contrast the normative and neoliberal paradigm. Indeed, if the individual and their economic success

²⁰ I thought of myself as a master in subliminal education, as I have spent the last years conducting a silent policy of indoctrination, made of newspapers strategically left open on the table, of novels recommended by national and international critics, of programmes and television debates that I pretended to have stumbled upon with careful zapping [...] By giving them books to read, suggesting them films to watch, and especially by showing them I was calm, serene, happy with the life I was living, I was trying to pave the way for the crucial moment, the one in which they would have understood that having a faggot son did not equate with failure.

are at the centre of a neoliberal society, implying that economic growth should prevail on human connections, then caring for other people, especially elders and sick people, is indeed a revolutionary and disruptive act. Moreover, the non-conjugal family bonds complicate the rural-to-urban imagery: by not rejecting or being rejected by their biological families, the characters are not prompted to leave their small towns to find a chosen family in the city. Much like the countryside can be a place where the characters can thrive, similarly their familiar relations do not need to be truncated, rather they are a source of support. The texts allow for a wider re-discovery of biological non-conjugal relations and their importance to the LGBTQ+ community as a means to counteract the homonormative perspective.

4. CONCLUSION

Queerness is often associated with a counter-hegemonic and disruptive nature. However, pre-emptively classifying certain actions of the LGBTQ+ community as normative or antinormative is in itself a normalising attitude, as “no one set of practices or relations has the monopoly on the so-called radical, or the so-called normative” (NELSON 2016: 91). By looking at white, gay, non-disabled, cisgender characters and their relationship with the rural-urban divide, this paper has challenged homonormativity on two fronts. Firstly, by looking at the rural-to-urban flight in Italian articulations. Since they are never estranged from their families, the main characters in the works by Bazzi, Biondi, and Bianchi all live in the liminal space between the city and their towns, they constantly oscillate between the two, and when they move, it is never to cut ties definitely. Moreover, they all find value in their small towns. The in-betweenness between the city and the countryside in the works is not a mere biographical detail. Rather, it embodies the idea that the urban-rural binary does not really exist. As argued by Jack J. Halberstam, the binary is not real, “it is rather a locational rubric that supports and sustains the conventional depiction of queer life as urban” (2005: 190). The country’s othering worked as a means to promote the urban lifestyle of success. However, these works have disrupted such binary by showing how much more nuanced queer life can be and expanded its possibilities.

The spatial queerness has been enabled by the strong attachment shared by the main characters and their families: the one between an adult child

and his parent and grandmothers in *Febbre*, between extended family members in *La Generazione*, and the one between siblings in *Generations of Love*. Indeed, the second front against homonormativity is their mutual care, as they have: contested the necessity of moving to the city, queered the family homes, and challenged neoliberalism, by placing to the front care networks rather than individualism. The adult care networks are also significant to the literary genre of the works analysed. The reciprocal care between his family and himself is described by Matteo in *La Generazione* as a “lungo racconto”²¹ (BIONDI 2015: 136). Biondi presents family relations as a narrative that connects and honours all of its members by keeping their stories alive. This line can be understood as a metanarrative remark that connects the graphic novel to Biondi’s life, as the author also comes from a small town in Tuscany (TRIBUZIO 2018). Although not strictly autobiographical in its genre, *La Generazione* seems to tell Biondi’s and her family’s story. The “lungo racconto” description also speaks for both Bazzi and Bianchi’s novels, as they are both autobiographical. Their narrations recreate the family care and, at the same time, pay tribute to it.

The family bonds in the core texts are “radical kinships” (FERRANTE 2019: 25) that contest gender norms and (homo)normativity. Due to their disruptiveness, they can be described as part of to the “mostre terrone femmine” paradigm (FERRANTE 2019: 49). Their type of bonds is a further challenge to the norms; indeed, the connections do not constitute a nuclear family nor a dyadic marital relation, thus, they are not priorities nor recognised as much by society or the current legislation. Analysing the current legislation and proposing alternatives goes beyond the scope of the paper. However, it can be argued that extending the rights to non-conjugal relations would maintain their disruptive nature. Legally recognised non-conjugal relations could still be counter-hegemonic, as they would challenge the (straight and gay) marriage institution and its exceptionalism, and positively expand the number of new beneficiaries (WARNER 2000: 98-99).²² This paper has only analysed non-conjugal disruptiveness in relation to homonormativity and the rural-urban divide. However, it can be argued that the non-conjugal challenge to the norms is increasingly expanding. For now, one can look back at

²¹ Long never-ending story.

²² Michael Warner argued against gay marriage because it reinforces an exclusionary institution, since it does not involve a plethora of other intimacies, such as polyamorous relationships (WARNER 2000: 98-99).

the beginning of the paper and say, a queer person in search for happiness does not, indeed, need to move to the next big city.

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WHAT

Themed section

Languages, aesthetics, bodies:
The queer within cinema and
audiovisual media

EVER

GRACE McNEALY

Queering the gaze: visualizing desire in Lacanian film theory

ABSTRACT: Film theorists typically conceptualize the gaze in film in terms of power and mastery. However, using Lacan's notion of the gaze as the *objet petit a*, or an unattainable object that provokes desire, this essay examines the *objet petit a* as the foundation of an intersectional queer gaze, aligning queer identification with desire and mirroring the lack of mastery that spectators who are queer, female, or people of color experience. In applying Lacan's invisible object that provokes our gaze as a lens through which to read queer existence and desire within discourses of queerness as "invisible" or an "open secret", we can locate non-heterosexual identifications and desires and radical queer potential in the unseen spaces in film. Examining the films *Safe* (1995), *Carol* (2015), and *The Watermelon Woman* (1996), I identify and employ three forms of the queer gaze: reciprocal queer gazing, inclusive spectatorship, and re-visibility. These tools more successfully capture the mechanisms of queer gazing both on and offscreen, allowing us to better view queer cinema and spectatorship and disrupting the privileging of "representation" in contemporary LGBT discourse.

KEYWORDS: queer film; queer theory; film theory and criticism; gaze; psychoanalytic film theory

INTRODUCTION

I, as most people are, was first introduced to the theoretical concept of "The Gaze" through the notion of "the male gaze". I had heard the term tossed around in non-academic contexts to describe anything ranging from advertising to art to films like *Blue Is the Warmest Color*. When, in my freshman year of college, I read Laura Mulvey's seminal essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", it seemed that I had found all the answers – I now had a concrete theoretical framework that articulated my own experiences as a young woman living on the receiving end of the male gaze in my day-to-day life. However, the more I encountered Mulvey's essay, the more unanswered questions it raised: if the role of women in film was simply as

objects to be gazed upon, what could my own relationship to spectatorship be? As a lesbian was I inadvertently participating in the male gaze? Could I reconcile my queer identity with my identity as a woman and a feminist, or were they at odds when it came to film? Was Mulvey's dominating male gaze the only available gaze?

The body of film theory produced after Mulvey is generally unsatisfactory in answering these and other questions. While a number of authors have expanded Mulvey's theory and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory more largely in order to understand how audiences other than heterosexual white men experience spectatorship, a close look at this scholarship makes it clear that psychoanalytic theory – at least, that used by Mulvey and other theorists after her – does not effectively conceptualize these other subject positions. As film theorist Todd McGowan notes, Mulvey's essay and her use of Lacan rely fundamentally on the notion of gazing in film as an act of mastery: the cinematic spectator is able to form an idealized subjecthood through identification with the characters onscreen and is afforded the safety to do so without being perceived by others in the darkened theater. However, Mulvey's dynamic of ego identification and objectification of an other sets up an understanding of spectatorship in which many spectators – women, people of color, queer people, or members of other marginalized groups who rarely experience mastery over others or even themselves in their lives outside the cinema – fall through the cracks, revealing a significant missed opportunity in the fields of film theory and gaze theory.

Rather than continuing to apply an outdated and largely ineffective theoretical model for understanding queer spectatorship and gazing in film, this paper proposes an alternative: an understanding of the contemporary queer gaze that is aligned with Lacan's notion of the gaze as *objet petit a*, an object that provokes our desire yet is fundamentally unattainable in the field of the visible. Rather than the traditional claim within film theory that the gaze operates as mastery, the *objet petit a* instead links gazing with desire, an interpretation that fits more neatly with queer experience and relationships to spectatorship. In employing Lacan's invisible yet desirable object as a lens through which to read queer existence and desire that has, out of necessity or perhaps even choice, remained invisible and imperceptible to the public eye, we can conceptualize a queer gaze that allows us to locate non-heterosexual identifications and desires in the invisible spaces in film. This line of thinking more successfully captures the mechanisms of

queer gazing both on and offscreen, providing us with new tools for understanding queer cinema and spectatorship. The queer gaze also provides a necessary critical intervention in the field of film studies by disrupting the hegemony of traditional Lacanian gaze theory and providing a framework for a more inclusive understanding of spectatorship. Furthermore, it opens the door for a new school of thought around queer desire and experience that extends beyond film into queer theory and politics.

A QUEER GAZE

Film theory that engages with the gaze almost exclusively employs Jacques Lacan's articulation of the mirror stage in childhood development in THE 1949 essay "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience". Laura Mulvey, for instance, argues that the process of identification in the mirror stage is replicated through the spectator's experience in the cinema: like the child in the mirror, the spectator in the cinema can both construct an idealized self-image through the images presented onscreen and overlook any potential discrepancies between this ideal representation and reality through the operation of the imaginary, which functions in film through fantasy. Mulvey elaborates on this relationship in her feminist critique by integrating desire into her analysis, but her vision of desire is centered around voyeuristic pleasure in looking, an objectifying, controlling gaze that always functions for men at the expense of women. Mulvey thus structures gazing as an "active/male and passive/female" relationship: ego identification and pleasure in looking both serve male viewers at the expense of the women onscreen, who function as an othered object to be consumed both by the male characters in the film and the male spectators in the audience (1975: 837). Like other early Lacanian film theories, Mulvey's male gaze also disregards the operation of the real in film, viewing cinematic spectatorship as a total experience of the imaginary and the symbolic that leaves nothing to be desired.

In HIS 1973 book *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, however, Lacan revisits the gaze, retheorizing it from his earlier discussion of the mirror stage. Rather than as a cohesive mastery as he does in "The Mirror Stage", Lacan defines the gaze as *distinct* from what the eye can see – rather, the gaze is that which, in our visual relation to things, "slips, passes, is transmitted, from stage to stage, and is always to some degree eluded in it" (1973: 73). Thus, it is not "seeing" the object that we are looking at that

drives our gaze but the very experience of *not* seeing it, yet still knowing it is there: the gaze is “presented to us only in the form of a strange contingency, symbolic of what we find on the horizon, as the thrust of our experience...[a] lack” (1973: 72-73). This analysis also restructures gazing from a relationship between an active gazer and a passive object that is captured and controlled by this gaze to one in which the gaze becomes more reciprocal: this interpretation of the gaze recognizes that the object of the gaze is self-aware and in fact possesses the power to threaten us with a reminder of lack, leading to the distinct feeling, when looking at an object, that this object is in some way looking back at us, or at least that it possesses an awareness that it is being looked at and is deliberately engaging our gaze. For example, Lacan discusses Hans Holbein’s painting *The Ambassadors*, which, across the bottom of an otherwise straightforward portrait, contains an anamorphic image of a skull that only becomes identifiable when the viewer shifts their position to the painting and views it from below. Thus, for Lacan, Holbein’s painting is emblematic of the functioning of the gaze, as the painting, already aware that it will be gazed at, manipulates itself such that the viewer must not only adjust their own behavior to view the skull but is then confronted with a reminder of their own death – the real – in order to comprehend the image completely.

Unlike the mirror stage, in which the gaze allows for the formation of a symbolic identity and thus reinforces the symbolic order, the presence of the object that cannot be captured by our gaze also reminds us that the symbolic order is in fact incomplete and has a fundamental gap at its center. The gaze thus leads us toward an encounter with the real, this “nucleus” of psychic resistance that exists at the unconscious level within all of us and accounts for the missing point in the vision of the world presented to us by both the symbolic and imaginary orders of existence (LACAN 1973: 68). This understanding of the gaze as an objective gaze therefore leads Lacan to conceptualize the gaze as the *objet petit a*, or object-cause of desire – the object that provokes our desire to pursue this gap in the field of the visible. In the context of the gaze, the *objet petit a* is the trigger of a desire for something that is lost, that which is invisible or unseen. The gaze thus is by its very nature unattainable; it is instead the very impossibility of ever seeing the *objet petit a* that motivates our desire to see it.

In his book *The Real Gaze*, Todd McGowan returns to Lacan’s notion of the objective gaze, writing that understanding the gaze as the *objet petit*

a makes it “something that the subject (or spectator) encounters in the object (or the film itself); it becomes an objective, rather than a subjective, gaze” (2007: 5). Therefore, while theorists like Mulvey interpret the gaze as one that dominates and possesses the passive objects of its focus, namely women, McGowan points to Lacan’s later writings of the objective gaze to reveal that in this interaction, the object of the gaze is anything but passive – instead, it functions in the opposite way, reminding us of the traumatic real and suggesting a possible encounter with it. McGowan also argues that this equation of gazing with mastery is a misunderstanding of Lacan’s own theories and a conflation of Lacanian theory with theorists who understand gazing as power and dominance such as Foucault. As he notes, the *objet petit a* “is not the look of the subject at the object, but the gap within the subject’s seemingly omnipotent look. This gap within our look marks the point at which our desire manifests itself in what we see” (McGOWAN 2007: 6). The gaze in film thus becomes the total opposite of mastery – it is turning ourselves over completely to desire for an object, allowing the film to provoke and sustain our gaze even as we know the real cannot be visually encountered.

Additionally, McGowan explains how film can sustain a viewer’s desire to see the *objet petit a* by teasing encounters with the real, but never actually providing them. In fact, McGowan suggests that desire lies not in obtaining the object but simply in pursuing it, and in fact that there is more pleasure in never seeing the object than watching its resolution through fantasy: “Desire perpetuates itself not through success (attaining or incorporating the object) but through failure (submitting itself to the object)” (2007: 9). In this way, the gaze marks the point at which we lose our subjecthood altogether, surrendering ourselves to desire for the *objet petit a*.

Many queer theorists have engaged Lacan in a similar way to McGowan, discussing the Lacanian real and its involvement in specifically queer desires and drives. In *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004), for instance, Lee Edelman suggests that because queer people have already to some extent been turned away from inclusion into normative society, they should in turn choose to reject it altogether, thus rejecting the law of the symbolic and instead chasing the earth-shattering real via the pursuit of death and self-destruction. Though so antisocial in its rejection of utopianism and futurity that it risks falling instead into dystopia, Edelman’s theory takes the logic of following the *objet petit a* to its extreme and employs it as an

avenue exclusively available to queer subjects so as to reject an oppressive mainstream. This suggestion that following the drive toward the real – for Edelman, toward death – is an explicitly queer pursuit also sets up a queer potential in McGowan’s theory. Like Edelman’s death drive, the queer gaze functions as the pursuit of the real through a drive, in this case the scopic, or visual, drive, which dictates our pursuit of the *objet petit a*. A queer search for the real in the realm of the visible thus presents itself as another avenue of queer resistance to hegemonic modes of seeing and knowing.

On the reverse side of Lacanian theorists such as Edelman is queer utopianism, which imagines queerness as a radical future that tempts us with its possibility but remains just out of reach. As José Esteban Muñoz describes in *Cruising Utopia* (2009), for instance, queerness is an “ideality” that, as an alternative mode of desire, allows us to “feel beyond the quagmire of the present” and visualize a better future (1). For Muñoz, queerness functions in the opposite way as it does for Edelman: queerness is not a resistance to futurity but is itself the future, one that is currently out of reach yet that allows us to imagine new, utopian possibilities for our current era. In *The Ethics of Opting Out: Queer Theory’s Defiant Subjects* (2017), Mari Ruti mediates the conversation between these disparate schools of Lacanian theory: antisocial queer theory versus social and utopian; “white gay men vs. ‘the rest of us’” (10). Ruti ultimately reinterprets Lacan into her own theory of attachment to cherished objects that drive our desire for our original lost object – the *objet petit a* – without plunging into the world-shattering real, as advocated by theorists such as Edelman. What is absent from Ruti’s argument, however, as well as those of other theorists, is the assimilation of this Lacanian queer theory into Lacanian film theory, which this project seeks to address. Queerness as *objet petit a*, and the radical queer potential of pursuing this *objet petit a*, come together in film, where films as objects can sustain our gaze and desire and queer viewers can recognize and even identify with an invisibility or lack of visual representation. The queer gaze thus presents a new understanding of spectatorship that functions outside of the “white gay men vs. the rest of us” dichotomy: understanding the queer gaze in film as the *objet petit a* permits a more inclusive means to examine queer spectatorship and desire, which applies to a variety of spectator positions and transcends the strict confines of visible representation.

Rethinking Lacan’s gaze as one of desire – specifically, desire for the *objet petit a* – rather than one of domination and control opens up an

important avenue in understanding queer film, spectatorship, and desire. Though the interplay between Lacanian theory and queer theory is not new, the redefinition of the gaze as it applies to a specifically queer gaze has gone relatively unexamined. For instance, we can forge a connection between Lacan's invisible yet desirable object and a queer existence and desire that has, out of necessity or perhaps even choice, remained invisible and imperceptible to the general public eye. Queerness, throughout Western history, has in some sense operated as a public *objet petit a*: a carefully coded, often invisible possibility that only those inside "the know" (that is, those who are queer themselves) can uncover and experience. In fact, queer theory has often articulated the notion of queer existence and possibility in similar terms to Lacan's *objet petit a*: as Muñoz writes, for instance, "We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality... Queerness is a longing that propels us onward... Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing" (2009: 1). Queerness here, like Lacan's *objet petit a*, propels our desire to search for it; it challenges the fundamental lack within our heteronormative world; and it exists indefinitely in the future, unattainable in our current state and time. Searching for queerness, then, becomes a radical act, allowing us to imagine alternatives for the future and attempt to uncover them in the present. The Lacanian *objet petit a* thus becomes a useful jumping-off point in developing an analysis of a queer gaze, particularly as it functions in film. For instance, many of the critical traits of the gaze as *objet petit a*, such as its provocation of desire that motivates us to keep searching for it; its drive toward the real; its gesture toward a fundamental lack and therefore its ultimate unattainability; and its function as an objective, rather than subjective, gaze all can be tied innately to conceptualizations of queerness such as Muñoz's, as well as the invisible way queerness can exist, for instance in American communities of color. In the context of film theory, merging these lines of thinking in the queer gaze creates an effective tool in understanding how queer filmmakers and spectators, and queer people more generally, interact with film and experience the world.

Situated within the body of film theory influenced by Lacan, the queer gaze thus functions as an alternative understanding of queer spectatorship to theories like Mulvey's male gaze and an expansion on McGowan's notion of films as texts that stimulate desire for the *objet petit a*. McGowan's

discussion of surrendering to desire, as motivated by the *objet petit a*, is crucial in understanding the way in which the queer gaze upsets traditional discourses of representation in film. The queer gaze instead offers us as viewers the opportunity to grasp at the possibility of queerness in film even where it is not explicitly shown, functioning as an alternative reading practice that queer audiences can employ beyond the medium of film and filmmakers can imbue into films themselves, allowing the film as object to trigger and sustain our desire. Further, for queer viewers, queerness's invisibility can operate both as identification and desire, rather than either one or the other as earlier Lacanian theory and McGowan's theory seem to suggest. In the queer gaze, these forces can jointly be found in the *objet petit a*: queer viewers can not only have their desire sustained by the invisible *objet petit a* but can in fact identify with its very invisibility, particularly within a legacy of queerness existing invisibly both socially and in film.

WHEN TEXTS GAZE BACK: READING SAFE

As a case study of an objective queer gaze, and of the operation of the queer gaze in film more generally, Todd Haynes' 1995 film *Safe* is an emblematic example. The film follows Carol, an affluent housewife, whose life breaks down in the face of a mysterious illness. We observe Carol as she searches for a cause and cure, ultimately checking into a new-age treatment center and isolating herself from the outside world. Throughout the film, the spectator's desire to uncover and find a solution for the undiagnosable illness plaguing its protagonist is prolonged, though the gaze remains unattainable as this question is never fully satisfied nor are the illness's symptoms resolved. As the *objet petit a*, Carol's illness is introduced in the very first scene of the film – as critic Chuck Stephens notes in “Of Dolls, Dioramas, and Disease: Todd Haynes' *Safe* Passage” (1995), the first “line” of dialogue in the film is in fact a sneeze – and is prolonged throughout the film as Carol attempts to discover the cause of her worsening symptoms, decides that she is suffering from an immune collapse caused by environmental conditions, and isolates herself away from society in an attempt to heal. The underlying uncertainty for the viewer, however, is the actual cause of Carol's invisible illness, and whether it is even necessarily an illness at all or rather a result of her social condition as a suburban housewife trapped in a life of isolation, ennui, and powerlessness. Throughout the

film, Carol's illness is inextricably linked to her mundane day-to-day: she turns down passionless sex with her husband, claiming a headache; she collapses into a coughing fit on the floor of a dry cleaner's; she faints at a friend's baby shower; she gets a nosebleed in the middle of her perm at the hair salon. Even after Carol suspects that her illness is the result of chemical sensitivity and abandons her old life for a retreat where she is protected from chemical exposure, her condition appears to worsen rather than get better, suggesting that at the heart of Carol's illness is something intangible and untreatable that neither she nor we as viewers are able to access or understand.

Paralleling the mystery of Carol's disease is the mystery of Carol herself: in some sense, it is her absence of a selfhood and identity that is the cause of her physical decay, or at least that is associated with it. It is difficult to understand or sympathize with Carol as viewers because although we spend the entire duration of the film with her, we never fully know her, never have access to any of her inner life nor are given reason to believe any such inner life even exists. For example, at her treatment center when the other patients are asked about the conditions in their lives that led to them becoming sick – all articulating their illness as a projection of personal social ills such as self-hatred, guilt, or trauma rather than actual physical ailments – Carol has no answer, leaving both the concrete cause of her illness and the more metaphorical problems that plague her blank and mysterious. This distance from Carol and inaccessibility of her consciousness is also enforced technically, with the majority of the events of the film taking place through long or medium shots in which the characters and their actions become barely distinguishable. For instance, all of the scenes depicting violent attacks of Carol's illness show them from afar: unlike Mulvey's concept of gazing as scopophilia, we as viewers are placed at a distance from Carol, who is unreachable to an objectifying gaze. The final scene, in one of the film's few close-ups, takes place in an almost completely dark room, and most visible are the sores on Carol's face, which makes her illness inescapable and halts any idealization or desire. This film-making strategy also physically separates the viewer from Carol, creating an emotional distance to her character that makes her thoughts, feelings, and motivations opaque and drives us to search deep into the film or extrapolate beyond it in order to derive meaning, paralleling Carol's failure to understand and find a cure for her illness with our own as viewers.



FIGURE 1 – Carol’s close-up (1:55’23”)

However, Carol’s invisible identity is readable through a queer gaze. Carol is in some sense established as a queer figure, one who is “visible” within the context of the film, yet whose true identity remains a secret, both to the viewer and to the characters around her. Carol fails to find contentment in her seemingly idyllic domestic suburban life, decaying physically under the pressure of the heteronormative social expectations of her as a housewife and ultimately abandoning any pursuit of these expectations altogether: she leaves her marriage and domestic routine, ostensibly because of her illness, in favor of a permanent stay at the treatment center. Carol is thus further queered in her opting out of heterosexuality: even before the treatment center, she consistently refuses sex with her husband, and she ultimately leaves him behind altogether, abandoning her young stepson and their nuclear family arrangement in the process. Clearly, the Carol we see throughout the film, blandly performing her daily homemaker routine, is not the “real” Carol, who chooses at the end of the film to forgo all of these comforts of domesticity in favor of a communal living arrangement free from romantic attachments – in fact, sex is explicitly banned at the treatment center, and men and women are kept apart from each other. Carol, therefore, herself becomes a queer secret at the center of the film that is rendered readable through a queer gaze.

Further, the film contains another hidden queer subtext that exists to be uncovered by spectators through a queer gaze: a discussion of the AIDS crisis and, in turn, a queer critique of the discourse of AIDS, an invisible undercurrent to the film that is easy to miss, particularly as a heterosexual viewer. Throughout the film, while the viewer's – and Carol's – drive to uncover the cause of her ambiguous illness is perpetuated, it parallels another invisible, explicitly queer analysis that lurks beneath the surface, waiting to be interrogated: the social silencing of the discussion around AIDS. For example, though the film was released IN 1995, a title card immediately establishes that our setting is not contemporary: instead, we are IN 1987, a deliberate setting that positions us in the midst of the crisis and of Reagan's presidency. Thus, AIDS as an invisible current underlies Carol's own disease, which is likewise an immune deficiency and is in fact specifically associated with AIDS at several points throughout the film. However, paralleling the political silence around AIDS during the time of the crisis, the film leverages this discussion in a silent and invisible way, leaving the viewer to build on preexisting knowledge in order to identify the film's subtle cues to AIDS.

This deployment of AIDS as the *objet petit a* stimulates the queer viewer's curiosity about Carol's disease and prolongs a desire to have any potential links to AIDS affirmed. In an early scene in the film, for example, Carol visits a friend's house whose brother has recently died, and though his cause of death is never revealed, it is presumably from AIDS. The conversation between the two women is intimately familiar to a queer viewer even if the word AIDS is never uttered; though the true meaning of their conversation remains unspoken, cues such as "because he wasn't married" to allude to her brother's sexuality (*Safe*). Like the discourse of the AIDS crisis, like the coded references to homosexuality that culturally predominated the era of the film's release, even like the subtle exchanges between queer people themselves in hostile times and places, the queer viewer must read between the lines of their conversation and comprehend queerness there even when it is deliberately avoided. Within the film's specific historical context and for its built-in queer audience – Haynes is himself a gay man and was a central figure in the New Queer Cinema movement – this otherwise fleeting and unimportant scene takes on a significant meaning to a queer viewer that is central to the function of queerness as *objet petit a* in the film.

The AIDS crisis is again (un)invoked in a later scene in the film, in which Carol listens to commentators on the radio debate Reagan's religious fundamentalism. As their conversation continues, Carol is overcome by a coughing fit, and we can hear only fragments of the discussion on the radio over the sound of her coughing. Here, again, the film's reference to AIDS is vague: we are given no context to the conversation on the radio, though through its mirroring of Carol's clear disease and the film's setting in time we can once again connect it back to the ongoing AIDS crisis. In a film so centered on disease, invoking Reagan, who essentially embodied the government's failure to respond to the AIDS crisis when he was in office, and particularly his religious fundamentalism, which was used to discursively frame the narrative of the disease as a plague and a punishment for gay men, necessarily returns the conversation to AIDS. In this way, Carol is again queered by the film – outward symptoms of her own illness are aligned explicitly with the discussion of AIDS on the radio, and the crisis of AIDS and the government's response to it parallel her own personal body in crisis as she, stuck in traffic, is forced to pull over and succumb to a prolonged coughing fit. Here, Carol's queerness again offers an avenue for identification for queer viewers, enforcing their investment in her as a means of prolonging a desire to uncover and resolve her disease.

Carol's queer illness and AIDS converge in the founder of her treatment center, Peter Dunning, who is a self-proclaimed gay man living with both AIDS and chemical sensitivity. In fact, this is also the first point in the film at which AIDS is specifically named, yet even Peter's references are often coded or vague in contrast to the other open conversations around illness that take place at the treatment center. For instance, in one scene at dinner Peter appears to be discussing his experience with AIDS, describing a dream in which "black sores turn into black pansies which bloom and turn into beautiful bouquets" (*Safe*). Here, Peter employs imagery surrounding AIDS – black sores, "pansies" – and repurposes it into something positive, even empowering, articulating his new-age philosophy that is central to his own attitude toward disease and approach to running the treatment center. Carol, however, exists outside of even Peter's unwavering positivity, instead queering his approach to disease by refusing to consider other causes of her illness and turning further inward rather than seeking community, eventually isolating herself completely in a tiny, cold quarantine in

the house of a recently deceased resident. Here, Carol's negative response to Peter's mainstream, gay positivity in the face of crisis and disease functions as a type of queer resistance to the minimalization of such illnesses, a social opting out and even, eventually, a turn toward the death drive as we see in the film's final scene wherein Carol, covered in rashes and looking even more gaunt and unhealthy than before, repeats affirmations of self-love in the mirror. Here, our curiosity for the *objet petit a* is perpetuated rather than resolved, and we are left only with a lingering sense of unease and anxiety that continues even after the film has concluded.

This anxiety, too, is queered throughout the film, manifested in the uncertainty and negativity surrounding Carol's illness and its connection to AIDS. In addition, there is another embodiment of queer anxiety – and an occurrence of the Lacanian real – that appears in another resident at the treatment center, a bizarre figure named Lester. Lester appears only in two brief moments in the film, both times from afar and clothed from head to toe, even covering his hands with gloves and his face with a ski mask. In fact, his entire appearance falls into the uncanny – his limbs appear unnaturally long; he moves in an awkward and almost unhuman gait; and the center of his ski mask where we would expect his face to be is likewise covered, leaving him simply white and featureless, with no recognizable human traits.



FIGURE 2 – Lester appears at a distance (1:43'04").

As Peter explains to Carol, Lester is “very, very afraid – afraid to eat, afraid to breathe” (*Safe*). As with the scenes of Carol’s attacks of illness, Lester is only shown at a distance through long shots, and the fact that we cannot unravel the confusion of his appearance with a close-up only contributes to his mystery and the uncanny feeling that his appearance evokes. In some sense, then, Lester, in our inability to pinpoint who or even what he is, likewise becomes a queer figure, one who, like Carol, is essentially a mystery to us and exists only as an incomprehensible presence. That Lester’s existence is portrayed as a consequence of extreme anxiety is not insignificant either. Though Lester appears to live in fear of contamination, the covering of his body and facial features and isolation from everyone else at the treatment center also convey a fear of being seen, of being recognized for who he truly is. In this way, Lester’s anxiety itself, like Carol’s, is queered, with his secret identity and outsider status from society taken to an absolute extreme.

Further, this disturbing encounter with Lester also evokes Lacan’s discussion of the *objet petit a* – Lester, like the skull hidden at the bottom of *The Ambassadors*, is difficult at first glance to visually make sense of, and he does not reveal himself to us throughout most of the film but instead is traumatically exposed to us when we are least expecting it, at Carol’s supposedly safe haven tucked away in the isolated desert. In this way, queerness operates throughout the film as an invisible identity, hidden in its main character yet confrontationally revealed, as an embodiment of the real, in the otherwise unexplainable appearance of Lester in the film. The film thus operates on multiple levels of invisibility: Lester, Carol’s identity, her illness, and even the film’s discussion of AIDS all function as an invisible undercurrent that becomes recognizable to queer audiences and stimulates their desire to unravel these multiple representations of the *objet petit a* that operate beneath the text of the film itself. *Safe*, then, on many levels reveals the queer possibilities of the gaze as *objet petit a*, not only through a concealed discussion of invisible queer identity and the AIDS crisis but further by pointing to the “queerness” of the Lacanian real itself – encapsulated in the film by a bizarre and incomprehensible figure like Lester – an aspect of existence that cannot be captured or understood and instead leaves us with a sense of vague discomfort and fear. The film therefore embodies a self-conscious employment of a queer gaze contained within the text itself, even one not specifically queer on its surface, that

can be read and identified with by queer spectators. *Safe* thus sets the stage for an analysis of the queer gaze as it relates to spectatorship, particularly for queer viewers who are seldom directly represented in film and, like in *Safe*'s queer narrative, function as hidden figures obscured within mainstream cinematic representations.

INCLUSIVE SPECTATORSHIP

As several critics have noted, the traditional Lacanian school of film theory leaves behind many subject positions – women, people of color, queer or transgender people, and members of other marginalized groups. The queer gaze as *objet petit a* thus offers a new mode of analyzing queer spectatorship that can take an intersectional approach, more closely aligning with an understanding of the gaze as motivated by desire, not mastery. This interpretation also upsets traditional perceptions of representation: if the queer gaze allows us to search for what is not actively presented to us, it therefore reshapes the demand for the images that are shown onscreen. In other words, when viewed through a queer gaze, representation need not align neatly, or even at all, with our own identities as spectators in order for our desire to be provoked. In this way, a queer gaze that probes the invisible spaces in film rather than takes at face value what is seen onscreen presents new possibilities for understanding queer spectatorship and identification.

In order to understand this construction, we must first examine the critique of visibility offered by queer theorists of color. In “Beyond the Closet as Raceless Paradigm” (2005), for instance, Marlon B. Ross challenges the construction of the “closet” in queer discourse – a space of secrecy and invisibility that it is necessary for the modern queer subject to visibly or verbally “come out” of – as one that is centered around white constructions of queerness and that ignores alternative experiences of sexuality that exist in queer communities of color. Ross suggests that because racial and sexual marginalization are constructed in relation to one another and cannot be examined separately in the subjects who experience both, the relevance of the closet narrative becomes complicated in communities of color in which alternative expressions of sexuality to “coming out” are available. Discussing an ethnography of black gay men in Harlem, for instance, Ross points out that

the emphasis is not on a binary of secrecy versus revelation but instead on a continuum of knowing that persists at various levels according to the kin and friendship relations within the community. Although sometimes imprecisely referred to as an “open secret,” such attitudes express instead a strong sense that it is impossible *not* to know something so obvious among those who know you well enough....When the question of telling loved ones what they already know does become an issue, it can be judged a superfluous or perhaps even a distracting act, one subsidiary to the more important identifications of family, community, and race within which one’s sexual attractions are already interwoven and understood. (2005: 145)

For Ross, these alternative modes of experiencing and knowing sexuality, particularly in communities of color in which sexuality is not usually the main identification shared among its members, complicate the dominant narrative of visibility that the closet discourse supports. Extrapolating from Ross, then, how might we come to understand these relations of visibility when it comes to representation in film? I suggest that it is precisely by reconciling this “open secret” experience with the invisible desire of the queer gaze that we can begin to approach an intersectional understanding of spectatorship aligning more closely with experiences of sexuality beyond the closet narrative. In other words, when queer spectators “gaze” at characters that outwardly appear nothing like them, the queer gaze can nevertheless sustain both identification and desire even far outside the realm of the visible. In this way, and in an absence of diversity of representation within queer narratives on film, the queer gaze can be employed to provoke a range of desires and identifications that extend beyond what is represented in the film itself.

This approach to spectatorship is enacted in Todd Haynes’ 2015 film *Carol*, which is, on its surface, a straightforward film about two white lesbians in 1950s New York City whose relationship is charted across the multiple hurdles both women must overcome in order to protect their reputations and families from the threat of their relationship being exposed. In his portrayal, however, Haynes actively engages the queer gaze to hint beyond what is immediately visible in the film, allowing for a sustained provocation of desire and ultimately contributing to a portrayal of queerness in line with a wide array of spectator identifications, not solely white American lesbians. In *Carol*, the closet dichotomy is dissolved in place of an invisible, yet knowable, lesbian existence and desire. As the film follows the

development of a relationship between two women, its location in history – the post-World-War-II era – causes the sexuality of both women and the relationship between them to remain explicitly unspoken, even as viewers, particularly queer viewers, are cued in to it visually and through loaded allusions such as “people like *that*” (*Carol*). In some sense, then, both main characters are situated both inside and outside the closet, paralleling Ross’ queer “open secret”: Carol, an older, married woman who eventually seduces the younger Therese, has clearly been acting on her lesbian desires for quite some time, but while her sexuality is recognized by those around her, it is never specifically identified nor revealed publicly. Her husband, Harge, for instance, is clearly aware of Carol’s previous relationship with her best friend Abby, to which they both refer several times throughout the film – when Carol refuses his advances and decides to stay home for Christmas, for example, he resignedly says, “There’s always Abby” and Carol matter-of-factly responds that “Abby and I were over long before you and I were over” (*Carol*), suggesting that both are aware of and have discussed this relationship before. In fact, Abby, like Carol’s own queerness, is mentioned in the film before she is actually shown, further embodying an invisible queerness that is alluded to but not visually revealed until much later.

As in Carol’s relationship with Abby, Harge is immediately aware of the romance between Carol and Therese upon discovering Therese in their house, angrily questioning them about how they met and stating to Carol, “That’s bold” (*Carol*). Abby, too, is aware, asking Carol, “You want to tell me about her?” and following up with a pointed “*And?*,” when Carol attempts to gloss over their clearly sexually loaded encounter by stating simply that “She returned my gloves” (*Carol*). In fact, though the threat that her “secret” will be revealed looms over Carol throughout the film – particularly wielded by Harge, who hires a private detective to follow her on a road trip with Therese and record evidence of their sexual encounters in order to gain sole custody of their daughter – Carol ultimately demonstrates that this threat carries no power against her, choosing instead to sacrifice custody of her daughter in order to live authentically. Here, again, however, there is no “coming out”, no formal revelation of her relationship with Therese; Carol declares to her husband and a conference room full of lawyers that she refuses to continue “living against [her] own grain” (*Carol*), again using language coded specifically for Harge – and the film’s queer audiences – that will remain unperceived by the non-queer others around her.

Therese, on the other hand, is far more “closeted” than Carol, as she lacks the same discernible “pattern” of lesbian relationships, allowing her feelings to remain hidden – even within her close relationships – for far longer (*Carol*). Her boyfriend, Richard, for example, innocently encourages her to spend time with Carol and does not become suspicious even after Therese pointedly asks him, “Have you ever been in love with a boy?” (*Carol*), while her friend Dannie misreads her sexual and emotional confusion as attraction to him, even attempting to kiss her. Though both men eventually to some extent catch on to her attraction to Carol, they still seem oblivious to the true extent of their relationship – Richard minimizes it as “some silly crush” (*Carol*), while Dannie assumes that her trip with Carol is a reaction to his advances rather than a product of genuine attraction. Unlike Carol, Therese’s youth and presumed innocence is understood by those around her to suggest that she is unaware of what she is doing, or perhaps that she is being preyed on by Carol. In this way, Therese’s queerness is not disguised, but it becomes invisible through the dismissive attitude of those around her, remaining essentially unrecognizable. It is not until the very end of the film, in fact, that Therese’s queerness is recognized in an extremely brief encounter with a woman at a party who seems to approach her flirtatiously. In this setting, however, it is possible that, at a gathering largely of acquaintances of Richard’s, this recognition is due to news of Therese’s relationship with Carol preceding her rather than because of any visible identification of her queerness. Therese thus eventually approaches the same level of recognizability as Carol, yet she is still positioned firmly within the closet even as her queerness is “known” by those around her.

Assisting the “open secret” of their relationship is the fact that both women also betray no visible markers of the expectation for lesbianism of the time. In a period in which lesbians were understood as butch “gender inverts” who assumed masculine roles and presented in a masculine way, both Therese and Carol visibly upset this portrayal, instead embodying what Robert Corber (2011) calls the “Cold War femme”: feminine-presenting lesbians who “posed an ‘invisible’ threat to the nation; because [they] could pass as ‘normal’” (3). According to Corber, this entrance into heteronormative society thus allowed femme lesbians access to institutions normally off-limits to homosexuals, which they could then destabilize from the inside by continuing to participate in a secret lesbian subculture, making lesbian femininity “a powerfully ambiguous signifier of sexual identity”

(2011: 5). This structure is outlined in the POPULAR 1965 book *The Grapevine: A Report on the Secret World of the Lesbian*, which observes that lesbian subculture existed as “a vast, sprawling grapevine, with a secret code of [its] own” and that lesbians had “an almost radar-like communication with each other, and seemed able to spot, not only other lesbians on sight, but potential lesbians as well” (CORBER 2011: 2). In the film, this secret system of recognition is made clear when Therese encounters a more stereotypically femme/butch pairing in a record shop, who stare at her, presumably in recognition, as the camera lingers on them in a prolonged shot. Here, the film self-consciously reproduces its own audience response – queer viewers of the film, like the women in the record shop, recognize Therese and Carol’s individual queerness and attraction to each other, even as heterosexual audiences or supporting characters in the film remain oblivious.



FIGURE 3 – Lesbians in the record shop (49’45”)

The film thus deliberately engages the queer gaze in a moment that otherwise passes by unnoticed in the film, providing a clue to Therese’s sexuality through its nod to queer history and allowing viewers to read into Therese and Carol’s relationship before it is revealed to us explicitly.

In addition to its abandonment of the closet metaphor, the film further opens up possible identifications through its awareness of its audience and

use of the queer gaze. For instance, throughout the film desire is sustained not only through the impossibility of visibility for the relationship between the two women due to its setting in time, but also by the drawing out of the development of this relationship, leaving any blatant queerness obscured to audiences untrained in looking for it. For instance, as Patricia White observes in “Sketchy Lesbians: *Carol* as History and Fantasy” (2015), though the attraction between the two main characters is apparent even from their very first interaction – their eyes meet across a crowded department store in a “frankly lecherous” gaze – the viewer is forced to wait, until the film is more than two-thirds over, for “this mutual and obviously sexual desire to be fulfilled” (13).



FIGURE 4 – Therese spots Carol across the department store (9’52”)

However, even after the consummation of their relationship, the spectator’s desire is again interrupted, this time by the invasion of reality – the next morning, Carol receives a threatening telegram revealing the private detective’s collection of evidence that will be used against her in court. As Carol cuts off all contact with Therese in order to resolve her own family drama, the viewer’s desire for the *objet petit a* is again provoked. We know, due to the film’s circular structure, that they will eventually reunite, as we see in its opening scene; however, this prolonged waiting is the driving

force behind the audience's desire, as viewers are forced until the end of the film to see any reunion between the two main characters and resolution of their relationship.

In its conclusion, however, the film evades a simple reconciliation and the satisfaction of a happy ending, choosing instead to suggest the women's reunion rather than show it. In the circular scene that appears both at the very beginning and end of the film, we see Therese – persuaded to meet with Carol despite the abrupt end to their relationship after the detective's tapes surface – reject Carol's proposal to move in together as well as her invitation to dinner. Later, however, Therese seems to reconsider, appearing at the restaurant where Carol is waiting as the camera, following her line of vision, navigates through the room looking for her. In this final moment, however, rather than reveal their reunion, the film keeps it invisible and inconclusive, choosing instead to end the film just as their eyes meet, thus perpetuating the spectator's desire for what is suggested but never attained. As White points out, this break is emphasized by cinematic technique: "This is no homo-normative world of 'happily ever after' in which Therese joins the sparkling dinner guests and they discuss the logistics of their move. Instead a hard cut to black leaves the audience hanging on the verge of this second coup de foudre, as the music resolves abruptly to emphasize the break" (2015: 17). In this way, though the film's conclusion is frequently lauded as a "happy" ending distinct from the lesbian films preceding it and for the time of its setting, the resolution that the "happy" description suggests is complicated. Instead, the film deliberately elides Therese and Carol's reunion, choosing instead to keep the viewer in a state of desire for what is not shown. Rather than providing audiences with the positive representation that a happy ending might allow, this ending instead perpetuates the queer gaze, which by nature cannot be satisfied or resolved and instead leaves the viewer suspended in pure desire.

In line with this analysis, White reads the film through her theory of "lesbian representability", which she defines as a spectator's own "inference" of desire between women that exists in opposition to representation (1999: 1). For White, this inference places the spectator, rather than the figures onscreen, as the desiring subject, and the characters in the film as the objects of that desire. White also situates lesbian representability in the murky space between visibility and invisibility, noting that *Carol* was heralded as "authentic" by critics although "these heroines don't even kiss

until ninety minutes into the movie” (2015: 10). For White, the film’s refusal to articulate itself as a lesbian film – the unspoken part of the “open secret” that exists between its protagonists – universalizes it as a love story, which, despite its specific historical setting, is “suspended in time” although it remains “a specifically lesbian fantasy” (2015: 11). It is this positioning of the spectator as a subject of explicitly queer desire that shapes the film’s interaction with spectatorship: Therese is to some extent rendered a blank slate, a pure desiring subject, onto whom any queer viewer can project themselves.

It is precisely this instability of the central character with whom we are meant to identify that contributes to the film’s queer universality. For instance, over the course of the film, Therese’s gender and class identifications both fluctuate: though her gender presentation is to some degree normatively feminine, she is separated as other from Carol through her youthfulness, which by the end of the film has disappeared in favor of a more mature and polished presentation, revealed in Carol’s remark that “You look very fine... as if you’ve suddenly blossomed” (*Carol*). Mirroring this evolution is a shift in Therese’s class position, as she trades her job as a department store salesclerk for one at the *New York Times*, and we see her poised and professional at work before her reunion with Carol, a stark contrast to the insecurity and confusion we see at the beginning of the film. Therese’s unfixed identity, like Carol’s in *Safe*, thus paints her as an empty space into which queer viewers can insert themselves: instead of being anchored by her gender or class, these identifications are instead destabilized, leaving Therese’s own characterization unestablished and open to the projection of other identities.

The power of the film for the spectator therefore lies in Therese’s “markedly blank subjectivity” (WHITE 2015: 12). Rather than painting Therese as a complete character with whom specific viewers can identify, the film instead self-consciously employs the queer gaze to allow for the complete identification with desire, specifically lesbian desire, which supersedes any other possible identifications within the film. With the character of Therese left blank, any of her other possible identities – as a white, cisgender lesbian, for instance, with relative class privilege, who is localized in a particular space and time – are erased, and she becomes instead a purely desiring subject, centering Carol as the object of her desire. However, this interaction is still specifically queer: as White notes, “What the audience

is given is Therese's desire with which to identify. Carol is the name of her obsession" (2015: 8). In this sense, *Carol* becomes a more universalized queer love story, one driven by queer desire rather than the specific identities of the characters or the film's setting in time and place. Any spectator, even one sharing no other similarities with either woman, can identify not with Therese herself but with her desire, desire which by necessity in the film must largely be kept hidden and secret. In such an intersectional approach to the film, while it is possible for any queer spectator to identify with the film's gaze, its abandonment of identity in favor of desire and employment of the invisible queer open secret creates other possibilities for spectatorship and becomes more accessible to queer spectators of color. In *Carol*, there are few opportunities to gaze back against negative representations because they largely do not exist, nor do any representations: what the spectator is given instead is the opportunity to identify solely with desire, desire that parallels experiences of queerness not only historically but, for many queer viewers, in the present as well. In this way, the lens of the queer gaze presents a new opportunity to understand spectatorship, a gaze oriented around an invisible, yearning desire.

RE-VISIBILITY

In recent years, the focus of discourse around queer films and film in general has been that of representation and visibility. The underlying logic of these concepts – that queer viewers can be empowered to be themselves when presented with positive representations of characters that look like them – is pervasive and has led viewers to champion queer representation in even such decidedly un-queer (in the political sense of the word) film franchises as Disney films or *Star Wars*. However, what this argument about representation ignores is the nature of the queer gaze itself, constructed around the long history of queer viewers reading back into the invisible spaces in film and inscribing or uncovering the real of queerness. This reading practice, in fact, can be extended beyond film and applied to history as well. As queer feminist scholar Emma Pérez articulates, for example, this same process of reshaping our vision of history in order to uncover or even invent queerness functions as “a decolonial queer gaze that allows for different possibilities and interpretations of what exists in the gaps and silences but is often not seen or heard” (2003: 129). Pérez's queer gaze is one centered on searching for, and at times even inventing,

what is absent from conventional recorded history. Thus, as we see in *Carol* and in *Safe*, another use of the queer gaze in film is the interrogation of history – combing the past for its own *objet petit a*, the queer figures and relationships that are invisible and inaccessible.

This interrogation of history is enacted in Cheryl Dunye’s 1996 film *The Watermelon Woman*, a mockumentary (or, more precisely, one of the filmmaker’s signature “Dunyementaries”) in which Dunye, portraying herself, attempts to uncover the history of an unnamed black Hollywood actress from THE 1930s whom she knows solely as “the Watermelon Woman”. Throughout the film, the viewer is included in Cheryl’s journey as she combs archives, conducts interviews, and searches libraries attempting to uncover the hidden – or perhaps nonexistent – historical record of the Watermelon Woman’s life and identity. However, Cheryl’s desire for answers is continually eluded by the invisibility of black women, particularly queer black women, in these institutional renderings of history. For example, Cheryl is informed by a black film historian that he knows nothing about the Watermelon Woman or her white director Martha Page because “Women are not my specialty” (*Watermelon Woman*). The library, too, proves to be an insufficient resource – discussion of the Watermelon Woman is absent from both the library’s compartmentalized “black section” and its white-centric books



FIGURE 5 – Dunye as the Watermelon Woman (1:17’03”)

on film history and women in film. Meanwhile, interviews with the cultural critic Camille Paglia, who is unaware of Martha Page's lesbianism and grandiosely challenges black scholarship's resistance to stereotypes, and students on the street who plead ignorance of the Watermelon Woman because "we haven't covered women and blaxploitation yet" reveal the shortcomings of academia in acknowledging those who exist at the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality (*Watermelon Woman*). In this sense, the Watermelon Woman becomes the symbolic *objet petit a*, the lost black lesbian woman from institutional histories whom both Cheryl and the viewer are driven to uncover and claim

Likewise, the oral histories of the Watermelon Woman – who is eventually revealed to be named Fae Richards – collected by Cheryl similarly present a contradictory and incomplete picture, further mystifying Fae's true identity and blurring the boundary between fiction and reality. For instance, while one interviewee, a self-described "stone butch" who frequented the nightclubs that Fae performed in, asserts that Fae was a lesbian and was in fact involved with Martha Page, Page's sister later rejects this relationship, declaring that "My sister was not that kind of woman!" (*Watermelon Woman*). This exchange, in fact, leads Cheryl to suggest that "it was almost like Fae never existed" (*Watermelon Woman*), once again alluding to the absence of these types of histories from the traditional record and the need for the invention of alternative histories as Pérez describes. Here, once again, we see a resounding "lack" in history – even in informal histories – to account for the full picture, only further motivating Cheryl's desire to fill this absence with the figure of Fae Richards. Throughout the film, the truth about Fae – at least, what is presented as truth within the narrative of the film – remains elusive, driving the viewer's desire both to uncover her from history and, like Cheryl, find her hidden queerness.

In fact, this mechanism of queer gazing as *objet petit a* is fully realized when Fae is revealed at the end of the film to be an invention of Dunye's rather than an actual person. As Laura Sullivan notes in "Chasing Fae: *The Watermelon Woman* and Black Lesbian Possibility" (2000), Dunye's elision of Fae's true fictionality drives the viewer's desire not only to uncover who Fae Richards is but also to find out whether or not she even really exists. Sullivan writes, "...while the issue of secrecy and confession are typically associated with gay identity, this film does not conceal homosexuality, but instead contains a 'secret' about the fictional nature of the subject of the

central character's documentary.... much of [the film's] power comes from the ambiguity of the figure of Fae Richards" (2000: 455). Thus, we can understand the driving desires of the film's viewer to uncover what is lost and hidden – the *objet petit a* – as threefold: the excavation of Fae Richards and other invisible women like her from history; the pinning down of her ambiguous sexuality as presented by the conflicting accounts throughout the film; and the unclear historical validity of Richards herself. While the final question is almost too straightforwardly resolved by a title card at the end of the film reading “Sometimes you have to create your own history. The Watermelon Woman is fiction” (*Watermelon Woman*), the other two remain ambiguous, especially when complicated by the revelation that all of the information presented as factual throughout the film is in fact an invention. Here, too, we see the ultimate unattainability of the *objet petit a* – both Cheryl and the viewer are “unable to retrieve this history [they] wanted to find” despite the desire to do so that drives the entire narrative of the film (SULLIVAN 2000: 456). In turn, the “hope”, “inspiration”, “possibility”, and “history” that Fae Richards represents for Cheryl and the viewer are likewise “illusions”: Sullivan concludes, “Dunye had to make up the history of a black lesbian actress; in other words, she had to create her own hope, inspiration, and possibility through the creation of a history that was not, but could have been, in some ways should have been, there” (2000:



FIGURE 6 – “Fae Richards” (33’52”)

459). Thus, *The Watermelon Woman* quite literally carries out the act of the queer gaze, constructing a history – and propelling the viewer through it by triggering their desire – that the filmmaker herself knows from the outset to be unattainable.

However, while *The Watermelon Woman* reveals this absence of representation from history and in some respect attempts to remedy it by telling the story of Dunye, a black lesbian filmmaker, it also demonstrates the limitations of visibility itself. As Kara Keeling observes in “Joining the Lesbians’: Cinematic Regimes of Black Lesbian Visibility” (2005), the film in some sense subscribes to and upholds the very constructions of visibility that it seeks to challenge. Keeling argues that the film, in its response to the historical invisibility of black queer women, represents its “black lesbian” subject precisely by discriminately handpicking some aspects of this identity to render “visible” while reproducing the erasure of others. For example, Keeling points to Cheryl’s privileging of the interracial relationship between Fae and Martha Page in her documentary over Fae’s relationship with her life partner, June Walker, arguing that this focus “legitimizes the ‘black lesbian filmmaker’ as ‘the one’ who will become visible as ‘black lesbian’ by invoking a sheet of the past that supports Cheryl’s needs and interests... a past wherein interracial lesbian desire is part and parcel of ‘black women’s’ participation in Hollywood and so continues to inform their entry into it” (2005: 223). Keeling also notes that in obscuring the parts of the past inconvenient to her narrative, for instance by dismissing Fae’s long-term relationship with June by calling her a “special friend”, Cheryl in fact “reproduces the homophobic discourse through which same-sex erotic attachments are obscured and rendered illegitimate within dominant conceptions of the world” (2005: 224). Here, we again see the role of visibility, even “positive” portrayals onscreen, in reproducing the same hegemonic constructions of the world that they seek to challenge. In a contemporary era of film in which there are more and more varied queer portrayals onscreen, it becomes necessary to challenge even the most nuanced representation for what is missing, for the facets of identity that are deliberately excluded and operate as their own invisible *objet petit a* when any single queer identity functions as representation for a whole.

The omission of these inconvenient identities in the project of visibility thus calls for a critique of visibility itself, despite its emphasis in modern discourses of queer film. As Keeling writes,

If the regime of visibility that authorizes black lesbian and gay images to cohere and be recognizable as such is itself a product of those movements that have become victorious by conceding to aspects of the existing hegemonic constructions of race, gender, and sexuality, then that which remains hidden in or obscured by those images still might retain the capacity to further challenge the dominant hegemonies set in motion by a politics of representation now predicated on black lesbian and gay visibility. (2005: 218)

In this sense, Keeling's critical approach to *The Watermelon Woman* and toward "black lesbian and gay" film in general suggests the availability of yet another possibility for the queer gaze: a tool through which to examine not only what is rendered invisible by hegemonic narratives but what is erased even from more contemporary attempts to re-write or challenge those narratives as well. Keeling's call to examine "that which remains hidden in or obscured" even when we are presented with "visibility" offers a radical ground for queer re-reading and the search for the *objet petit a*. Further, Keeling's argument demonstrates the limitation of representation in an era in which it dominates most popular and even critical discussion surrounding queer film. As this argument reveals, no representation is truly complete, and even the most comprehensive attempts at visibility will always have a fundamental lack. Any construction of visibility, then, itself needs to be probed for its own *objet petit a* even when it appears to wholly represent a previously un- or underexamined identity. It is the task of the queer viewer, employing a queer gaze, to "rigorously interrogate" these images and attempt to uncover the hidden subjects that any representation necessarily obscures.

In this way, the queer gaze offers a radical potential in this critique of visibility; reading back against black gay and lesbian representations, even seemingly "positive" ones like Dunye's, and all queer images more generally, becomes the site of counterhegemonic resistance. This interrogation, argues Keeling, is the only mode of preventing the "comfortable complicity with the very forms of domination, oppression, and exploitation that the birth of 'black lesbian and gay film' itself critiques" (2005: 217). However, the gaze here remains aligned with the *objet petit a* and grounded in desire, a desire that cannot by its very existence be satisfied. For Keeling, the queer gaze reminds us of the alternatives – "the 'stone butches,' the 'special friends,' 'the studs,' 'the femmes,' 'the woman-lovers,' and 'the queers'" – those "ambivalent, destabilizing, and unstable forces of desire

and community [that] cohere as a collective expression of a multifarious ‘we’ that complicates any innocent notion of ‘the one’ who says, ‘I am a black lesbian filmmaker’” (2005: 224). Just as with Keeling’s “black lesbian filmmaker”, in any comprehensive construction of queer visibility the very aspects of identity that are inconvenient to such a construction – those that destabilize any single “queer” identity as the one being represented – are rendered invisible. The queer gaze thus is enacted through the radical desire of queer viewers to uncover themselves in this obscured collective of queer misfits: gazing at a film becomes not passive absorption of hegemony but a challenge to it and a search for alternatives.

CONCLUSION: TOWARD A POLITICS OF INVISIBILITY

In an absence of theory that accurately articulates the particular mechanisms of queer gazing in film, for spectators, and in a larger social context, this theory takes the next step in contemporary film theory by demonstrating how gazing, even on a small scale, constitutes a radical act. The implications of the queer gaze as demonstrated here expand far beyond film, allowing us to rethink queer spectatorship, queer representation onscreen, and a larger political project of queer visibility. For example, in reimagining queer spectatorship from the approach of earlier film theorists, who largely assimilated queer spectators into other theoretical constructions of the gaze such as Mulvey’s male gaze, the queer gaze allows us to understand queer spectatorship in a new way, one that is more widely applicable to intersectional spectator identities. Further, the queer gaze presents a critical tool to challenge queer representations where they do exist and uncover the erased aspects that make those representations complete. The queer gaze, therefore, teaches us that queer spectatorship and visibility can come in many forms; that no representation is comprehensive, and visibility is a flawed goal; that queerness as a possibility can exist anywhere, waiting to be uncovered.

Further, when viewed with a queer gaze, film becomes a political project, teaching us to identify the flaws in what is presented to us and imagine seemingly impossible alternatives to our current world order. Todd McGowan, for example, highlights the way in which even the suggestion of an encounter with the real holds the potential to disrupt dominant ideologies, writing that “Our ability to contest an ideological structure depends on our ability to recognize the real point at which it breaks down, the point at which the

void that ideology conceals manifests itself. Every authentic political act has its origins in an encounter with the real” (2007: 17). Thus, in order to separate ourselves from the symbolic power of ideology, we must as political subjects instead opt to pursue the seemingly “impossible” real, even though it cannot be visualized or grasped. For McGowan, “The only way to break from the controlling logic of the ideology is to reject the possibilities that it presents and opt for the impossible. The impossible is impossible within a specific ideological framework, and the act of accomplishing the impossible has the effect of radically transforming the framework. The impossible thus marks the terrain of politics as such” (2007: 177). McGowan argues that film, in facilitating an interaction with the gaze, can subsequently grant us the ability to glimpse this “impossible” real and allow us to assume the perspective of the gaze, the *objet petit a*, itself, radically destabilizing our visions of the world and ourselves and therefore marking us as political subjects capable of seeing beyond the rigid constructions of ideology.

When we understand McGowan’s observations through the lens of queer theory, we can begin to see that in many ways, the queer subject is always already viewing the world from the position of the invisible other, already able to imagine the impossible – after all, queerness itself has long operated as an “impossible” way of life to realize – thus functioning as an inherently political subject. The queer gaze therefore offers us a new approach to queer politics that differs from a mainstream LGBT movement focused on assimilation into a heteronormative mold – the ideological norm – and instead allows us to imagine a queer, impossible alternative. Queer theorists have long presented their work as an approach to this very concept, positioning themselves in contradiction to the assimilatory goals of marriage, productivity, reproduction, and normativity and conceptualizing various responses available to the queer subject in the face of social pressure to conform to such expectations. In this way, the pursuit of the invisible *objet petit a* and of the real can function as another queer political response, less extreme than Edelman’s self-destructive pursuit of the death drive yet still granting us a tool to look beyond and critique the ideological structures that surround us, even within the queer community itself.

Most significantly, the queer gaze, as an invisible, ideological rupture, calls for a reinvention of the visibility-oriented goals that are frequently emphasized in modern queer communities through events such as the Transgender Day of Visibility or through an emphasis on increased

representation in film, television, and advertising. As Mia Fischer writes in *Terrorizing Gender: Transgender Visibility and the Surveillance Practices of the U.S. Security State* (2019), for example, mainstream LGBT organizations such as the Human Rights Campaign or GLADD solely prioritize increasing the number of “good” representations of transgender people in the media, but fail to examine “what these representations actually *do* and how they impact the lives of queer, trans, and gender-nonconforming communities” (5). As Fischer and other critics note, for many queer people, visibility often comes at the cost of erasure, repression, and even violence, particularly for the multiply marginalized such as trans people who are poor or people of color. For transgender populations, for example, the question of visibility becomes even more fraught in a contemporary cultural era in which there is simultaneously more transgender representation in media, art, and the public eye than ever before and, at the same time, a rising wave of brutal violence against transgender people, especially transgender women of color.

Further, in her essay “Queer Visibility in Commodity Culture” (1994), Rosemary Hennessy argues that the call for visibility perpetuates the suppression of class analysis in queer discourse, a process in which there is always a marginalizing of an other in order to render some visible – what she describes as the “unspeakable underside of queer critique” (68). In our contemporary, post-marriage equality era, Hennessy’s critique becomes even more salient – as more and more queer subjects are granted mainstream visibility, the class component to which she calls attention has remained relatively untouched. An intersectional approach to the queer gaze, therefore, recognizes not only the tangible danger of existing as visibly queer or transgender but, further, examines the impact that mainstream commodification of such visibility has had in increasing the surveillance and control of queer bodies and normalizing and exploiting queerness, essentially folding it into the very ideological system that it originally sought to critique. In this way, the queer gaze as a practice of reading invisibility in media becomes socially and politically relevant as well, highlighting the cracks in the regime of visibility and allowing us to imagine alternatives.

I draw on these examples of the underside of visibility not in order to dismiss it outright but rather to present as an alternative a mode of queer seeing and knowing that rests not on visibility but on its very absence, as presented in the invisible *objet petit a*. What these arguments about visibility highlight is the breaking point of a dominant LGBT ideology that privileges

assimilation, conformity, and visibility adhering to certain accepted markers of representation and disregards those who cannot, or choose not to, render themselves visible. They also point to the use of the queer gaze in interrogating all ideological constructions, even those foregrounding a regime of visibility that is seemingly empowering for queer subjects. The “invisible others” who are obscured under white, middle-class, gay or lesbian visibility call for the same application of the queer gaze as Pérez’s historical backward-gazing or Keeling’s interrogation of the underside of black gay and lesbian representation. Film, in this sense, is a part of a larger visibility project in which every representation is by necessity incomplete, as it always possesses an invisible, uncapturable center – the real – which is waiting to be probed by the queer gaze. It is only when we recognize the ideological structures that surround us as incomplete that we can search for the *objet petit a*, these “impossible” alternatives – a world unregulated by sexuality, for example, or one in which the radicalism imagined in queer theory becomes politically attainable. The queer gaze is the foundation for both this interrogation and re-imagining, demonstrating how anything, even our own formation of the world, can be rewritten when viewed through a queer lens.

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ISSY MACLEOD

Identifying a queer aesthetic in amateur video manipulations of Disney content as part of a utopian visualisation of lesbian desires

ABSTRACT: In traditional applications of queer theory onto the cinematic medium, reading the subtext as a spectator becomes the main way in which queerness can be uncovered within past texts that might at first glance be considered part of the heteronormative sphere. However, I intend to upend this notion by foregrounding the work being done by online video editors to reformulate one of the more traditional culture makers – Disney – through a re-contextualisation of their animated canon to create an exploration of lesbian desire. By analysing the aesthetic concerns of these videos, freely available on YouTube, from their jagged editing seams to their wide-ranging narrative paths, a link will emerge between amateur fan content and the queer spectator as an active participant rather than a passive watcher. I will take this link to its inevitable conclusion, that digital bodies severed from their original context prove fertile grounds for the next steps in the intersection of queer theory and fan studies.

KEYWORDS: media studies; fan studies; queer desire; Disney; amateur content.

In Henry Jenkins’ seminal text on fan studies, he states that “fans are poachers who get to keep what they take and use their plundered goods as the foundations of the construction of an alternative cultural community” (2013: 233). It is this anarchic vision of fandom that has informed the study of the specific aesthetics found in fan-created content. In the specific case of fan edited videos, known as fan vids, Katharina Freund identifies this plundering as part of a shift in focus of “cult and genre television shows on to elements the editors (known as vidders) find more interesting” (2018: 207). Often times the areas of more interest pull out queer intent within the subtext of a single piece of media, but as Freund outlines, the intertextual limits of fan vids is expansive and can make use of the most tenuous of links between various media products (2018). The expansive nature of fan vids invites aesthetics often defined by their queer, amateur, and digital

sensibilities in ways that avoid conventional definitions of media content. It is the specific case of lesbian Disney fan vids I intend to explore within this essay. By literally cutting and pasting 2D animated Disney princesses from one film to another, these fan vids mark themselves as distinct from fan vids that only compile media clips set to music to re-contextualise what already exists in the subtext.

These fan vids, primarily posted on YouTube, edit or; as it is often phrased in the community, manipulate existing images of Disney princesses to express an inherent queerness in the content, not just in the original narratives but in the bodies of the characters themselves, bringing them into contact where previously they existed separately in their heteronormative spheres. The narrative and technical structures displayed by these fan vids – though clearly indebted to a long history of fan vidding within the community (FREUND 2018; LOTHIAN 2009; MORRISSEY 2018; RUSSO 2009, 2018) – reflects a new movement in how queer theory can be expressed outside of academia in an era where the lines between consumer and producer are increasingly blurred. By moving outside of sanctioned spheres of theorising the queer experience, these fan vids raise many questions including; how radical such creative endeavours can be in a late-capitalist sphere? What are the moral implications of the problematically entangled aesthetics of the queer and the amateur? And how can one coherently identify aesthetic choices made by a community of content creators constantly in flux?

To explore these questions, I have selected fan vids that illustrate a range of narrative structures, from those that bear a similarity to their source material to those that construct a bleaker end for their heroines. Due to the limitless capacity of both fandom content and the Internet itself, it would be impossible to address every type of even this relatively niche fan vid form, but by analysing those that limit themselves to the crossover of two Disney 2D animated films – with the occasional third source when necessary – the answers to the questions I have posed will be able to be more clearly concluded. Such a methodology does not come without issue, but I have attempted to – within the limits set out above – represent a variety of fan vids in terms of both narrative formula and the diversity of the characters used. Amongst the five fan vids I will go on to consider, three of them feature characters of colour as romantic leads, and as mentioned, not all follow the normative formula established by their chosen characters' original story. They are also all freely available on YouTube. Though

a platform argued by some fans to be lacking in community (MORRISSEY 2018), the accessibility of the platform – not requiring an account to view content, linking directly to related videos allowing an unbroken stream of fan content, placing all videos on equal standing (another fan vid is as likely to be recommended to you after watching one as a trailer for an official Disney property is), and allowing a level of anonymity for the creators – has proved significant in facilitating a by all appearances thriving community of lesbian Disney fan vidders.

FROM PASSIVE SPECTATORS TO ACTIVE CREATORS

In one of the more well known scenes from *The Little Mermaid* (Ron Clements & John Musker, 1989), Ariel (Jodi Benson); the titular red-haired mermaid, swims up to a boat at sea where a party is taking place. It is this scene where she sets eyes on her true love for the first time. However, instead of seeing the dashing and masculine Prince Erik (Christopher Daniel Burnes), Princess Aurora (Mary Costa) from another Disney classic; *Sleeping Beauty* (Clyde Geronimi, 1959), stands superimposed amongst the dancing sailors. This is not the moment of heterosexual realisation from the original film, but rather the beginning of an exploration of lesbian desires which marks the opening of most of these Disney fan vids. Freely available on YouTube, *The Princess and the Mermaid (Ariel/Aurora)* tells the story of lesbian love between two Princesses drawn out of their self-contained original narratives. Disney's original intentions of reinforcing conservative and heteronormative standards are reworked to serve a radical and queer re-contextualisation of heterosexual content by making use of widely available editing technologies. There is an established tradition of femslash – the widely used term for the pairing of female characters – being understood within fan studies as partaking in “critical and activist responses to the mainstream media industry” (RUSSO 2018: 156). Marginalised within both the fan community as a derivative of slash – the pairing of male characters – and fan studies itself due, according to Julie Levin Russo, to “the presumed synchronicity between its participants (primarily queer women) and its content (queer relationships between women)” (2018: 156) as opposed to the contrast between slash content's presumed majority female consumers/producers and male characters. Femslash through its separation from the more documented slash subsection of fandom has the ability to more readily adopt their own cinematic language through repeated motifs and

an unsaid understanding in the queer intention of the pieces even if there is a misalignment of the narrative sutures. That this is a language widely understood amongst those who count themselves a part of the queer Disney fan vidding community is proved by *The Princess and the Mermaid* having over 400,000 views. Yet before considering the aesthetic choices made in within these fan vids, I want to establish their relation to recent work on queer cinema theory. In particular, three main branches that are distinguished in the way they draw queerness from the text. The intention with such a comparison is not to divorce these fan vids from their fannish origins. Instead, it is to indicate a shared queer desire to not only spectate and theorise over; in this case lesbian, subtext, but to actively participate and remake those same narratives in ways that allows the direct expression of a lesbian experience through the femslash lens.

The first branch is laid out by Alexander Doty who positions himself in relation to *Cahiers du Cinéma*'s category 'e' films that can be "obliquely" examined by queer-positioned readers for textual signs that complicate or resist the coherent presentation of conventional straight ideology" (DOTY 2004: 23). The use of textual signs perceived only from specific angles then puts the onus of interpretation on the spectator. Although for Doty any text has the ability to be read as queer, he also gives examples of oblique readings that include interpretations supported by the queerness – whether known at the time or not – of the director, thus positioning a possible use of oblique readings to uncover the radical potential of the work and reclaim it under the queer banner, sometimes many years after its first circulation. Some of this impulse to reclaim retroactively can be seen in videos like *The Princess and the Mermaid*, considering that Howard Ashman; one of the main lyricists, was a gay man. Ariel's desire to live in the human world can then be read *obliquely* as queer. The lyrics of "Part of Your World" where Ariel sings "Up where they walk, up where they run, up where they stay all day in the sun / Wandering free, wish I could be, part of that world", take on the narrative of a queer longing for the kind of acceptance afforded to heterosexuality. Yet where this kind of reading is usually limited to more professional academic spheres which consider these outside contexts, *The Princess and the Mermaid* expands the queer narrative further by manipulating queer subtext into queer text.

But what of queer narratives present in works that do not "complicate or resist" (DOTY 2004: 23) heteronormative identity? This forms the second

branch, an identification of the role queerness plays in what Meredith Li-Vollmer and Mark LaPointe identify as “powerful messages regarding the goodness of order, obedience, and normalcy versus the evilness of chaos, transgression, and deviance” (2003: 90). The notion of queer as something to be overcome, or as a transgression to be corrected, has a storied history in cinema and casts a shadow over approaches to queer theory that have attempted to reveal and challenge these kinds of moral coding as part of a radical reclamation. The alignment of queer with evil is a common issue raised in critical analysis of Disney’s 2D animated films (LI-VOLLMER and LAPOINTE 2003), with many of their villains attributed with a camp – if not outright queer – sensibility. Yet the fan vids I looked at eschew away from villainous queer subtext to instead consider the capacity for femslash narratives amongst Disney’s heroines; defying any need for an established subtext that has been previously identified by scholars. Jack Halberstam argues this positioning of queer as the negative other is informed by how heteronormativity is aligned with the morally good and queerness with anti-capitalist defiance (2011: 89). Part of this anti-capitalist intention can be seen in how fan vids, and more broadly fan content, often garner the stereotype of being amateur, as opposed to the Disney – or which ever company the content is owned by – approved professional content. When exploring how creators participate on YouTube, Eggo Müller expresses the fear that “the new ‘uneducated’ participants neglect professional standards of craftsmanship, aesthetic quality and ethic norms” (2009: 127). The presence of content that is more queer/amateur is positioned as an affront to professional standards, it questions the necessity of those same standards in a free-form space such as the Internet and challenges “established hierarchies based on traditional notions of aesthetic norms and standards” (MÜLLER 2009: 129). In the same ways that dominant ideologies encourage a movement from amateur aesthetics to professional ones as part of a naturalised progression, they are also encouraging a subsuming of anything non-normative into a heteronormative and capitalist form. To return then to Halberstam, he finds a freedom in the above alignments of queer with amateur, and amateur with anti-capitalism. His main argument in *The Queer Art of Failure* is that failing can be viewed as a positive – and queer – outcome, as it is a way to continue to exist outside of the capitalist ideologies that define success (2011).

However, existence outside the mainstream also means limited access to forms of representation. Ika Willis is suspicious of the supposed radical

nature of remaining at the margins, for her queer readings are “not only not ‘resistant’ but not even an intervention into a text (or into the cultural context within which that text is read): it is simply an ‘actualisation’ of a ‘latent’ property of the text itself” (2006: 154). This is the third branch of queer theory and closest to the ideological thrust of queer fan content in the digital sphere. Queer narratives are not simply read or experienced, they are made in a way that overtakes the heteronormative original reading. In spite of Willis’ insistence on an anti-resistant approach and identifying resistant readings as “wrongly suggesting the texts are inherently or originally heterosexual” (2006: 154), she is still interested foremost with the idea that queer fan content can be “a deliberate, politically loaded, practice of re-contextualization” (2006: 156). In ways that will be explored in this essay, lesbian Disney fan vids work with both sides of the discourse; “critical and activist responses to the mainstream media industry” (Russo 2018: 156) versus fantasies of desire, embodying a vision of queer ideas that don’t “line up tidily with each other” (WILLIS 2006: 157) – sometimes literally within the aesthetics of the content itself. Indeed, Willis’ statement on the re-contextualising aesthetics of queer fan content as an actualisation rather than just a reading (2006: 154) bolsters the notion that fan vid creators are the inevitable development from passive queer spectator who only interprets to active producer (FREUND 2018: 207) who is untethered from the original subtext of queer villains and heterosexual heroines.

Freund provides an expansion on this actualisation in the case of fan vids, identifying that “vidders take a position of mastery over the text and become more than spectators: they are editors and creators of meaning themselves by making new texts of their own” (2018: 209). And although it is important to be aware of what Russo sees as the failed techno-utopia of fan content due to the commercialisation of online platforms (2018: 159), the widespread availability of media production tools and free to upload platforms such as YouTube has had a noticeable impact on fan vidding practises (MORRISSEY 2018: 55). The ease of production of and access to these fan vids allowing them to stand as a defined amateur alternative to the heteronormative mainstream of Disney content. In addition, Katherine Morrissey argues that fan vids “present a distinctly female gaze and feminised aesthetic codes” (2018: 56) that aligns them with the aforementioned femslash community’s historic marginalisation (RUSSO 2018). This double marginalisation of both content and form insists upon the need to reject

passivity. Instead of drawing out what is present – lesbian content that is already minimal even when subtextual – femslash fans and fan vidders specifically fill in the gaps with their own narratives and experiences.

The desire to create in the face of marginalisation is then a shared experience amongst fan creators and queer media creators – a fact bolstered by the significant proportion of fan creators who identify as queer. Mark Duffett is somewhat hesitant to mark out fans as an Other, arguing it only serves to further ostracise their communities by analysing the aesthetics they engage in (2013: 66). But without marking out their differences – especially for femslash fans who are further marginalised within already marginal spaces like fan communities – fans’ readings and re-contextualisations would remain unnoticed. This dismissal can be connected to the long-term marginalisation of groups like women and queer people despite their proven history in media spaces and as consumers of content. It is a marginalisation Kristina Busse is cognizant of when she notes that “the widespread embrace of the white middle-class heterosexual male geek in popular culture redefines but does not erase boundaries of exclusion” (2015: 111), identifying that even as nerd culture is becoming more acceptable, fan communities remain valuable spaces to marginalised groups who face a continued rejection from mainstream spaces. Of similar value is the specific aesthetic choices that “require at least an understanding of the text, if not the fannish context, to become comprehensible” (BUSSE 2009: 104), allowing a community of understanding founded on shared fan vidding practices.

It is possible now to begin to understand how lesbian Disney fan vids combine queer theory’s ability to read the queerness of a text with a fannish impulse to insert their own desires into the narrative. All of which feeds into the aesthetic choices made by these content creators. In particular, there is an amateur approach to the videos that is made all the more apparent when working against the professionalism of a corporation like Disney, whose “trademarked innocence operates on a systematic sanitisation of violence, sexuality, and of political struggle concomitant with an erasure or repression of difference” (BELL, HAAS & SELLS 1995: 7). Similar to Halberstam’s vision of “heteronormative common sense” in direct opposition to anything queer (2011: 89), this firm control; which often manifests on YouTube as copyright strikes, becomes all the more significant when considering the double marginalisation of queer female content creators

in terms of both gender and sexuality. Russo identifies that “genres [of fan vids] that enjoy legal and corporate sanction are disproportionately produced by men, whereas creative works that explore relationships between characters and ‘expand the universe’ are the near-exclusive preserve of women” (2009: 128). Female fans are aligned with the creation of space in which they can insert their “unauthorised and non-normative appropriations of copyrighted media sources” (2009: 127) and in turn face risk of punishment or censorship from the media sources themselves, in ways that their male counterparts may not.

SEAMS, WELDS AND OTHER UNRULY AESTHETICS

The marginalised viewpoint cultivated by these fan vids due to their alignment with femslash and a “distinctly melodramatic form” (MORRISSEY 2018: 56) can also be seen in the specificities of the editing style. As mentioned, another common term for these fan vids due to way they cut and paste content is ‘manips’, this shortened form of ‘manipulation’ can be understood through the lens of both fan studies and amateur/professional discourses. The term draws attention to what Jenkins sees in fan spaces as “textual poaching” (2013). In the specific case of fan vids, Alexis Lothian further expands on this idea as fans’ ability to work with “mashups, vids, and similar arts of juxtaposition [to] challenge the idea that creative legitimacy relies on original ideas that belong only to those who initiate them” (2009: 133), particularly when the original owners cannot see – or refuse to see – the queer possibilities of their characters. Russo links this idea of forcibly shared creative legitimacy to the amateur issue by placing the fan vidder as someone who “provok[es] antagonism over the limits of participation” (2009: 125), while Freund’s list of possible reasons fan vidders are attracted to the form include “making political statements about representation of women [and] speaking back to the creators” (2018: 209). To be amateur becomes an active choice in the face of the professionalism of the official content they *poach* from, creating an active creator of queer content rather than a passive interpreter of it.

Fan vids can then be approached as a radical project in the way they defy professional and thus heterosexual expectations. The moments in Disney 2D animated fan vids where the sight-lines between romantic interests do not – to use Willis’ term for the experience of being a queer reader – “line up tidily with each other” (2006: 157) become moments of queer

denial of what is expected from their romance. This is seen in “*Kamikaze*” *Esmeralda x Cinderella*, when Cinderella (Ilene Woods) must hold hands with Esmeralda (Demi Moore) through the proxy of the prince from her film’s hand. The creator overlays the prince’s hand onto Esmeralda’s body, cutting between Cinderella and Esmeralda’s faces to further reinforce the hand’s separation from the original source. The scene is de-contextualised from its heterosexual source and used in service of lesbian desires. In these moments, the fantasy of lesbian contact within a Disney sphere must be completed by the viewer themselves; similar to queer theory readings, their mind must smooth over the ragged edges of the editing to form a fully coherent story. These unruly aspects to the lesbian Disney fan vid’s aesthetics; where heterosexual fulfilment becomes moments to explore lesbian longing, only further reinforce the connection between fan studies, the amateur form, and queer theory.

On the fan studies side, Jenkins identifies that fan vids in general are a “careful welding of words and images to comment on the series’ [or in this case the films’] narrative” (2013: 225). The use of “welding” is notable as it captures the aesthetic look of these fan vids as described above. The line created when characters who never interacted in canon are brought into the same sphere as each other is more pronounced; welding images that may at first seem completely separate from each other. Anne Jamison similarly notes how fan content “lets its seams show in ways other works that also build from sources and predecessors may be at pains to hide” (2013: 14). The sequel to *Mulan* (BANCROFT & COOK 1998) might draw from the designs of its predecessor but is also authentically new and separate. Meanwhile *Mulan & Ariel // The Destiny // Disney Crossover*, a love story between Mulan (Ming-Na Wen) and Ariel, exposes its seams in its displacement of Ariel from her original narrative, the two distinct styles of animation; Chinese influenced and western animation, contrasted with each other. The seams also become literal in the moments Ariel’s superimposition into Mulan’s world is marked by a pixelated edge to her body, forming what could be seen as electronic stitches and showing that welding is not just informed by the cinematic notion of a cut from one scene to another but the more fluid cutting and pasting of bodies from one cinematic sphere to another. The use of the terms seams and welding then indicates a more technical approach to fan content, emphasising the fans’ position as content creators, or at least recyclers of content to expose new viewpoints.

But it is a return to queer theory that opens up the question of the moral implications of fan vidders approach to inserting their queer desires into content that for all intents and purposes stands as a bastion of heterosexual conservatism. As touched upon briefly before, these fan vidders do not focus on the more obviously queer villains of the films they choose to edit. Instead, they rework Disney's classic narrative formula that establishes heteronormativity as "rooted in a logic of achievement, fulfillment, and success(ion)" (HALBERSTAM 2011: 94), twisting it into a world accommodating of queer desires. Russo echoes, perhaps unintentionally, this new queer form of success(ion) within the Disney fan vids when she identifies fan vids generally as a "queer form of reproduction that mates supposedly incompatible parents ('original' media source and 'original' creativity) to spawn hybrid offspring" (2009: 126). Though in the case of lesbian Disney fan vids it is the hybridisation of two different Disney sources, the impulse appears the same, it is a desire for success(ion) rather than the embrace of failure Halberstam argues for (2011). This impetus is illustrated in all the lesbian Disney fan vids that do have happy endings, such as *The Princess and the Mermaid* which ends in a classic Disney marriage; a symbol of heterosexual "achievement, fulfillment, and success(ion)" (2011: 94) reformulated to serve lesbian desires.

QUEER HEROINES VERSUS HETERONORMATIVE VILLAINS

A return to the classic, normally heterosexual formula does however indicate that even when constructing a utopian queer space, lesbian Disney fan vids cannot help but rely on the original context, making them "an unofficial and transient space in which the work simultaneously reproduces and undermines the structures that enable it" (Lothian 2009: 135-6). Multiple fan vids I looked at, including "Kamikaze" and *Disney Crossover – Esmeralda and Pocahontas*, draw on the narrative of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (TROUSDALE 1996). In both, Esmeralda remains a love interest as she does in the film, but the place of Quasimodo (Tom Hulce) is taken by another Disney princess. The outsider narrative of Quasimodo due to physical disability is replaced, somewhat problematically, by marginalisation due to lesbian desire. The link between the two becomes clearer when considered in tandem with the fact that more negatively stereotypical queer figures "left a lasting legacy, as they not only told straight people what to think about gay people but also gay people what to think about themselves"

(DAVIES 2016: 13). Even in a supposedly utopian space, queer content makers are haunted by past media representations of queer figures as failures or dangerous outsiders and must navigate them accordingly. The reversed narrative of queerness as success(ion) extends to the villain of the fan vids – within both portrayed by Frolo (Tony Jay) – who becomes an enforcer of the heteronormative sphere by standing against the lesbian love that is trying to flourish. Thus, even though the context can be manipulated to express different forms of desire from the Disney model, it still operates within its broader narrative conventions.

This reliance on original narratives while also manipulating their intent is consistent with Jenkins' use of the term "heteroglossia"; understood as when "writers [and video makers] ... hope to activate certain pre-existing meanings while suppressing, albeit imperfectly, others" (2013: 224). The idea of imperfect suppression can be seen in the narrative – and inevitably aesthetic – choice that many fan vids make to forgo speech. The choice speaks to the tension between the Disney heroines' narratives as "fairy-tale templates of passivity and victimage" and their bodies as "portraits of strength, discipline, and control" (BELL 1995: 112). By removing the voices that play the parts of passivity only the body is left in the narrative, a firm force that reveals the performance of womanhood and in turn works in "anti-capitalist logics of being and acting and knowing" (Halberstam 2011: 20-21). A logic revealed through its exposure of the formulaic ways these heroines' bodies are constructed and how that formula is disturbed by their manipulation towards foregrounding lesbian desires. Additionally, the personalities of Disney's female characters are brought into the videos largely intact. As Amy Davies notes of the so-called Eisner Era of Disney films that encompasses most of the late eighties onwards, the female protagonists "show their integrity through their actions, rather than through their inaction. Furthermore, the level of action and independence demonstrated by their heroines grew exponentially with each film" (2006: 171). For example, Esmeralda's forthright nature in the original text makes her in the new context of the aforementioned fan vids the instigator of the lesbian romance, and her acceptance of her outsider identity becomes an acceptance of her lesbian desires. The manipulation required in terms of the personalities of these characters is actually quite minimal, and might suggest why queer content creators were attracted to such characters in the first place. As Davies also notes of this era of Disney heroines; "their

independence, strength of will, determination to engineer their own fates, and *insistence on being true to themselves* are unquestionably their strongest traits” (2006: 176) [emphasis mine]. The common factor of truth to one’s self among these heroines who appear again and again in these fan vids reveals a desire within their creators to, as Russo puts it, “delve into things that we [femslash fans] experience directly – sexually, romantically, or politically” (2018: 157). Disney’s films; though purported to be in the heteronormative sphere, actually resound with queer children with their abundance of narratives about being true to oneself, and fan spaces in turn provide these same queer adults with the tools to make what they experienced within the text into the dominant viewpoint.

This re-contextualisation of Disney heroines’ traits is not limited to the Eisner Era however. In *The Princess and the Mermaid*, Aurora’s reluctance around her prince; which in the original text is part of her personality as a demure signifier of womanhood and chasteness that is informed by Disney’s “carefully encoded and constructed aesthetic of eroticism [manifested] ultimately into (an)aesthetic asexuality” (BELL 1995: 113), is removed from its original context and juxtaposed with Ariel’s fretful expression to create a new meaning, one of heterosexuality forced upon the pair in the form of an interloper (Fig. 1 & 2). It is Ariel’s association with strong expression of self as a product of the Eisner Era that allows Aurora to escape the passive space she previously occupied in her film as part of a more



FIG 1. Aurora is entrapped by heteronormativity in her cinematic sphere.



FIG 2. Ariel's expression serves to re-contextualise this heteronormativity as dangerous.

regressive era of Disney princesses. She literally leaves the space of her film to enter Ariel's within the fan vid, and all her moments of distress and forced heterosexuality occur while she is still within her own cinematic world. This form of retroactive re-reading and re-editing is made easier by the animated nature of its subjects for "as cultural artefacts, their meanings are not fixed, but invite a diagnosis of the encoded possibilities of multitextual iconographies" (BELL 1995: 109). Encoded possibilities that invite something more radical when combined, rather than existing as separate texts.

Even though the narratives that play out in these fan vids do not require knowledge of their source material due to their narrative simplicity, extra knowledge is what helps viewers access the "multitextual iconographies" (BELL 1995: 109) that give the fan vids a radical edge by claiming Disney heroines for a lesbian space. Additionally, as Davies notes, "the significance of Disney's animated films is that, by and large, they did not disappear" (2006: 18). Their cultural osmosis into popular memory makes them ideal material for re-contextualisation despite the purported control Disney tries to wield over their images. The widespread knowledge of Disney narratives and characters is proved by the high number of views many of these fan vids accrue, suggesting an interconnected community around properties near inescapable globally, let alone in English-speaking countries. "*Kamikaze*" has the highest number of views of the fan vids I investigated,

at over 1.1 million. Its creator; TheNight130, appears well known in the community with 185 000 subscribers and other fan vidders, including merbunny (creator of *The Princess and the Mermaid*), thanking them in their fan vid’s description for access to technologies that aid the process of manipulating the 2D animation. The exchanging of editing techniques and tricks reinforces the notion there is a unified aesthetic to be found amongst these fan vids born of the strong community ties proved by the consistent negotiation of authorship between fan vidders; where the credit of different elements to produce the fan vid can be seen as part of more general ownership of the form amongst multiple authors. This multiplicity would also include Disney itself, forming the foundations vidders can “actively resist and subvert as they work to make meaning in their own ways” (FREUND 2018: 221).

THE INHERENT QUEERNESS OF THE OUTSIDER

To illustrate the foundational subtexts present in the original texts, I will focus on the use of two characters; Ariel and Belle (Paige O’Hara), and how their narratives and characterisations are drawn out as something more inherently queer than one might first perceive it. Within queer theory, the inherent queerness of these characters would be discussed only through an academic lens, but, as Morrissey argues, the sometimes detached style of academia forms a barrier against fan vids excess of affect (2018: 58). To truly address the queerness of the material, it is not enough just to write and observe, we must experience it as immediately as possible through a re-editing of the original content. It is this immediacy that these lesbian Disney fan vids provide, pushing past the very edges of the films they use to force new meanings out. As touched upon above, with Ariel’s creation “the influence of Ashman and Menken undermin[ed] Disney’s sanitisations” (SELLS 1995: 183) to create a queer subtext. Previously in queer theory the focus has primarily been on the villain of *The Little Mermaid*; Ursula (Pat Carroll), who embodies the common thread of female Disney villains as “treacherous, sexually potent, and powerful personifications of the terrifying nature of unchecked femininity” (LI-VOLLMER & LAPOINTE 2003: 95). In a word; they are queer. Disney fan vids go some way to reject that notion of villainy equalling queerness, instead the villains of their videos are the heterosexual men and women that serve as obstacles to lesbian love. For Ariel this is often her father, recreating the original narrative of *The Little*

Mermaid – star-crossed lovers due to their difference in species and Ariel being held back by her over-protective father – into a story of overcoming homophobia and becoming your authentic queer self. Laura Sells notes that the barrier between the land and water in the original narrative creates a situation where “those who are privileged by the white male system are oblivious to anything outside the system, while those outside the system know about the dominant culture as well as their own marginalised culture” (SELLS 1995: 178). For Sells this creates a feminist metaphor, but it is easy to see Ariel’s story as one queer viewers would identify with, understanding themselves as different and seeing hope in Ariel’s success. It is unsurprising then that the mermaid narrative is found again and again in lesbian Disney fan vids, including ones that don’t even involve Ariel, instead manipulating human princesses into mermaids to express their difference from the dominant heterosexual culture.

Though less fantastical than Ariel’s difference, Belle from *Beauty and the Beast* (TROUSDALE & WISE 1991) is similarly marked out as different in ways that are reinforced by her original narrative. As Susan Jeffords notes; “Belle’s credential as heroine is early logged in when she is the one of the town’s single women not to swoon over Gaston” (1995: 124), and so it is easy to read Belle’s disgust with Gaston (Richard White) as a disgust founded on Belle’s queerness and a rejection of traditional masculinity. Like Esmeralda’s previously mentioned kindness towards the outsider, Belle also falls in love with a monster who – while inescapably masculine coded – does not bear many traditional gender markers that animation uses as a shorthand for enforced heteronormativity. In their struggle against being villainised, queer content creators envision a space where these Disney women who already love outsiders and those cast as monstrous, love instead lesbian figures – who often are associated with the same groups in a negative context.

THE POWER OF QUEER FAILURE

The final question that is raised from these narrative manipulations is then: what kind of world is Disney asserting and what kind of world are the lesbian Disney fan vids asserting? Although I do argue that these fan vids are more utopian in their egalitarian vision of lesbian desire, particularly when considering that “many fans characterise their entry into fandom as a move from social and cultural isolation – whether as rogue readers,

women in patriarchy or gay men in heteronormative culture – into more active communality with kindred spirits” (DUFFETT 2013: 224). (A move made all the easier by lesbian Disney fan vids rejection of traditional notions of hierarchies of professionalism – there is an open sharing of techniques amongst community members as mentioned and no obvious hierarchy thanks to YouTube’s open access platform; a video with 4000 views can be recommended after one with 400 000 views.) There is still a lingering desire for queerness – for lack of a better word – in the narrative. More than a few fan vids I looked at rejected rather than embraced “success(ion)” (Halberstam 2011: 94) or at least complicated what queer success could be. Despite the celebration of lesbian desire in videos such as “*Kamikaze*” or *ILLUMINATED*, the spectre of forced heteronormativity is the winning force by the end, causing the death of the couple in both videos at the hands of a male figure. This refusal to deny the reality of homophobia and the violence that threatens lesbian desire places such fan vids as part of a two-sided lesbian media history. Andrea Weiss expands on the two sides as the radical “lesbianism [as] an antidote to male power” versus the cultural vision of “lesbian nirvana ... kept as far from patriarchal realities as possible” (2004: 45). Despite my own belief in the utopian sentiments these fan vids present, I do not want to dismiss these moments lesbian desire clashes with hetero-patriarchal powers. Nor do I disagree with Russo’s argument that “techno-utopias (even feminist ones) began to tarnish ... with the increasing commercialisation of digital and online platforms” (2018: 159), though I believe small pockets of content such as these lesbian Disney fan vids remain outside of the growing hold of commercial forces. Instead, I will return to Halberstam’s ideas on queer failure, these tragic endings become the “acceptance of the finite, the embrace of the absurd, the silly, and the hopelessly goofy ... let us instead revel in and cleave to all of our own inevitable fantastic failures” (2011: 187). Lesbian desire may be unable to succeed in the heteronormative Disney sphere, but both “*Kamikaze*” and *ILLUMINATED* end with an idyllic afterlife where the couples reunite, finding freedom in the failure of life.

Fans have always “compensated for deficiencies and gaps in the marketplace” (COPPA 2006: 42), and will continue to do so. Indeed, Disney has shown no signs of embracing the queer in their narratives. And if they did, the question would become whether the aesthetics of lesbian Disney fan vids would remain the same? In some ways it is the very amateur aesthetic,

one of untidy edits and failures in narrative connections that brings the queerness of the images to the surface – a quality that a corporation like Disney would never be able to replicate. At the same time, to force a radical intention on these fan vids risks commodifying them in exactly the way Morrissey warns against when considering their place in academia (2018). As Duffett definitively states; “rather than getting political for the sake of it, fans are usually more interested in modifying the text in ways that extends their pleasure” (2013: 187). So where is the line between queer pleasure and queer politics? Theorists like Halberstam would likely argue the two are mixed. From there it would be easy to extrapolate the fact it would be a political step as well as a pleasurable one for queer audiences if Disney did create a canonically queer princess. As it is, there remains a “relative powerlessness of the consumer in relation to powerful institutions of cultural production and circulation” (DUFFETT 2013: 279), and an end goal of being subsumed by Disney would result in a loss of power that lesbian Disney fan vids hold as paratexts that are both separate to and intertwined with the source material. Their amateur nature remains a reminder that the utopian sphere Disney has tried to monopolise is easy to co-opt for the voices of outsiders.

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The queer potential of the abject

The agency of matter and radical negativity
in Mona Hatoum's *Corps étranger*

ABSTRACT: We present our thoughts here on British-Palestinian¹ artist Mona Hatoum's *Corps étranger* (1994), a video-installation consisting of endoscopic images of the inside of the artist's own body projected from beneath the glass floor of a cylindrical booth. In a departure from the social constructionist proposal of Judith Butler, who emphasizes the role normative ideals play in the construction of the body by imposing an imaginary morphological ideal (assigning some parts of the body to a position in a hierarchy while dismissing others), this performative work of art is analyzed in the light of an emerging theoretical field known as New Materialism. Using this perspective, a return to materiality is proposed as a counterpoint to hyper-constructionist queer thought, presented here as inadequate for addressing the complexity of the agency of matter and its relation with meaning. Similarly, and in agreement with criticism of that sector of queer theory which revolves around representation and silences or demonizes materiality and its processes, we suggest connections between material agency and antisocial queer negativity, which some theorists link to the death drive. On the basis of these theoretical connections we utilize some non-essentialist viewpoints of the body that enable us to see that Hatoum's video-installation confronts us with a corporal dimension which manifests itself as an eruption of matter outside the limits of linguistic mediation. *Corps étranger* constitutes a potent onto-epistemological resource that brings us closer on the one hand to integrating the agency of matter into the definition of what it is to be human, and on the other, to the recovery of queer theory's potential to make peace with dimensions that cannot be confined to the limits of language.

KEYWORDS: body; abject; matter; presentation; psychoanalysis.

INTRODUCTION

The present critical study has been conceived as part of the activities of an intellectual group called 'QUIASMO'.² This group has dedicated a great

¹ This article has been edited on July 2021 to correctly qualify Mona Hatoum as British-Palestinian, instead of Lebanese.

² For several years, this group has been dedicated to the study of the body from a point of view articulated on the basis of key ontological and epistemological ideas which owe a great deal to new critical and non-foundationalist materialism. The group is registered in the Centro Interdis-

deal of thought and discussion to the concept of the body in the light of criticism articulated with the advent of psychoanalysis in the early 20th century and further developed with the contributions of different types of ontological materialism in the last several decades. For a variety of reasons, we affirm here that neo-materialism offers powerful theoretical tools for approaching the concept of the body from a novel angle. It is a perspective too which challenges psychoanalysis, post-structural philosophy, and Anglo-American queer theory of the late 20th century. This appears unavoidable given the impact of the corresponding postulates and the relevance they have acquired on the current academic scene, as well as in the construction of some of the most prominent neo-materialistic views. If queer theory has acquired considerable political and theoretical power since the late eighties, it has been able to do so thanks mainly to its criticism of extra-discursive identities. Such a rejection of all essential and natural connotations of the idea of what it is to be human has been strongly connected to the concept that sees our bodies as the result of discursive power relations. It can be traced back to the hyper-constructionist approach that Judith Butler derived from the thinking of Michel Foucault (2008), and which has provided her with analytical vectors that reveal the power of the discursive dimension (BUTLER 1990). In a contrasting opinion, Stacy Alaimo has pointed out that:

the predominant trend in the last few decades of feminist theory has been to diminish the significance of materiality. Predominant paradigms do not deny the material existence of the body, of course, but they do tend to focus exclusively on how various bodies have been discursively produced, which casts the body as passive, plastic matter. (2008: 237)

The appearance of Julia Kristeva's *Pouvoirs de l'horreur* (1980) on the French academic scene made a significant contribution to the post-modern concept of the body. Towards the end of the 20th century, when the body ceased to connote totality, closure, and an ontological basis, Kristeva called attention to bodily fragments and physical residues as demonstrations of the unrelenting and uncontrollable force of matter. The visual arts in particular have, as Rina Arya (2014) noted later, been interested in Kristeva's

ciplinario de Investigaciones en Género (CInIG) of the Instituto de Investigaciones en Humanidades y Ciencias Sociales (IdIHCS, UNLP/CONICET).

contributions regarding the body. While North American post-structuralism understood the body as matter of signification and attempted to subvert the norm on the basis of the norm by means of resignifications in discourse, a wide range of performing artists involved the materiality of their bodies in a variety of extreme experiences. They thus concerned themselves with pushing the body beyond the limits of representation in a search for bodily presentations that could not possibly be contained within normative limits.

In the present proposal we wish to link abjection, performance, and body on the basis of a conception of *queer* that acknowledges the limits of language. In this way, the psychoanalytical root of the concept of abject leads us to rescue from essentialism or biologicism a series of categories that do not fall within the scope of social constructionism. The concept of drive, and the idea of sexuality that is derived from it, presents us with a negative, anti-social force that can serve as a powerful tool for criticism (EDELMAN 2004; BERSANI 2010). Here, we prefer to interpret this radical and anti-social negative manifestation as an expression of the agency of matter and an opportunity to reevaluate the existence of what might well lie beyond stigmatized identities. Thus it is that the scenic character of performance art is particularly suitable for the irruption of this negative force which eludes any possible discursive nomination. In the same way, corporal abjection fails to receive its due in the experiential chronicle.

Neo-materialists have harsh criticism for what they define as an extreme representationalism that is incapable of acknowledging processes specific to matter and emphasize the vitality and agency of matter beyond anthropic action. This emerging perspective implies, in the words of Diana Coole and Samantha Frost:

returning to the most fundamental questions about the nature of matter and the place of embodied humans within a material world; it means taking heed of developments in the natural sciences as well as attending to transformations in the ways we currently produce, reproduce, and consume our material environment. (2010: 3)

It is relevant in both political and theoretical terms to point out that this view does not pretend to make matter the necessary basis for a given social order, nor does it suggest that it is a primary and essential datum from which a certain order of signification is to be developed, nor does it even

assign matter any relevance beyond its interactive connection with the order of signification. This view does make relevant contributions, however, to our approach to the notion of body, because they permit epistemological insights capable of making room for corporal dimensions that cannot be reduced to representation and language, so that the limits of these can now become the subject of reflection and discussion.

Without doubt, one of the productive groups of society that is open to the implications of neo-materialistic philosophy is that of artists, and as noted by intellectuals who belong to this group (SCHNEIDER 2015; JONES 2015), performance artists in particular. Performance art contains elements that align with certain aspects of neo-materialistic inquiry. In this regard, we should note the interest in the experiential and in the ephemeral and *live* character of the idea of performance, which casts doubt on and even contradicts modern western concepts of art production (ALCÁZAR 2014). This ephemeral character alludes, in short, to the inextricable linking of action and reception. Performance, from this perspective, emphasizes presentation over representation, since it is not intended to be the symbolic translation of something else but that which, by definition, disappears as soon as it is constituted and therefore eludes representational closure (PHELAN 2011).

It is against this background that we propose here to approach the idea of bodily material in the light of psychoanalytic and post-structuralist contributions based on neo-materialistic ideas as they relate to the contemplation of a work of performative art. The work in question is Mona Hatoum's video-installation titled *Corps étranger* (1994)³ and consists of endoscopic images of the inside of the artist's own body projected from beneath the glass floor of a cylindrical booth (ANTONI & HATOUM 1998). Beyond the experience of the viewers/participants of this work – and therefore of the unfolding of the components of performance art that we have pointed out as relevant – interest in the video-installation increases dramatically in response to its peculiar presentation of the body and, at the same time, due to the way in which it fractures the possibility of representational depiction.

³ *Corps étranger* was staged for the first time in 1994 at the Musée National d'art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, in Paris. There are several websites where one can find images of the piece and fragments of the videos that compose it. For reference, we include the following link: <https://art-contemporain.tv/mobile/27737/video-de-loeuvre-de-loeuvre-corps-etrange-de-mona-hatoum.html> (available on June 6th 2020)

I

The body has been the subject of analysis of a considerable range of queer thinkers whose ideas revolve around post-structuralist principles. These thinkers offer, far from any essentialism, considerations for regarding body morphology as an effect of the regulative power of normative schemes (MARTÍNEZ 2018). The body, then, is a complex construction in which highly intertwined but distinct social, political, normative, and material forces intervene. Similarly, Lacanian formulations regarding the mirror stage (LACAN 2009) are taken into account such that it is possible to understand body image and Self as being configured in the same movement based on identification with a reflected image that imposes unity on an experience characterized by partiality, fragmentation, and the lack of coordination. Specular reflection returns to the *infans* a borrowed, orthopedic totality that retroactively produces the fantasy of a dismembered body, meaning that “this operation not only prospectively inaugurates the unicity of the body that the image in the mirror reflects... but also retroactively initiates a body in pieces” (MARTÍNEZ 2018: 29). For Lacan, the mirror stage is when typification of the constitution of the Self takes place as a primordial identification, fundamental for any identifications to come. It is on the basis of this identification with a specular image that the Self is constituted as a unity that permits the suturing of a collection of body fragments. The Self appears, then, as an “illusion of unity [...] [which] entails a constant danger of sliding back again into the chaos from which he started” (LACAN 1953: 15). Fragmentation instituted retroactively from the specular operation threatens the Self configured in that same movement with its return.

As is well known, Butler (2010) states that every body is articulated and becomes intelligible constrained by the violence of a normative ideal of unicity established by modern ontology. The complex process that Lacan refers to is not conceivable, then, as being outside a social dimension that imposes unity as a normative formal ideal. The subject is constituted from the identification with a specular image that is normatively composed. The subject acquires self-awareness in the same process which configures that identity whose borders coincide with the limits of the superficial body. For Butler (1989, 1993) the body acquires existence – comes to be intelligible – from the imposition of a normative morphology that outlines its limits. The normative ideals of modernity form the body, hierarchically organizing some areas and

suppressing others, and ensure the exaltation of the sphere of representation and the demonization of materiality and its processes. In this regard, we can recover the contributions of Kaja Silverman (1988), who suggested that the entry to the symbolic has as a consequence the loss of certain parts that are affirmed beyond the normatively delineated body image and that in turn make up the field of the abject, the unintelligible, the inhuman.

The performance effected through Hatoum's video-installation, entitled *Corps étranger*, experientially invokes the force of the rejected we are alluding to: the force which manifests itself within the interstices of linguistic representation. *Corps étranger* stages aspects that cannot be entirely integrated into the image of an intelligible body as such, normatively indicated by totality and unification. This allows us to reflect upon the horror – in Cavarero's terms (2009) – that Hatoum's work is capable of triggering, as it exposes us to the uncanny alien quality of an interior that is presumed to be absolutely personal and private. Her video-installation orients us towards the inversion implicit in a body presented as pure fragmentation, towards the *chaos* that threatens the unicity, totality and integrity and that “offends the ontological dignity that the human figure possesses” (CAVARERO 2009: 25). Hatoum's performance confronts us with a bodily dimension that cannot be reduced to the scope of representation of a narrative. This dimension, far from being deep within, constitutes radical otherness, a foreign quality that is affirmed beyond all representation, a true *foreign body*.⁴

Hatoum makes us spectators of a series of endoscopic images, and the more these images differ from conventional representations of the body, the greater the strength becomes of that dimension beyond the normative representation of the body, that dimension of pure negativity which cannot be positivized, conceived of, or integrated into language, one that is identified with a figure of the conceivable. It is, in short, a collection of raw images resistant to the hegemonic mediation of sense, and while they do not cease to be in some way symbolic themselves, they present a negativity

⁴ It should be noted that whereas the term *étranger* is mainly translated from French as *foreign*, referring to something or someone that comes from a country different from one's own, the compound form *corps étranger* alludes, as a medical term, to a body or particle of biological or inert origin introduced voluntarily or involuntarily into a part of an organism that it does not belong to (Royal Academy of Medicine of Spain 2012). Furthermore, another possible definition of the term *étranger* is unusual or unfamiliar; difficult to comprehend or peculiar. Thus, the name of the work allows for multiple interpretations and can be translated as foreign body, strange body, or alien body.

that threatens to cripple any all-encompassing pretensions (MARTÍNEZ Y MORA 2020).

II

The performative video-staging of this artwork can be described as a circular space between two semicircular partitions with two openings in each one. The floor is a circular glass plate through which close-up video images of several internal characteristics of Hatoum's body are projected upwards while the viewers stand and look at them, which are at a distance equivalent to the height of the beholder's own body. These images are cast from immediately below the feet and invade the eyes and ears; one might say that the feet provide tactile contact with the images.

The most disturbing images in *Corps étranger* are those of the visceras. These have been captured with optic instruments (endoscope and colonoscope) used to examine segments of the digestive system. Hatoum presents a journey through a visual sequence complemented by an ultrasound recording of the deep echo of the heartbeat in different parts of the body together with the sounds of Hatoum's body fluids and breathing. Like deep and dark catacombs, remote from the rational light of the modern western logos, the cavities of the body are explored by camera in a labyrinthine quest for orifices. In this descent into deep places, the visceral tunnels do not lead anywhere anymore. As in a scene from a horror film, the observer finds himself in a dark room, wandering by means of the camera until running repeatedly into living, viscous, and vibrating walls that have a tendency to rumble truculently at the slightest provocation. The end of this wandering seems to be the return to a luminous and oxygenated exterior that is very reassuring, but the feeling of relief turns into one of terror when we realize that we have travelled through the interior of the artist's body.

Hatoum's performative installation is not interested in representing the body. It rather reveals a bodily aspect that in its presentation pierces us with the rawness of a dimension that does not admit of symbolic mediation. At the same time, the experience of this visceral descent puts us in the place of a swallowed, and potentially disposed of, object. In this way, it generates conditions of identification not with an idealized and totalizing image, but with that which it is necessary to expel if there is to be any idealization. This absorption into the deep darkness of the cavities of the body is a descent towards a nether region in which the normative force of

cultural ideals of the body seems to lose its power to assign limits. We are talking here about a pure type of materiality that, far from lending itself to discursive exposition, defies reduction to absolute symbolic taxonomies. And while discursive mediations impede our appreciating the resonance of this materiality when we only see the illuminated surfaces of our bodies, the depths of Hatoum's body remind us of how terrifying and upsetting it can be when the presumption of representation and its ability to assign and distribute agency are discredited.

Hatoum's video-installation can be described as an experiential call to recognize the existence of the force of the negative to which we have alluded: the one that acts within the interstices of linguistic representation. Following this line of discourse, we mean to refer to the (re)presentation⁵ of that bodily materiality which is not susceptible to control within the sphere of representation. Some reflections expressed in performance studies have shown interest in the live character of performance art, insofar as it cannot be reproduced or re-presented. The performative experience takes place by virtue of its being live, the display of the live and ephemeral character of the lived experience and present-time action. This non-permanence, at least in the view of Peggy Phelan (2011), compels the performance arts to disappear as they are constituted. In the author's words, "performance's only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded,

⁵ The psychoanalysis of linking configurations – engendered and consolidated within our local setting – offers the notion of *presence*. Confronted with the problem of the annulment and reduction of the otherness to the intrapsychic, it has become relevant to affirm the extraterritoriality of the Other with regard to the representational structure that organizes the mental sphere (FRIEDLER 1998). Among Argentinian authors, we single out Isidoro Berenstein (2001), who moves away from object relations psychoanalysis, which he considers objects since they are internal re-presentations of external Others, and emphasizes the presentation of the Other as an external and autonomous center of activity. The first case refers to an object whose externality depends on representational production; the second, to the alienness that cannot be incorporated into signification. On the basis of these considerations, otherness cannot be completely subsumed under re-presentation. The alien, Berenstein states, cannot be symbolized, it is immune to representational modeling and inherent to the presence of otherness. We can go a step further: with the word "(re)presentation" we wish to call attention to the unavoidable tension between the impossibility of avoiding representational mediation when it comes to signifying experience and making it intelligible to the world, and the attempt to allude to the portrayal of an insistent presence that only the scenic is able to contain. We speculatively bet on the existence of this presentation articulated within representation although inarticulable under its terms. This presence has ontological interest, given that it withdraws omnipotence from language when it comes to configuring reality; and it has political interest, because it permits the conception of a critical dimension that does not recycle normative terms.

documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance” (PHELAN 2011:146).

To the mind of Eleonora Fabião (2019), the potency of performance lies in its permanent movement. For this reason, the ontological precariousness of performance refers to the precariousness of existence as well as to the experience of precariousness, in which it is possible to know what a body can do by dismantling and creating. There is a certain inadequacy of hermeneutics and semiotics as disciplines from which to approach performance, since they both center on the interpretation of signs, the understanding of meanings and the deciphering of ideas. Performance favors experience realized in the presence of both the performer and the audience. This perspective draws us away from the idea of presence “as something necessarily rhetorical that always depends on representation, which is to say that it depends on other meanings and, therefore, remains within the sphere of what is already constructed” (BLEEKER 2019: 72). We can find in performance a politically active ontology that “resists [...] reproduction as a heteronormative dogma” (FABIÃO 2019: 46).

In tune with these perspectives, Hatoum reveals a bodily presence which in representational terms is unacknowledged. The power of *Corps étranger* lies in its staging of that process through which Otherness is constructed as a way to confront the threat of the representational empire of the Self. Like this, the Other, the other body that is impossible to capture with sex and gender categories, is conveniently placed in the dark depths of representation, a place, which, paradoxically, is out of place. When we become aware of the agency of the body, over which we have no control, we realize there has been a change in the terms on which we must approach this body that is beyond image, without image, and that acts independently of discursive closure. What must we do when we find ourselves before a body in control of itself, beyond any identities we may have assigned to it?

As mentioned above, Butler (1990, 1993) states that the body is the materialization of a norm. The body is the stabilization, the normative sedimentation resulting from acts. In a few words, it is a construction that refers to an ideal, a construction that we are obliged to sustain performatively over time so as to preserve identities that make us exist as subjects. Hatoum invokes the material power of the body, matter that cannot be reduced to normative materialization, matter that is excluded from and lies outside

the representational sphere. Matter paradoxically located in the heart of the subject though relegated to the Otherness of what is not subjective. Hatoum shows us that, beyond the limits of representation, the body acts at times in unforeseeable ways. In such a deviation of the body from representation we realize how matter is capable of disrupting the norm. It is here where we see this disruption that negativity is born of corporal matter and abjection resides and grows.

What Jack Halberstam (2018) calls the queer art of failure can perhaps be interpreted as an act performed by corporal matter. Failure, mortality, catastrophe, noise, unpredictability, loss of control, and contingency turn into bodily components that play a role in the production of the anti-social. This idea is further developed by Leo Bersani in his article *Is the Rectum a Grave?*, where he examines cultural representations of HIV and AIDS which portray it as the result of promiscuity. He says that this portrayal makes homosexual identities abject, so they are accordingly held up as agents of unlimited hedonism carried to the reprehensible extreme of anal pleasure.⁶ This social image contributes greatly to the idea of the anus as a grave, inasmuch as it threatens contagion and consequent biological death. This, however, is not the only way Bersani interprets the word *grave*. He goes on to say that homosexual arousal triggers identification with the oppressor, and that anal sex plays out the destruction of the interior masculine ideal that is found at the core of homosexual desire. Thus, the anus is a body site which offers the possibility of access to unlimited pleasure, one where the loss of control and the abdication of power promise dissolution of the phallic ideal. To Bersani, the nature of this devastating sexual orientation is apparent in its “anticommunal, antiegalitarian, antinurturing, antiloving” character (BERSANI 2010: 22). As such, sexuality has the potential to plunge its subjects into a “self-shattering and solipsistic *jouissance*” (BERSANI 2010: 30). It is in the gay rectum where the internalized phallic

⁶ The presence of a material substratum that cannot be subsumed into representation is revealed at the precise moment it goes out of control with the disease. The organic disease shows the agency of the body since it is a process of materiality that does not lend itself to channels of representation. The disease, insofar as it is a bodily activity that is the opposite of the representational ideal, confronts us with dimensions of the body that reveal its autonomy when it pierces our fantasies of symbolic control (BREU 2014). The denomination of disease by means of the operative medical diagnosis constitutes an attempt to keep its otherness, which irrupts from a material level into the symbolic, within the limits of the language. It is immediately evident that representational mediation of the disease, normatively permeated with hegemonic health criteria, is helpless against the intransigence of bodily matter.

ideal is sacrificed and pulverized, because this is where a drive liberated from all identification is played out without regard to societal priorities.

Several thinkers have pointed out that the linguistic monism that supports post-structuralism has implied a silencing of matter and they posit that, beyond the margins of representation, the agency of matter is ubiquitous. The Freudian idea of drive, in which the queer concept of sexuality has a strong anti-social bias, (HALBERSTAM 2008; BERNINI 2015), allows us to suspect links between the potency of a radical negativity that does not acknowledge social objectives and the agency of matter – both of which are considerations labeled as *essentialism* and dismissed by queer post-structuralism. *Corps étranger* leads us to the way in which Freud accounted for the elasticity and plasticity of matter in his notion of the death drive. Catherine Malabou (2018) detects the power of Freudian allusions to plasticity. Freud explains the nature of drives as “tendencies inherent in living substance towards restoring an earlier state of things [...] of a conservative nature and, as it were, the expression of an inertia or elasticity present in what is organic” (FREUD 1920: 254). He also says

In what way is the drive connected with the compulsion to repeat? At this point the idea is forced upon us that we have stumbled onto the track of a general and hitherto not clearly recognized – or at least not expressly emphasized – characteristic of drive, perhaps of all organic life. According to this, a drive would be a tendency innate in living organic matter [...] a kind of organic elasticity, or, to put it another way, the manifestation of inertia in organic life. (1920: 36)

The compulsion to repeat, a sort of demonic rhythm that does not lend itself to symbolization within the psychic framework of representation, is an expression of the conservative character of the death drive and, moreover, reveals itself as nothing less than the pulse of life. To Malabou, this rhythm is the agency by means of which matter evolves to become productive and creative.

The ties between drive and bodily life are explicit in Freud’s work. But to what kind of bodily life could Freud have been referring to? His concern with differentiating drive from instinct makes it clear that this unrelenting acephalous force in pursuit of satisfaction does not respond to physiological stimuli that disappear when it encounters its natural object. Malabou suggests that the intrusion of drive into psychic life is testimony to the presence

of the activity and pulse of matter. It is misguided to suspect the presence of determinisms or essentialisms behind compulsion that cannot be reduced to representation. Its characterization in terms of the plasticity of matter allows us, Malabou states, to think about the way in which the emergence and explosion of its presence coincide. In Malabou, plasticity expresses both the formation of the figure and the explosion of all form. Thus, the adjective *plastic* refers as much to the ability to change form as to the possibility of creating and preserving it. The author focuses on the Freudian characterization of drive as an internal tension from which there is no escape. She states:

The impossibility of flight at those moments when extreme tension [...] pushes towards an outside that does not exist. [...] What is and what can be a way out, right there where there is no outside, no other place? It is not about escaping confinement but about escaping within the enclosure itself. It is precisely in these terms that Freud describes drive, that strange arousal that cannot be discharged outside the psyche and that is [...] impossible to end by fleeing [...] The only possible way out of the impossibility of fleeing is transformation. [...] This structure of the formation of a path as an escape in the absence of a way out corresponds precisely to the logic or the economy of plasticity. (MALABOU 2018: 7-8)

Catherine Malabou (2004) confronts us with new ontological coordinates for contemplating the presence of bodily matter. The concept of plasticity revolves around a Hegelian perspective from which she interprets the power of the bodily and (non-essentialist) biological matter to generate alterity where the other is completely absent. Drive indicates that bodily matter, far from being an inert substrate, is active, and therefore its dialectical behavior produces alterity where there is no transcendence. Notwithstanding some subtle shades of difference, Catherine Malabou's ontological perspective appears to converge substantially with the thought of Slavoj Žižek (2006) and Adrian Johnston (2014), whose speculative views affirm the dialectical and immanent productivity of matter and thus allow us to detect the radical nature of queer potency. Here we prefer to interpret Hatoum's scenic staging from the standpoint of this new materialism inasmuch as it promises powerful tools for undermining the normative principles which are the basis for the construction of the subject. Hatoum scenically condenses the power of what, to our way of thinking, is an initiative that is more radical than the deconstructionist queer proposals that derive their strength from post-structuralism.

Hatoum's performative experience turns out to be uncanny, since it shows us the way in which the strange irrupts into the familiar (FREUD 1919). A mix of terror and fascination that ends up drawing the spectator into the silent and vibrant interior of matter. Luce Irigaray (2007) called attention, a number of decades ago, to the tendency to demonize matter in order to exalt abstract, disembodied, phallogocentric rationality. The western metaphysical tradition excludes danger from any conception of active matter capable of reducing the hegemony of symbolic order that sustains the normative efficacy of language.

Hatoum locates material difference and otherness *inside* us. She thus invokes matter into the center of subjectivity. The irruption of the strange – the force of matter – into the familiar – the representation and the image of the body symbolically and normatively mediated – alludes to what Freud (1919) called *the uncanny*: a situation in which something that should have remained hidden comes to light. In these situations, the repressed comes back and, in this way, Hatoum shows us how her scenic montage erases the line between matter and language. We might say that the notion of the unconscious, as articulated in Freudian psychoanalysis, implies the introduction of the Other into the Self (FREUD 1915). Kristeva analyzes this as follows:

On the basis of an erotic, death-bearing unconscious, the uncanny strangeness [...] sets the difference within us in its most bewildering shape and presents it as the ultimate condition of our being with others [...] By recognizing our uncanny strangeness, we shall neither suffer from it nor enjoy it from the outside. The foreign is within me, hence we are all foreigners. (1991: 192)

The radical nature of Hatoum's proposal is not reduced to a phenomenological approximation through which we contemplate the body's viscera as something we are not especially conscious of, and which we exercise little control over as long as it remains under the skin. It is rather an experience that leads us recognize the activity of the matter of which our bodies are composed. This experience undermines an entire ontological matrix that tends to support our symbolic and subjective order: the metaphysics of substance or presence that makes matter a passive substrate onto which the symbolic is inscribed.

Hatoum's performative installation makes use of medical equipment designed for the diagnosis of disease. Disease is something that could well

be understood as bodily behavior which cannot be foreseen on the basis of symbolically constructed knowledge. Endoscopies and colonoscopies are medical procedures that are done when the body has become strange, queer, or dysfunctional in the eyes of medicine. Thus, the strange, queer body is not simply reduced to viscera that we are not particularly conscious of, but rather, it brings to the foreground agency or vitality that, to the extent that it does not contradict the corollaries of symbolic mediations, usually remains invisible. And thus, the queer immediacy of the visceral body – that does not conform to any normative scheme – becomes profoundly threatening. A queer body is revealed as alien to that subjective context which has been delineated on the basis of an internalization of the social norms, alien, in other words, to what we generally refer to as identity.

Since the body's materiality is immanent, we could say it lacks nothing. It is symbolic mediation that imposes a transcendent conception under which we posit the existence of deficiencies, failure, or loss of control. This failure is a direct result of material agency deviating from the norm. Therefore, the potential of Hatoum's staging does not lie in the abject use of rare images of the body and their potential for a recategorization of the body. It lies rather in its persistent and disturbing intimation of a realm outside of or beyond categorization. And if we find it impossible to suspend the categories we rely on, we must at least admit their failure when it comes to dealing with and controlling the force inherent in the agency of matter. Far from being interested in the discovery of a new body, we are interested in the *intra-active*⁷ (BARAD 2007) and *chiasmatic*⁸ (BUTLER 1997)

⁷ Karen Barad points out: "Discursive practices and material phenomena do not stand in a relationship of externality to each other; rather, the material and the discursive are mutually implicated in the dynamics of intra-activity. The relationship between the material and the discursive is one of mutual entailment. Neither discursive practices nor material phenomena are ontologically or epistemologically prior. Neither can be explained in terms of the other. Neither is reducible to the other. Neither has privileged status in determining the other. Neither is articulated or articulable in the absence of the other; matter and meaning are mutually articulated" (BARAD 2007: 152).

⁸ Butler offers the idea of *chiasmus* (VACCAREZZA 2011; CAMPAGNOLI 2013). It is a postulate of a complex connection between materiality and signification, where no dimension causally precedes nor becomes the basis for the other. It is a tension that forces us to rethink the links that Western thought has posited between these components, even questioning the ontological distinction between them. Although the explicit problematization of the tension between materiality and language is in all of Butler's early work, it does not explore its ontological and epistemological potential in depth. However, it opens a promising path of analysis when it comes to thinking about the way in which materiality, in general, and the body, in particular, are significant in the production of the subject outside the deterministic and foundationalist character in which we tend to think about them.

emergence that imprints a radical onto-epistemological turn onto the way we tend to separate the fields of matter and representation. We propose an affirmation of the entanglement of both, notwithstanding the strength of representation which, to the detriment of matter, has the support of the entire occidental metaphysical tradition. Under this light, Kristeva's notion of the abject, and the way in which it attacks symbolic representation, is a tool towards a first deconstructive moment. Only by exposing the ruins of representation can we build a queer order where matter and signification are integrated into something like a promise, with no fear of ruin or failure.

III

Hatoum does not utilize her body as a means of expression, or as a canvas or a platform for a work of art. Like many other artists from the 80s and 90s of the last century, she has been characterized by her use of video-installations and other technologies. Her concern is with the presentation of the real body as opposed to the represented body. We the authors of this study find these performances, grounded on the irruption of the presentation of the body, powerful because they distance us from modern issues that revolve around representation. Susan Stryker (2006) has pointed out that representation is organized around a mirror epistemology. In this construct, representation legitimizes itself as a reflection of the original found in reality. This duplicity generates problems, not only because of its ability to withdraw agency from matter and concentrate it in representation, but also because of the consolidation of a natural and foundational environment that serves to produce legitimate and illegitimate subjects. In the face of the normative force of any representational specter that is obligated to produce degraded otherness, Hatoum commits to a search for a force capable of dismantling symbolic mediations. For this purpose she resorts to penetrating the external surface, the skin, a body part largely subjected to normative frameworks, as Lacan shows by pointing out that identification with the external image of the body is that which inaugurates the identity and the normatively correlative representation of the body.

Corps étranger was staged for an exposition in 1994 at the *Musée national d'art moderne* of the *Centre Georges Pompidou* (Paris). In the contribution *Rites of Passage: Art for the End of the Century*, Kristeva explicitly tied Hatoum's work with her concept of the abject – something which even resonates in the title of the performance. In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on*

Abjection, Kristeva points out that the abject is anything that induces us to retch or have a strong emotional desire to throw something away, wipe something off or get rid of it in any other way. She states:

There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated [...] that impetus, that spasm, that leap is drawn toward an elsewhere as tempting as it is condemned. (1988: 7)

As examples of the abject, she refers to excretion and vomiting. Kristeva portrays the abject as a bodily reaction of “spasms in the stomach, the belly; and all the organs shrivel up the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat, cause the forehead and hands to perspire” (KRISTEVA 1988: 9).

Kristeva articulates a series of aspects of the abject, including the abjection of the corpse, concerning which she writes:

The corpse (or cadaver: cadere, to fall), that which has irremediably come a cropper, is cesspool, and death; it upsets even more violently the one who confronts it as fragile and fallacious chance. A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not signify death. [...] In that compelling, raw, insolent thing in the morgue’s full sunlight, in that thing that no longer matches and therefore no longer signifies anything, I behold the breaking down of a world that has erased its borders: fainting away. (1988: 10, 11)

In the first quote, we see that the abject is a visceral experience, not logical or linguistic. In the second quote, the focus is on the abject nature of the human body. In the naked flesh of the interior of the body, the abject resonates. Abjection is an attempt to positively give form to that which is dismissed by representation, that which disturbs identity. Kristeva defines it as the reaction of horror to the threat or collapse of meaning: the loss of the limit between oneself and the other. Like the corpse – the lifeless body – it causes horror as it threatens the meaning of life; the liver tones of our bodies’ interior and the abysses that resonate and grow at the margins of our body image attack representation in the purely material dynamic of bodies.

The raw surface of visceral tissue coated in fluids becomes an object resistant to symbolic mediation. Moreover, Hatoum’s performance shows us how this material support is in our interior as a condition for our handle on the

world. It forces us to face a disturbing identification with the abject and thus interrupts the incessant process through which we try to dismiss from our representation of the body that which is primarily a source of horror: we are, in the final analysis, dirt, feces, blood, an open wound and unavoidably subject to the contingencies of the behavior of the matter that constitutes us.

Kristeva states that the corpse evokes the greatest abjection. She argues that the feeling of abjection takes root very early on in our development as subjects, before our initiation into the world of language. It coils around the experience of individuation, in which the child starts to become conscious of being an independent agent. Individualization is initiated through the abjection of the mother. In Kristeva's conception there is a universally experienced period (prior to Lacan's mirror stage) in which the child rejects the body of the mother as abject and redefines the Self in terms of his *own body*. The body of the mother is the object of desire in the Freudian concept, to which Kristeva subscribes, but at the same time, the rejection of that body must take place first so that the subject can exist as such.

Reading Lacan we might think that the Self is constituted on the basis of an identification with the mirror image of the body. This genesis is laid out in affirmative terms and, for this reason, the Self is articulated when it finds a place in language. But for Kristeva this is only one side of the coin; there is also the side that the subject wants to do away with. To explain this, Kristeva articulates the concept of the abject. She theorizes that this negative operation takes place prior to the delimitation of the subject as unified and whole. The structuring function of the mirror image is produced through a positivity that defines a place for identification. But such a place is always precarious due to the negativity that precedes the initial identification.

Is purification of the abject one of the functions of art? Hatoum's performance does anything but this. It does not attempt to name the abject, to open up a slot for it in the chain of signifiers. It does not reveal any intention of elevating the abject character of the body to the level of a normative ideal demanded by a framework of intelligibility that defines legitimate forms. It divorces the body from pure abstraction and faces us with a material and mundane body. The abjection of the visceral within the body is discussed in *Powers of Horror*, where Kristeva explains the way in which the abject (re)presents a contaminating danger to any bodily identity clearly included within the domain of discourse. The body turns into carnal matter whose processes resist being integrated into a normatively outlined representation.

In Kristeva, abjection evokes a fascination that lies beneath the skin. Because it is here where we feel the terror of the possibility of the restitution of a constitutive loss, a threatening restitution that indicates that impossible region which is as tempting as it is damned and (re)presented as the irruption of a terrifying dimension that shatters the appearance of unity created by the normatively saturated image of the body. The abject lies in that outlying bodily matter which the image of the body cannot absorb; its exclusion is the key to attaining the idealization of unicity and totality that the body requires. Hatoum, far from expelling or rejecting raw materiality, has brought it to the forefront, liberating it from symbolic mediation and from the abstract and rational delineation favored by the demonization of matter. She confronts us with a process of disgregation and restitution that evokes the abject force that undermines the presumption of totality.

The notion of the abject marks a process linked to what Kristeva denominates semiotic *chora*, a totality that comprises infant drives connected to the body of the mother (KRISTEVA 1984). If Lacan's mirror stage allows us to think about the appearance of an identity that has the potential to be rearticulated over time, Kristeva postulates the process of abjection to explain the indispensable separation of the baby from the body of its mother. Here, abjection means rejection or expulsion, a prior requirement for the subject to assume a position in the imaginary register during the mirror stage and, subsequently, in symbolic language.

In summary, the abject refers to a strong aversion, to a separation, distancing or rejection of something as Other, an exile to the periphery of conscience in an attempt to keep it at a distance, an attempt to attain a sense of self-control with the instauration of borders or limits. The naturalization of the image of the body – which, strictly speaking, is highly normative – is the primary operation for establishing the limits that throw the abject into the realm of the Other. Abjection is not, however, a synonym of repression – a process that relegates something experienced as traumatic and unbearable to the unconscious. No, the abject is not precisely unconscious, it rather occupies an ambiguous place within a marginal realm between the somatic and the emotional. As the Other embedded in the heart of identity, the abject torments the subject.

The abject comprises a part of reality, that materiality which is tied to language. As such, it connects with the semiotic, that is, with a distinctive means of signification. Before entering the symbolic realm of language

(where meaning parcels out the identities that the subject internalizes by identifying itself with the idealized image of the body in the mirror), the subject already finds itself immersed in a meaningful exchange through tactile sensations and movements. These experiences have a semiotic meaning that is intrinsic to the rhythms of matter, and they prepare the subject to enter the symbolic.

Once the entry of the subject into the symbolic order has taken place, the semiotic continues its work in superposition with the symbolic. Rooted in the energy of drive, which goes beyond the symbolic, the semiotic has the potential to transgress the symbolic order. Hatoum confronts us with that abject area where the semiotic potential to disturb the symbolic and idealized image of the body dwells. Entering the semiotic and abject experience of going deep into the body, the performer semiotically induces instability in that identity which becomes complete and coherent as it is conveniently incorporated into a body normatively outlined as a totality and never entirely carnal. Semiotic subversion destabilizes the symbolic and the symbolic mediations of the body and exposes the material power of the abject so that the foundations of our identities, previously stable, become intermittent and shaky. Like a scalpel, the abject opens the symbolic covering of the body and leaves the flesh and its pulsation, incapable of being expressed in language, exposed. Thus it is that Hatoum's artistic proposal has the potential to breach, rupture, twist, and at the very least to interrupt the disincarnated forms by means of which the symbolic order elevates the body beyond the material assemblages of which it is constituted.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Mona Hatoum's body is not a static entity immortalized by representation. Nor does her presentation of her own body come close to capturing any ideal of totality and unicity. Instead it constitutes a fragmentary irruption that includes the potential decomposition of its living matter and, finally, just as Freud anticipated (1920), admits dissolution into the destiny of inorganic matter. This body is no longer just the seat of a sexual identity; it is rather rhythmic pulsation with a negative current that dissolves any attempt to subsume the flesh under a meaning. As drive and as seen under the presumption of unification implicit in any norm, Hatoum's body is damaged and broken. Exactly as anticipated by Melanie Klein in her concern over the incidence of viscera in psychic life, the body falls, continuously, to pieces.

Hatoum is interested in *trans-corporeality*⁹ in the sense of Karen Barad's agential realism: a body whose materiality comes into being performatively. The experience of the abject comes from these somber regions of matter. In the ontologically absent heart of the subject we struggle with the acephalous character of drive. A necessary condition for representation is the rejection of this negative force, rendered allegorical above all by bodily fluids, excrement, filth, cadavers, and putrefaction. Mona Hatoum locates the abject in the last place we could wish to find it: in our bodily matter. Just as Karen Barad (2007) has noted, the strength of Foucauldian-Butlerian queer theory contributes to the representationalism that holds sway in academics and which is the reason why all material substrate that cannot be reduced to the performative potency of language becomes essentialistic and leads us again to biological determinism. However, not all conceptions of matter should be tied to the metaphysics of substance and much less to biological determinism. Neo-materialism has not disregarded the terms of debate on which "representationalism," rests, but they have congregated around a strong criticism of its onto-epistemological assumptions and, fundamentally, of its idea of inert, passive materiality that has no agency outside of that created by productive or interpretive linguistic meanings. In contrast with this inanimate characterization of matter, neomaterialists imbue matter with agency (BARAD 2007; BENNETT 2009). They affirm not only the existence of a vitality and agency in matter that challenges the hegemony of language, but also of a force distributed among multiple bodies in different degrees, far from the anthropocentric way in which we conventionally understand the capacity of a conscious and unitary subject.

The contributions of neo-materialist philosophy confront us with a dimension of reality that raises questions about representationalist premises. If we admit that it is not possible to directly access the reality of material vitality, but that it is only through symbolic mediations that we may recognize it, it necessarily becomes the topic of speculative exercise. After

⁹ By *trans-corporeality* we mean the idea of a material body that is performatively realized. The materiality that we refer to here, in spite of being considered resistant to any dilution of signification, in no way implies a point zero, or primary or foundational data. It is a performatively produced materiality. Stacy Alaimo points out that "one of the most unfortunate legacies of poststructuralist and postmodern feminism has been the accelerated 'flight from nature' fueled by rigid commitments to social constructionism and the determination to rout out all vestiges of essentialism. Nature, charged as an accessory to essentialism, has served as feminism's abject – that which, by being expelled from the 'I', serves to define the 'I'" (ALAIMO 2008: 237).

all, “the remaining problem, once objectivist realism has been toppled, is the difficulty of affirming, and negating, with certainty an exterior reality, independent of the subject.” (PALACIO 2018: 15). In this way, the performative work discussed here invites us to reflect speculatively on a bodily dimension that defies expression through symbols and language while mocking any idea of control by a rational subject over the body or living matter. This video-installation places us before a dimension of the bodily that is manifested as an immediate irruption of matter, that is, one not mediated by representation and not entirely influenced by normative frames. If we admit to the proposal developed here, this bodily interior comprises a force that is capable of piercing the mediations of representation and impacting other aspects, thus enabling us to form a vague impression of the functioning of matter. Hatoum’s work, then, is an epistemologically powerful tool for facilitating recognition of the limits of language.

Even so, the power of identity, or that of linguistic taxonomies, appears to have defeated the unrelentingly critical position of queer theory. Our hope is that the concern for the agency of matter allows us to recover a queer view that is capable of abandoning identity and recover the radical negativity that undermines the pretension to closure, be this symbolic or subjective. Could anything be more queer than this?

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ELEONORA COLLI

Singing utopia: body and voice in *Boys Don't Cry*, *Orlando*, and *Una Mujer Fantástica*

ABSTRACT: In this article, I analyse how gender identity is represented and constructed in Kimberly Peirce's *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), Sally Potter's *Orlando* (1992), and Sebastian Leilo's *Una Mujer Fantástica* (2017). Taking from Muñoz's theories of queer futurity and performance, I argue that the focus on the singing voice displayed in *Orlando* and *Una Mujer Fantástica*, particularly when it comes to transgender and/or gender-bending characters, indeed constitute a powerful representation of queer futurity, in its never tangible performance of queer world-making that takes away the focus from the physical body and its concrete reality.

KEYWORDS: Boys Don't Cry; Orlando; Una Mujer Fantástica; gender; queer theory; film studies, trans studies.

In his seminal work *Cruising Utopia* (2009), José Muñoz responds to Lee Edelman's *No Future* (2004), critiquing its "embrace of queer negativity" (EDELMAN 2004: 6) in order to move to a celebration of queer future potentialities. To do so, he argues that queerness has to be interpreted as an "ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future", and which therefore embodies a "rejection of a here and now" (MUÑOZ 2009: 1). This particular imagining of queerness as always deferred allows for a practice of "queer world-making" which "hinges on the possibility [...] to cast pictures of utopia [...] in any map of the social" (40), thus reacting against ideology in the present through the imagining of a distant queer future. Muñoz particularly stresses on the value that performance can have in representing queer potentialities: to him, in fact, queer performances portray "an anticipatory illumination of a queer world" (49) in their presentation of "identity as a site of struggle" (MUÑOZ 1999: 6) against the dominant cultural ideology. Queer performance, then, has the "ability to establish alternative views of the worlds" (195) in its continuous portrayal of different and queerer worlds and identities.

Understanding film as creating such a performance of queer world-making, then, this article will explore how film might depict the

“no-longer-conscious” and the “not-yet-here” of queerness (Muñoz 2009: 1-12). The discussion will focus particularly on representations of queer futurity put forward in Kimberly Peirce’s *Boys Don’t Cry* (1999), Sally Potter’s *Orlando* (1992), and Sebastian Leilo’s *Una Mujer Fantástica* (2017): in different ways, all three films revolve around a protagonist whose gender identity is continuously presented as either “a site of struggle” or performance. Rather than conducting a chronological discussion, I will analyse the three films thematically, contrasting Peirce’s focus on the biological body to Potter’s and Leilo’s representation of queer performance, centred particularly around voice and singing. As this article will argue, then, the singing voice becomes, in both *Orlando* and *Una Mujer Fantástica*, a representation of queer futurity, in its powerful and yet never tangible performance of queer world-making.

Peirce’s *Boys Don’t Cry* narrates the real story of Brandon Teena, a transgender man who died as a victim of an extremely violent hate crime in Nebraska during the early 90s. Brandon became known as one of the earliest cases of transgenderism, an element which, along with the extremely violent and rural context he lived in, makes Halberstam define him as a figure who was “out of time and out of place” (Halberstam 2005: 16). Halberstam also sees particular moments between Brandon (Hilary Swank) and his girlfriend Lana (Chloë Sevigny) as creating “fantasy shots in an otherwise wholly realistic film” (87), hinting at “an elsewhere for the star-crossed lovers that is located in both time and space” (77). Halberstam’s notion of queer time and space is also referenced by Muñoz in *Cruising Utopia* (165), and these moments in the film can thus be interpreted as interlacing with the aesthetic of queer futurity put forward by Muñoz.

The opening sequence of the film already introduces the possibility of queer futurity, starting with an establishing shot of the small town where the action will take place (Peirce 2002). Peirce’s lens remains on the town for a few seconds, showing a time-lapse of the city and of its lights, and thus indicating the possibility of a different queer world through the use of techniques which “pervert our usual relationship to cinematic time” (Schoonover & Galt 2016: 277) in presenting a different and faster temporality. After the time-lapse, the camera cuts to a highway and then to the interior of a car, where Brandon’s eyes are shown reflected in the front mirror. By blurring time and space through the car in motion, then, Peirce establishes, from the very start of the film, how

“the highway provides the transgender protagonist a space of freedom” (SCHEWE 2014: 39), as a place characterized by its fast-paced potentiality for movement and change.

A similar shot of the town and its highway is featured after Lana stops Brandon from testifying his manliness to her, as her mother and ex-boyfriend requested. As Brandon tries to explain his transgender identity as a “weirdness”, Lana stops him by saying “don’t be scared... look at how beautiful it is out there” (PEIRCE 2002): the camera cuts from Lana’s room to a time-lapse of the town seen from afar, then quickly moving upwards and panning on the blue sky. Lana then reassures Brandon that she is going to tell “what we know it’s true [...]. I know he is a man”. These moments of fast temporality thus represent a queer utopianism in their indication of a future elsewhere, paired with verbal recognition of Brandon’s gender identity. This is further repeated in the final scene, where Lana runs down the highway in her car as the only survivor of the tragedy, and the camera focuses on a time-lapse of the road in front of her as she smiles melancholy. For Brandon, however, utopia remains unattainable and impossible, impeded by his murder at the end of the film.

This fully-fledged representation of queer utopia is further prevented by the film’s insistence on showcasing Brandon’s body, which in its tangible physicality reinstates the “here and now” as constituting a “naturalizing idea of the present” (MUÑOZ 2009: 12). Peirce’s emphasis on the naked body is also understood by Halberstam as re-establishing the “gendered binary on which the stability [...] of mainstream cinema depends” (HALBERSTAM 2005: 86). This is particularly evident in the last love scene between Brandon and Lana: here, Lana asks Brandon to explain “what were you like before [...] were you a girl?” before completely divesting him and showing his naked body, which had been previously forcefully exposed by Lana’s ex-boyfriend (PEIRCE 2002). Peirce’s focus on the body then re-establishes a binary gender opposition which questions and endangers Brandon’s identity. Seeing transgenderism as a state of “permanent dislocation” (HALBERSTAM 2005: 124) and indeed as “a site of futurity and utopian/dystopian potential” (HALBERSTAM 2018: 21), Halberstam then criticizes *Boys Don't Cry* for failing at portraying this utopian potential in its gendered focus on the body and binary oppositions: to Halberstam, instead, transgender identities should be portrayed as a site where to explore the potentialities of queer futurity, in all their power of self-fashioning.

Such a self-fashioning is portrayed in both Sally Potter's *Orlando* and Sebastian Leilo's *Una Mujer Fantástica*, particularly through their focus on performance and the singing voice. Potter's work, taking from Woolf's novel, focuses on the character of Orlando (Tilda Swinton) and their travels across time, space, and identities; while *Una Mujer Fantástica* portrays the story of Marina (Daniela Vega), a transgender woman who performs as a singer. While Marina's occupation renders the role of the voice self-evident in Leilo's film, singing performances play a fundamental role in *Orlando* as well, as a tool of queer self-fashioning. Both of these films, then, move away from Peirce's focus on the body in order to better represent queer-ness' future potentialities, stressing on the role of the voice as a gesture which "signals a refusal of a certain kind of finitude" (MUÑOZ 2009: 70). Performance and the singing voice therefore represent, as Muñoz would say, "alternate modes of textuality and narrativity" (MUÑOZ 1996: 10), as a mode of self-fashioning where identity is constantly deferred and never fixed, moving away from the physical tangibility of the body. The self "produced by fiction" (MUÑOZ 1999: 20) in these films, then, performs "new formations within the present and the future" (MUÑOZ 2009: 56) through the utopian value of the singing voice.

In *Orlando*, voice and performance play a fundamental role from the very first sequence of the film. While the opening titles are running on the black screen, viewers can already hear music and a speaking voice: it is Orlando's, shown as he walks back and forth reciting a poem. Swinton serves not only as the main actor, but also as narrator through the use of voice-over. As Orlando continues reciting, Swinton's and thus Orlando's voice-over states: "there can be no doubt about his sex, despite his feminine appearance". After Orlando sits down, the camera cuts to a close up of his face: as the voice-over continues "but when Orlando", the narration is interrupted by Orlando himself looking straight into the camera and saying "that is, I" (POTTER 1999), breaking the fourth wall. From the very start of the film, identity is then presented as a continuous site of struggle and performance between the narrating I and the narrated self, establishing Orlando's "role as a practitioner of [...] self-conscious conjectural thinking who shares activity of sign tracing with the audience" (DEGLI-ESPOSTI 1996: 80-1).

This exploration of identity is particularly portrayed through artistic self-expression and performance. The first sequence ends with a close up of Orlando's fingers holding a pen over a blank page, only to retreat his

hand and look melancholy in the distance, symbolizing his temporary failure of expression. Orlando dozing off against a tree leaves space to the second sequence of the film, starting with several establishing shots of the royal palace: these are accompanied by a high-pitched voice, singing an Elizabethan ode. The falsetto performance makes it momentarily impossible for audiences to attribute a gendered body to the singer, who is then revealed to be Jimmy Somerville, a gay British icon, standing in the role of a castrato singer and dressed in garish courtier's clothes. Somerville's appearance is also paired with the first close-up of Queen Elizabeth, played by another queer icon of the times, Quentin Crisp (POTTER 1999). As Skyora puts it, "the clash of word, voice and image in the prologue of the film [...] can be understood as a paradigmatic introduction to [...] incongruences" of identity (SCHULTE 2006: 337): *Orlando* then portrays identity as a site of struggle and potentialities, where gender norms are blurred and re-invented through self-fashioning and the singing voice.

In its lack of embodiment and thus of a physical and visible signifier of gender identity, the voice is what better represent Muñoz's potentiality of queer performance as a "flux [...] when the here and the now is transcended by a then and a there" (MUÑOZ 2009: 97). The potentiality of singing and vocal performance are re-instated at the end of the film, where Somerville reappears as an angel in the sky, draped in golden robes, singing "I am coming [...] neither a woman or a man" (POTTER 1999) and thus chanting the promise of a queer future. His falsetto voice is recorded by Orlando's daughter, symbolizing a new era of self-expression, which also coincides with the publication of Orlando's book. The camera work here rapidly changes from the diegetic video-recorder held by Orlando's daughter to Potter's own camera, ending with a shot of Orlando staring directly at the audience, and thus inviting them into the queer utopia portrayed by the film. While filming and writing remain as valid modes of self-expression, singing and the counter-tenor voice in particular, in its gender-bending value, remain as the topical moment of queer performance: voice is in fact willing to "hurl itself out of sex-and-gender and onto the sands of a neutral, signless shore" (KOESTENBAUM 1994: 164). Somerville stands as a symbol of the queer performer, never defined by gender and instead characterized by the power of his singing voice and thus of self-fashioning performance.

Similarly, voice plays an equally important role in Leilo's *Una Mujer Fantástica*, recounting a week in the life of Marina, a transgender woman whose partner dies suddenly of an aneurysm, leaving her to deal with her own grief and his transphobic family members. Marina is first seen singing in a salsa bar: here, as in Potter's film, her voice is heard before her appearance is shown, as the camera slowly tracks her partner Orlando entering the bar. Interestingly, Marina is also an opera singer, as shown through her performance of Vivaldi's *Sposa Son Disprezzata* during her singing practice (LEILO 2017). The lyrics are clearly symbolic of Marina's own experience, as she struggles to be recognized as Orlando's partner by his own family, who constantly abuses her throughout the film: "Sposa son disprezzata | Fida son oltraggiata | Cieli che feci mai?" (VIVALDI 1734).¹ This is symbolically portrayed in her performance of *Sposa Son Disprezzata* through an almost surrealist moment where, as her singing voice continues the aria, Marina is framed through a tracking shot as she walks down the streets, and resist on her heels against an implausibly powerful wind. After a cut, the last notes of the aria are still resounding as Marina is framed looking into an elevator mirror, staring into the camera. Performance and recognition in the mirror are then strongly connected in this scene: a similar look into the camera is given by Marina at a later point in the film, where she imagines herself dancing in a club and then jumps to meet the camera, again breaking the fourth wall. Like in *Orlando*, then, performance allows the protagonist to establish a sense of self both to themselves and to the audience.

The thematic leitmotiv of the wind introduced in *Sposa Son Disprezzata* connects the performance of this aria to Marina's final performance of *Ombra Mai Fu*, a hymn to a platanus whose lyrics end with "tuoni, lampi, e procelle | non v'oltraggino mai la cara pace" (HANDEL 1738).² Marina's performance of Handel's *Ombra Mai Fu* is particularly interesting in relation to the history of the aria, explicitly written for a castrato voice and now commonly performed by male countertenors and sopranos. While Marina's previous singing performances had been explicitly coded as female, then, her last opera performance is a re-appropriation of a piece traditionally sung by figures who also struggled with public recognition of their gender

¹ "I am his wife and yet I am despised, I am faithful and yet I am scorned. Heavens, what did I do?". My own translation.

² "May thunder, lightning, and storms | never profane your peace". My own translation.

(WOOD 2006). Her performance takes place after Marina is shown lying naked on her bed: having zoomed in on Marina's naked body, the camera cuts and slowly zooms into a shot of her crotch area, where her genitals are covered by a mirror. Her genitals are then made to symbolically reflect her face, creating a moment of recognition of her own gender identity, where by looking at the mirror, Marina is also staring at the audience.

Through this moment of recognition and through her final performance, then, Marina is self-fashioning identity and opening up new possibilities for queer art and representation which are not merely focused on the body, and not relegated to a gender binary: a transgender re-appropriation of the falsetto voice and performance represents a "movement away from an initially assigned gender position" (STRYKER 2018: 456), thus refusing the "here and now" of the body in its power of performance. The singing voice is therefore a "mode of understanding the movements and circulations of identificatory force" which, to Muñoz, "would establish new possibilities while at the same time echoing the materially prescriptive cultural locus of any identification" (MUÑOZ 1999: 30).

In presenting the character of Marina through her main occupation as a singer, Leilo's film is centred on the value of the voice and of singing performances: like *Orlando*, then, *Una Mujer Fantástica* refuses the binary opposition of the gendered body present in *Boys Don't Cry* by focusing on the power of self-fashioning and queer world-making introduced by performance and the singing voice. While *Orlando* almost always successfully manages to do so, Swinton's naked body is shown to symbolize her transition from manhood to womanhood, thus temporarily re-instating the gender binary. By contrast, *Una Mujer Fantástica* does not allow audiences to voyeuristically gaze at the body: instead, they are invited to appreciate the power of Marina's final performance, where the voice offers the possibility of "an elsewhere, a place outside of our knowledge, a verge" (KOESTENBAUM 1993: 164). As Koestenbaum states, "singing is a movement that never coalesces long enough for us to hold it" (164), thus constituting, in its lack of embodiment and tangible existence, a performance of queer utopianism that evades gender categorization. In order to represent the utopianism presented by Muñoz, then, film does not necessarily have to utilize particular filming techniques or representation of time and space, as depicted in *Boys Don't Cry*, but avoid to obsessively and voyeuristically focus on the body, portraying its intangible performances

instead. The queer voice can then forever perform and never be categorized, in a utopian space of “ombra [...] | cara ed amabile, | soave più” (HANDEL 1738).³

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ALKIM KUTLU

Queering the competitive cooking show: performance on/of Netflix's *Nailed It!*

ABSTRACT: This paper will look at Netflix's *Nailed It!*, a competitive cooking show that introduces humor to the traditional format. In my analysis, I will look at the genre conventions of both food television and competitive cooking shows to situate *Nailed It!* within both these genres to understand its particular position. In comparing the show to the conventional narrative structures and performances within genre conventions, I will come to the conclusion that *Nailed It!* is a queer rendition of a cooking competition. In order to do so, I will look at how humor works in the show, both in the performances of the host, judges, and participants, as well as the format and production design. Finally, I will conclude that the particular use of humor enables the show to be read as "a queer cooking show", in how it destabilizes gender roles ascribed to the traditional genres as well as the genre itself.

KEYWORDS: performativity; media studies; food television; humor; discourse analysis.

Netflix's *Nailed It!* is unlike any other competitive cooking show. Inspired by the Internet phenomenon of amateur bakers posting attempts of their aspirational baking and failing miserably -captioning their effort with the sarcastic motto "Nailed It" -, the baking competition has certainly had an impact on the streaming platform. Since its premiere IN 2018, it has spawned a sizable franchise; with four seasons, a three season holiday spin-off, a Youtube spin-off called *Sleighed It!*, a virtual experience package titled *Nailed It! At Home Experience*, and four international productions, all in two years. *Nailed It!* has also received critical acclaim, with positive reviews by critics as well as Emmy Nominations for both the show and its host Nicole Byer.

In reviews, *Nailed It!* is often categorized as an entertaining baking show, with its comedic quality often credited for its success. In this article, I will argue that the comedic elements of the show are in fact, queer moments in the context of competitive cooking show conventions. Using

the term queer here will help identify the departure of *Nailed It!* from traditional food television, which is heavily structured around gender binaries. Furthermore, approaching *Nailed It!* through a queer lens will allow to contextualize it within the cooking show genre, understanding the genre conventions and consider it a way to go against them.¹ In order to do so, this paper is divided into two parts: a definition of “queer” in the context of this paper along with a broad overview of food television in the first half for context and analyzing the narrative structure, tone, and content of *Nailed It!* as a “queer cooking show” in the second.²

QUEER IN CONTEXT

In order to understand *Nailed It!* within the perspective of a “queer cooking show”, I would like to define “queer” in the scope of this paper. Taking the broadest understanding of the term “queer”, defined by Donald E. Hall, as a means “to disrupt, to render unnatural and strange, texts and practices that are naturalized and neutralized, i.e. taken-for-granted”, I will explore the ways in which *Nailed It!* queers the conventions surrounding the genre of cooking shows (as qtd. in WATSON 2005: 74).³ Often applied to ideas and theories surrounding personal identity, this fundamental operative quality of a queer perspective will be helpful in identifying moments of disruption in *Nailed It!* in terms of both the format and conventions of

¹ A similar approach has been used recently by Katharina Vester in her analysis of cookbooks through a queer lens (2020). In her article, Vester situates particular cookbooks within the broader frame determined by the genre conventions, establishing a way of “queering the cookbook” through them. To do so, Vester takes into account stylistic departures from the genre, as well as some gender-bending narratives, drawing from works not only by LGBTQ+ authors, but other narratives that lead to “a critical exploration of the genre” (140). In her analysis, Vester identifies Alice B. Toklas’s *The Alice B. Toklas Cookbook* as such an example for the performance of “queering the cookbook” through “disturb[ing] the normative power cookbooks traditionally wielded” by framing her recipes within “culinary memoirs”, “autobiographical stories and testimonies” (140). It is interesting to note that there is no work -to my knowledge- that conducts a similar work within the field of food television, which is determined by ideological implications of genre conventions overlapping with those of cookbooks. Sarah Murray makes note of this in her entry for *The Routledge International Handbook of Food Studies* which covers the field of food television, identifying “queer representation and queer aesthetics” as an area that would benefit from attention (2013: 193).

² In the same chapter, Murray implies that “cooking shows” and “food television” are two terms that can be used interchangeably (2013). I will also use these two terms interchangeably, referring to the broader field/genre of food television/cooking shows.

³ Imre Lakatos maintains a similar understanding of queer, as “by definition, whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant” (qtd. in Dell’ AVERSANO 2018: 36).

the genre to which it supposes to belong, in short, its identity as a competitive cooking show.

In this regard, to explore further what is meant by a queer approach, I will refer extensively to Carmen Dell'Aversano's article, "A research programme for queer studies" (2018). In it, Dell'Aversano advocates for a new approach within queer studies and details the problematics that arise from attempts at a queer approach within preexisting categories. She gives examples from Harvey Sacks's undertaking of "denaturalization of social categories", as she draws to the conclusion that these categories must be first deontologized before any "performance" can be deemed queer. She states this as:

Performativity, which is arguably the most widely applied concept in queer theory, is, from the logical viewpoint, nothing but a consequence of this questioning and deconstruction of categories: unless social categories are deontologized, they cannot be revealed as nothing more than the outcome of the iteration of performances. (Dell'AVERSANO 2018: 38)

This statement complicates the statement that *Nailed It!* is a queer cooking show, as it still adheres to some of the formal conventions of the genre, as seen in its premise and distribution label.⁴ However, the show still performs queerness by destabilizing a lot of these preconceived notions that come with these labels, denaturalizing genre conventions by example.

Therefore, it is particularly interesting to look at *Nailed It!* through a queer lens, especially at the way in which it manages to play on the conventions of a cooking show, which allows it to create space for alternative ways of existing within the genre. In this sense, it maintains what Dell'Aversano expresses as essential for a queer perspective: "a consistently queer position can only aim to defend the freedom of expression and self-definition of *any* subject" (42).⁵ And as I will demonstrate in the second half of my paper, *Nailed It!* is able to defend various different experiences, especially in the

⁴ The show is marketed as a baking show by Netflix, and the tags for the show include "Food and Travel Series", "Reality Competition Series" etc. It is also often featured on lists identifying best cooking shows on the Internet, notably by Katerina Daley on *Screenrant* and Loren Cecil's article for *Esquire* (DALEY 2019; CECIL 2020). It is important to note this, as despite its heavy emphasis on quirky humor, the show is still marketed and viewed as a regular cooking show.

⁵ In her work, Dell'Aversano refers primarily to identity. Here, I consider "cooking show" as *Nailed It!*'s identity.

context gender roles as prescribed by food television. In its particular way, the show is able to somewhat comply with Madhavi Menon’s proposal of a queer formulation, which “disrupts the discourse of differences, no longer perform[ing] the ontological division mandated by the term... becom[ing] difference” (qtd. in Dell’AVERSANO 2018: 66).⁶ The “indifference” one has in this process is also an important attribute, as *Nailed It!* performs difference without any seemingly explicit methods or actions. The reason for this implicitness stems from the fact that the queer performance of *Nailed It!* comes out sheerly through its comedic aspirations.

FOOD TELEVISION AS A GENRE

Before going into the details of the humor of *Nailed It!* and its subversive potential, we need to understand the genre in which the show seemingly belongs. For this purpose I will first establish the genre of cooking shows, as well as the sub-genre of competitive cooking shows. Through this, I will be able to identify particular narratives and structures engrained within these genres, giving an in-depth understanding the convention in which *Nailed It!* is positioned. In this endeavor, I will draw from a number of works that have conducted a genre analysis of cooking shows.

First of these is Kathleen Collins’s book, *Watching What We Eat: The Evolution of Television Cooking Shows* (2009). In it, Collins offers an insightful progression of the genre, starting from its early conception as radio programming to the television shows in THE 2000s. The evolution that Collins alludes to her title is defined as:

[A]n evolution of women’s roles from homemakers to coworkers; food as a way to feed ourselves to a way to express out creativity and cultural capital; a shift from a culture of conformity to one of diversity; and a change in focus—from a social life centered inside the home, to one outside of the home, to a desire to have a foot in both. (9)

This quote is interesting in understanding some of the genre defining conventions Collins identifies within food television. According to this, the main driving forces in the evolution are; the shift of women’s place

⁶ This proposal is suggested by Dell’Aversano to be a queer argument, reflecting both the “de-ontologization of categories” and the “denaturalization of performances” in the foundation of queer studies (65).

in relation to domestic food preparation and foregrounding the desire to be entertained while expanding their knowledge in the cultural, environmental, and nutritional aspects of food. This is the base of what numerous scholars identify as the shift from the instructional “home cooking” to the entertainment oriented “lifestyle” format which brought with it the rise of celebrity chefs, and of food media that further fed into this divide (PACKHAM 2016: 85).⁷ Within this divide, cooking shows were coded with the former being considered feminine, and the latter as the masculine (87).

The second work relevant to understanding cooking shows in the scope of this paper is “Inquiry in television cooking shows” by Kelsi and Keri Matwick. Here, the authors raise the question of how cooking performs “social and cultural functions” as well as the implications it has “in a media context” (2015: 313). In their analysis, Matwick and Matwick look at four aspects of inquiry in cooking shows; purpose, expression, participants and context (315).⁸ These four aspects of the genre as understood within the scope of their paper will be fundamental in my analysis of *Nailed It!* particularly in terms of how they are queered through the performances of the hosts, contestants and the show. They are as follows:

Purpose, the first aspect, is formed around the instructional nature of the cooking show. The emphasis here is on the desire to learn, and the “rich exchange” that manifests from the “shared wonder” between the expert and novice (316). Therefore, the purpose of the show implies mutual interest and successful outcome in communication between host and viewer, expert and novice. When talking about the premise and narrative structure of *Nailed It!* this idea of purpose will be seen to be built on an assumption that fails realization.⁹

Expression, the second aspect discussed by the authors, highlights the expression, presentation, and representation of food displays on the show (321). Through transforming food into a “vehicle of expression”, the authors

⁷ These scholars include Jonathan Leer, Charley Packham, Isabelle de Solier, Deborah Phillips, among others who look at this shift from various disciplines and standpoints.

⁸ The authors use “inquiry” here to define “information-seeking and wondering” within the genre (316).

⁹ It is important to note that in the article, Matwick and Matwick apply these criteria to a number of cooking shows, acknowledging the differences in the various aspects of inquiry in relation to particular channels and celebrity chefs and how they demonstrate certain conventional notions such as healthy food vs. junk food (322). However, most cases here show a universal notion of inquiry, which is rendered complicated in *Nailed It!*

suggest that the cooking show becomes “a site where the viewer witnesses long-term personal development and growth” (320-21). Once again, this framework is complicated in *Nailed It!* through the host Nicole Byer as well as a number of contestants.

Participation is defined as the driving force behind the discourse on the show, mostly about taking into account the addressees of this communication be it the audience, co-host, or the food itself (324, 326). This aspect is highly important for understanding the queerness of *Nailed It!* particularly as a competitive cooking show, as the heightened sense of interaction on the show allows for a far more nuanced way of introducing humor and delivering critique.

Context, the final aspect of inquiry, consists of two separate domains: the physical and the social (326). The physical implies the *mise-en-scène* whereas the social is the institutionalized context in which the show is based, both of which contain notions of gendered ideologies. The authors go on to state that the physical can also inform analyses on the social context of the show, with daytime television exhibiting “male hosts... as professionals or hobbyists and female as domestic cooks” and the evening shows being “competitions or travel oriented” (327). Or, similarly with set pieces that convey messages of traditional masculinity and femininity.¹⁰ In this, gender becomes “a determining factor in the context and the expression of inquiry,” thus creating coded meanings within the genre, with most male cooking shows communicating power and professionalism tied to the masculine identity and female cooking shows as a “time saving and economical solution to daily food preparation” (327). This means that context “helps to establish a recognizable set of expectations or genre... which captures the conventions understood by a shared stylistic criteria, one steeped in gender (327). Therefore, as I mentioned in the introduction, understanding the social context by which *Nailed It!* is surrounded, it will be possible to see the subversions that exist throughout the show.

¹⁰ Some examples given for this are; “billiard tables, a red Viking refrigerator... a racing stripe, a drum set, a large flat-screen television turned on with extreme sports shows” as masculine set pieces and “flower decorations and bright lighting... soft yellow tablecloth and lemon lace cookies” as set pieces reserved for shows representing a feminine way of cooking (327).

THE COMPETITIVE COOKING SHOW AS A SUB-GENRE

In the effort to get a more nuanced comprehension of why certain aspects of *Nailed It!* can be identified as queer performances, I will contextualize it specifically within the sub-genre of competitive cooking shows. This final step of contextualization is particularly important due to the hyper-masculine conventions that are linked to them.

“On the line: format, cooking and competition as television values” explains the particular “structural logic of the format” in detail, its social context, and specific genre expectations (OREN 2013: 20). The one crucial aspect of these shows is their narrative structure, where the emphasis of the shows lies. This is explained by Tasha Oren as the following:

[The] climax is not the dish itself. Here too, the format reorganises the show’s procedural syntax, deferring the climax from the dish’s successful completion/presentation to its reception/critical evaluation. This final stage, coming on the heels of the frenzied rush and (more often than not) tears and meltdowns, visits fresh humiliation on the contestants whose dishes – and, by clear extension, personal worth – are scrutinised, criticised, and often rejected by a panel of judges. (30)

The essential format of the cooking show, therefore, focuses not on the cooking but on the evaluating to “taste hierarchies” which is inherently a male dominant aspect of cooking shows (31).¹¹ As noted by Jonathan Leer, the persona of “the *connoisseur*” is someone who has a “sophisticated relationship to food” - a relationship found similarly in the persona of the professional chef (2018: 17). Collapsing these two personas into the -predominantly- male judge, cooking shows double down on creating “a tradition of food shows with male hosts in which archaism and aggression promote hypermasculinity” (19). Taking Oren’s idea that the competitive cooking show is about the critical evaluation, and the “hypermasculine” judges that embody authority in this framework, competitive cooking shows are spaces exhibiting “cold, harsh and often stinging atmosphere of the professional kitchen” (2013: 31).

¹¹ Analyzing the TV show *Masterchef*, scholar Deborah Phillips also expands on this by noting that the role of the judges “is judgmental, rather than about sharing skills and knowledge, and their assessment is unassailable”, underlining the authoritative position of the panel of judges within the space (176).

THE “QUEERNESS” OF NAILED IT!

“Welcome to *Nailed It!* the only show with the fire department on speed dial”. (“Ready to Wear, Ready to Eat” 2019)

“Home bakers with a terrible track record take a crack at re-creating edible masterpieces for a \$10,000 prize. It is part reality contest, part hot mess.”¹²

The premise of *Nailed It!* is simple: Three contestants who are notoriously bad at baking -evidenced extensively through introductory footage- come into the *Nailed It!* kitchen to participate in two consecutive challenges. The first one is called “Baker’s Choice”, which features various confections decorated according to the theme of the episode. The name “Baker’s Choice” refers to how the contestants choose the confection they want to replicate by running up to the stand and grabbing it. The winner of this challenge usually gets to -or, more accurately, has to- wear a golden baker’s cap embellished with glitter and a cooking themed gift such as baking moulds or stand mixers.¹³ The second challenge, “Nail It, or Fail It” is a multi-tiered cake, elaborately decorated, which needs to be replicated in approximately two hours, which is possibly too big a task even for professional bakers.¹⁴

The potential of failure is set up through these impossible tasks laid out for contestants whose credentials for being on the show are being under qualified. Looking at the premise of the show alone, it is possible view it in line of traditional competitive cooking show, warranting “a tense and sweaty affair, featuring contestants, impossible assignments, rushed preparations, costly mistakes, and withering assessments” (OREN 2013: 24). However, this expectation is undercut through the humor embedded in the performances throughout the show.¹⁵

¹² This is the official description for the first season of the show on Netflix.

¹³ With the exception of the second episode of the fourth season titled, “The One with the 90’s Theme” in which the winner, Crystal Roman, is gifted a “ghettoblaster” and a neon tracksuit inspired by 90s fashion.

¹⁴ Looking at *Sugar Rush*, another baking competition that launched on Netflix a few months after the debut of *Nailed It!*, it is possible to see that many of the competitors, two professional bakers, struggle with this task within a time span, nearly doubling what the contestants on *Nailed It!* get.

¹⁵ Aside from humor, the show queers the genre through introducing non-conventional ways of being in this space. This constitutes a multitude of subversions ranging from genderqueer guest judges -Art Smith, Zac Young, Fortuna Feimster to name a new- and contestants such as Broad-

“QUEER” HUMOR IN NAILED IT!

The entire narrative structure of *Nailed It!* centers around humor. The most apparent way in which this can be seen is in the producers’ decision to cast comedian Nicole Byer, who lacks experience in food television, as the host.¹⁶ Through this, the purpose and participation aspects of inquiry in the show are oriented towards humor and not culinary knowledge. This can be viewed as a starting point, or better yet the driving force, of how the show offers a queer rendition of the genre of competitive cooking shows.

The emphasis on humor is a deliberate choice by the show’s creators which creates a queer way of doing baking competitions. However, the show is truly queering this genre through the existence of an out-of-place “queer” host and the way in which her presence informs the elements of participation and expression in the show’s inquiry.¹⁷ A final aspect of the show I will look at is its physical context, and how the *mise-en-scène*, cinematography, and editing employed in the show play into the queerness of *Nailed It!* compared to the serious, cutthroat format that exists in conventional competitive cooking shows.

Humor in the context of food television is also connected to gender, making its use significant in understanding queer performances in the show. Kelsi and Keri Matwick consider humor as a potential way in which to perform gender outside of the binaries established within the genre, through humor’s “ambiguous nature” (2019: 126). Although their study focuses primarily on the instructional cooking show format, applying some of the ideas in their work to the competitive cooking show framework will work to show how humor may function in the context of this

way dancer John Carroll or the cast of *Queer Eye* performing gender roles in a non-traditional way, a stay at home dad, working mom or a grandmother who cannot cook to name a few (“Zoo You Bake?” 2018; “Bonus: 3,2,1... Ya Not Done!” 2018). Likewise, some guest judges subvert expectations set solely from gender appearance, as is seen with Natalie Sideserf whose interest in gore and creepy cakes is unusual for “someone who seems as sweet her” (“Cake-o-Phobia” 02:55-03:21).

¹⁶ It is interesting to consider that early research into humor deems women as incapable of telling jokes, proven to be a misconception through the success of *Nailed It!* (Matwick, MATWICK 2015: 127-28).

¹⁷ I identify Nicole Byer as a queer presence not only because of her lack of cooking knowledge but, as I will demonstrate shortly, in the ways in which she performs this persona, as completely different to the roles traditionally ascribed to the women who inhabit the space with a professional chef-featuring in a chef’s coat-as the student (LEER 2018: 17-18). Traditionally, such a persona is there to function as “the voice of the public” as well as “eye candy” (18). Compared to this image of the feminine as a passive and submissive companion, Byer asserts herself into the narrative of the show with considerable force.

particular sub-genre. The authors underline two kinds of humor; “teasing” and “self-deprecatory” (126). These two specific types of humor are especially noteworthy in the interactions between the judges and the contestants of *Nailed It!* in how it undercuts the authoritative judging process and severe atmosphere in the arena of competitive cooking described earlier in this paper. In order to situate humor within *Nailed It!*, I will consider the four aspects of inquiry in cooking shows; purpose, participation, expression and context, with particular emphasis on how humor operates within these frameworks (Matwick, MATWICK 2015: 321-24).

“QUEER” PRESENCE/PARTICIPATION IN NAILED IT!

Before locating specific sites where “teasing” and “self-deprecatory” humor contribute to the queering of the show, I will first look at how humor as an aspiration for the show gives way to a subversive potential to for the host and judge of the show, Nicole Byer and Jacques Torres. The duo are the established in a very subversive manner in relation to the traditional roles they are prescribed in the genre, particularly in relation to gender.

Nicole Byer, the larger than life host of the show, is a highly unconventional persona in the genre of competitive cooking shows. She embodies a person who is clueless about the world of baking, often asking head judge Jacques Torres to relay the steps in which to correctly execute the tasks at hand. In that sense, she helps extract information from the “professional chef”, similar to the traditional function of a novice. However, in certain cases such as the “Zoo You Bake?” episode, Byer subverts this role (2018). When she says she would love to see how the mice decorations for the cake are made, Torres takes out three mounds of fondant tasking both Byer and guest judge Art Smith to participate in the demonstration. Byer responds to this by saying “I hate this”, alluding to her distance to the craft and implies resistance to learning. When they are displaying their results, Byer’s mouse is complete with anthropomorphic breasts indicating it is a “girl mouse”, a decision she explains stating “because of feminism” (25:49-59). Through setting up this joke with a straight face, Byer both introduces feminism as a concept into the show, while also offering a subtle irony to term by attaching it to very narrow application. In this example, Byer both queers the position she is meant to occupy, as well as the subject matter discussed.

Byer’s performance and subversive discourse within the genre is noticed in her use of sexual imagery and language. She does this by pointing out

certain sexual connotations, as seen with the bottle the contestants have to shape from Rice Krispies Treats in the episode titled “Tailgate, Failgate” (2018). Torres points out the bottle made by Leean Muns, asking Byer what she thinks the bottle looks like. She replies, “you don’t want me to say what her bottle looks like” (2018: 18:42-53). The cinematography works to make her comment suggestive, using a perspective shot which highlights the phallic property of the bottle, lacking any of the details or shaping that would identify it as a bottle. In this moment, the show leans into Byer’s joke, just enough to get away with its family friendly rating.¹⁸ Similarly, in “Let’s Get Lit”, she observes that one of the contestants’ piping skills is off, commenting “everybody knows you have to put the tip in” (2020: 11:37-42). This double entendre is alluded to by a “boing” sound effect, once again drawing attention to the humor that is derived from sexual imagery.

Byer further plays on this by explicitly expressing her own sexual desire in the show.¹⁹ In the “Tailgate, Failgate” episode Byer approaches the guest judge, NFL player Johnny Hekker, asking to be set up with single football players they may know. Byer adds, “they don’t even have to buy me dinner, I am a sure thing” (2018: 05:44-06:07). Through this, she reduces her interest in potential dates as purely sexual, creating a feminine embodiment of a (hyper-)sexual appetite. In the previous episode, “Fictitious and Delicious”, Byer exhibits similar sexual interest in the joker call of contestant Chris Elam. Awarded a special “Call-for-Help Button” due to mishaps in his first attempt, Elam calls his friend Sean to get help in the second round. Byer holds up a tablet to facilitate the conversation, and upon seeing Sean, remarks, “Sean, you are cute” followed by, “oh, Sean can get it” (23:32-39). In both these instances, Byer expresses sexual interest independent of any food related expressions. This reverts the gender conventions in the genre in two ways; first it switches the implicit sexual assertion communicated through food into an explicit one that stands on its own. The second way is

¹⁸ The bottle is out of focus in the shot, which focuses on the panel of judges, allowing it to maintain the implicit suggestive tone.

¹⁹ Byer’s sexuality on *Nailed It!* can be read as aggressively straightforward in comparison to other women occupying the space of cooking television. Packham, in her work analyzing gender in television shows, notes Nigella Lawson’s use of “suggestive vocabulary in a husky, dulcet tone... displaying her assets”, concluding that through this Lawson negotiates a break from the often subservient homemaker figure into the elevated status of “domestic goddess” through performing her sexuality (2016: 89, 91). In comparison to Lawson’s suggestive approach, Byer is far more forthcoming in her sexual desire, expressing it clearly without attaching them to the performances around/through food.

that it takes the traditional masculine coding of this energy and transfers it into a woman.²⁰

Jacques Torres creates an entirely different persona compared to that of Nicole Byer. He is the head judge and resident baker who dons a chef's coat in each episode. As mentioned in the beginning of this sub chapter, his attire is indicative that he is the authoritative figure in this kitchen.²¹ Torres aligns his authority with the figure of the instructor, repeatedly expressing his desire to teach the contestants, to have them leave with having learned something, using his knowledge to offer help in place of criticism ("Fictitious and Delicious" 2018: 27:55-28:05).²² He expresses this attitude when asked if he finds it "ironic that [he] is a highly decorated, well-respected pastry chef that eats trash every day for money" ("Let's Get Lit" 2020: 06:00-20). Torres responds to this by noting that he enjoys being able to explain to the contestants what their mistakes were and help them improve their baking skills, calling an opportunity. In this statement, Torres implies that he enjoys his job due to its potential to educate, a task often given to female hosts in the traditional genre conventions (PACKHAM 2016: 85). As a result, he gives up the *connoisseur* identity as a judge, by subjecting himself to "four seasons of bad cakes" in order to teach (LEER 2018: 17; "Let's Get Lit" 2020: 01:27-29).

In line with this, he often explains to contestants where they went wrong in the judging process. When Nicole Combs presents her cakes mashed into a single pan after underbaking them, Torres walks her through steps to ensure her cakes are baked all the way through ("Fictitious and

²⁰ I want to briefly add that Nicole Byer is a woman of color, further destabilizing the hegemonic structures that are inextricably linked to whiteness, which is not discussed in the scope of this paper but nevertheless creates further layers of "queering" traditional roles.

²¹ It should be noted that Jacques Torres does not perform the authoritarian figure of the professional male chef on the show. This is pointed out by the guest judges who taken aback by how he is situated in the show. This is seen most explicitly in the "Out of This World" episode, where Joshua John Russell marvels on how Byer can tease Torres, distinguishing him as a legendary aspirational figure during his time in culinary school (2018: 21:19-44). The interaction exposes how Torres's presumed position, established through his credentials, is realized in a queer manner through the premise, interactions and structure in the show.

²² There are also various ways in which his persona is queered through his relationship with Byer. She often teases him, prompting him to do a southern accent, asking him to take her to France all expenses paid in a mocking manner, and asking him to strike an "Iron Man pose" ("Tailgate, Failgate" 2018; "Out of This World" 2018; "The Marvel Episode!" 2019). Torres plays into this, at times even contributing to the sexual innuendos laced throughout the show, albeit far less than Byer's contribution. ("High Society" 2018; "Out of This World" 2018).

Delicious” 2018: 27:43-28:52). Similarly, Torres also provides a voice-over for the steps in order to correctly execute recipes, coupled with a video montage providing visual reinforcement. Here too, Torres posits his role as an instructor, this time addressing the audience as the participants. He carries this position through to the judges’ panel as well, often bringing in demo equipment to execute small elements from the confections and walks Nicole Byer and a guest judge through the process, which at times gets interrupted as mentioned earlier in this paper. Therefore, Torres embodies teaching fully, demonstrated in multiple addresses throughout the show.

Torres’s insistence of bringing an instructive, or educational element into the show is evocative of the origins of the genre of cooking shows. However, this is undercut throughout the show in exchange for humor. This is best exemplified with the “Pardon-My-French Button”. The “Pardon-My-French Button” is offered to the least successful contestants from round one to sabotage other contestants. It can be used to block any other contestant’s “Panic Button”. The function of the button is to offer help to contestants any time during the second round, for three minutes. This help comes in the form of Jacques Torres going up to their station, answering any questions the contestants may have and offering advice. The “Pardon-my-French Button” disrupts this educational interaction altogether, as when it is pressed, Torres must speak only French during the entire three minutes. The effect of the combination of these two buttons can be seen in the episode “Zoo You Bake?”, when Kate Christenbury activates the “Pardon-My-French Button” ten seconds after Kelly Williams Bolar uses her “Panic Button” (2018: 20:13-51). Not understanding Torres’s French instructions, she misinterprets the French word for color, *couleur*, as cooler, nearly freezing her buttercream. Due to these gimmicks, the instructional tone provided by Torres is queered in the broader sense.

“QUEER” JUDGING/EXPRESSION IN NAILED IT!

As emphasized in the first half of the paper when establishing the genre of competitive cooking shows, critical evaluation is the focal point of the genre’s entire narrative structure (OREN 2013: 30). This process is identified as an extremely harsh and unforgiving affair, where the judges often reject the food in front of them to assert their authority (30). The premise of *Nailed It!* renders this process impossible to maintain. First of all, the contestants come onto the show with zero claim and/or expectation that

they can fulfill the challenges. Secondly, on a show where the expected result is failure, the criticism for the sake of critiquing is rendered obsolete. Apart from the aforementioned efforts by Torres to use the moment to instruct the contestants, the judging on the show primarily is centered around humor more so than critical evaluation.

“Teasing” and “self-deprecatory” humor are often used in expression by both judges and contestants, resulting in reciprocal friendly banter in place of a “cold harsh environment” (OREN 2013: 31). An example to this exchange can be seen in the interaction between Jacques Torres and Toni Bryant when he approaches her station after observing her donuts from afar (“Fantasyland” 2018). Torres teases Bryant admitting that he came down to check out her glazed donuts because they looked like baked potatoes from the judges’ table. Torres continues, saying they look like baked potatoes up close as well. This prompts a laughing fit from Bryant clearly amused by this comparison, reciprocating self-deprecatory humor (09:15-51).

Teasing is mainly used by Byer in her interactions with the contestants. In the “Fictitious and Delicious” episode, upon witnessing that two of the three contestants had to scoop the baked parts of their cakes into one mould, Byer tells the contestants “to cut or layer” their cakes for the judges to taste (“Fictitious and Delicious” 2018: 29:05-10). In her critique, Byer notes how it is “wild” that Nicole Combs’s cake is dry and under-baked at the same time, prompting laughter from all three contestants (30:30-40). Byer engages in similar teasing with Jamie Olivier in the “Oui Can’t Bake!” episode, when she points out that he served the judges Rice Krispies in both rounds, adding “you did not bake one thing today – on a baking show” (2019: 29:52-30:13). Once again her teasing joke is met by Olivier with laughter, maintaining that her teasing does not cross into harsh critique.²³

Another way in which Byer softens the blow in her teasing is through self-deprecatory humor. Byer often targets herself in her humor, chipping away at her authority as a judge. There are several examples that can be given to this. In the “Holi-Daze” episode, contestant Joelito Nunez corrects

²³ During the evaluation, the judges often comment on the positive notes of an endeavor, seen in how Ron Ben Israeli points out that Kristina Black’s take on a unicorn horn -two candy canes wrapped with sour candy stripes- is a viable solution in an emergency (“Fictitious and Delicious” 2019: 30:05-12). This gentle approach to find words of encouragement for even the most out of proportion baked goods emphasize that these moments of teasing are not about humiliation but just there for comedic play.

Byer's mispronunciation of his name. Byer is horrified at her mistake and keeps bringing this back up, evoking her mistake (2018: 15:33-16:05; 17:45). The fact that she, as a seasoned performer and host, can also make mistakes makes the show a space where mistakes happen but are not determining of anyone's capability of doing something.

Byer also functions as a saboteur, upon the use of the "Nicole-Nags Button", which works similar to the aforementioned "Pardon-My-French Button". When pressed, Byer goes up to the other two contestants, annoying them verbally and physically by yelling, asking questions, and standing in the contestants' way to restrict their movements in the kitchen. This too can be read as a form of self-deprecatory performance, as she performs acts associated with a small child, undermining any authority that comes from her title as a judge as well as the expectancy that comes with it. In the literature themed first episode of the fourth season, Byer exhibits similar behavior that goes beyond self-deprecatory humor.

Self-deprecatory humor is also used by the contestants to emphasize their position within the show, not as amateur bakers to be ridiculed but as contributors to the comedic atmosphere. This is seen with contestants introducing their own catchphrases, such as Jennifer Parks's "Snailed It!"-alluding to her éclair with a snail decoration, or Gregory Gardner's "bursting" which prompts a burst-o-meter graphic inserted into the episode marking the use of the term („Oui Can't Bake!" 2019: 12:43; "Let's Get Lit" 2020). After introducing her creation, Parks jokes that her snail is asleep, justifying it being presented on its side (12:48). In "Masterpiece or Disasterpiece?" Toyshika Peterson goes through the list of things required to make a cake decorated with a replica of Michelangelo's *David* statue, noting that the cake part is "not a problem" but moulding the statue is (2019: 19:39-49). In her lament, Peterson says; "I can't even get a damn man, y'all want me to mould one", poking fun at her relationship status (19:48).

"QUEER" PRODUCTION/PHYSICAL CONTEXT IN NAILED IT!

The final element of inquiry that helps establish *Nailed It!* as a site of exhibiting and experiencing queer competitive food television is the production design. Here I use production design to talk about *mise-en-scène*, or set design, as well as the cinematography, and editing choices all of which make up the physical context of the show. All of these elements function in the context of the purpose of the show which is, as stated earlier, is to

produce comedy in the form of a baking competition. In this effort, the set design varies from that of other competitive shows.

The basic form of the *Nailed It!* set is made up of the judges' table, contestants' stations and the pantry. There is a wall behind judges' table, displaying a Willy Wonka-like array of cakes and sweets, all of which are misshapen in some aspect. There are three separate stations for the contestants, set up with negative space between each station. The pantry is built behind a wall to the side, with wooden walls and shelves. What is particularly interesting about this set is the negative space that is used throughout. None of these individual elements are linked but are instead situated within a bigger open space with an industrial aesthetic. Industrial aesthetics are pointed out as a characteristic for the set of *Masterchef*, a competitive cooking show that embodies the highest level of the previously discussed genre conventions (PHILLIPS 2016: 176). By constructing a non-cohesive set which looks like it can be easily disassembled within this broader space, the show feels like a guerrilla takeover of a space into which it does not naturally belong. This negative space also works to remind audiences that this show takes place in a made-up, constructed space that functions as a stage where performances take place, instead of a narrative of reality.

The editing of the show also goes hand in hand with this aspect of the set design that foregrounds performativity. Throughout the runtime of the episodes, the production crew is shown in the camera frames, exposing the "real" space behind the constructed reality of the show. In relation to this, many mishaps and moments that should normally be edited out also make their way into the show. The best known example to this is the incident with guest judge, Jay Chandrasekhar in the sixth episode of the first season ("In Your Face!" 2018). Halfway through the show, Chandrasekhar asks to be excused for a bit while filming to pick up his children. Byer responds by telling him he needs to Kip, one of the producers of the show. After Kip approves, he departs, leaving Byer and Torres confused as to whether he is coming back at all. Chandrasekhar does make it back in time, bringing coffee for the other two judges (2018: 22:05-26:56). The fact that he was there in time for the evaluation suggests that his absence could have been edited out altogether from the episode.²⁴ The decision to include this works

²⁴ When asked about this viral moment in an interview, Chandrasekhar answers that he had no idea they left that part in the show, assuming they would edit it out to make the show "nice and normal" (CHANDRASEKHAR 2018: 00:14-35).

to highlight the reality in the making of show, exposing the failures of the show itself. A similar moment happens in the “Fictitious and Delicious” episode where the judges are told to change switch where they stand and wait for camera adjustments. An awkward silence pursues as the contestants and judges stare at each other and do silly dances, before the crew finally informs them that they are ready to resume shooting (2018: 28:02-30). These moments work to show what editing erases out of a traditional finished episode of a show, exposing the reality behind it and queering the heterotopic space of food television. It also creates solidarity with the contestants, by choosing to leave in some of the mistakes that occur when producing a television episode, pointed out by Byer in her remark that the show itself is “the *Nailed It!* version of a TV show” (“Fictitious and Delicious” 2018: 23:31-37).

CONCLUSION

Considering the formulation of a traditional cooking show episode as laid out in this paper, the show offers an alternative to the naturalized discourse mandated through certain (gendered) conventions of the cooking show, creating a queer performance of the entire genre. The centralization of humor in the narrative structure of *Nailed It!* allows for a lot of room to subvert traditional roles within the genre and create a queer performance that challenges it. With humor, *Nailed It!* denaturalizes the personas, interactions and space within the traditional setting, allowing for disruption. The recognition, marketing and success of *Nailed It!* as a competitive baking show suggests that the performances within are a valid possibility and this translates to the audience that the competitive cooking show can still entertain without its hypermasculine formulations. Whether or not the purpose behind the show is solely for comedy, the show is able to manifest queer performances within the genre as well as communicate a possible way to queer the format.

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NAILED IT! EPISODES

"Bonus: 3,2,1... Ya Not Done!", 2018, *Nailed It!*, series 2, episode 6, Netflix, 29 June.

"Cake-o-Phobia", 2019, *Nailed It!*, series 3, episode 2, Netflix, 17 May.

"Fantasyland", 2018, *Nailed It!*, series 1, episode 2, Netflix, 9 March.

"Fictitious and Delicious", 2018, *Nailed It!*, series 2, episode 2, Netflix, 29 June.

"High Society", 2018, *Nailed It!*, series 2, episode 1, Netflix, 29 June.

"Holi-Daze", 2018, *Nailed It!*, series 2, episode 4, Netflix, 29 June.

"In Your Face", 2018, *Nailed It!*, series 1, episode 6, Netflix, 9 March.

"Let's Get Lit", 2020, *Nailed It!*, series 4, episode 1, Netflix, 1 April.

"Masterpiece or Disasterpiece?", 2019, *Nailed It!*, series 3, episode 3, Netflix, 17 May.

"Oui Can't Bake!", 2019, *Nailed It!*, series 3, episode 5, Netflix, 17 May.

"Out of This World", 2018, *Nailed It!*, series 2, episode 5, Netflix, 29 June.

"Ready to Wear, Ready to Eat", 2019, *Nailed It!*, series 3, episode 6, Netflix, 17 May.

"Tailgate, Failgate", 2018, *Nailed It!*, series 2, episode 3, Netflix, 29 June.

"The Marvel Episode!", 2019, *Nailed It!*, series 3, episode 1, Netflix, 17 May.

"The One with the 90's Theme", 2020, *Nailed It!*, series 4, episode 2, Netflix, 1 April.

"Zoo You Bake?", 2018, *Nailed It!*, series 2, episode 5, Netflix, 29 June.

KUSMITH JAI

We too have a Style!

Questioning and subverting the masculine stereotype
in fashion through the designs of Neil Grotzinger.

ABSTRACT: Social stigma of masculine and feminine, the constant struggle between manly strength and womanly sensitivity, God's other human creations, labeled as 'the queer' are highly neglected even in modern times. Queers' struggle for acceptance even in the creative fields is sorer to accept than in the commercial fields. Hence, this research focuses on the role and scope of gender agnostic designers and designs in the fashion industry. By questioning and subverting the masculine stereotype and its effects on the creative non-normative brains through the special study of life and designs of Neil Grotzinger; whose mission was to tease society's notion of masculinity and lavish them with intricate embroidery and embellishments that had been previously reserved for women and brought that into menswear. This research conclusively evaluates the effects of Neil Grotzinger's designs on the male, female, and queer genders and the fashion industry and thus evaluates the scope of queer fashion in the mainstream fashion industry.

KEYWORDS: fashion studies; queer fashion; gender stereotypes; Neil Grotzinger; social acceptance.

INTRODUCTION

"Strength, courage, mastery, and honor are the *alpha* virtues of men all over the world" (JACK & N.F. MILLER 2012). In today's society, the most gender prejudiced phrase in the English language is 'be a man'. To be a man today says film-maker Jennifer Siebel Newsom "is to fight for success and sex, to reject empathy, to never cry and to act masculine because that's the thought people have associated with a man" (NEWSOM 2016). The studies of masculinity were believed to be inspired by a feminist interdisciplinary field that emerged at the beginning of the 20th century as a topic of study. This is a very vibrant, interdisciplinary field of study, which is concerned with the social construction of what it means to 'be a man' and what is 'masculinity'.

The term 'masculinity' refers to the behaviors, social rules, and relations of a man with a given society as well as meaning attributed to them. "The stereotypical masculine or feminine qualifications are not personality characteristics of individual men and women but these are socially

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constructed representations of gender, based on what society expects of each sex” (CONDOR 1987, LLOYD & DUVEEN 1993). And such gender stereotypes are fixed ideas people have about men’s and women’s traits and behavior and that of attire. For example, if a man is wearing a floral pink printed shirt, he’s assumed to be feminine, weird or he’s not suitable to his gender. So, through the context of clothing, these masculine and gender stereotypes can be subverted in people’s minds because clothes are the visible expression of gender and personal identity.

While Clothing plays a huge role in fashioning one’s identity, and setting a trend; a non-normative sexual identity that are contrary to the socially determined genders, who are other than straight or cisgender and widely referred as ‘queer’ become an interesting element to study. ‘Queer Fashion’ is a very well-discussed yet largely ostracized trend in society as well as in the queer community. Queer fashion is all about gender non-conformity and doesn’t limit one to a specific style. In fact, queer fashion does not show any rule. It is a lenient and less oppressive way of expressing oneself. It is nothing but people expressing them in their way and having fun with what they wear. But unfortunately, queer fashion and people face severe acceptance issues even in today’s progressive society. As Lewis G. (2018) puts it,

It is still very limited like in terms of people how they look at us or how they look at our clothing. Like the queer can and could still have much more fluidity and so much more possibilities rather can categorize our behavior, fashion or anything in one small tiny box. Queer is all-encompassing we can form our identities or likes and dislikes.

While Lewis established the important to understand the other side of the normative fashion, Nakhane expressed the agony of acceptance and fear the community is facing by saying that “there are just spaces in the world where walking down the street looking like we all do can get scary and our style could get endangered” (NAKHANE 2018).

Despite all the rejection, dejection and distress, there came queer fashion designers like Alan Crocotti, Gogo Gradon, and Neil Grotzinger who left an enormous mark on the fashion industry with their style and designs that neither the queer community nor the world had ever seen before. Such trend transformers however, just because they are not straight have found

lost their right of fame in the curve of social stigma. Therefore, this research aims at understanding the role and scope of gender agnostic designers and designs in the fashion industry. Further, elements like social reproach, questioning and subverting the masculine stereotype and its effects on the creative non-normative brains have been critically analyzed through the special study of life and designs of Neil Grotzinger; whose mission was to tease society's notion of masculinity and lavish them with intricate embroidery and embellishments that had been previously reserved for women and brought that into menswear. This research conclusively evaluates the effects of Neil Grotzinger's designs on the queer community and the fashion industry.

BACKGROUND STUDY

The basic concept of 'to queer' according to 'queer theory' is 'to disrupt' or 'make something strange,' twisting something or pushing the invisible to the spotlight (JOHNSON 2014). These techniques are seen to have the potential to transform the normative (taken for granted) assumptions and are widely used to challenge assumptions about sexuality and gender. If one looks back in the history, during the 1700s homosexuality was illegal in Europe, this opened the doors towards small and secret homosexual subcultures. In public, it started when the members known as the mollies, would cross-dress in private to self-identify and to attract partners. There were also secret dress codes that allowed gay men and lesbians to identify each other. Later Such queer fashion extended its influence on the runway, especially when it came to subjects perceived as social taboos during the 1990s.

However, the fashion of queer aesthetics is still an emerging concept in today's world, there often happens a comparison of it with that what the binary gender group wears. It is only from the year 2000 onwards' millennium looks which is beyond gender binaries and the idea of gender-less clothing was prospered. For instance, one of the well-known Indian designers, Rohit Bal entered into the idea of androgyny fashion through his collection 'The Alpha Men'. In 2003 Lakmé Fashion Week, he gave creative tribute to the new breed of secure alpha men. He used elaborate drapes and floral prints. These kinds of silhouettes and prints usage was not seen in the regular men's fashion. (see fig.1). He presented male models wearing long skirts, *sindoor* (vermillion), and a nose ring! – elements primitively associated with the feminine gender. Through this collection, he wanted to show

men being in touch with their feminine side. Another designer from France Jean Paul Gaultier, also went on to make skirts for men, (LADHA 2019).



FIGURE 1. Rohit Bal's 'The Alpha Men' collection from Lakmé Fashion Week, 2003

However, straight men's opinion about carrying this kind of fashion were found separated from that of Rohit's and as a result, his trickled down skirt fashion got submerged in the loud applause for the beautifully embellished jackets accompanying the skirts. This can be considered to be the evidence that queer fashion has still not found complete acceptance as a trickle-up fashion.

The queer youth fashion has also always been a mode of self-expression because it gives people visibility of what they love. But it does have its pros and cons. For example, there are men today who don't care and dress up the way they want in a creative field workplace. But workplaces with a particular uniform to follow, queer men cannot dress the way they want, to avoid 'masculinity dilemma' at work. Even if they don't want it, they have to achieve or pretend having masculinity. Facing identity crisis is also very commonly faced by this community in the society; as Chinese model Weimin Li says, "I wish society was more accepting. You don't have to be brave to express yourself, but it's still dangerous (for the queer). We need exposure [to nongendered clothing] to make it more normal. It helps people to express themselves" (WILSON 2019). So, a bunch of designers working on non-binary fashion was like a ray of hope for this community.

Designers like Sohaya Misra's 'Bye Felicia' collection in Lakmé Fashion Week Winter/ Festive 2018, again broke the rules of gender norms by making Prateik Babbar walk the runway in a pair of grey, wrap-around pants

with mock buttons attached along the front and an oversized black jacket with detailing on the sleeves. He was also accompanied by multi-talented make-up artist, Jason Arland sporting a sheer, heavily layered, and frilled off-white gown with a charming and attractive veil (see Fig.2) that brought the gender-neutral theme to the forefront and could subvert the basic men's wear (Roy, 6-9- 2018). Designer Anvita Sharma, who showcased her gender-neutral collection at Lakmé Fashion Week too says, "there was a time when the queer fashion was not represented on the ramp and was simply ignored. But that's changing this fashion is become a strong tool to express your freedom. I'm glad that designers are doing this now" (Sharma A, 2018).



FIGURE 2. Prateik Babar and Jason Arland of Sohaya Misra's 'Bye Felicia' collection in Lakme Fashion Week Winter/ Festive 2018 and S/S 2019

Throughout history, the basic stereotype of regular men's wear is mostly been checks, stripes, suits, shirts, etc. but queer fashion is all about breaking these assumptions and accepting something new. For example, Neil Grotzinger's intricate embroidery, lavish designs, and zippers on the trousers that are halfway open on menswear are the details not usually seen on the regular men's fashion. This community is always looking for something new that they can embody. Neil, through his designs aims to- 'give an erotic sensation' to his garments 'so that the queer community especially can embody them and express themselves (Subservient Authorities

collection)' (CFDA, n.d.). By his extraordinary approach to the menswear he not only challenges the traditional understanding of the masculinity, but making a mark through subverting the authorities and hence, this research focuses on the detailed study of the designs of Neil Grotzinger and his perception of masculinity and queer fashion. His 'whatever' attitude makes him appropriate choice for this study.

FOCUSED STUDY: NEIL GROTZINGER AND HIS WORK

Famous for his gender agnostic designs and the main focus of this study, Neil Grotzinger caught people's eye by showing what's fashion through his eyes. He strongly considers that 'queer fashion' is more than just a trend. It is an expression of oneself in their unique way and having fun with what they wear. Neil Grotzinger believes in making his garments more internally erotic and gives self-fulfilling desire by aiming at 'pulling people from the underground. And provide and stage within his community to as many as people possible who are underappreciated by not making mainstream or stereotypical designs' (GROTZINGER 2019).

Neil Patrick Grotzinger was raised and brought up in a very conservative town just outside Colorado Springs only a few miles away from the air force academy. This town is a built system of ascendancy and obedience. It was the home for a lot of mega-churches in America. So, he grew up around people who always craved for authority. From a very young age, he discovered that he was sort of misplaced in this part of the world. Which got him in observing things very consciously. He started taking note of all the roles and that was being played by especially men in his age group and the assumptions they had. Families around him completely overshadowed their personalities. E.g. If the father is a soldier the son in the family saw himself as a future soldier or if there were people in the archery or hunting were meant to have their wardrobe filled with camouflage fabrics. It seemed very restricted and downright.

Neil's starting point in design as he remembers "being fascinated by clothing in movies which were what lead me to move to New York City and pursue a career in fashion. The obsession with embroidery came from a similar place. It makes things seem unreal" (GROTZINGER 2019). Interestingly, Neil Grotzinger draws inspiration from the disposition thoughts based on the concept of masculinity in the Midwestern that saturated his upbringing. This kind of stereotypical thinking fascinated Neil and inspired

him to introduce his SS19 collection titled ‘Subservient Authorities’. His aim was to take a stereotypical idea, that too a well-known one within the masculine culture and then subvert those characters through hand embellishments and beadwork that often consider to be a statement for women’s wear, in different techniques to break the idea of gender.

His ‘Subservient Authorities’ collection was inspired by using the American symbols as the main tool for subverting and questioning the masculine stereotype. Symbols that people expected to look masculine like troops, armies, camouflage, officers etc. which people expect as a representation of strong, bold, and masculine (see Fig. 3) were used to show firmness, fearlessness and authority of the otherwise.



FIGURE 3. Hector J Diaz and Jancarlos Daiz in Nihl.nyc for new issue of Gayletter magazine (photo @ nihl.nyc, 2018).

Neil Grotzinger’s amazing take on this broke the perception of people on how to act, seem, or be a male. He changed the whole vision of manliness. His work since then has evolved into challenging the framework of menswear today.

Most of his designs included embroidery, hand emblems, or use of jockstraps and sexy peeling off pants caught the people’s eye (see Fig.4). Well, a lot of queer-identifying people immediately latched his work just based on having that same suspicion of like ‘I feel like no one is making this right now but I’ve always wanted to see it. (GROTZINGER 2019). And a certain sized straight man who would be interested could wear it but the queer community is who is in his head when designing.



FIGURE 4: Designs from Neil's NIHL A/W '20 and S/S'18 collections

According to the study, it is very visible how this community believes in embracing their style and fashion in terms of what they love and not what their gender is. And show a new way of embodying something. A lot of queer-identifying people immediately latched his work just based on having that same suspicion of like 'I feel like no one is making this right now but I've always wanted to see it. (GROTZINGER 2019). As Neil mentions this community immediately latched on to what he is doing simply because they had never seen someone do this ever before but needed this badly. So, few designers mentioned above including Neil Grotzinger opened doors for this community. His innovative ideas whether it be embroidery, hand emblems, or use of jockstraps and sexy peeling off pants (see Figure 4) that are put into each collection are something fresh and simultaneously break the masculine stereotypes around us.

Neil's goal is to displace and dispel masculine stereotypes in people's minds, his garment construction denies their predictable and customary purpose by transforming what was once functional and separating it into couture objects. He innovates by putting traditional garments and elements of hand craftsmanship in a way that consistently challenges stereotypes and holds in on an erotic sensation. His 'Masculine Effeminacy' collection is a very specific spot where he was trying to highlight within the gendered grey area. He was particularly fascinated by the term 'effeminate' when he developed his first collection. He also wanted to dissect this term because it has, at least up until this point, typically only been used as a sort of 'call-out' or insult. At first glance, he says, "it might seem this collection was meant

to contradict, but it was really about finding the misnomers within the male culture that were almost borderline, then push them so over the edge that there was no questioning on how queer they'd become" (Grotzinger 2019)

Neil's designs (see fig. 1 & 2) clearly show his curiosity behind why these symbols have to look strong or manly was what lead to this collection. He subverted the masculine stereotypes by giving an erotic and sensual look to his garments. As Neil says "I'm also curious as to why these archetypes are the way they are. As men adopt gender roles throughout life, each old role submits to a new one. From this notion, a parodic, eroticized tone emerges in the collection". (PATEL 2018).



FIGURE 5: Models at Neil's Grotzinger SS19 collection titled 'Subservient Authorities' (Shkoda L. 2018).

His designs (see fig. 5A & B) are a contrast of traditionally feminine techniques like hand-beaded embroidery with stereotypically masculine

shapes which includes contemporary ideas about masculinity power, strong and dominant. The jacket silhouette resembles the basic military jacket which is a chain mail jacket with a dirndl neckline which is laced in red elaborated braided trim and deep to show the bare chest which took over a week and 100 hours of handwork to make it (YOTKA 2018). The jacket (see fig.5 A) is made with the interlocking of metal hooks to each other with fitted inlets and distorted seams where the jacket is cut short to give it a crop top/blouse like effect yet look raw. The model walks with showing off his thick strap of his tights-whities and lowers which are slight open revealing till the thigh which is made up of metallic trap.

Whereas the circular hole (see fig. 5 B) at the stomach with flat seams revealing the waist gives it a sexy yet burnt hole effect to remind that the struggle of chasing of beauty and something you love can be painstaking. There is a very deep cut neckline with black dangling beads hand embroidered on the neckline to enhance the so-called feminine techniques with and hook and eye attachments. The pants material is soft silk which is flowy and is again slit high open showing bare skin till the thighs with dirndl neckline with red laced braided trims of long hanging straps, belts, and buckles (see fig. 5 B)

Few garments in Neil's collection also produced pants using screen printing technique and silk dyed shirts that tapped into the tie-dyed world today as a fun element with hand-embroidered deep necklines and pockets and trim like laces and tie-ups inculcated in the garment to keep it feminine and give a new vision to maleness.

In all, this collection was an endorsement of a new kind of sensual, it simultaneously subverted the stereotypes and elevated a new platform for the community. The purpose behind this collection was to see clothing beyond just beautiful or something tactile but wanted to give out a new vision and reach and get closer to the queer community.

Grotzinger loves challenging himself and changing the normality of people's perception mainly on the topic of how men should look or behave to appear masculine and also be able to pay homage for his community. So, in his NIHL A/W '20 collection Neil aimed at sending up all things to break the notions of masculinity. The theme of this collection was: Villainy. Inspired by the horror film *The Silence of the Lambs*. Drawing inspiration from this film, Grotzinger depicted stitching together and build a connection between the queer culture and the fondness he has for crampy cinema



FIGURE 6: Neil Grotzinger's SS19 collection, 'Subservient Authorities' (Shkoda L. 2018)

villains. Each model on the ramp for this collection depicted different characters from the movie and ramp walked with their expressional take on a spooky feel. He aimed to show the rebellious nature of the queer community and how the world sees them as villains but still they move forward and fight for their identity by breaking these social taboos.

The dungaree style jumpsuit (see fig. 7A) silhouette where the fabric is soft and a very subtle color pallet and has a patchwork at the crotch area with long straps are attached to the waist using the buckles and thin strings. Inside is a contrasting red mesh material sleeveless tee. The pants have zippers attached that kind of peeled off till down to give that sexy look and had cut-outs on the thigh. He also tops the look with a leather belt to gives that strangled character look. Whereas in the other garment (see fig.7 B) Grotzinger has used slinky jockstraps with pieces of leather fabric with thin suspender-like straps that are rounded and knotted at the model's shoulders. And inside is a thin black mesh piece covered only on one leg and one cloth which covered till the elbow to kind of balance the overall look. And paired the whole look with ankle-high boots. This erotic look yet a very spooky and furious expression attracted people's eye.

However, these garments were less about function and more towards



FIGURE 7: Neil Grotzinger's NIHL A/W'20 collection, 'Villainy' (Shkoda L. 2018).

sexual, scandalous, and a dysfunction concept. The garments were about showing as much skin as possible, along with the portrayal of dissident and furiousness through their expressions. His designs for the Villainy collection also reflect the influence of the army in the excessive usage of fasteners like straps, belts, and buckles. However, in the sharp contrast to these masculine elements, lace and mesh fabrics were used to show the bare chest. The sexy peeling of pants till the pelvis bone and also few cuts around the calf and knee which were getting the sensual feel out.

The other set of garments also included that raw and spooky look yet showed the delicate side of the people from this community with the help of the roses attached to the garment.

As shown in figure 8 A, two half tore bands covering the face to show that the fight is real. The top length is cropped till the chest with normal tie-ups and flat seams using very subtle nude colors. The short sleeves also had dysfunctional zippers attached on the sides to enhance the theme. The stripped one-leg palazzo pants with the contrasting red zipper till the end of the pant brought in an elegance feel to the look. To give a raw, delicate yet fun look he also inculcated floral prints on his garments (see fig-8 B). Where the cropped jacket with raw edges and beaded embroidery on one



FIGURE 8: Neil Grotzinger's NIHL A/W'20 collection, 'Villainy' (Shkoda L. 2018).

side of the jacket to get the feminine side out. And only the sleeves and a long patch on the lower garment were made of light and little see-through floral printed fabric that was very flowy. And he topped the look with few roses attached to give a soft and elegant look from the petals but also a spooky feel from the thorns.

So, there were models in high heels to play on the feminine side but with the sinister theme. With a green see-through mesh full sleeves top with a black and grey contrasting patch on the sleeves. It also had red, green, and silver dangling beads embroidered on the lower part of the chest to get the texture and tactile feel to the garment. And finally, a short above the knee skirt of glossy PVC material and a separate piece added on one side of the leg made this a completed the erotic and the sexy look (see fig.10 A). The show ended off with a grand golden princess looking full-sleeved dress which revealed the hips of the model. The fabric was rich in color with printed flowers to give the royal character look. And finally topped the look with a beautiful golden tiara (see fig.10 B) The overall collection was dysfunctional and made it look chaotic in their way giving it the spooking and yet a delicate look to completely stay in the theme and the aim to subvert the notion of masculinity.

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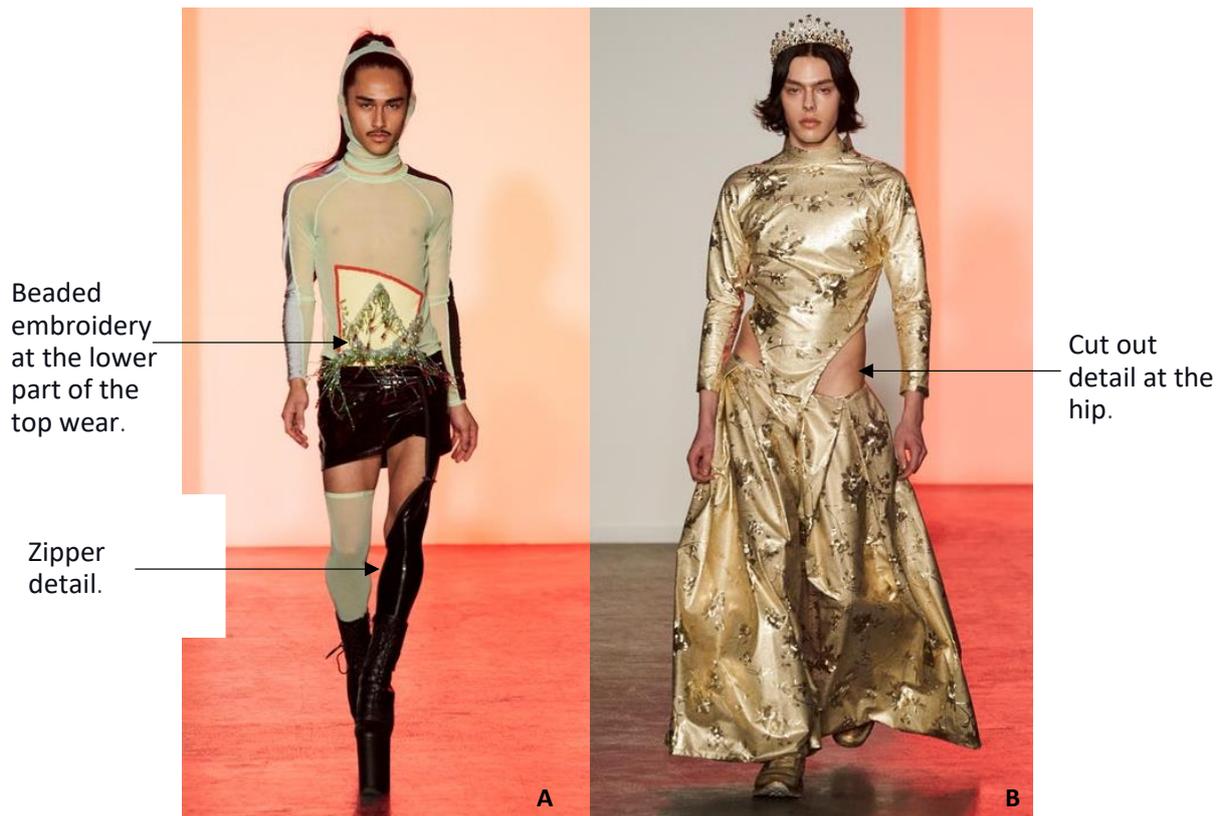


FIGURE 9 – Neil Grotzinger's NIHL A/W'20 collection, 'Villainy' (Shkoda L. 2018).

After analyzing Neil's gender agnostic designs and understanding his perception of queer fashion, appreciating his creative attempt to find approval in the mainstream fashion, researcher found it important to understand main genders' review on such designs so as to predict the further scope of queer fashion. With the same motive, researcher circulated online questionnaire to 100 young fashionistas between the age of 18 to 33. Sample was selected through thorough profile check and considering their interest in the fashion and its current trends. A request mail was sent to all the possible participants to participate in an online survey on the captioned topic and 60 of them agreed to participate in the survey.

This survey received responses from 50% male, 40% female, and the rest were non-binary and gender-fluid respondents. This survey gave a perspective to the surveyor of the thoughts that come to people's minds. This survey observed influence of the age to be one of the guiding force in being conservative to the set norms of the society. Age group of and above 29 years was found more exposed and aware to the gender stereotypes contrary to that of the age around 18 years old. This indicates people of older age are more prone to the basic gender stereotypes of 'man has to act masculine and a girl has to act feminine around them'.

To understanding the respondents' thoughts and their take on breaking the masculine stereotypes, designs of the gender agnostic designer Neil Grotzinger were presented to them through photographs. On the scale of 1 to 5, 45% (see figure 11) of the total respondents liked the concept of breaking masculine stereotypes through embellishments and embroidery, however, upon asking possible acceptability ratio of these designs (See fig. 1 to 10) in the society, a 28-year-old female positively responded that she thinks 'this is highly acceptable', whereas 26-28-year-old men were 'not quite sure if this would be highly acceptable in the society'.

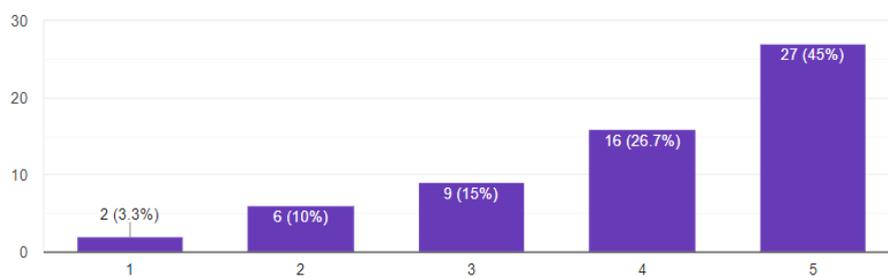


FIGURE 10 – Reponse on acceptability of Neil's designs in the society.

Overall, female participants were more positive to the acceptability of these designs by people around them than the male participants.

As acceptance of society is generalized and not in a hand of one individual, however, acceptance of one has potential to inspire the crowd, personal opinion of the respondents also mattered at length for this survey. Hence, the surveyor questioned that if the respondents were given a chance would they ever purchase or would like wearing any of Neil Grotzinger's garments. 27-year-old female respondent positively responded that, 'sure, it looks very quirky and I loved it' she specifically appreciated 'beautiful feminine touch, the embellishments, and also the silhouettes' and found it 'something new and [she] would go for it.' Another female respondent feels that 'this is something empowering and bold, which she aspires to be, and want to see this as something normal soon.' She also insisted upon wearing 'whatever they like or feel comfortable in and not classify clothes based on gender.' 24-year-old female respondent marked that what Neil is doing is 'needed today and that is okay for men to cry and a female to look more biff than a man.' On the other hand, only 1% male respondents were found positive for his designs. Majority (97%) of them clearly said that 'they

won't be comfortable wearing such garments' because either it is 'not their style' or they are 'not supportive of woman behavior in men'. However, 2% of the male respondents liked the designs and agreed to wear them if in future gender-neutral trends come into fashion. Men here proved to be more rigid and orthodox for their style. When women could easily adapt wearing pants and shirts, men seem to be more withdrawn towards the idea of accepting the stereotyped silhouettes and embroidery traditionally set for the women. So, such contrast of responses was highly observed throughout the survey majority of the female respondents were open to this idea and dint mind the exploration, and men were more proven to be a little rigid, and inclined to the perception of gender stereotypes. The non-binary respondents definitely liked the designs and think that these designs 'are for all the genders' and can 'break the stereotypes' and help them 'gaining acceptance in the society'.

After considering view points of main genders, the respondents' opinion on Neil's way of subverting masculine stereotypes and possibilities of giving the place and acceptance to the thried gender through his attempt in the society were asked. A 22 year's male respondent has a positive response as he thinks this 'can be worn by queer, male and female, and flaunted very confidently but depends on person to person and their personal choice'. Where as a 26-year-old female respondent thinks that Neil is 'helping them to come out confidently with their style'. Another repondent is of the opinion that 'these clothes break the laws of male stereotyping' and 'appeal to the audience that [soceity] doesn't identify as male'. Also, majority of the respondents (89%) strongly believe that 'the designer is doing a great job' and they 'like the way Neil blurred the line between typical male and female fashion'. Such positive responses prove that men and women are completely on board with Neil Grotzinger's idea and how he is opening doors for the queer community. He has brough the hope for the queers.

The survey concluded by asking if the respondents believe that this is could be the future of fashion which would help in subverting the masculine stereotypes where 30-year-old female respondent has positively marked that 'Yes, it can be' as she thinks that 'the society around us is changing drastically and at some point, the queer fashion will have its place and acceptance and she hopes to see that day very soon'. Another female respondent thinks that 'some people out there who wish to wear emotions and stay very close to what they feel and that audience could take

this fashion up in the future. A 30-year-old male respondent has connected the designs with the earlier fashion trend and a positively mentioned,

Yes, this should be the future of fashion because it's what we deserve! And fashion is a constant change there's always something new on the plate. For example, ripped jeans were introduced in the fashion industry and both men and women followed the trend, so maybe, if ripped jeans could become fashion then why not this. We sought inclusivity and that's why he thinks that this could be the future of fashion as it is more inclusive and promotes freedom of choice.

However, a 33-year-old man respondent thinks that 'this is very personal to people, it could be an addition, yes, but as a whole no because labeling fashion that's meant to be for a certain kind of gender identity does sort of deviate from the purpose of inclusivity'.

Such contrast of response is been highly observed through this survey where the majority of the respondents, male and female were found open to the fact that the queer audience do need a platform and not just queer any man who wants to wear something like this should be completely seen as normal and its time that these masculine stereotypes are broken. On the other hand, few male respondents support this idea but also feel that it is very personal and seem a little rigid, orthodox simply because of the set of perceptions on masculinity they've always been tagged with by the people around them.

CONCLUSION

As mentioned before queer style is more than just a trend. These people raise a toast on genderless fashion. They want recognition for their style uniquely and not seen or used as an insult. In today's time, the queer fashion is still not seen as a formality. Their style still deserves to reach out on a larger and deeper level because at the end of the day every person follows an individualistic style and expects freedom to follow that and this includes every gender. The difference of gender did affect the queer community a lot as they believed and wanted to wear something that they prefer and carry themselves with the same confidence as the other genders, hence Neil was like a ray of hope for this community. Neil Grotzinger is still taking his journey forward in breaking the notion of how to be, seem, or act as a male because they deserve the platform and the freedom to feel on amongst us. Neil Grotzinger's innovative designs and his very creative

way of subverting masculine stereotype by getting hand embroidery and hand embellishments into menswear was an eye-opener to the people who believed in gender norms and for the queer audience who believed that this kind of style was probably not done by anyone but craved for it.

With the positive responses from the youth like, ‘everyone should be freely able to wear what they like and it doesn’t matter what the society expects from the queers’ (male respondent of 24) and people should ‘have the freedom to wear what they feel most confident in, and shouldn’t be restricted by the billions of identity labels that exist’ (female respondent of 19), youth is showing more liberal attitude and acceptance. However, it is still not easy to break the stigma and accept queer as the gender-neutral fashion. The queer community has still a long path ahead to be accepted by all. However, creative brains like Neil is a motivation for them to believe in themselves, reject the social reproach and freely wear what their hormones crave for.

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FIGURE 4. Yotka S. 2020. Designs from Neil’s NIHL A/W ‘20 and S/S’18 collections [Online][Accessed on 20-08-2020] <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/fall-2020-menswear/nihl> and <https://in.pinterest.com/pin/737534876450023256/>

FIGURE 5. Shkoda L. 2018. Models at Neil’s Grotzinger SS19 collection titled ‘Subservient Authorities’. [Online] [Accessed on 24-09-2020] (Shkoda L. 2018) <https://www.vogue.com/article/nihl-spring-2019-menswear>

FIGURE 6, Shkoda L. 2018. Neil Grotzinger’s SS19 collection ‘Subservient Authorities’ .[Online] [Accessed on 24-09-2020] (Shkoda L. 2018) <https://www.vogue.com/article/nihl-spring-2019-menswear>

FIGURE 7, Shkoda L. 2018. Neil Grotzinger’s NIHL A/W’20 collection, ‘Villainy’. [Online] [Accessed on 01-10-2020] (Shkoda L. 2018) <https://www.vogue.com/article/nihl-spring-2019-menswear>

FIGURE 8, Shkoda L. 2018. Neil Grotzinger’s NIHL A/W’20 collection, ‘Villainy’. [Online] [Accessed on 01-10-2020] (Shkoda L. 2018) <https://www.vogue.com/article/nihl-spring-2019-menswear>

FIGURE 9, Shkoda L. 2018. Neil Grotzinger’s NIHL A/W’20 collection, ‘Villainy’. [Online] [Accessed on 01-10-2020] (Shkoda L. 2018) <https://www.vogue.com/article/nihl-spring-2019-menswear>

FIGURE 10, Shkoda L. 2018. Neil Grotzinger’s NIHL A/W’20 collection, ‘Villainy’. [Online] [Accessed on 01-10-2020] (Shkoda L. 2018) <https://www.vogue.com/article/nihl-spring-2019-menswear>

FIGURE 11. Kusmith Jai 2020. Reponse on acceptibility of Neil’s designs in the so-
ciety [Bar Chart] Primary data analysis.

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WHAT

Dossier

What do we talk about
when we talk about queer death?

ed. by Mattia Petricola

EVER

MATTIA PETRICOLA

Introduction: Researching Queer Death

ABSTRACT: The present article serves as an introduction to the dossier *What do we talk about when we talk about queer death?*, edited by M. Petricola. This introduction briefly interrogates the premises, scope, and objectives of Queer Death Studies (QDS) in such a way as to complement the views expressed by the contributors to this collection. I will begin to discuss the premises on which QDS are based in a preamble focused on Italo Calvino's book *Mr. Palomar*. Section one will provide a more systematic and analytical perspective on these same premises. I will move on to reconstruct some crucial moments in the genealogy of QDS in Section two and conclude by sketching a research program for QDS in Section three.

KEYWORDS: thanatology; death studies; queer theory; identity; category theory.

The six-part dossier to which these few pages serve as an introduction attempts to map some regions of the area of inquiry that sits at the crossroads of death studies (or thanatology) and queer studies. The multi-authored articles that follow, each made up of five to seven short essays, are meant to be read by (and accessible to) scholars from both these fields. They aim to give the reader an idea of what kind of questions one might address when researching queer death and what theories, methods, and hermeneutical tools one might adopt when answering those questions. The articles' titles (1/ *Theories and definitions*; 2/ *LGBTQ+ necropolitics*; 3/ *Queering death beyond the human*; 4/ *Queering death in the medical and health humanities*; 5/ *Writing and filming queer deaths*; 6/ *New perspectives in queer death studies*) already provide a preliminary map of the field.

The present introduction will not summarize the contents of the dossier – this task is covered by the articles' abstracts. Rather, it will try to briefly interrogate the premises, scope, and objectives of Queer Death Studies (abbreviated from now on as QDS) in such a way as to complement the views expressed by the contributors to this collection. I will begin to discuss the premises on which QDS are based in a preamble focused on Italo Calvino's book *Mr. Palomar*. Section one will provide a more systematic

and analytical perspective on these same premises. I will move on to reconstruct some crucial moments in the genealogy of QDS in Section two and conclude by sketching a research program for QDS in Section 3.

PREAMBLE: LEARNING TO BE DEAD

This preamble draws its title from the last chapter of Italo Calvino's 1983 collection of short fictions *Mr. Palomar*, in which the protagonist "decides that from now on he will act as if he were dead, to see how the world gets along without him" (CALVINO 1999 [1983]: 108). Mr. Palomar soon begins to discover that "being dead is less easy than it might seem" (*Ibidem*). How should he think about his relation with the world of the living? How is he supposed to conceptualize his afterlife identity? How should he define himself? And in relation to who/what?

The dead should no longer give a damn about anything because it is not up to them to think about it any more; and even if that may seem immoral, it is in this irresponsibility that the dead find their gaiety (110).

The problem is not the change in what he does but in what he is, or more specifically in what he is as far as the world is concerned. Before, by "world" he meant the world plus himself; now it is a question of himself plus the world minus him (109).

So he might as well get used to it: for Palomar, being dead means resigning himself to the disappointment in finding himself the same in a definitive state, which he can no longer hope to change (110).

Therefore Palomar prepares to become a grouchy dead man, reluctant to submit to the sentence to remain exactly as he is; but he is unwilling to give up anything of himself, even if it is a burden (125).

This train of thought, in the end, takes Palomar further and further beyond his death. Firstly, he contemplates the extinction of the human species, then he travels to the end of time itself:

Thinking of his own death, Palomar already thinks of that of the last survivors of the human species or of its derivations or heirs. On the terrestrial globe, devastated and deserted, explorers from another planet land; they decipher the clues recorded in the hieroglyphics of the pyramids and in the punched cards of the

electronic calculators; the memory of the human race is reborn from its ashes and is spread through the inhabited zones of the universe. And so, after one postponement or another, the moment comes when it is time to wear out and be extinguished in an empty sky, when the last material evidence of the memory of living will degenerate in a flash of heat, or will crystallize its atoms in the chill of an immobile order (125).

Mr. Palomar's musings might seem a little more than an idle, quintessentially post-modern conceptual game. However, behind them lies an only apparently absurd question that could serve as a crucial starting point for QDS as an intellectual and critical project: how do we learn to be dead?

This question, in turn, might be broken up into sub-questions as: how do we learn to categorize someone as dead? What does categorizing someone as dead imply (for us as individuals, for a group of people, for a whole culture)? How do we learn to rethink our identity and the identities of others when they begin to shift from life to death? How do we learn to *acknowledge* death?

1 QUEER, DEATH, QUEER DEATH: SOME THEORETICAL PREMISES

Death is not a natural event. This might appear as a provocative statement; in fact, this is the basic premise of a number of schools of thought within the field of thanatology. If we think of death as natural, we fail to acknowledge that death is, first and foremost, a social construct whose shape and structure change endlessly across time and space. Attaching an adjective to the word 'death' – natural, biological, universal, necessary, among countless others – often (always?) implies inscribing death within a system of knowledge, that is, according to Michel Foucault, within a system of power. If we think of death as an event, we fail to acknowledge the *process* of dying and, in more general terms, the different temporalities along which dying, death, mourning, and disposal unfold.

Since the primary aim of every social construct is that of categorizing the individuals of a given social group by assigning *identities* to them, the word "dead" can be said to refer to a social identity – whose exact structure and implications, once again, change dramatically from one culture to another. According to queer death studies, identities are not simply and passively possessed, but rather actively *performed* by the members of a social group. One needs to learn how to enact, embody, and recognize an identity – all

activities which, in turn, require knowledge and training. As an intellectual and critical endeavor, queer studies can be seen as based not only on the premise that identities are performances, but also on the idea that *every* identity construct should be problematized and deconstructed. From this perspective, queer studies and LGBTQ+ studies are not synonyms. In the words of Carmen Dell’Aversano, queer

does not simply maintain that it is OK to be gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender [...] but states that any construction of identity (including LGBT ones) is a performance constituting a subject which does not “exist” prior to it, and encourages to bring into being (both as objects of desire, of fantasy and of theoretical reflection and as concrete existential and political possibilities) alternative modes of performance (2010: 74-75).

Adopting an analogously wide and inclusive framework, Radomska, Mehrabi and Lykke (2019) define queer death studies as a field

addressing issues of death, dying, mourning and afterlife in a queering, relentlessly norm-critical mode, questioning ontologies, epistemologies and ethics, as well as bio- and necropolitical agendas, while affirmatively looking for alternatives (5).

In more concrete terms, this means that

QDS attends, among other things, to issues of diverse historical, cultural, social, political and economic conditions; to the entangled relations between human and nonhuman others in the current context of planetary environmental disruption; and to the differential experiences of marginalised communities, groups and individuals who are excluded from hegemonic stories and discourses on death, dying, grief and mourning (RADOMSKA, MEHRABI & LYKKE 2020: 88).

From a methodological perspective, as conceptualized by Radomska, Mehrabi and Lykke, QDS are based on the idea that “death becomes meaningful in terms of assemblages (DELEUZE & GUATTARI 2004) and intra-actions (BARAD 2007)”.

By looking at this description of QDS in the light of the premises that I posited earlier, QDS could be framed, in general terms, as a field tackling such questions as (among many others): which power-knowledge systems arrogate to themselves the right to situate the members of a given culture

along the life-death continuum? In other words, who *owns* this continuum? Who decides how to structure and define it? Which performances contribute to defining and structuring the identities along this continuum? What happens if someone (or something) cannot or *does not want to* adhere to these performances and identities?

In this sense, QDS can be defined as a hermeneutic stance aimed at problematizing and deconstructing the identities that define death, dying, mourning, and disposal within a given social group by analyzing the performances on which these identities depend. I will explore the implications of this definition later on; first, I will briefly investigate the origins of QDS.

2 WHERE DO QUEER DEATH STUDIES COME FROM?

Obviously, the definitions of QDS formulated by Radomska, Mehrabi, and Lykke between 2019 and 2020 did not emerge from a vacuum. Scholars and activists have been working at the intersection of thanatology and queer at least since the 1980s. As the contributions that follow will prove extensively, a seminal text for queer theory like Leo Bersani's *Is the rectum a grave?* can be considered, without hesitation, a pioneering work of QDS. Originally written as a review of Watney 1987, Bersani's essay dialogues with Foucault's history of sexuality, Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, and the theory of BDSM in order to study

what might be called a frenzied epic of displacements in the discourse on sexuality and on AIDS. The government [...] is more interested in those who may eventually be threatened by AIDS than in those stricken with it. There are hospitals in which concern for the safety of patients who have not been exposed to HIV takes precedence over caring for those suffering from an AIDS-related disease. Attention is turned away from the kinds of sex people practice to a moralistic discourse about promiscuity. The impulse to kill gays comes out as a rage against gay killers deliberately spreading a deadly virus among the "general public" (BERSANI 1987: 220).

Drawing on Watney's notion of the rectum as grave, Bersani embraces a disruptive, antisocial, apocalyptic view of the relation between queerness and death by affirming that

if the rectum is the grave in which the masculine ideal (an ideal shared – differently – by men and women) of proud subjectivity is buried, then it should be

celebrated for its very potential for death. Tragically, AIDS has literalized that potential as the certainty of biological death, and therefore reinforced the heterosexual association of anal sex with a self-annihilation originally and primarily identified with the fantasmatic mystery of an insatiable, unstoppable female sexuality. It may, finally, be in the gay man's rectum that he demolishes his own perhaps otherwise uncontrollable identification with a murderous judgment against him (222).

Such an apocalyptic view of queer death has been revived, from a Freudian-Lacanian perspective, by Lee Edelman in another classic of queer theory, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004).

Fundamental contributions to the field that we define today as QDS were also provided by another key figure for the development of queer studies like Judith Butler, who posited one of the main theoretical tenets of QDS in *Precarious Life* (2004):

[s]ome lives are grievable, and others are not; the differential allocation of grievability that decides what kind of subject is and must be grieved, and which kind of subject must not, operates to produce and maintain certain exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human: what counts as a livable life and a grievable death? (XIV-XV)

One year before the publication of *Precarious Life*, postcolonial thinker Achille Mbembe (2003) had coined terms like “necropolitics”, “necropower”, and “death-worlds”, that is, “new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to living conditions that confer upon them the status of the living dead” (MBEMBE 2019 [2016]: 92). Formulated in the context of postcolonial studies, Mbembe's theory has become an essential part of QDS' theoretical arsenal (see, for example, HARITAWORN, KUNTSMAN & POSOCCO 2014).

These are just a few examples of how we could investigate and reconstruct the cultural genealogy (or, rather, the cultural genealogies) of QDS in all their richness and plurality. Attempting to draw such genealogies could indeed be a major task in the context of a research program for QDS. In the next and final section, I will focus on what this research program might look like.

NOTES TOWARDS A RESEARCH PROGRAM FOR QUEER DEATH STUDIES

Defining QDS as the project of problematizing and deconstructing the identities that define death, dying, mourning, and disposal within a given social group by analyzing the performances on which these identities depend implies that QDS can develop along two main lines of research. The first line, rooted in the premise that identities can be defined as networks of traits, could deconstruct the mechanisms through which certain networks of traits create socially recognizable and valued identities while other networks generate dysphoric or socially devalued identities – for example, the trait “human” makes a life much more grievable than the trait “farm animal” or “glacier”. This line of inquiry might also benefit from the application of the branch of philosophy known as category theory (ROSCH 1999; LAKOFF 1987) to the study of social constructs.

The second line of inquiry, rooted in the premise that identity traits depend on performances, could deconstruct, on a more concrete and “hands-on” level, how specific performances are enacted, recognized, and associated to certain traits, as well as how traits are assigned to actual bodies of groups of bodies. For example: what happens if we examine the concrete performances through which the representatives of the medical power-knowledge system determine the clinical death of a patient (from checking the lack of pulse and breathing to ascertaining the absence of brain signals through a brain scan) from the perspective of QDS? Or the performances through which a death certificate signed by a medic leads to the creation of legal documents? Or the ways of expressing grief that are considered inadequate, embarrassing or obscene in a given social group?

These two lines of direction, of course, are closely intertwined and involved in a constant process of cross-fertilization. Given this framework, the potential objects of inquiry are countless: medical cases in which situating a patient along the life-death spectrum represents a particularly complex task (like coma or consciousness disorders); the environmental cost of human health (see STANDEFER 2020), for example in the cases of cancer therapy or COVID-19 vaccines; the relation between health and environmental humanities; the construction of what Susan Merrill Squier (2004) defines “liminal lives” (embryos and stem cells, among others); the relation between human and non-human practices of grief; the application

of QDS to design and architecture, from the making of caskets to the making of cemeteries; practices of ecological grief like those described in *Talk Death* (2020) and Milman (2021); the possibility to theorize the presence of a “necrophiliac gaze” in art (example might include, among many others, Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s *Ophelia* and Jacques-Louis David’s *The Death of Marat*); how art and fiction can help us re-imagine and re-construct the thanatological imagination of our time (RADOMSKA 2016; PETRICOLA 2018).

We have just begun to scratch the surface.

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What do we talk about when we talk about queer death?

1/ Theories and definitions

ABSTRACT: This is part 1 of 6 of the dossier *What Do We Talk about when We Talk about Queer Death?*, edited by M. Petricola. The contributions collected in this article sit at the crossroads between thanatology and queer theory and tackle questions such as: how can we define queer death studies as a research field? How can queer death studies problematize and rethink the life-death binary? Which notions and hermeneutic tools could be borrowed from other disciplines in order to better define queer death studies?

The present article includes the following contributions: – MacCormack P., What does queer death studies mean?; – Radomska M., On queering death studies; – Lykke N., Death as vibrancy; – Hillerup Hansen I., What concreteness will do to resolve the uncertain; – Olson P., Queer objectivity as a response to denials of death; – Manganas N., The queer lack of a chthonic instinct.

KEYWORDS: Thanatology, Death Studies, Queer Theory, Mourning, Grief.

WHAT DOES QUEER DEATH STUDIES MEAN?

To ask this question offers two immediate options, which will in turn, lead to a conservative outcome, or a proliferative force of trajectories unknown. We can think of queer death studies as oppositional – to straight life studies. We can think of queer death studies as something otherwise, as a tantalising encounter with *outside*. Outside the anthropocene. Outside normativity. Outside where death already dwells, beyond language beyond signification, incandescently fleshy and material nonetheless. Here is another false binary. For the matter (in every sense) of queer death studies is both. Striving, in activism, in philosophy, in art, to join the elite exclusory hegemony of straight being equated with life is a practice toward which many difference movements seemed compelled within anthropocentrism. The anthropocene has rarely privileged humans so much as certain kinds of humans. So counting means counting as those kinds, equivalence counting over additional qualities. If queers want to count we usually have to ‘pass’. All our lives we

pass or don't pass. We count as lives or don't count contingent on our passability. The dying, the never really counted as life-worthy, already queer, and the queer not valid human life, not willing or able to straighten up to reproduce in order to perpetuate the earth and nonhuman genocide every human generation perpetrates. None of us have belonged to human life. So within anthropocentrism were we ever alive? Were we already dead? Is that what draws us to the worlds of vampires, the undead, zombies with their colonialist insinuations, werewolves howling in packs and refusing to de-hirsute, hairy chested feminists and gendermorphous wrong-kinds, wrongkins, occupying unnatural positions within constellations of desiring flows that exceed, deny any positional, hierarchical stratification of subjects? Our unnatural nature belongs to nature, as anthropocentrism belongs to society. Anthropocentrism's repudiation of nature makes its occupation define 'life' as something highly synthetic, synthesising master signifying systems with enamourment of power, flesh an inconvenience that allows the not-counted to suffer and die, or to be exploited as flesh alone, labour, consumed in any variety of ways. If we don't live anthropocentrically, we live queer. If we live queer we never counted. So we are alive differently. To trauma, to mourning, for every manifestation of life in spite and wilful ignorance of its strata and subject. But also to fabulated monsters, ahuman perpetual becomings, desiring pulsations. Queer death studies are the resistances of creativity against anthropocentric definitions of life. Embracing precarity, treacherous to the dominant value of the dominant being. Traitors to humans. Not wanting to count within those parameters and never having done so anyway. We queer death studies activists were never alive but lived anyway. We were never not queer no matter how we tried to 'norm up'. Queer death time is the time of the mesh of nature and life in its infinite combinations succeeding the anthropocene. We deny the primacy of human exceptionalism and its reproductive compulsions. The thriving and flourishing of non-anthropocentric life, and the radical compassion of death activism that sees nurturing art in care are central. We don't covet your life, power performing as normalcy. We seek grace in existence and anthropocentric death as revolution.

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ON QUEERING DEATH STUDIES

What does “queer death” mean in “queer death studies” (QDS) is in fact a question that immediately requires rephrasing: what does the queering of death in queer death studies mean? And why to talk about queering death here and now? In the second half of the twentieth century, it became increasingly clear that the manufacturing of death had reached unprecedented planetary scales: colonial genocides and postcolonial violence; two world wars; the Cold War with its lingering spectre of threat from nuclear winter and radioactive waste; and the recognised since the 1970s ongoing environmental disruption, manifested in the annihilation of ecosystems and landscapes, extraction of resources, and turning of certain habitats into unliveable spaces for both nonhumans and humans alike (RADOMSKA, MEHRABI & LYKKE 2020).

Furthermore, culturally speaking, some deaths are not even recognised as deaths in the first place. As philosopher Patricia MacCormack writes:

Where even statistics only occur on abolitionist pages because most humans do not see death of the nonhuman as death; Where female death, racially motivated death, disabled death, LGBTQ death still do not seem to register as their own nations; Where the anthropocentric ego is a single point of perception of the world for an individual to get through and thrive and the Earth as a series of relations will always come second to individual survival, be it as excessive or as daily struggle. (2020: 109)

It is thus both crucial and urgent to zoom in on global as much as local mechanisms of necropolitics (MBEMBE 2003) that exert their power over the lives and deaths of human and more-than-human populations, making some deaths more grievable than others (BUTLER 2004).

Against this background, QDS calls for a rethinking of death, dying and mourning in their ontological, ethical and political terms, attuned to the present and whilst doing away with the perpetuation of “the epistemological and symbolic violence (with their practical, real-life consequences) of dismissing some deaths as not ‘worth enough’, not grievable enough, not even seen as ‘deaths’ in the full sense of the word” (RADOMSKA, MEHRABI & LYKKE 2020: 82). In other words, queering death means striving to approach it in unceasingly norm-critical ways, where ‘queering’ operates as a verb and an adverb, pointing towards a process and a methodology of questioning certainties and consistently disturbing the familiar, undoing “normative

entanglements and fashion[ing] alternative imaginaries” (GIFFNEY & HIRD 2008: 6) beyond the exclusive concern with gender and sexuality.

What follows, QDS is characterised by three major aspects that distinguish it from more conventional death-focused research: (1) its concern with necropolitics and necropowers, that is, the mechanisms of letting certain populations die through the instrumentalisation of “human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations” characteristic of modernity (MBEMBE 2003: 14); (2) its focus on the planetary-scale mechanisms of annihilation of the more-than-human in their ontological, epistemological and, most importantly, ethico-political dimensions; and (3) its critique of normative and exclusionary notions of the human subject, understood along the lines of a series of dichotomous divides characterising modernity (human/nonhuman; cis-/hetero-normative/queered other; ‘civilised’/‘savage’; etc.), which are prevalent in more traditional approaches to research on death, dying and mourning. In this way, QDS also draws on more and less kindred fields of research: post- and decolonial studies, critical race studies, feminist posthumanities and environmental humanities, critical animal studies, queer studies, feminist studies, critical disability studies, to name a few.

By doing so, QDS mobilises three critical-theoretical entangled and entangling moves: decolonising, posthumanising and queering (LYKKE in this dossier; LYKKE forthcoming 2022). The decolonising move encompasses both the undoing of necropolitics of post/colonial violence combined with capitalist extractivism, and turning towards pluritopic hermeneutics (TLOSTANOVA & MIGNOLO 2009). In doing so, decolonising death means refusing to follow the path of Western universalisms and instead engaging with the situated knowledge-seeking practices of indigenous philosophies and cosmologies, which shift towards different, critical-affirmative understandings of death.

The posthumanising move refers to systematic critique and dismantling of the planetary-scale machinery of annihilation of the more-than-human world in its ontological, epistemological and ethico-political magnitude. It encompasses critical analyses of the human/nonhuman divide and power differentials that have allowed for the reduction of the nonhuman to mere resource and instrument for human actions. In consequence, posthumanising death involves problematising philosophical and cultural meanings of extinction (cf. ROSE 2012); focusing on environmental violence, environmental grief, and nonhuman death manufactured *en masse* through

anthropocentric habits of consumption and extractivist destruction. Furthermore, it entails taking seriously the issues of responsibility, accountability and care for/in dying more-than-human worlds, while remaining grounded in radical critiques of human exceptionalism (HARAWAY 2008). One way to mobilise posthumanising death is by way of deterritorialisation (DELEUZE & GUATTARI 2004), where our understanding of death is no longer anchored in a value ascribed to the human subject, but instead moves towards “the multiplex, intra- and interacting ecologies of the non/living” (RADOMSKA 2020: 131), characterised by “strange new becomings, new polyvocalities” (DELEUZE & GUATTARI 2004: 211).

Finally, the queering move of QDS refers to both (1) open-ended deconstruction of normativities in their various incarnations (e.g. CHEN 2012), and (2) deconstructing and abolishing of heteropatriarchy, heteronormativity, binary gender and sexuality systems, governed by reproductive biopowers and reproductive futurism (e.g. EDELMAN 2008). Consequently, queering death in QDS ranges from unpacking and problematising modern Western ontologies of death and the life/death binary, grounded in Western philosophical and theological dualisms, to the critical analyses of the ways in which misogyny, trans- and queerphobia lead to ‘social death’, and how violence towards non-normative individuals strives to mark their lives and deaths as ‘non-grievable’ (RADOMSKA & LYKKE forthcoming).

In sum, through its three-partite analytics, QDS provides theoretical, methodological and ethico-political frameworks that are both crucial and necessary if, in a systematic manner, we are to analyse, critique and *resist* the entangled structures of global necropolitics – further amplified by the ongoing environmental, socio-economic and geo-political crises – and the accompanying systems of oppression: racism, sexism, speciesism, classism, and ableism, to name a few. Perhaps, if we follow this analytical path, it will open for us a critical and creative space for ontological and ethical reflection and different kinds of narratives in the times of global environmental disruption, violence and injustice, when “our common present always exists in the wake of a complicated past, and ahead, to a common future that may best be understood as an ongoing end” (ENSOR 2016: 55).

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DEATH AS VIBRANCY

From the beginning, queer theory has articulated the terms, queer/queering, as open-ended and fluid categories. Therefore, I do not opt for only one fixed way of talking about queering death. I define queer/queering, preferably to be used in its processual verbform, as terms which, first of all, refer to a general undoing of all kinds of norms, normativities and underlying structures. However, I also see such a definition as but one instant within a multiple spectrum, in which another instant is made up of meanings specifically related to the undoing of heteropatriarchy, heteronormativity, and the gender binary. For me, queer/queering death at the latter end of the spectrum of meanings implies a situating and specifying of the genealogies of my embodied, queerfeminine desires. In this instant, I explore my urge to queer death, and the ways in which it is personally grounded in my queerfeminine desires to reconnect with my passed away beloved queermasculine, lesbian life partner. I take these queerfeminine desires as a queer-femme-inist (DAHL 2012) point of departure for my political, theoretical and ethical work to queer death. In sum, my work to queer death scales (zoom in/out) (JAIN & STACEY 2015; LYKKE 2019a) between a personal point of departure and over-arching ethico-political perspectives.

In my forthcoming book *Vibrant Death. A Posthuman Phenomenology of Mourning* (LYKKE 2022), I follow this scaling practice insofar as I build an ethico-political figuration of death as vibrant from the personal story of my queerfeminine desires to reconnect with my passed away partner, now turned to ashes mixed with sand in a seabed built of algae (species: diatoms) 55 mio years ago. Diatoms are queer critters. They defy categorizations as either plants or animals (ALLEN *et al.* 2011). They are also old and wise. They have been around on the Earth for around 150 million years, and living diatoms are still today filling the waters of the planet, including the waters, where my beloved's ashes are scattered. Diatoms belong to the species of phytoplankton, which, like terrestrial plants, contains chlorophyll, transforms light to chemical energy through photosynthesis, and produces oxygen. Living diatoms are today reported annually to generate about 20% of the planet's oxygen. In 2011 it was discovered that diatoms, earlier considered plant-like due to their ability to photosynthesize, also have an urea cycle making them able to excrete nitrogen and metabolize in ways which, until then, were assumed to characterize only animals

and animal-like creatures (ALLEN *et al.* 2011). An alien, non-human, but very vibrant and queer world, abounding with living and fossilized diatoms, makes up the watery assemblages of which my beloved's ashes have become part (LYKKE 2019b). Symphysizing (i.e. bodily empathizing, LYKKE 2018) with my beloved's non-human remains and the waters where the ashes are scattered, I explore my position of excessive mourner to contemplate the concepts of life/death and human/non-human, taking lessons to reontologize them. Reflecting on this world, and trying to co-become with it, brought me to end my book (LYKKE 2022) with a queering question: What if every critter's death was vibrant?

Implied in this question, is the argument that life/death and human/non-human should be seen as continuous, and not as dichotomously separated. I ground this argument in an immanence philosophical, vitalist materialist and spiritualist materialist framework (BENNETT 2010; BRAIDOTTI 2006, 2013; ANZALDUA 2015). I argue that life and death have been made into opposites by Western modernity, in its entanglement with Christianity and Cartesianism, and their celebration of destructive linear thought and contempt for flesh and matter, human as well as non-human. Therefore, queer/queering death means for me to approach death radically differently, i.e. to understand death as part of a life-death continuum, and to work from embodied desires to spiritually materially recognize and honour the ways in which decomposing and growing are totally entangled in each other – what feminist biophilosopher Marietta Radomska (2020) articulated as matter's being in a state of non/living. Rethinking death like this means to unlearn the epistemic habits of the sovereign human subject (often materializing in white, heteropatriarchally acting bodies who pursue (their own) immortality, while arrogantly sustaining norms and structures which make most other categories of bodies exploitable and disposable). Instead we should learn to understand ourselves as part of an egalitarian planetary kinship of vulnerable and mortal bodies, human and non-human, organic and inorganic, animate and inanimate.

Along these over-arching lines, I find it crucial to intersectionally combine queering with posthumanizing and decolonizing (see also Radomska in this special issue). Decolonizing means making visible and undoing the necropowers and necropolitics of colonialism, capitalism, and racism, which haunt societies, pushing forward structurally enforced distinctions between disposable/non-disposable, grievable/non-grievable bodies. This

perspective is entangled with a posthumanizing one, insofar as disposable/non-disposable, grievable/non-grievable bodies are to be understood not only within the framework of hierarchical human-human relations, but also against the background of a general casting of all non-human critters as in principle disposable, exploitable, and non-grievable. Entangling with decolonizing and posthumanizing efforts to undo necropolitical structures, queering death means making visible and critiquing not only norms and normativities, but also underlying structures which keep up norms and normativities. However, staying in a critical mode is not enough. The search for alternatives is crucial as well. The critique of structural and normativizing aspects of capitalist, post/colonial and speciesist necropolitics, the arrogant making live and letting die of vast (human and non-human) populations of disposable bodies must go hand in hand with efforts to create elsewhere-spaces for doing things otherwise (LYKKE 2019a). My question: what if every critter's death was vibrant (LYKKE 2022) is critically-affirmatively addressing the search for such open-ended spaces and timescapes for thinking and acting differently.

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WHAT CONCRETENESS WILL DO TO RESOLVE THE UNCERTAIN

Talking about (queer) death we often find ourselves chewing through frontiers put in place by conventional ideas about what life is. To illustrate, I will use an aspect of my own research,¹ which – while with no intention to dismiss the importance of insights harbored in this field at large – wonders what happens if one reads the biomedical realization of grief as diagnosis as a response to something else?²

“Complicated Grief” (CG),³ write Shear *et al.*, “entails harmful dysfunc-

¹ HILLERUP HANSEN forthcoming.

² Grief was added to *the International Classification of Diseases* (ICD) in 2018 and is awaiting entry into *the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM).

³ That is, grief symptoms that do not wane or disappear after a set period of time. Here is an example of how “[p]rolonged and intensified acute grief” will have the bereaved show “symptoms of strong yearning for the person who died, frequent thoughts or images of the deceased person, feelings of intense loneliness or emptiness and a feeling that life without this person has no

tion in that a normal healing process has been derailed [... it] reflects an underlying psychobiological dysfunction” (2011: 3); “CG is a recognizable syndrome that can be reliably identified with several rating scales [...]” (*Ibid.*: 4).⁴

This definition signals, first, to the influence biomedicine has had on psychiatry broadly.⁵ Looking to the molecular to decipher pathology, biomedicine has established a causal relationship between the brain and the mind, making mental illness a reflection of its presumed biological basis (ROSE 2001: 197-8).⁶ Secondly, in this framing of the biological as cause⁷ surfaces biomedicine’s (neo)vitalist understanding of and investment in human life qua its organic capacity to live (*Ibid.*: 42).⁸

Couched in this causality, the argument that predominantly follows grief’s rendering as pathology – namely, *for* the necessary, even inevitable, return of the “bereaved subject” to perceived normalcy (e.g. Shear *et al.* 2013; ZISOOK *et al.* 2012) – comes to deliver a normatively framed level of life energy as a neutral and uncontestable (because biologically wired)

purpose or meaning. Complications also lead to dysfunctional thoughts, maladaptive behaviours and emotion dysregulation such as troubling ruminations about circumstances or consequences of the death, persistent feelings of shock, disbelief or anger about the death, feelings of estrangement from other people and changes in behaviour focused on excessive avoidance of reminders of the loss or the opposite, excessive proximity seeking to try and feel closer to the deceased, sometimes focused on wishes to die or suicidal behaviour.” (SHEAR *et al.* 2011: 3-4) See also Zisook *et al.*’s definition of ‘complicated bereavement’ (2012: 426).

⁴ This is a version of the general definition of grief one encounters in the research literature that has come out of the fields of medicine, psychiatry and public health before, but concentrating around, the removal of the ‘Bereavement Exclusion’ from the 2013-edition of the DSM.

⁵ While Shear *et al.* include “behavioral” and “psychological” aspects in their definition of CG (2011: 3), the centrality of their exemplary alignment of “psychobiological dysfunction” with “brain” and “underlying biology” (*Ibid.*: 5) makes the dominance of, what Nikolas Rose calls, biomedicine’s “molecular” (2001: 215-6, 253-4) lens apparent. Rushing to aid this point is the context in which this alignment emerges where the treatment of, so called, “complicated grief” with anti-depressants has become possible with a much more pervasive push toward the use of psychopharmacology to treat mental illness (RABINOW & ROSE 2006; HORWITZ & WAKEFIELD 2007).

⁶ In the words of Rose “mind is what brain does” (198). The term ‘underlying’ should therefore not be read as an indication of an older or more classical understanding of the brain as this deep and abstract phenomenon (130; SEDGWICK 1981: 255) but rather as a 1:1 relation and mechanics in which the biological appears to be the control room that decides what is given expression, externally, as mental ‘dys/functioning’.

⁷ Thus denoting a relation of impact *and* the biological as engine or vehicle i.e., as that which sets things into motion.

⁸ Elaborating the quality of this investment in the context of biomedicine’s ‘molecular’ approach to the human body, Rose writes, “what is at issue is vitality at the level of the organism, where the very meaning and limits of life itself are subject to political contestation” (*Ibidem*).

fact of human life.⁹ Still, the rather impressive epistemological feat, that is the realization of grief as diagnosis, manages something more. For hints of *what*, one need look no further than to a queer uptake of another vitalist discourse. This is, Freudian psychoanalysis (or its theorizations) illustrated, in the context of my work, by Leo Bersani.¹⁰

Wanting more from Freud's concept of drive than a theory of "normative sexual development" (1987: 217), Bersani picks up Freud's vitalist understanding of sex drive *as* libidinal or life force where it gestures to sex's "value of powerlessness" because denoting a "radical disintegration and humiliation of the self" (*ibidem.*)¹¹ Approaching sexual pleasure (*jouissance*) as but one expression of life as energetic force, Bersani makes an afterthought of the subject who, as the case of grief's biomedicalization well exemplifies, usually stands as a transcendental marker of (human) being in a Western tradition of philosophy and knowledge production.¹²

While left rather unexplored for another urgent point about the deeply violent nature of the Symbolic, the space of possibility left open by (my reverse engineering of) Bersani's reading of Freud holds out an intriguing insight.¹³ Namely, that life is always more than or in excess of its capture in human form.¹⁴ Noticeably provided by an alternative use of vitalism, this concept of life offers a different ontological point of departure than what its biomedical rendering – through the route of the subject's return to

⁹ What I mean to stress here is how a vitalist concept of life is influenced by normative ideations of how life should be *lived*, specifically, by contemporary ideals of happiness and wellbeing. See for example CVETKOVICH 2012; AHMED 2013; SHILDRICK 2015.

¹⁰ Interestingly Freud appears in the biomedical literature on grief (e.g. SHEAR *et al.* 2011). Because of the general shunning of psychoanalysis from the field of biomedicine, I do tend to think of his function as leverage for a biomedical point – which, by the way, has nothing to do with his concept of mourning (and melancholia) and the argument he makes in relation to it – as an indication of his near-pop cultural status more than it reflects a sincere intellectual and scientific alliance. This intriguing juncture remains, however, one of the reasons why I find it relevant to bring psychoanalytic insights to bear on a contemporary biomedical discourse.

¹¹ This is a super speedy and condensed version of a much more elaborate reading (HILLERUP HANSEN forthcoming).

¹² Loyal to the theoretical environment his argument is embedded in, and also to have it host a dose of critical insight on the kind of violence this concept denotes, Bersani names the subject a "proud subjectivity" (222).

¹³ The space I name ontological possibility, Bersani only remarks on in passing and by reference to Freud's returning speculations on sexual pleasure (217) as thresholds of intensities that have "the organization of the self [...] momentarily disturbed by sensations or affective processes" (*Ibid.*).

¹⁴ For examples of different (from this and each other) routes that remark on a similar point about the excess of animacy and life, respectively, see CHEN 2011; ALAIMO 2008.

‘normalcy’ – makes available.

Thus, Bersani points to the range a concept of vitalism traverses while he illustrates how life is not a neutral phenomenon. It is molded and often with great violence.¹⁵ Consequently, the subject begins to look more like a model to capture what life *is/should be*, which in turn leaves me speculating if the troubling yet impressive epistemological feat of bringing grief as diagnosis into being also holds another quality?¹⁶

With the rendering of grief as “biological dysfunction” an abstract phenomenon, entailing ontological openness and existential uncertainty beyond what can be captured and resolved medically, is *made* concrete, physical, specific. Meaning, in describing grief in biological terms (physical) and defining it as ‘syndrome’ (specific), these reparative efforts may (also) be seeking to mend the blow of uncertainty loss impacts – either for the first time or over again – not just into a specific life but a steady (ontologically speaking), fixable (epistemologically speaking) world.¹⁷

Gauged through this prism, a biomedical literature’s confident parading of a solution appears as a near-anxious measure of (self)protection against an, indeed overwhelming, ontological openness. With biomedicine serving as but one example, my symptomatic reading of what concreteness does to avert or resolve the abstract, open and uncertain, comes from a place of compassion toward a relatable need to repair (so as to feel safe and/or make things better). That said, this reading means to lean into the space of possibility highlighted above to explore what forms and modalities being may take (i.e. the range of existence).

¹⁵ Variations over this critical insight may be found in black studies (e.g. WYNTER 2015) as well as anti- and posthumanism (e.g. BRAIDOTTI 2013).

¹⁶ Offering an, in this context, uncommon reading of the aggressions unleashed at gay men in particular during the early years of the US AIDS epidemic, Bersani sees in homophobia the ‘symbolic’ itself being triggered by and surging to calm ‘excessive’ energies into a malleable form. Transposed to the biomedical realization of grief, to my mind, this insight has the subject appear as at once the result of and a formula used for the eradication of unorganized life energies, rather than (as is the implied position in the biomedical logic of reparation) a natural state of being at which reparative return is aimed.

¹⁷ Here I am pointing both to a representationalist account of reality defined by ontologically inherent and independently existing objects (BARAD 2003) as well as to an embodied sense of safety with/in the world that finds support in a broad generic range, spanning from scientific discourse (the biomedical being but one example) to knowledge and narrative more broadly or commonly, such as the kind of stories we tell, so as to convince, ourselves that ‘everything will be OK’. Such embodied sense of safety is also very much a question of privilege and the material conditions in place to envelop some lives in more stability, comfort and protection than others.

In ending, here are some avenues this reading opens, which my research tracks. Textures to explore the flexing and morphing modalities of being unfold as the affective and sensory experiences of the, so called, ‘bereaved subject’ who slips from and jolts out of a ‘normal’ level of life.¹⁸ So too does the ‘deceased’ – who, when marked as “hallucination” (e.g. CASTELNOVO *et al.* 2015), is altogether dismissed as nonexistent – offer site to explore the forms presence might take when not forced to appear in terms physical and at the present moment.¹⁹

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QUEER OBJECTIVITY AS A RESPONSE TO DENIALS OF DEATH

When I was around nine years-old I followed my dad – as I often did after he picked me up from school – through the basement of the family business he co-owned with my grandpa Lyle, toward my dad’s tiny, cluttered office on the other side of the boiler room. The trip to his office took us past a penny candy machine that stood against the wall in a shared, basement office space with doors to the boiler room, the casket display room, the service elevator, and the small, two-table “prep room”. On this day, Bruce, the only licensed mortician employed by my dad and grandpa, stood over a dead human body. “Hey Bruce!” I called, glancing through the ever-open prep room door. (This was a work space, and the only door that was *always* closed was the one that separated this space from the lushly carpeted, amber lit casket display room, through which “families” – my dad’s customers – walked to shop for caskets.) No more than a few steps into the

¹⁸ I am by no means trying to make a positive spin on what are, arguably, difficult and taxing experiences related to grief (the same way arguing they are modes of resistance, vis-à-vis the expectations that shape neoliberal subjecthood, can have the unfortunate effect of romanticizing depression or other mental health struggles). What I am, however, trying to signal is a (reading) ‘otherwise’ whose critical and affirmative potencies are not defined by dichotomies such as positive/negative, good/bad, resistance/coercion etc. As example, I am too briefly recapping my alternative reading of grief’s symptomatic profile – which can be found elsewhere in full length (Hillerup Hansen forthcoming) – as a way to reconfigure affective and sensory experiences related to grief beyond their function as diagnostic index (cf. footnote 3).

¹⁹ I am pointing to Jacques Derrida’s characterization of a metaphysics of presence, founded, he argues, in the verifiable “physical presence and time of the present” (1996; see also DERRIDA 2012).

boiler room I stopped dead in my tracks. What did I just see? Retracing my path, I stood before the open prep room to survey the scene.

Wearing little more than a white apron to protect his dress shirt, tie, and suit pants – no gown, cap, face shield, goggles, or shoe coverings, for this was the late 1970s, roughly a decade before the advent of what John Troyer calls the “HIV/AIDS Corpse” (2020: 59) and its concomitant PPE. Bruce stood facing me on the opposite side of a white, ceramic table that tilted slightly to my right toward a sink lying far too low for comfortably washing hands. This sink had for decades received various bodily fluids, as well as some of the embalming fluids used to prepare and preserve bodies for viewing. At the slightly raised end of the table the head of a dead man sat raised on a hard plastic, rose-colored head rest. The skin was pulled back from the man’s open rib cage, revealing muscle, bone, and an empty torso. An organ donor lay on the table.

For the first time in my life, it struck me that the normalcy of human corpses in my daily experience was very abnormal (though I did not have the capacity to think it queer). The things with which I had grown so familiar – dead bodies in various states of dress or undress, black body bags with broad, rough zippers, the smell of embalming fluids (for me inseparable from the fusty, chalky taste of stale penny candy), the sights and sounds of grieving people, hearses, the back doors and insides of nursing homes, hospital morgues and loading docks, cannulas, trochars, bristly pink eye caps, those uncomfortable-looking rose-colored head rests, collapsible casket trucks skirted in ruffled red velvet, organ music, eulogies, and flower arrangements heavy with lilies and gladiolas – these things were now emerging from the background of my childhood, and they were growing more powerful. I soon learned that I could wield my familiarity with the dead to make people feel uncomfortable and to make people laugh – often both at the same time. As a middle schooler, playful jokes about cannibalism and necrophilia were the spellcraft through which I controlled the narratives, fantasies, and affects surrounding the mysterious source of my family’s livelihood.

But the power I wielded as an adolescent was coiled in the privilege of a birthright: a birthright that granted access to the dead, and that permitted movement through *all* the spaces of the funeral home. I could walk through walls. More literally, I could walk through ever-closed doors that separated the “front stage” spaces (staged for public rituals of grief and

consumption) from the “back stage” spaces (reserved for professional rites of knowing and production). Being able to see – and to touch, smell, hear, and taste (in penny candy, in my fingertips) – all the spaces and textures of the funeral home meant that, in *my* experience, very little was forbidden. Moreover, as a straight, cisgender, white, male I cannot claim to *be* queer in any unproblematic sense. There! I just came clean. (I also just got dirty – like “[subject] matter out of place”(DOUGLAS 1966).) How to sort this. Donna Haraway teaches me here.

Vision is *always* a question of the power to see – and perhaps the violence implicit in our visualizing practices. With whose blood [and flesh] were my eyes crafted? (HARAWAY 1988: 585)

It is perhaps a stroke of moral luck that my seeing eyes were crafted by a *donor* – by someone who (I presume) *willingly* gave his flesh to others. My eyes were crafted, or, more precisely, ‘roughed-in’, by willing flesh and blood. But that fortunate logic only goes so far. The donor’s flesh was exceptionally accessible, but his body was one among hundreds that I had the power to see. Still, my view was not “unmarked” and “self-identical” (*Ibid.*). I saw dead flesh from a position of a funeral service insider: a normative position powered by social, legal, cultural, professional, economic, and material networks. The funeral-industrial complex wields potent necropower. Yet my position was (and remains) marked as deviant. I was becoming aware of a split through myself that mimicked the boundaries between the front and back stage spaces of the funeral home: a split not unlike the one my then-six-year-old daughter pointed to when, during our third day together in Santiago, Dominican Republic, she asked, “Dad, would I be me if I wasn’t *me*?” Would I be me if I had grown up differently? Would I be me if I had never seen dead bodies with these powerful, deviant eyes? Something opens up in the passage between ‘I’ and ‘me’. George Herbert Mead (2015 [1934]) found “generalized others” moving through that passage. María Lugones (1987) found room to move, play, and love in that space. Donna Haraway (1988) found space for objectivity in that opening. Queer theorists explore a seemingly infinite source of social-creative potential in the passage between an “I” and “me” that are free to associate or dissociate, or to collaborate or contend with ever-evolving social, political, biological, ethical, and sexual normativities.

What sorts of *necro*-normativities and *thanato*-normativities will emerge in response to the question, “what do we talk about when we talk about queer death?” Is there anything special about the normativities surrounding death and “dead matter” (SCHWARTZ 2015)? Or are matters of death and dead matter just arbitrarily bounded objects of inquiry or domains of action?

In 1991, while in college, I briefly worked as a live-in night attendant and embalming assistant at a Fargo, North Dakota funeral home, where I was expected to do a wide variety of jobs, including lawn mowing, hearse and limousine washing, vacuuming, furniture dusting, answering phones, assisting with funerals and visitations, body removals (from private homes, nursing homes, hospitals, roadsides, train stations, etc.), and assisting licensed embalmers with their techno-artistry. One reason I quit this job was because, in my employers’ eyes, each of my tasks was considered (and compensated) the same as any of the others. Yet, it seemed to me there were important differences between vacuuming a floor and aspirating a dead body, between washing a car and washing a corpse. After I quit the funeral home, I took a job as an after-hours infectious waste janitor at a Fargo hospital. My job, which I shared with two or three others, was to collect the red bags, the contents of red, plastic sharps containers, and the waste from the chemotherapy room. These things were not handled by the “regular” janitorial staff. There are different kinds of waste and different kinds of “cleaning up”. Here I found some recognition of the differences that went unmarked in the Fargo funeral home. Functions and structures matter.

When we talk about queer death, do we talk about a *special* site for queering? Do we talk about *unique* agencies and practices? Do we talk about hitherto underexplored and underappreciated forms of experience, labor, embodiment, and ways of knowing? Do we talk about whom and what have been excluded (and *by* whom and *by* what) from our individual and collective recognitions of, and encounters with, death? We talk about all of these things, and talking about all of these things holds forth the possibility, I want to suggest, of *queer objectivity* – an onto-ethic-epistemology (BARAD 2007) of conversation and exchange: not an objectivity that reduces death and the dead body to passively inert objects for collective conversation and analysis; not an objectivity that approaches death as a resource; not an objectivity that fails to privilege perspectives that warrant

privilege; and not an objectivity that hypostatizes disruption as the ultimate guide to life, death, reality, and imagination. Rather, queer objectivity recognizes death as an actor – sometimes a collaborator, sometimes an adversary, sometimes a fellow traveler – that has its say in ever-shifting assemblages of humans, more-than-humans, and technologies at a variety of scales: individual, social, ecological, planetary. Death plays the intruder, whose interruptions cryonicist “immortalists” (FARMAN 2020) seek to silence. Death’s prolific production of corpses during the COVID-19 pandemic has taxed governments, grievors, dyers, first responders, and “last responders” (ROSENFELD 2021). Death marks bodies as those that may die, those that must die, those that may be forgotten, or those that must be remembered. Death isn’t impartial. And the study of death should reflect that fact. It makes sense for queer objectivity to privilege non-normative voices – especially the voices of those who challenge dominant norms of gender and sexuality – for it is in privileging non-normative voices that the contours of death’s partiality get seen and felt most clearly and most deeply.

It has been over thirty years since I have touched a dead human body, but less than ten years since I transitioned from a philosophy department to a Science and Technology Studies (STS) department, and, in so doing, discovered death studies. As a philosopher I wrote and taught about both epistemology (including feminist epistemology) and normative and applied ethics. As an STS and death studies scholar, I have translated these interests into teaching and writing about technological expertise, gender, bodies, and labor with respect to the processing and disposal of dead human bodies. Given my background, it should come as no surprise that my STS/death studies scholarship foregrounds questions about professionalization, labor, and expertise. Funeral industrialists (including funeral directors, embalmers, cremationists, and cemetery operators) have an interest in marking themselves as occupants of a distinctive social and professional domain – the domain of “death care”.

There are multiple means by which funeral industrialists delimit the bounds of their professional jurisdiction and cultural authority over death care. Evoking the Weberian concepts of “status groups” and “castes”, Spencer Cahill (1999) shows how mortuary science students at a North American community college deploy their deviant familiarity with dead human flesh as a “mark of honor” or “nobility” (117) that sets them apart

from a generalized other that is in turn marked by “pathological death denial” (113).

This rhetoric of death denial and public ignorance was central to these students’ professionalization. It transforms the stigma of their chosen occupational identity into a mark of honor: funeral directors’ familiarity with and knowledge of death and its aftermath set them not only apart from but above the death denying lay public. (CAHILL 1999: 114)

Memorable appeals to a purported cultural pathology of “death denial” include both Ernest Becker (1973) and Philippe Ariès (1981), and the rhetoric of death denial remains alive and well. Proponents of the contemporary, U.S. home funeral movement use the term to set themselves apart not only from a generalized other, but also from the normative institutions and practices of funeral industrialists (OLSON 2016). Champions of “death positivity”, too, use death denial as a foil for their own ability and willingness to discuss the particularities and practicalities of death, dying, and the disposition of human remains (DOUGHTY 2021). As Lyn Lofland (2019 [1978]) points out, death denial repeatedly gets evoked as the proper antagonist to higher, nobler, or more *authentic* relationships with death. Lofland is skeptical of the reality – let alone the pathological nature – of death denial, but, she notes, “the importance” of the rhetoric of death denial “. . . is not its ‘truth’ but its utility” as a tool for challenging “the ‘conventional view of death’” or “the conventional wisdom about death” (73).

Queer death studies, too, can make use of death denial as a tool for challenging normativities that dominate death studies. Queer death studies can strategically deploy death denial as a point of leverage for critiquing powerful, partial perspectives that really do *deny* non-normative perspectives on (and experiences of) death, dying, and the disposal of dead human bodies. Queer death studies can reveal the *truth* of death denial’s realities by responding to the voices and fleshed of those whose relationships with death have been denied. In doing so, queer death can avoid *caste*-ing itself as a status group by refusing the heroic goal of authenticity and embracing, instead, the attentive exchange of *queer objectivity*.

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THE QUEER LACK OF A CHTHONIC INSTINCT

Norwegian novelist Karl Ove Knausgaard opens his celebrated novel *Death in the Family* (2009) with the observation that the sight of a corpse is taboo and that we as a society do the utmost to hide the dead body from public view. Why can't a dead body be on display for an hour or two? Why must it immediately be removed or covered? He writes that it is "as though we possessed some kind of chthonic instinct, something deep within us that urges us to move death down to the earth whence we came" (2009: 7).

The use of the word "chthonic", derived from the Greek word *khthonios* meaning "of the earth", is curious (FONTELIEU 2010: 152). Chthonic refers to what lies underneath the Earth's surface, that is, in the underworld (FAIRBANKS 1900: 242). The Greeks worshipped both Chthonic gods such as Hades and Persephone who flourished in darkness, as well as the Olympian deities that are associated with light. But as Burckett and Marinatos point out, "the semiotics of light and darkness are nothing if not complex in Greek thought" (2010: xv). For the Greeks, light may represent life, order, and vision, and darkness evil, violence, and ignorance; but the line separating the two was often blurred (BURCKETT & MARINATOS 2010: xv). This is because there is a surprising duality to the term: chthonic evokes both abundance (light) *and* a state of darkness (FONTELIEU 2010: 152). As Burckett and Marinatos wryly intimate: "creatures of darkness ... need to surface or communicate their existence in the world of light" (2010: xvii). The chthonic deities were connected to souls and for this reason they evoked both dread and hope as the Greeks sought their blessings for the journey into the afterlife (FAIRBANKS 1900: 252). By worshipping chthonic deities, Greeks were, according to Fontelieu, "participating in a relationship with the projected darker parts of their own nature" (2010: 152).

In classical studies, Fontaine has traced the dualism of light and darkness in the Greeks and beyond and argues that dualistic thought can be found in all places and at all times, suggesting that it is necessary to make sense of the world (1986). Succumbing to the depths of the underworld, and the light/dark dualism that such a descent implies, is a metaphor that has extended beyond classical studies and religion and into the disciplinary areas of psychoanalysis and literary studies. Fontelieu reads the Greek worship of Chthonic cults and darkness through a psychoanalytical lens and suggests it was liberating for the Greeks insofar as it acknowledged

the darker parts of human nature:

Today, rather than a reverential attitude toward the awesome power of the chthonic force, even in psychological systems and religions, much of this drive is the target for a life long battle to contain, banish, or defeat it in oneself and in society. Unlike the Greek chthonic cults, today darkness is not worshipped, it is feared. Denial of the dark side of the soul (dark did not mean evil to the chthonic cults, but implied an insufficiency of illumination) inevitably creates projection of one's own unacknowledged urges onto others. (2010: 152)

Fontelieu's reading of the Chthonic realm is drawn from Jungian psychoanalytic theory that also toys with a dualism between darkness and light. According to Jung: "Sexuality is of the greatest importance as the expression of the chthonic spirit [which] is 'the other face of God,' the dark-side of the God-Image" (1968: 168). The chthonic realm can function as a constructive site where Jung's individuation process can be accomplished: the unification of the Self is attained by journeying towards the underground of human consciousness. Literary theory has adopted the Jungian idea that individuation is achieved through unique psychological phases. As Kiliçarslan describes the process: "The *Chthonios* is where archetypes reside and wait to be explored through mythological descent into the underground (*Katabasis*) which begins with the persona and ends at the Self, the deepest layer of the psyche" (2008: 55). By descending into the underworld characters can "face their true identity", revealing their subconscious desires and motivations as they "voyage towards self-realization" (KILIÇARSLAN 2008: 55-56).

If descending into the underworld is such a fundamental part of achieving self-realization, whether in individuals or texts, it is telling that societies tend to banish darkness from plain sight. Knausgaard's contention that we are possessed by "some kind of chthonic instinct ... that urges *us* to move death down to the earth whence we came" (my emphasis) is therefore an apt metaphor to describe modernity's quest for lightness (2009: 7). But the "us" in Knausgaard's formulation not only acts as a universalizing totality – we are all one, we all share a *chthonic instinct* that makes us human – but also, I suggest, erases queer subjects that do not always have the privilege of being able to "move death down to the earth" and into the underworld. Here, then, lies a simple provocation: Queer subjects, as much as they would like to "move death down to the earth", are continually

reminded that their existence unsettles and exceeds the binary between life and death. Or to paraphrase Burkett and Marinatos, the semiotics of light and darkness are nothing if not complex in queer lives (2010: xv). I am not referring to death here as a finality, even though for many queer subjects death is often final (HIV/AIDS, transphobic femicide, hangings), but rather as a symbol that queer subjects experience as a looming presence. Queer subjects, because of their very queerness, not only do not have a chthonic instinct but are rather defined by a *lack* of such an instinct.

By saying that queers lack a chthonic instinct I am not mirroring Freud's contention that "the goal of all life is death" (1922). Nor am I aligning my argument with Edelman's conjecture of a politics of the death drive (though I share his assertion that "queerness can never define an identity, it can only ever disturb one") (2004: 17). Instead, my argument is that for many queer subjects death is unavoidable, inescapable, impossible to "move down to the earth". It is the queer subject's apartness that makes the presence of death so very present. It begins with the apartness experienced in childhood. Then adolescence. Then adulthood. It seeps into the cracks exposed in the shame that that apartness often provokes (DOWNS 2012).

My own childhood was defined by a looming presence of death that was experienced as a pre-trauma, a *catastrophe yet-to-come*. I longed for death in order to avoid the catastrophe of having my queerness exposed. And death was always preferable to the shame that the exposure of my sexuality would wreak on both my Self and my family. For many queer subjects death is thus a long-standing companion. Queer subjects do not have the privilege of resorting to a chthonic instinct, to move death to the earth, as death is so intimately tied to our fantasies.

As well as a catastrophe yet-to-come, queer subjects may also experience death in the reverse. Death is no longer *our* wish-fulfilment but rather the wish-fulfilment of others. When my queerness was exposed to my father and I told him that I had *always* been queer, he responded: "I wish you had told me earlier. I would have thrown you to the sharks". You get so accustomed to your own queer death fantasies that you are shocked when others verbalize the same fantasy back at you. But the shock does not lie in the words themselves but in the confirmation of the fantasy itself. Telling a queer subject that they would be better off dead simply confirms that their pre-trauma was not imagined but part of their lived experience of darkness. The queer figure thus becomes the creature of darkness that needs

to surface to communicate their existence in the world of light (BURCKETT & MARINATOS 2010, xvii). But it is difficult for light to penetrate when queer subjects are forced to constantly project the darker parts of their own nature (FONTELIEU 2010: 152).

Fontelieu argues modern societies have sought to banish the state of darkness from our psychological systems and religions (2010: 152). She contends that in contemporary societies today, “only if the darker aspects of the personality are defeated does the transformation end in a better life” (2010: 152). But for queer subjects darkness is inescapable. We do not have the capacity to dream that a better life is possible by emerging into the light. We are perennially stuck between light and darkness.

In his *Cruising Utopia* José Esteban Muñoz posits that “queerness is not yet here” (2009: 1). By this he meant that queerness is about a future potentiality and the “rejection of the here and now” (2009: 1). By setting up queerness as an ontological object of hope, a utopia, he underlined how queerness can be “distilled from the past and used to imagine a future” (2009: 1). It is perhaps because “we are not yet queer” that we lack a chthonic instinct (2009: 1). But if we agree with Muñoz’s assertion that “queerness is always in the horizon” (2009: 11) then the queer figure can delight in provoking both dread and hope, joy and despair. We might not have a chthonic instinct but our queer horizons provide us with the potential to radically re-engage with the darker parts of our own nature. Let there be light. Let there be darkness. We are the shadow. Your shadow. Us.

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What do we talk about when we talk about queer death?

2/ LGBTQ+ necropolitics

ABSTRACT: This is part 2 of 6 of the dossier *What do we talk about when we talk about queer death?*, edited by M. Petricola. The contributions collected in this article sit at the crossroads between thanatology, gender studies, and LGBT+ studies and tackle questions such as: how can queer death studies problematise heteronormative/cisnormative constructions of dying, death, and mourning? How can queer death studies approach the post-mortem manipulation of transgender identities? How can this discipline change the current cultural perception of the link between queerness and suicide?

The present article includes the following contributions: – Alasuutari, V., *Queering the heteronormative and cisnormative lifeworld of death*; – Whitestone S., *Queering as identity preservation: transgender identity after death*; – Goret Hansen L., *When I talk about queer death, I talk about trans-necropolitics and suicide prevention*; – Jaworski K., *Notes towards rethinking the agency of queer youth suicide*; – Doletskaya O., *Queer death and victimhood in Russia: 'westernised queer activism'*; – Zubillaga-Pow J., *Lesbian Liebestod: sapphic suicide in a Chinese society*.

KEYWORDS: Thanatology, Death Studies, Queer Studies, Suicide, Grief.

QUEERING THE HETERONORMATIVE AND CISNORMATIVE LIFEWORLD OF DEATH

One of the norm-critical angles through which queer death studies (QDS) shake the established ontologies of death is to explore and question heteronormativity and cisnormativity related to death, loss, and grief. Death is an inescapable part of the lifeworld, understood here in a Habermasian sense as a culturally transmitted and organized stock of knowledge about life and its principles (HABERMAS 1987). This means that the traditions of thought and action guiding other aspects of the lifeworld are present in the context of death as well, with different kinds of normativities being no exception. Building further on the Habermasian articulation, I argue that this stock of knowledge guides people towards unproblematized notions of life and death that are culturally taken for granted (ibid: 124-125). However,

what seems to be “‘always already’ familiar” (ibid: 125) about death in the prescriptive continuum of the lifeworld may not always apply. As I will show in this essay, the socio-cultural practices of death and bereavement are filtered through the normative ideation of what it means to be human, what it means to die as a human, and what counts as a grievable loss for humans caring for each other. This ideation is guided by heteronormative and cisnormative presumptions of life and relationships, making queer and trans experiences of death and loss often invisible and unaccounted for in various institutional contexts, bereavement support services, and established death rituals (ALASUUTARI 2020a).

As life in itself is highly relational (ROSENEIL & KETOKIVI 2016), what is significant in human death does not only concern the dying individual but also other humans (and other life forms) in their vicinity. To study death is often to study those who have experienced death as a loss of another (e.g. ALASUUTARI 2020a; LYKKE 2015; 2018; JONSSON 2019). With a vast variety of intimate relations, our losses take on varying forms. However, not all types of loss attract an equal amount of attention (in research or otherwise) or even sympathy from others who are still alive.

Instead of embracing this multiplicity of intimate relating and subsequently the multiplicity of death-related losses, institutionally death is often seen as a family matter. Losses that matter the most are considered to be losses within a heteronormative nuclear family structure: the death of a (married) spouse, a child, a parent or a sibling (DOKA 2002). These types of loss are both legally and socially recognized as losses worth grieving. For instance, the loss of a family member (of this kind) may justify one receiving paid bereavement leave from work, organizing the funeral of the deceased in culture-bound ways, and inheriting their property based on legislative rights. While such legislation is often designed for those who have a job, who can afford funeral costs, and who have something to inherit – being thus indifferent to class differences (see e.g. SEECK 2017) – it is also designed for those who build their intimate relationships in the “right way”, that is, following the heteronormative family script. This is apparent in bereavement support groups that are more often available to those who have lost a spouse or a child than, say, a friend. Moreover, such groups may be divided by the binary categories of gender, following the idea that there is something essentially different in male and female grieving (DOKA & MARTIN 2011). An alignment to the family norms can also be seen in the

visual legacies of gravescapes, highlighting the heteronormative belonging in the form of the shared graves of heterosexual couples and larger family units with shared bloodlines (DUNN 2016; ALASUUTARI 2020a). But what if life – and therefore the deaths we inescapably encounter during that life – does not follow the heteronormative and cisnormative script?

According to Doka's (2002) sociological theory on disenfranchised grief, grief that follows other kinds of losses is not regarded as equally valid, intense, or in Butler's terms (2004), grievable. This shows up in LGBTQ people's bereavement stories as a lack of socio-legal recognition, exclusion, and mitigation of pain (McNUTT & YAKUSHKO 2013). Following these observations, queer death can mean death that escapes the heteronormative matrix and family structure as well as the cisnormative notions of gender. It instead takes place within other forms of intimate relating and being in the world. Studying queer death in this sense may mean, for example, studying how people leading queer and trans lives experience the death of their intimate others in a world that does not always recognize them, their relationships, or the complications caused in connection to death by the marginalization operating in social institutions and cultural habits. Even though the legal recognition of same-sex couples and possibilities for queer reproduction and family-making have recently increased, particularly in many Western countries (e.g. DAHL 2018), in the context of death the marginalization and disenfranchisement of people, whose ways of relating take non-normative or queer forms, has not entirely vanished. For example, culturally established death rituals that follow a religious protocol may be strongly centered on a heteronormative family which leaves little or no space for variation and respect for other kinds of intimacies. This makes it possible for the parents or siblings of the deceased to exclude other mourners from such rituals, making the others vulnerable to their whims and dependent on their goodwill (ALASUUTARI 2020a).

The gravescape, in turn, poses a question of relational and individual remembrance and their heteronormative and cisnormative limits. These limits manifest in the lack of visible queer monumentality in cemeteries (DUNN 2016), in the rarity of shared graves embodying queer belonging (ALASUUTARI 2020a) and in the names inscribed in gravestones. In the case of trans people, these names do not always respect the deceased and accurately depict the names used in life (WITTEN 2009; ISRAELI-NEVO 2019). This silencing practice makes trans lives and legacies invisible in and beyond

death. As noted by Israeli-Nevo (2019: 177), it is “both an ontology and an opportunity for the hegemonic order to restructure, neglect, and erase the gender resistance of their trans being”. The same is true when trans people are posthumously misgendered in public, as is known to happen in the police and media reports of trans homicides (SEELY 2021).

However, disenfranchisement is not always a binary issue but rather a question of context and varying volume. While one’s grief might be disenfranchised in one context, it may be enfranchised in another, and vice versa (ALASUUTARI 2020a; 2020b). Disenfranchisement is thus not only significant when absolute but also when it happens in varying intensities in the details of death’s institutional and interpersonal encounters. Making space in the analysis for the varieties of dis/enfranchisement in both its practical and affective dimensions makes such an analysis more attuned to the variety of hardships encountered by LGBTQ people in the normative lifeworld of death. Moreover, such an approach allows to explore the affirmative possibilities of doing death differently.

Following this idea, studying queer death can also focus on how death can be approached in affirmative and supportive ways as a part of queer and trans lives and community building. QDS can explore, for example, how queer families of choice and friendship become of highlighted importance in times of death and bereavement. They may step in to patch up the gaps in support left behind by the institutionalized sources of support that are not always accessible, nor particularly LGBTQ-friendly, including the welfare state, religious institutions and/or families of origin (ALASUUTARI 2020a; ISRAELI-NEVO 2019). Additionally, QDS can attune to the queering of rituals, showing how old and established rituals carrying normative burdens (like church funerals with strict rules of attendance based on normative understandings of kinship) can be either modified or completely set aside in order to build new queerly affirmative rituals that better reflect the life of the deceased and their intimate others (LYKKE 2015; ALASUUTARI 2020a). Moreover, QDS may reflect on how remembrance builds post-mortem forms of intimacy that linger on affectively long after the dead intimate other has left the material world (ALASUUTARI 2021), queering what it means to care for others not only in life but also beyond death.

In the varied world of QDS, the term queer does not limit itself to norm-transgressing identity categories as importantly noted by Radomska, Mehrabi and Lykke (2019; 2020). Therefore, it is worth noting that even when

studying death in relation to people identifying as LGBTQ, what is interesting for a queer death studies scholar is not necessarily the identity categories as such. Instead, as I have argued here, the focus may be on different kinds of social positions, their intersections, and societally and culturally operating marginalizations that position queer and trans people differently from the heterosexual and cisgender “mainstream”. When investigating death as an inseparable part of the lifeworld and its underlying logics, it is possible to explore how being differently positioned in life may make one differently positioned in death as well. This is not only a marginalized position but, as argued here, it may also entail important possibilities of queering death and its normativities in personally meaningful ways, respecting the individuality of those who have been lost and those who remain mourning. Paying attention to queer death and queering the heteronormative and cisnormative lifeworld of death allows QDS scholars to further explore this positioning and its affective consequences in death’s proximity.

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QUEERING AS IDENTITY PRESERVATION: TRANSGENDER IDENTITY AFTER DEATH

To be queer is to be doubted. Challenged. Diminished. Erased. In response, the “living” queer must engage in a constant, often vigorous, identity negotiation with agents of the dominant (and doubting) culture. Consequently, the queer identity becomes particularly salient upon the moment of death, for that is the moment when the queer individual becomes incapable of further negotiating or defending their identity. Instead, at the moment of death, agents and institutions of the dominant culture (families, governmental bodies, churches, mortuaries) become empowered to enact the deceased’s identity for them. Predictably, the queer deceased’s identity is often reframed in a manner that denies or diminishes their queerness in favor of an identity that more readily conforms to white, cis-hetero conventions and affirms white, cis-hetero-dominated social hierarchies.

In the eyes of their loved ones, a trans person’s transition is often experienced as movement into a state of being that challenges both social

convention and family norms. To de-transition that loved one would then bring the errant family member back into harmony with the family's expectations. In a sense then, the family can be seen as intentionally moving the deceased from a state of ungrievability to one of grievability (BUTLER 2004, 2009).

In my own work (WHITESTONE *et al.* 2020), I explore the phenomenon wherein transgender and non-binary individuals (TNB) are de-transitioned by their families upon their deaths. Transgender lives are notably and sadly precarious (KIDD & WITTEN 2010), but transgender identities may be even more so. Post-mortem de-transitioning – as recorded in technologies of public mourning such as obituaries, gravestones, cemeteries, funeral rituals, and online remembrances – represents a symbolically violent negation of both the individual's identity and of the authenticity of the non-conforming identity itself.

Perhaps counterintuitively, it is not the mis-memorialized subject who experiences harm and injury in these instances. (To the best of our knowledge, the deceased are not aware of the manner in which their identity is treated after their death. Nor do we assume that they experience pain or harm because of it.) Instead, it is the members of the deceased's community who experience insult and devaluation. Members of the marginalized communities from whence the deceased came – in this case, the transgender community – witness these acts of disrespect and denial, and are reminded of (1) the precarity of their own identities and (2) the low esteem with which their identity is held by society at large.

Weaver (2018) investigated the negative reactions posted to social media regarding the inaccurate public memorializations dedicated to deceased trans women, Jennifer Gable and Leelah Alcorn. Weaver quotes Smith (2015) who sadly realizes that we (as a community) were not only unable to prevent Alcorn's tragic death by suicide, but were "equally powerless to prevent her family from erasing her chosen identity further" (Weaver: 3). One of Gable's Facebook friends responded to her de-transitioning with remarks of "disgusted" and "so very sad" (ROTHAUS 2014).

In my own study, several trans participants reacted with unchecked anger at the thought of being de-transitioned after their death. One respondent remarked, "That would be terrible. I would get out of my coffin and kill every one of those motherfuckers. I will lose my shit on [the family]." Another respondent concurred, "...If someone did that to me, I'd have to

come back and haunt them for the rest of their life” (Whitestone *et al.*: 325). These reactions underscore the heightened emotions associated with non-consensual, post-mortem de-transitioning and of the injurious feelings experienced by the broader transgender community when such an event occurs.

In the case of trans identity, it is possible for individuals to use legal means to plan ahead and appoint a *designated agent* to manage the disposition of their body and affairs. However, many trans people do not have access to information about end-of-life decision-making, nor do they have access – physically or financially – to legal counsel. Consequently, the fate of the identities of TNB people after death lies most often with their loved ones and family members. The Smith comment above illustrates the helplessness of queer friends and community members to defend their trans siblings in the face of cis-friendly and hetero-friendly laws and policies. As long as laws and legal authorities fail to recognize queer interpersonal bonds and chosen families, and insist on prioritizing blood relationships (regardless of the disposition of those blood relationships), transgender identity after death will remain at-risk.

Therefore, when we speak of “queering death,” I believe we speak of attempts to dismantle systems, policies and conventions that prevent or inhibit queer access to that most common of human goals – a death with dignity. The at-risk nature of queer identities (and specifically TNB identities) compels us to question and confront such cis-hetero thinking. If, as Crimp (1989) maintains, mourning becomes militancy, then mourning troubled by intentional acts of post-mortem distortion, devaluation, and/or erasure demands a great sense of urgency. Queering death cannot stop at observations of difference. It must engage in tangible acts of systemic change and remedy.

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WHEN I TALK ABOUT QUEER DEATH, I TALK ABOUT TRANS- NECROPOLITICS AND SUICIDE PREVENTION

1. INTRODUCTION

These days, when I talk about queer death I talk about my master's thesis on suicide prevention for trans children and young people¹ in Denmark. I usually talk about the findings of my thesis; how my interviews and literature reviews support findings on i.a. 1) the importance of parental support in early life, 2) how access to trans-specific healthcare, including gender-affirming treatments, serves as suicide prevention, and 3) that people who did not have access and support early in life, are more likely to attempt or complete suicide later in life (TURBAN *et al.* 2020). However, I often end up finding myself presenting the theories that serve to explain, or outline, a 'politics of suicide' at length. I.e. the context in which I talk about my current association with queer death. This side-track usually starts off with the mentioning of a common point of reference; biopolitics, allowing me to talk about necropolitics, which then leads me to trans necropolitics. This, in turn, leads to critical suicidology and finally the relationality of misery. By that time, if my audience is still with me, I'll finally make a connection to trans liveability and some more tangible ideas of what can be done in practice, to make lives liveable rather than non-liveable. By having such conversations I hope to provide some understanding as to why access to gender-affirming care is essential in effective suicide prevention for trans CYP, not only in the contexts in which it has been researched, but in a Danish setting too. In this essay I would like to focus, deliberately, on some of the key theories I applied in my thesis concerning: a) trans necropolitics, b) the relationality of misery, and c) the risk which a perceived lack of futurity presents to a liveable life. Finally, I aim to direct some attention to the issue of deficient coronial data-collection, in cases of trans suicidality.

But first, I briefly share a little bit of my journey towards working with queer death and the topic of suicide prevention for trans CYP in Denmark.

2. QUEERING SUICIDOLOGY

Queer death to me, at this point in time, is evidently a matter of suicidology. Yet suicidology as a discipline inhabits traditions of pathologisation

¹ "children and young people" referred to as 'CYP' from this point onwards.

and the active undermining of any agency and means of rationality in people who have experienced suicide ideation. Yet a new understanding of suicide prevention as approached through a critical suicidology increasingly spreads its messages of a new, holistic and norm-critical practice in both research and hands-on suicide prevention projects. It further introduces a vital change of paradigm, which demolishes underlying assumptions and damaging understandings of neurodiversity, agency, liveability and political neutrality invoked through an individualising approach to suicide ideation (WHITE 2017). Queer death studies and critical suicidology is connected not only through death, but also in their subversion. Where queer death studies are described as inherently critical to structural and western cultural understandings of death (RADOMSKA *et al.* 2020), the greatest points of potential in critical suicidology builds on like-minded understandings, i.e. rooted in intersectional thought, seeking to support unprecedented acknowledgement of silenced, pathologised, suicidal others within academia as well as in practical suicide prevention efforts (CRITICAL SUICIDE STUDIES NETWORK 2019).

As a result, analyses of the demographics of suicide statistics are gifted with a tool to decipher otherwise puzzling occurrences, such as the ‘gender paradox’, in which more women than men attempt suicide. Yet the suicide mortality rate is higher in men (LESTER 2014: 13). When writing my bachelor’s thesis in philosophy, my work centred on masculinities and suicide, the fatality of western masculine ideals and the emotionally silencing, yet explosive, effects of hegemonic masculinity as theorised by Raewyn Connell (CONNELL *et al.* 2005). Unknowingly, I was already meshing a critical suicidology with queer understandings of non-liveability and death. My work served as my personal introduction to the field of suicidology. In the summer of 2020, when writing my master’s thesis in Gendering Practices, I was finally confident in utilising critical suicidology as a vital part of the theoretical and methodological framework.

It is due to this focus, that these days, what I talk about when I talk about suicide prevention, is lack of focus on transgender children and young people in the world at large, but in particular in my country of origin, Denmark. When deciding the topic of my master’s thesis, being a part of the Copenhagen queer community in conjunction with having worked with the British trans CYP charitable organisation ‘Mermaids’ shaped the direction of my focus.

Due to some literature and knowledge being produced internationally on the topic of trans suicidality and suicide prevention over the past years, it was concerning to me, that this knowledge seemingly isn't utilised and recognised within the Danish healthcare system. With ongoing debates on trans rights, and in particular trans CYP rights, I wanted to bring international knowledge to the Danish table. In doing so, I politicise suicide prevention and re-frame access to gender-affirming care as a means of ensuring liveability rather than, as claimed by some, unnecessary luxury, a waste of public healthcare's limited resources or even child abuse (FUUSAGER *et al.* 2019).

To do so, I endeavoured on a journey of building the above mentioned theoretical framework which encompasses queer rage, bio and –necropolitics, trans necropolitics, and critical suicidology. With these theories I sought to outline the politics of suicide relevant to an understanding of access to universal (trans) healthcare as vital to effective suicide prevention, in a country where trans youth mortality rates and suicide ideation had not yet been studied nor widely recognised (GORET 2020).

3. TRANS NECROPOLITICS AND THE RELATIONALITY OF MISERY²

Due to the nature of this being a brief introduction to what I talk about when I talk about queer death, I shall focus on only two different aspects of my theoretical framework. First I briefly introduce trans necropolitics which serves to centre trans-specific politics of death, and subsequently, I briefly describe a theory built on critical suicidology which introduces some essential points as to how we understand suicidality and non-liveability.

Trans-necropolitics, as outlined by Jaime Alonso Caravaca-Morera and Maria Itayra Padhila, builds on Achille Mbembe's necropolitics and factor-in trans-specific adversities as they seek to uncover the "relation between the cisnormative social policies and the invisibility and (physical and symbolic) death of trans entities through their life histories." (CARAVACA-MORERA *et al.* 2018: 1) Death is induced, not only directly at the hands or tools of state institutions in the shape of death-sentences or police-brutality, but more often through the biopolitical (non)distribution of life chances, the thought is. The deaths of lives made unliveable are understood to be an issue of a structural and political kind, rather than an individualistic

² This section contains paragraphs from my master's thesis, GORET 2020: 10-17.

and solely psychopathological one. Their study provides a combination of content analysis of life as well as death stories of transgender Costa Ricans and Brazilians, and an articulated insight to the contemporary relations of necropolitics and postcolonial powers. In their study, several testimonies are highlighted, most notably expressions of suffering, suicidal thoughts and suicide bereavement. Expulsion from families, threats and experiences of violence and stigmatisation, among other factors, contribute to the high prevalence of suicidality, according to the study. They quote an anonymous trans woman from Costa Rica:

They do not kill us directly, but they force us to kill ourselves. [...] one of them jumped in front of a car and the other two hung themselves. But these are not suicides, they are murders, everyone has this blood on their hands, it is the fault of everyone, of the government, of society, of the whole country. (CARAVACA-MORERA et al. 2018: 6)

To better grasp some aspects of the complexity of that which the interviewee refers to as 'indirect murder', the work of critical suicidologist Rob Cover can provide some insight. Cover theorises the concepts of futurity and the relationality of misery. He problematizes how any consideration of cultural, social and structural contexts in regards to suicidality is often wrongfully limited to gaining an understanding of marginalised suicide ideation, when it could be beneficially applied to suicidology and suicide prevention in majority populations as well (COVER 2016: 91).

Cover finds that a common factor contributing to suicidality is a perceived *lack of futurity*. The very capacity to aspire to perform according to culturally normative standards of achievements of a regular life cycle is lost when any perceived chance of futurity is. Futurity and the capacity to hope for normality, stability and positive or neutral progression in terms of quality of life, are found to be key components of a liveable life (COVER 2016: 100). As standards and norms of life aspirations, achievements and belonging are based in "Neoliberal discourses of normativisation" (COVER 2016: 105) which demands minority groups, such as queers, to "produce and articulate themselves through narrow, regimented regimes of sexual truth that are compatible with dominant sexual assumptions" (COVER 2016: 105), failing to participate and live by the same standards as one's peers, economically and socially, can lead to beliefs of being less well off in relation to one's peers.

Marginalised people in particular are at risk; the wish to better one's life chances, due to cultural condition or as means of survival, and thereby relating oneself to a community whose standards and modes of living one doesn't have access to, produces *a goal of belonging*. When lacking chances of closing the gap between one's situation and the situation of one's peers, or losing the very desire to attain things, one believes they should desire or aspire to, "there is a risk of frustrated aspiration and relative misery" (COVER 2016: 107). These can in turn, together with the lack of the capability to aspire and perceived or institutionalised lack of futurity, be understood as a causal factor in suicides. But this concept of *relationality* is not only relevant to marginalised lives, it is also essential when trying to understand suicide as prevalent in all economic classes of society, and when explaining the high suicide rates of the wealthy West, and particularly in middle aged White, cis men, who may otherwise be understood to enjoy liveable lives with plentiful life chances. As such, the capacity to aspire for futurity and perceiving life chances and liveability as a possible part of ones' future, depends on *relative misery* in context of the living standards of one's (perceived) peers, rather than a global cross-cultural scale of satisfaction in life.

4. TRANS SUICIDALITY AND SUICIDE PREVENTION

While writing my bachelor's thesis on the fatality of Western ideals of masculinity I found that the majority of studies on suicidality in general populations, take gender and sex for granted as concepts, and any discussion of the categorisation or distinction between cis and -transgender people is absent. When looking at literature reviews on suicidality in transgender populations, alarming rates of suicide ideation, attempts and completed suicides are apparent, and even more so than in the countless studies on suicide in cis men. I addressed two such literature reviews for my master's thesis, wherein the highest finding of prevalence of suicide attempts in a given sample was 45% (MARSHALL *et al.* 2016: 65). The other literature review points out that gathering data on completed suicides within trans populations would be valuable, but difficult and even impossible, as coronial data does not include trans identities, and additionally may even record assigned gender, rather than the actual gender of the deceased. Correctly registered data on completed suicides could help map the most vulnerable parts of the LGBTQ communities. Issues of low quality or absent data

within suicidology is however a world- and population wide issue. The WHO states that “it is likely that under-reporting and misclassification are greater problems for suicide than for most other causes of death” and they encourages each country to work towards improving suicide-monitoring in order to provide effective suicide prevention and strategies (WHO 2019). Data on suicidality levels during different stages of trans people’s lives and what stressors and protective factors are present, in terms of age and transition-process, would also be of tremendous value for trans specific suicide prevention strategies and practices.

This, as well as the duty of the state in regards to suicide prevention and the redistribution of life chances, WHO recommendations, anti-trans discourse, white washing of trans issues, the figure of the transgender child as discussed by Jack Halberstam, Danish suicide research politics and much more is what I talk about when I talk about queer death.

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NOTES TOWARDS RETHINKING THE AGENCY OF QUEER YOUTH SUICIDE

When we talk about queer death, we need to talk about the task of challenging the notion that LGBTQ sexualities *cause* suicide among young people. The queer subject, often understood along the anthropocentric lines, continues to be associated with death, represented as either the cause of death per se, or a dead end in terms of reproductive futurism (BERSANI 1987; DOLLIMORE 1998; EDELMAN 2004). This problematic framing of the queer subject as ‘a bearer of death’ is nothing new (BUTLER 1996: 61). Homophobic media representations of LGBTQ people living with AIDS often frame them as the living undead (HANSON 1991; NUNOKAWA 1991).

In the context of queer youth suicide, the problematic framing of the queer subject is difficult to challenge and critique. Existing research continually reports that LGBTQ young people are three to four times likely to experience suicide in comparison with their heterosexual counterpart (BRYAN & MAYOCK 2017; CISZEK 2014; COVER 2012a, 2012b; McDERMOTT & ROEN 2016; REAM 2019; SKERRETT, KÖLVES & DE LEO 2015). This alarming

reality happens because of homophobic bullying, lack of support, relationship breakdowns, loneliness, alcohol and drug abuse, and mental health issues such as depression and anxiety (ARANMOLATE, BOGAN, HOARD & MAWSON 2017; BERONA, HORWITZ, CZYZ & KING 2020; GREYDANUS 2017; McDERMOTT & ROEN 2016; McDERMOTT, ROEN & SCOURFIELD 2008; NICOLLAS & HOWARD 1998; PULLEN 2004).

The problems queer young people face are real, as is the discursive life of statistics, their circulation and the circulation of assumptions about what it means to be queer and young. As Waidzunus (2012) shows, the statistic regarding queer youth suicide originated as an assessment of risk made by a social worker in a U.S government report. While the statistic contributed to generating much needed institutional reforms in the U.S since the late 1980s, and inspired many studies on LGBTQ suicide across a range of disciplines such as psychiatry, psychology, sociology, social work, media studies and cultural studies, it is remarkable, Waidzunus argues (2012: 201), how numbers that “began their career as mere estimates...are now presented as common sense facts.” The quandary with the discursive life of numbers I am addressing here is not whether they are well crafted, and whether they “objectively” represent reality. Nor is the quandary about what Hacking (2004, 106) calls “dynamic nomalism,” namely, the making up of people at the same time as human classifications are invented. While such issues are important to address, the problem for Queer Death Studies (QDS) is that we need to talk about the way numbers contribute to the framing of queer young subjects as wounded, alone and without a liveable future (COVER 2012a, 2012b; 2013a, 2013b, 2016, 2020; TALBURT 2004a, 2004b).

Thus, the challenge for QDS is not to forget the reality many queer young people face in still heteronormative societies, while remaining critical of the deployment of statistics and thinking through what it means to be a young LGBTQ person making sense of their being in the world, with such making often diverse, and outside both heteronormative and homonormative norms (COVER 2013a, 2015; DUGGAN 2002; STRYKER 2008). In this sense, those of us who are responding to queer youth suicide need to tread a fine line, and draw on research tools that challenge the normativity of numbers without denying their strategic usefulness. Otherwise, we will continue to inadvertently strengthen the powerful instrumentality of not only numbers, but also norms that frame and regulate queer sexualities

as pathological, and queer subjectivities as doomed to die by deaths such as suicide.

Alongside the problem with causality is the problem with the way young queer subjects are represented more broadly. This is often apparent in well-meaning initiatives such as the *It Gets Better* (IGB) project, which was developed to offer hope to alienated queer young people, initially through the social media medium, YouTube (SAVAGE & MILLER 2011). As Cover (2012a, 2013b), Goltz (2013), Grzanka and Mann (2014), and Muller (2011) argue in various ways, the IGB project is framed by a neoliberal notion of the human subject, who happens to be gay, but also male, white and middle class, who more often than not lives with a partner in an urban setting, has a career and relative wealth, all of which enable a certain level of self-sufficiency. This in itself is a false promise laced with cruel optimism (BERLANT 2011), because of the diversity of queer lives along race, class and gender lines, and because the optimism of life getting better is unrealistic due to structural and ideological inequalities. Queer Death Studies, in its transdisciplinary formation, is well-positioned to question normative and exclusionary ideas of this notion of human subjectivity, precisely because, among a variety of things, its focus is on challenging “the conventional normativities, assumptions, expectations and regimes of truths that are brought to life and made evident by death, dying and mourning” (RADOMSKA, MEHRABI & LYKKE 2020: 88).

My suggestion, then, is that we need to talk about, and pay attention to, not only the framing of queer youth suicide and queer subjectivities, but also the notion of agency, and what it is like for LGBTQ young people to exercise agency. By agency, I do not mean the capacity to act that a person possesses, as if agency is something human beings possess by virtue of being human. Instead, agency is performative in a Butlerian (1990, 1993) sense in so far as it becomes apparent in the way bodily practices cite and reiterate existing discourses via cultural and social norms. In this way, existing discourses produce effects of gender, sexuality, race, class and so on. Thus, agency is possible because what we do and how we do things with and through our bodies draws “upon and reengage[s] conventions which have gained their power precisely through a *sedimented iterability*” (Butler, 1995: 134, original emphasis). In other words, agency is present, but its presence is located at the very moment of a practice brought into being through performative actions rather than residing in a prediscursive

subject as its source (BUTLER 1993, 1995). Such an understanding of agency, however, is not complete, as what is material and cultural is active thanks to what Barad (2007) refers to as intra-action, which “recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather *emerge through*, their inter-action” (BARAD 2007: 33, emphasis added). Thus, the exercise of agency, vis-à-vis agential realism, is possible because of “*mutual entanglement*” (BARAD 2007: 3, original emphasis), or the way different materials, people, ideas and contexts constantly change, blend, mutate, influence and work inseparably in the course of bringing objects and subjects into being (ALAIMO 2008; HICKEY-MOODY 2020; TUANA 2008).

Adopting a performative intra-active approach to agency, I think, will help us to work out how queer subjectivities are not inherently death bound, but instead are material effects of discourses that frame and regulate them as death bound. Furthermore, adopting such an approach will help us to work out how vulnerable young people still have a voice, because vulnerability does not automatically mean voicelessness, and the human subject is not the only site of its study in queer youth suicide. Perhaps, then, we can begin to imagine different futures in which queer life itself is no longer causally bound to death.

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QUEER DEATH AND VICTIMHOOD IN RUSSIA: ‘WESTERNISED QUEER ACTIVISM’

Those who do not fulfill the normative idea of a white, upper or middle-class, heterosexual, cis-gendered, able-bodied, tend to be ignored in dominant stories of death, loss, grief and mourning. Although queer individuals have been largely excluded from Death Studies, death has always been at the core of queer theory and the gender and sexuality research around the world (RADOMSKA *et al.* 2020). Largely fueled by the HIV/AIDS epidemic, which whipped out an entire generation of gay men and other members of the queer community, ‘Western’ LGBTQ+ activism often relies on queer deaths in its public narratives. As queer and gay lives have historically been stigmatized and seen as ‘non-grievable lives’,

there is a lot of literature and media accounts of queer grief and reflection on the complexities of deaths in the LGBTQ+ community (RADOMSKA *et al.* 2020). However, here I want to focus on a ‘non-Western’ perspective of queer death and grieving, in the unique cultural context of ex-Soviet countries. Scholars have discussed the lack of research of Eastern European and ex-Soviet localities in queer and reproductive studies (KAHLINA 2015; MIZIELINSKA 2020). In this work I want to explore which queer stories represented in the public discussions in Russia and what is the role queer deaths play in this conversation.

Russia is a famously hostile state to its LGBTQ+ citizens (BUYANTUEVA 2018; WILKINSON 2014; ZHABENKO 2014). Over the past two decades the pool of anti-queer legislation in Russia has been imminently growing with such additions as the 2013 Dima Yakovlev law which bans adoption by same-sex couples and the ‘anti-gay propaganda law’ which criminalises what it calls ‘propaganda of non-traditional relationships to minors’ (FL-135, article 5, 2013). This law in particular has allowed for children to be relinquished from their gay and queer parents under pretences of the parents ‘propagating’ ‘non-traditional relationships’ to their children (WILKINSON 2018). Many queer families and activists like Masha Gessen have emigrated, fearing for the wellbeing of their families (GOLUNOV 2019; GESSEN 2019). This ‘war on queerness’, as scholars have called it, has been targeting queer parenthood and queer livelihoods as a particular focal point of the ‘traditional family values’ narrative which in the past decade has become Vladimir Putin’s claim to almost indisputable power (WILKINSON 2014; 2018). However, the past few years have also become a ‘renaissance’ of queer culture, art and queer visibility in Russia. Online activism and the emergence of diverse independent media provides a different perspective and amplifies queer voices for the first time in more than twenty years of Putin’s rule. Online queer journals like *O-zine* and *The Calvert Journal* and social media platforms have allowed queer stories to seep through the homophobic censorship of the state and into the eyes and ears of the Russian people.

Homosexuality is firmly understood by the Russian State as dangerous behaviour that threatens Russia’s future as a nation, it is anti-Christian and ‘Westernised’ (WILKINSON 2014). Russia positions itself as opposed to ‘Gayropa’ (a mocking term for the European countries that accept LGBTQ+ rights), the European ‘tolerance’ and LGBTQ+ ‘propaganda’ (SUCHLAND 2018). As Mizielinska (2011, 2020) notes while talking about a

similar state-led narrative in Poland, queer identities are often seen as a kind of ‘Western extravagance’ in opposition to Polish (post-socialist) traditional values. However, ex-Soviet states, particularly personalist autocracies, like late Putin Russia, are known to have a particular official rhetoric that might not necessarily coincide with societal attitudes (WALLER 2018). Following other scholars (BUYANTUEVA 2018; WILKINSON 2014) I argue that Russia’s homophobia is politicised and state-sanctioned, tied closely to Putin’s claim to power. While the government introduces new ways of portraying queer people as ‘unfit’ parents and ‘unfit’ citizens, independent media and public discussions revolve are more open to ‘liberal’ changes (DERGACHEV 2019). Thus, Russia is at a crossroads. While the population is engaging with neoliberal ideas while the government still exemplifies paternalistic and neo-traditionalist politics as it introduces more anti-queer legislation.

As queer issues in Russia become more and more visible, the stories of queer suffering and victimhood prevail. In this work I want to investigate two cases of queer Russian deaths vocalised in Russian (and international) media. First, the murder of Yelena Grigoryeva, an LGBT-activist, in 2018. Second, the Chechnya anti-gay purges which started in 2017 and were widely publicised in the 2019 HBO documentary ‘Welcome to Chechnya’, recently shortlisted for an Oscar for best documentary. I want to focus on the ways both cases felt for the community and the impact they made on the international and local discussions of queer rights.

An individual queer death which shook the community to its core is the murder of Yelena Grigoryeva, an LGBT-activist who was stabbed to death in St Petersburg outside her flat after receiving death threats and being denied help from the police (WALKER 2019). Yelena’s death was not a direct act of state terror, but the government’s reaction to it is hard to describe in any other way. The refusal of the police to investigate the death threats she had been receiving prior to her death as well as the inaction in investigating her death convey a clear message: violence against women, particularly queer women, is normalised by the state. The other message was that activism is unacceptable, voicing protest is frowned upon, the only way to live a queer life is staying quiet about it. This is very much a Soviet logic of ‘open secrets’ which has largely been adapted by the queer community in post-Soviet times, particularly in the 90s and the early 00s). Russia has inherited Soviet duality of official and unofficial rules which

often contradict each other (YURCHAK 2006). As the famous Russian saying illustrates: ‘Russia is a country of unread laws and unwritten rules.’ Queer people are forced to navigate this gap between the official laws and the unwritten rules: the realities of queer lives in Russia lie outside the Western-style politics of ‘out’ and ‘proud’ (GOODFELLOW 2015). There is always a notion of what to reveal and what to conceal which dates back to the Soviet conceptions of ‘open secrets’, an idea that something can be known to everyone and not talked about openly at the same time (LEDENEVA 2011). Many testimonials of LGBT folk mention that they avoid ‘protruding’ their sexuality, wearing it on their sleeves, showing it off. The case of Yelena’s death plays into those old Soviet ideas of keeping identities to yourself as advocating publicly can be dangerous. Yelena’s murderer has never been charged.

From an individual death to a mass murder case, the Chechnya’s ‘anti-gay purges’ have appeared in international news since 2018 (GESSEN 2018; ROTH 2019). The purges have been happening for much longer. Chechnya is a deeply patriarchal and religious region of Russia which *de facto* makes independent political decisions although *de jure* remains a part of Russia. The Head of Chechen Republic, Ramzan Kadyrov has been known to express homophobic, sexist and nationalist sentiments to journalists, other politicians and on social media (ROTH 2019). Since 2017, maybe earlier, there has been torturing and killing of gay and queer men and women in Chechnya. LGBT organisations like the Russian LGBT Network have been trying to rescue these people as President Putin has been forced by other international leaders to investigate the issue. He never has.

Welcome to Chechnya is a documentary which focuses on the gay men and women prosecuted during the purges as they are resettled and, ultimately, leave the country to seek asylum in various European countries. Met with praise from the English-speaking public, the documentary faced criticism from the Russian queer community and activists. The documentary used a deepfake technology otherwise referred to as the ‘digital transplant’ technique, in which volunteers’ faces are digitally grafted onto those for whom public exposure might threaten their lives (RICHARDS 2020). However, some Russian activists online have expressed concern citing anonymous sources and activists inside Chechnya stating that the anonymising technology was ineffective as the families of documentary participants in Chechnya have recognised them. This can

cause great harm not only to those who appear in the documentary, but also their families who are still in Chechnya. Although this discussion has travelled around activist telegram channels, group chats and twitter threads, it has not resulted in a wider public discussions among film critics or LGBTQ+ organisations.

This brings up questions of ‘white saviour’ activism and ‘Western’ queer activism and the ways in which LGBTQ+ activism in non-Western countries is ‘forced’ into a ‘Western’ mould by ‘Western’ investors. As we see elsewhere, much of ‘non-Western’ queer activism is heavily influenced by ‘Western’ activism trends and narratives which often fall flat in representing the complex ‘non-Western’ queer reality (DAVE 2012). This is particularly true in Russia and other Eastern European and ex-Soviet countries (DOGADINA 2019; WILKINSON 2014). As ‘Welcome to Chechnya’ shows, the livelihoods of queer people are encapsulated in the imminent dangers they face. The international media cycle is only interested in very specific Russian queer stories (of suffering or escape) portraying queer Russians as ‘pitiable victims’ until they emigrate to a (‘Western’) country where they can finally live openly and be their true selves. There is a paradox of Russian queer deaths being so highly visible and thus deeming invisible existing queer lives. Queer deaths feel like a tragedy that keeps happening in Russia, and it requires international media and political attention. Simultaneously, death becomes the only definition which describes Russian queer reality in the eyes of international public media. Queer people, particularly Russian or Eastern European queer people, are only visible when they are dead.

As a Russian queer woman and an academic who studies Russian and ex-Soviet queer experiences, I wonder if the queer deaths and victimhood that we get to see in the ‘West’ are a reflection of bigger issues. Alongside other scholars (DAVE 2012; MIZIELINSKA 2020), I find an imbalance in queer studies where conversations are often overly focused on ‘Western’ experiences and skewed towards ‘Western’ happiness and ‘non-Western’ suffering. From international academic and media discussions, it seems that the only thing a queer person can do in Russia is to die from the hands of the homophobic oppressive regime. However, in reality, many queer people choose to stay in Russia, have families, raise children, make art and thrive in their support bubbles with the help of their communities. As queer death studies discuss grievable and non-grievable lives (Radomska *et al.* 2020), I

want to pose the question: do we perceive queer lives in certain localities as grievable before they even die?

Anthropology as a discipline has a tendency to overly emphasise the “harsh and brutal dimensions of human experience” both in theory and in ethnography (ORTNER 2016: 49). As anthropologists like Ortner call for ‘activist research’ to replace the ‘misery porn’, to reflect on the colonial, racial and class dimensions of researching human suffering, I seek to explore the complexity of Russian queer experience. I advocate for queer studies to reflect, as anthropology does, on the ways ‘non-Western’ queer livelihoods are represented in international activist discourses and move towards a productive pessimism in research rather than focusing on the tragic events in ‘non-Western’ queer lives and deaths.

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LESBIAN *LIEBESTOD*: SAPPHIC SUICIDE IN A CHINESE SOCIETY

This brief contribution provides an East Asian perspective to the foundation of Queer Death Studies. More specifically, this intervention addresses what Donna Haraway calls the response-ability of “collective knowing and doing” (HARAWAY 2016: 34) from a material and temporal perspective. On the one hand, this implies that some objects can give signification to the actual demise of human life. On the other hand, this means that queer passions and actions across the *longue durée* can cultivate new traditions in the modern project of queer world-making. This onto-epistemological practice of knowing and doing/being stimulates a responsive correlation (as well as a contradiction) between vital destruction and creation. Such an oxymoronic juxtaposition underscores the sociological ontology of death as a symbolic and assembled construct, which in itself characterises death’s role in present-day society (KIONG 2004; HENG 2020). It is precisely because these separate theoretical inductions of symbolism and assemblage are aligned congruently with the “collective knowing and doing” that death and dying in East Asia, whether heteronormative or queer, gain impetus by responding to social and cultural developments. As I will highlight later in this essay, the simultaneous suicides of young

women across the Southeast Asian polity of Singapore will buttress this perspective.

In East Asian mythology, there is a matchmaking deity known as “the old man under the moon”. According to his book of marriages, compiled on the seventh day of the seventh month of the lunar calendar, he would tie red strings around the ankles of prospective lovers. As the trend of arranged marriages gets replaced by the freedom to choose one’s own partner, humans now chart their own destiny by tying red strings on each other. Chinese Singaporeans who believe in the notion of reincarnation still practice this little ritual, especially in moments that involve separation and desperation.

From my ongoing research, that focuses on the cultural history of LGBT lives in Singapore (ZUBILLAGA-POW & YUE 2012), I learned that some Chinese women who are attracted to women rely on such traditional aspects of spiritual practice in the hope of changing their destiny. The spate of suicides over the past decade has created a substantial amount of media commotions and coffee-shop quibbles. From drowning in reservoirs to jumping off buildings, the methods and demographics of people who committed suicide consist mostly of: 1) people in their twenties; 2) elderly or foreign laborers, usually Chinese by race. While figures provided by the Singapore Department of Statistics indicates that suicide rates between 2006-2015 hover between 350 to 460 episodes per year, the World Health Organization, differentiating the gender ratio, indicates 15 suicides among men and 8 among women for every 100,000 persons per year (WHO 2014: 23; SINGAPORE DEPARTMENT OF STATISTICS 2016). Specialists at the Singapore Institute of Mental Health have also pinpointed problematic relations with peers or family members as the most common reason for suicide attempts among young people (CHEE 2010). Recent quantitative research on suicidal thoughts and projects in East Asia also shows that young women in industrialized cities represent the most suicidal social category (BLUM, SUDHINARASET & EMERSON 2012).

Given these premises, the juxtaposition of Chinese spirituality and female same-sex affairs can be subsumed under what I call “red-thread suicide”. We know that, in addition to the legend of the matchmaking deity, adherents of ancient Chinese traditions believe that red objects can ward off evil spirits. For example, the Chinese would wear red clothing during the first few days of the Chinese New Year or put on red undergarments

during one's birth-year within the twelve-year cycle of the Chinese zodiac. However, Chinese supernatural beliefs also acknowledge that someone who commits suicide when dressed in red will return as a vengeful spirit. Others believe that the red string will ensure that the souls remain bound together in the netherworld (KOH 2011). Among the most famous cases is that of a 34 year-old cancer-stricken woman who tied a red string around her two infant daughters' wrists to her own before jumping off a housing block in March 2004 (VIJAYAN & FONG 2004). Another case involves a 32 year-old housewife and her three-year-old son, who were found drowned in a reservoir. They were both dressed in red and had their wrists bound together with a red thread and their fingernails painted red. The newspaper reports later revealed the woman to be "distraught over marital problems, which involved an impending divorce and custody [lawsuit]" (ANONYMOUS 2011). The day on which the suicide was committed, September 2011, was coincidentally the day just before the autumnal equinox.

Two other events, occurring a decade apart, also provide us with more information on the necro-spiritual aspects of same-sex lovers. On 16 April 2001, two women wearing red T-shirts with a red thread around their ring fingers committed suicide by jumping off a block of flats. At age 20, the younger of the two women was supposedly undecided between her boyfriend and her 31 year-old girlfriend (CHONG 2001). However, a critical reading of the situation via a mythological perspective potentially uncovers her sexual preference. The two women were probably resentful of the pressure to form heterosexual relationships or were being rejected by their families. What further reinforces the interpretation of this particular relationship as an amorous one was the subsequent reaction by the team members of the local women's group RedQueen, who undertook professional training to set up a free and confidential counselling service for women who are attracted to other women.

Another instance of a red-thread suicide took place on 8 February 2012, the 17th day of the Lunar New Year (FONG 2012). Two university students aged 20 and 24 took their lives by suffocating themselves with fumes in an isolated chalet. The investigation found out that they had planned their suicides by booking the chalet online and drafting their own media statement (ANWAR 2013). They checked in just after the first fifteen days of the New Year festivities as observed by the Chinese, and a photograph provided by *The Straits Times* shows two beds with dark red bed-sheets and pillows



FIGURE 1 – “Furniture inside the Aloha Resort chalet in Changi, Singapore”. Source: https://www.asiaone.com/static/multimedia/gallery/120209_changi/pic4.html

(Figure 1). It might appear as more than a coincidence that this chalet was chosen over all the others .

As these mournful events show, mythology and traditional beliefs can become a necropolitical medium for women who find themselves under psychological pressure and for women who are attracted to other women to communicate with each other, as well as with society at large. The phenomenon of the “red-thread suicide” gradually takes on an onto-epistemological meaning: it brings women who are attracted to other women closer to one another and closer to us. Returning to Donna Haraway, our collective response-ability involves the immediate recognition of these symbols of death. These indicators present themselves as tangible material; they crystallise over time through imprints and impressions.

By analysing red-thread suicides among women in East Asia, one can trace both the plans and processes of self-annihilation. Objects are procured, letters are written, locations are reced and reserved. The recurrence of these activities as assembled by different bodies fabricate an ontology of the necropolitical. By transitioning from the realm of life and that of death, the homosexual subjects *qua* agents defy and resist the prevailing social and legal discrimination against queer assemblages, thus creating a new genealogy of knowing and being/doing queer.

This regeneration and revitalisation of queer symbols within East Asian societies and beyond is a critical response-ability for many young women who are attracted to women. Through their self-destruction, they have constructed the socio-political agency of their bodies and lives. Their impetus toward death is one that is driven by nothing but queer passion and the freedom to love. In a nutshell, the onto-epistemology of Sapphic suicides arguably lies in the *Liebestod*, that is, in the love-death.

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What do we talk about when we talk about queer death?

3/ Queering death beyond the human

ABSTRACT: This is part 3 of 6 of the dossier *What do we talk about when we talk about queer death?*, edited by M. Petricola. The contributions collected in this article sit at the crossroads between thanatology, critical animal studies, and the posthumanities and tackle questions such as: how can queer death studies deconstruct our perception of non-human deaths? How can we rethink human death from a non-anthropocentric perspective? And how can queer death studies approach the COVID-19 pandemic?

The present article includes the following contributions: – Beccaro C. and Tuckett M., The life cycle of the agaonidae wasp: death, queerness, and the shattering of the human; – Langhi R., Corpses are remains: queering human/animal boundaries across death; – Véliz S., Tilting points of reference: how nonhuman death narratives unsettle research; – Varino S., (Un)doing viral time: queer temporalities of living & dying in pandemic times; – Pevero M., Recalcitrant by nature: queering death through biological art practice.

KEYWORDS: Thanatology, Death Studies, Queer Studies, Animal studies, Posthumanism.

THE LIFE CYCLE OF THE AGAONIDAE WASP: DEATH, QUEERNESS, AND THE SHATTERING OF THE HUMAN¹

A human hand passes by and reaches for a fig – concealed under the skin, an erotic event unfolds. Inside the burgundy flesh-like fruit, a network of flowers converge; each yearning to be pollinated. Back on the surface, a female wasp gravitates towards the bulbous fruit. A wasp of the Agaonidae family, to be precise, otherwise known as the fig wasp: a member of a colony of wasps who engage in pollination mutualism with the fig tree (PADMANABAN 2016). The sweet stickiness of the fig's aroma acts as an invitation. With some effort, the wasp penetrates the fig at the stem, breaking its wings as it comes inside it: a bittersweet release. Trapped, the wasp quivers at the sight

¹ Some of the ideas in this paper were borne out of a collaborative short-length film project with Margaux Fitoussi and Alexa Hagerty. We thank them for their work and creative reflections.

of unpollinated flowers. It dusts off the pollen from its birth-fig. It lays eggs inside some of the flowers' seeds. Finished, the wasp dies. The seeds nourish the wasp's offspring, while the pollen deposited by the vector wasp allows the seeds to flourish. Still in the fig's ripe chamber, the male wasps hatch and seek mates (WHEELER 2020). As martyrs, they dig out escape routes for their female counterparts. Wingless, they too, find death inside or near the fig's softness while the female wasps, full and fed, cruise for a new fig.

Biologists assert that the fig acts as a trap where the wasp dies (PEREIRA *et al.* 2010). "The" wasp being the first wasp in our tale, the original wasp, one might say. But is this really *the* wasp? The stages described in the wasp's life cycle are nothing like that of the human's. *The* human, we are taught in elementary school, travels from infant, to child, to adolescent, to adult and eventually to the grave. The neat pictures in text books show an individual, or perhaps, in a more expansive rendition, a nuclear family. The life cycle of the Agaonidae wasp, however, cannot be told in such singular fashion; for in the telling, the subject flickers from female to male, first generation to third, between dead and alive. The wasp is deeply enmeshed in its swarm and in the flesh of the fig.

So, does the wasp die in the fig or is it born there? Moreover, is this the life cycle of the wasp or the fig? This confusion arises from a scientific impulse to explore, discover, and classify the wasp, the fig, the human, (the queer?). A wasp, singular, dies in the fig. She is undone in the fig. Physically, her wings are dismembered and metaphysically she dies. Any individuality is undone in the fig. And yet, *the* wasp, the wasp as a swarm, as a colony, as a collective, thrives in the fig. And the fig thrives with the wasp. An individualized notion of the wasp, of the fig, cannot exist – their lifecycle is codependent. This doesn't make them *vulnerable*, quite the opposite, in fact. Like the King who survives the death of his body to be reborn in his heir, the wasp, we are tempted to say, never dies! (see KANTOROWITZ 1998).

Queer sex, with its inflections of unproductiveness and of wastefulness, has been articulated as a kind of death drive (EDELMAN 2004). After all, in death, the productive potential of life is indeed said to be put to an end! Yet, queer theorist Leo Bersani suggests that the malaise, revealed in certain attitudes towards queer erotics and death, might be better understood otherwise. Not as a sense of terror regarding one's own futurlessness; but rather, as a state where pleasure and ecstasy are the vehicle through which the subject of the self is lost. The penetrated rectum, he celebrates, is the site of the breakdown

of the human defined through a masculinist trope. An undoing of categories and individuals which amounts to what queerness itself is: that which “transverses the human”, running across it and away from it (LUCIANO & CHEN 2015: 189). The original and ultimate “drag”, one might say, which mocks at every encounter anthropocentric classifications. Queer, as that which undoes distinctions and redraws alliances. What is death then, as a moment that shatters the integrity of the self, if it is not what is already queer?

Characterized, perhaps, by the wish to re-inscribe death with human control, the Western funeral industrial complex aims to sanitize death (HAGERTY 2014). Burial practices centered on embalming the dead are marked by a desire to whisk away the dead body (MITFORD 1963). The corpse as an uncanny and even polluting object is the body in decay. Simultaneously you and not you, the corpse tinkers with the boundaries between the human and non-human. It occupies a quasi-state of non-identity. The semi-medicalized practice of embalming works to slow down this decay and freeze the transgression of death on the body. We might characterize this as an urge to tilt death *away* from death’s queerness. At the limits of Western medicine, death shifts the body from person to object and we are forced to confront whether we are the organic matter that decays into the ground. These questions are familiar to queer bodies who have long pondered the mattering of matter.

In the mutualistic relationship of figs and wasps, the separation between the living and the corpse, between life and death, between “a fig” and “a wasp” (and perhaps, “a hand”) is undermined. It is precisely this relationship that has provided us with an understanding that the quality of the embrace (between the fig and the wasp) is exactly what we talk about when we talk about a queer death: a site of breaking down, pregnant with potential.

The fig to the wasp is not unlike the rectum to the queer: a place of “losing sight” (BERSANI 1987: 222).

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CORPSES ARE REMAINS:

QUEERING HUMAN/ANIMAL BOUNDARIES ACROSS DEATH

The field of Critical Animal Studies is deeply involved in an anti-specie-sist approach to the inhabitants of the planet for a more sustainable and respectful relationship with the Otherness that escapes the boundaries of the human. By taking into account the worldly necessities of plants, non-human animals, as well as entire ecosystems, these studies have underlined how a double standard operates a divide in the continuum of the living creatures. Yet I argue that the real discrepancy does not take place in the realm of life, but in the one related to death. In what follows, I will briefly outline the different treatment designated to human and non-human animals and why things must change.

As Butler states, some deaths are more grievable than others (2014), even within the non-human animal community. While the human corpse is concealed, too many animal's dead bodies are exposed and pornographically desired as a lusty nourishment. People strive to be euthanized, pets may be "put down" or "put to sleep", but the majority of animals is "destroyed". Furthermore, human corpses undergo a process of sublimation by being buried or cremated while animals increase their market value when they produce a fully exploitable dead body. Carol J. Adams has described the deployment of this disposable commodity as the "absent referent" (1990), addressing an interlocking system of oppression that reinforces itself by stating that to be fully alive, one needs to take pleasure in consuming the death of another.

Highlighting even further the dichotomy human/animal, the absent referent is the *conditio sine qua non* for assembling a necropolitics that takes pride in the exhibition of pieces of dead animal bodies, while a corpse induces shame or performs as a taboo. Corpses must not be seen; the ongoing process of death must be disguised by the undertaker and decomposition must happen out of sight. That is why Sally Mann's photobook *What remains*, which displays, among others, the picture of her beloved greyhound Eva a year after she had died and been buried, strikes such a deep chord. As Alice Kuzniar (2006) suggests: "[...] although Sally Mann might be accused of uncovering and publicly displaying what is intensely personal, namely, the remains of a loved one, by representing finitude and loss she militates against how grief over a pet is socially foreclosed."

Within this double standard, human bodies are a taboo, suggesting the notion that people working with them are creepy, gloomy, or possibly paraphiliac. In Italy, the law that allows body donation for research and education (L.20/2020) has gone almost unnoticed. The anatomical donation is still perceived as sacrilegious or at least useless:

The promotion of a pro-PMBD culture and the adoption of measures to regulate this practice for scientific purposes may not only improve physicians' anatomical and surgical education, but also significantly reduce the number of animals sacrificed. Such policies may consequently narrow the gap between Italy and many other countries where there is a good availability of donated bodies for educational purposes. As physicians can play a pivotal role in promoting PMBD and also be a good vehicle of information for patients and relatives, students should be directly trained in this matter. (CILIBERTI *et al.* 2018: 6)

Yet this practice would not only save lots of animal (and human) lives, as the study of death is strictly inherent to major knowledge about life, but it would also be crucial in exposing how some treatments to conceal bodies are polluting the planet. Greener practices, such as alkaline hydrolysis and natural burial ought to be encouraged by environmentalist associations, as cremating one corpse take up to three hours and the necessary heat releases great amounts of carbon dioxide and mercury into the atmosphere, while conventional burial is even more polluting, as the anaerobic decomposition of bodies generates methane and occupies soil.

On the contrary, animal flesh, which becomes meat, is something to show, offer as a gift, and produce in as much quantity as possible. Furthermore, animal experimentation is far from being eradicated. The sacrifice of thousands of animals in the name of science is perceived as a sad necessity, but no real alternative has been undertaken, despite the effort of the animalists community and the fact that these tests are not only useless but ineffective, as Peter Singer and Tom Regan, among many others, have clearly displayed throughout their works and advocacy. Derrida describes sacrifice as the “noncriminal putting to death” of the other, not only animals, but also humans marked as animals. According to Derrida (1992), animal sacrifice is the symbol of a generalized carnivorous violence, a “carnophallogocentrism”, modelled upon the virile strength of the adult male. These carnophallogocentric discourses perpetuate domination and assimilation of the other. Derrida, in an interview with Jean Luc Nancy called “Il

faut bien manger”, states that sacrifice is one instance of the subject, that doesn’t recognize what is not a “normal adult male,” the standard against which the moral worth of others is measured .

Everybody, alive or dead, should be treated with respect and dignity. Working with a dead body without interfering with the process of death is not disrespectful, whereas deliberately putting to death a living creature is despicable. I would thus conclude by stating that queering the boundaries of death by refusing double standards of bereavement and promoting a more accessible contact with dead bodies, while simultaneously learning to respect the previous lives they contained. It would be advisable to prevent further cruel deaths to the detriment of nonhuman animals and to encourage technologies for body disposal that could be more carbon neutral and eco-friendly.

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TILTING POINTS OF REFERENCE:

HOW NONHUMAN DEATH NARRATIVES UNSETTLE RESEARCH²

I am researching at a library in a school. A girl is with me. Art materials, sketchbooks, and a bunch of unopened picturebooks are in front of us. The girl tells me about how good she is at repairing keychains by drawing the lock’s mechanism, and how she learned to fix them. I am eager to start the session because the library is never this quiet, and because this is my doctoral research, and this girl is one of my first encounters. Eventually, I tell her that this research is about how children and adults read about death. I explain the materials on the table (picturebooks about death, art materials to use as she wishes, the tape recorder where I collect her “voice).” She takes one of the picturebooks (*I am Death* by Elisabeth Helland and Marine Scheider), opens it up, and reads the first verse out loud:

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I am death.
As life is life.
I am death

FIG. 1 – Quote from the book *Life and I: A Story About Death* by Elisabeth Helland Larsen and Marine Schneider, Little Gestalten Publisher, 2016.

Then she closes the book and puts it away. In the following 45 minutes, she tells me the story of her dogs. It is difficult for me to follow the narrative because things happen without a cause, and characters show up without introduction, the girl throwing around names of dogs and more dogs. I am using emergent listening (DAVIES 2016) as a strategy against myself and internalized research practices. This disposition forces the research assemblage (FOX & ALLDRED 2015) that I am entangled with, to listen, and not to interrupt. The research assemblage is also committed to what Karin Murris (2016) proposes as ontoepistemic injustice, that produces children, and many others, as incapable of producing knowledge. With emergent listening as my primary strategy of posthuman research, I keep silent, aching for interrupting and get to the “data” I am interested in.

In this girl’s narrative, the dogs run through very narrow passages and tiny houses. There is one dog called Telma that is born in the girl’s house. Telma is a prominent entity in the story, moving through the genealogies of the woman in the girl’s family: “it first was my aunt’s, then my mother’s, and then Telma was mine, for the rest of my life she was mine.” However, the girl’s family cannot take care of the dogs because food and care are expensive, and the garden, says the child, is non-existent, with enough

space for just one tree. A family member ends up taking care of the dogs, because this person lives in the countryside. Now Telma is so far away from the girl's house that they can only visit her using a car that the girl's family does not have. A visual map showing the distances between both houses is materialized with ink and lines, and the words "serca" (a misspell of the word close in Spanish) and lejos (far away) place the countryside (the big square at the center) as difficult to reach.



FIG. 2 – Drawing of the interviewed girl, P.D.

At the center of this drawing rests a big black dot. The girl tells me that this is a point of reference, useful when you are lost. This brings the research's point of reference, the neoliberal production of knowledge, to the fore. My doctoral thesis is about how schools produce readers as the recipient of sanitized narratives, regulating which deaths are proper for children to talk about. At this point in the encounter, and despite my methodological positioning, I think that this confusing story is not about reading, nor about death. I believe that I am failing to produce "data"; therefore, I betray the emergent listening and ask her why she tells me this story. She says that this is a story about the death of her dog, Telma.

The big black dot at the center of the drawing is a nonhuman death.

Nonhuman death was materialized and given meaning (Radomska, MEHRABI & LIKKE 2020) by the drawings/maps, the conversation, and the logics of the research assemblage, among others. The conception of human death as exceptional (RADOMSKA, MEHRABI & LIKKE 2020) and the only narrative of death that counted (RADOMSKA, MEHRABI & LIKKE 2019) made the dogs' story unintelligible for research. I thought that the dogs were anecdotic, negating them the agentic capability to tell a story because I was invested in narratives of human exceptionalism. The dog's genealogy, the impossibility to care for them, the "outsourcing" of care to others expressed as more capable or more wealthy exposed a kind of grief that started way before Telma became the big black dot in the drawing. As Telma's dead body materialized as a point of reference, it tilted what I understood as research.

Literary reception studies are centered on the subjectivity of the readers; therefore, what matters for research is how the reader echoes the book in ways that are considered meaningful. The picturebooks' subject was death, therefore, my research would have happily received straightforward engagements with the matter, centered around human mourning and grief narratives. For this field, an encounter that fails to engage the reader with the book is considered disposable data. My research was interested in post-human research and postqualitative approaches, which demanded attention to affects and flows, inhuman and nonhuman encounters. However, my design was qualitative, mirroring the methodological mainstream in the field. After all, I designed the research focused on interviews and focus groups and collective and private readings. Honestly, I was interested in human subjectivity and only marginally in matter and materialities. However, the event weighted in my field of research, refusing to be reduced to humanist frameworks that would read it as normative grief for the loss of a pet, or as an individual reception of a literary work.

My research collapses; the black dot in the drawing weights, attracts, and reorganizes all of the research's assumptions. Queer death studies reshape the story of Telma from a failed engagement with literature to a narrative of resisting normative biopolitics and emotions associated with grief (HANSEN 2017), not centered on human subjectivity as the "grieving subject." Telma's story produced spatial temporalities where the realms of the living and the dead, the present and absent, were indistinguishable (SHILDRICK 2020) and revolved around inhuman intimacy and kinship (WEAVER

2015). Moreover, the story of Telma emerges as profoundly entangled with necropolitics of nonhuman lives as disposable and marginally grievable. With this encounter, I became posthuman.

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(UN)DOING VIRAL TIME: QUEER TEMPORALITIES OF LIVING & DYING IN PANDEMIC TIMES

I want to find ways to keep addressing the question: How might we queer the temporal scales of viral time? Without wanting to suggest a seamless queer lineage of viral temporalities, I do want to engage with a genealogy of continuities and discontinuities from the coronavirus pandemic to the multiple temporalities (and spatialities/geographies) of the AIDS crisis.

Historian of science Edna Bonhomme asks another question that helps me to (re)formulate this one: “What Makes Us Sick?” (BONHOMME 2020) As one of the core questions fueling Bonhomme’s research, it engages with material and social structures of injustice and inequality in the context of pandemic politics and in relation to histories of public health. How do specific conditions foster health and wellbeing for some living bodies while forcing others, in particular racialized and gendered minorities, to endure unlivable lives of disease and death? Physical safety and access to environmental resources, from clean air and water to nourishing food, are crucial for disease prevention, as are low levels of exposure to pathogens and toxic substances. Viral time is thus *also* environmental time, the time of the living world that bodies occupy and move through in myriad ways, my body and yours, the bodies of those who can and the bodies of those who cannot read this text.

Covid temporalities are a moving object that is constantly shifting in scale and tempo. From an initially inexplicable epidemic of pneumonia cases in Wuhan, China, to the new viral variants spreading at an alarming rate, the pandemic seems to exponentially quicken the pulse of time at certain temporal nodes, and then to slow down days and nights to a seamless succession of domestic scenes for those privileged enough to be

able to protect themselves by staying home, or to seemingly interminable stretches of time for those working impossibly long shifts as essential workers, waiting for care in crowded emergency rooms, breathing in and out through tubes what rationed oxygen they have been assigned.

The pandemic has brought to the fore how the margins matter, as marginalized and oppressed groups continue to bear the brunt of Covid cases and deaths, particularly BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Color), alongside disabled, chronically ill and elderly people. The pandemic has challenged affluent nations with brutal, heartbreaking lessons in minoritarian and intersectional politics of vulnerability. It has interrupted grand narratives of technological progress or biomedical prowess, as industrialized nations struggle to provide basic protective equipment for hospital staff, oxygen supplies are rationed, and ventilators and hospital beds remain scarce. Much like equipment and supplies must be carefully rationed, so must *time*. The emergency temporalities of crisis mode, with a dizzying succession of sensorial stimuli and cognitive demands, affect everyone in different ways, from healthcare centers saturated with fear and hope, to the daily “doomscroll” making endless demands on the capacity to process information, respond and adapt.

Queer theories of time offer myriad ways of considering the odd temporalities of the pandemic as an interruption/disruption, breaking down the linear narratives of straight time. As Mel Chen points out in “Feminisms in the Air” (2020), published in *Signs Journal* on the coronavirus pandemic, while the situation seems unprecedented, there is actually a great deal about it that feels oddly familiar, as if we were living out all our worse collective fears about infection, contagion, outbreak. It does not take much probing to find various historical precedents either, both in the distant and near past, from the 1918 flu pandemic to typhus, syphilis, diphtheria, poliomyelitis, Ebola or malaria epidemics. Masks, in particular, may remind us of not so distant (historically and geographically) events: swine and avian flu outbreaks, high pollution levels, chemical warfare, or even speculative scenarios of climate calamity from science fiction. Masks mark this time: what I am calling “covid masks,” the broad range of masks worn by non-medical staff, from makeshift swathes of cotton cloth adjustable to the face with an elastic ribbon, to N97 or FFP2 grade filtering masks, share and recite a long genealogy of protective masking practices functioning as prosthetic forms of embodiment.

Masks have been a source of intense anxiety since the beginning of the pandemic. Covid denialist movements and protests have tended to focus on the right to *not* wear a mask in public with the same conviction that public health campaigns have used in their efforts to advocate for widespread mask wearing as one of the most effective measures to prevent the spread of covid-19. I contend that these polarized responses have more to do with attitudes towards the “natural” and the “artificial” than with biomedical data or the actual covering up of faces. Instead of presuming that certain forms of prosthetic embodiment are better (i.e. more natural or benign) than others, it might be worth clarifying which forms of prosthetic embodiment one might prefer and why. For example, to claim a preference for unmasked faces and unvaccinated bodies, or for neglecting hygiene and social distancing measures, and an indifference to mounting numbers of infected bodies left to die, might seem justified based on a dislike of ageing, disabled, immune-compromised bodies whose contribution to capitalism is minimal and whose costs to the state are massive. On the other hand, it might express a dislike for state sanctioned measures based on scientific evidence and even encapsulate a desire to actualize the ideal of “natural” human bodies properly adapted to their mostly benign natural surroundings, always capable of activating an adequate immune response that does not jeopardize the survival of the individual. Viral time is thus also embodied, material time: the time of internal bodily mechanisms attuned to the agency of nonhuman life and of the object practices we engage in to sustain life, from weaving cloth to producing tight nets filtering pathogenic particles, from extracting latex to produce condoms to developing the complex biotechnologies that have produced retroviral drugs alongside a plethora of covid vaccines, both of which are widely available only in wealthy nations with subsidized healthcare systems. Viral time is the time of waiting for the pharmaceutical, biochemical intervention of “drugs into bodies,” one of the most iconic ACT UP slogans. Waiting to become a prosthetic body in order to survive a plague, an outbreak of global proportions, bodies are protected via the rudimentary physical barriers of masks and condoms, placed on the surface of the body to isolate it from the exterior and contain its interior, until far more elaborate mechanisms intervene inside the body to facilitate responses to pathogenic RNA chains that will prevent death and hopefully foster life.

The coronavirus pandemic does not encompass only the devastating consequences, lethal for millions of people, of developing covid-19 but, much like the AIDS crisis, a far-reaching pandemic of economic and affective, embodied uncertainty: about lockdown measures, the financial consequences of prevention measures, the efficacy of (which kinds of) masks, about the mechanisms of disease transmission, about pathogenesis, about risk factors and the safety of a vaccine and/or its long-term efficacy. Because I am writing genealogically without a firm commitment to finding instances of repetition and resemblance, but rather invested in how difference and divergence are also genealogically diffracted across events, I take an approach informed by historical materialism, material and visual histories, and transdisciplinary methods in history of science and medicine. The book project I am currently working on at the University of Potsdam about the long histories of the coronavirus pandemic expands on ideas I have pursued elsewhere (VARINO 2017, 2019) about models of immunity that are ecologically attuned, accounting for the myriad ways in which contact with the material, affective and social environmental impact the mechanisms of immunity. With a focus on the specificity of object practices deployed in disease prevention and transmission, I am also writing about the very concrete materiality of death and dying, the materiality of multiple temporal registers, pulsating at the core of human and nonhuman bodies striving to stay alive.

Paying close attention to how time structures a hyper-networked phenomenon like a global pandemic also informs a queer thanatology oriented towards embodied temporalities. Does the coronavirus pandemic begin with the first reported cases of covid-19 clinical scenarios, months before the disease was officially recognized by the World Health Organization? Does it begin with the first animal to human transmission of the virus, whether or not that led to a human body becoming sick? Does it begin with the long history of coronaviruses inhabiting (at times human) organisms? Does its temporality begin with the first coronavirus coming into being as a mutation over millions of years of protein chains replicating and transmitting their genetic material? Or do we want to investigate further the origin story of the novel coronavirus disease of 2019, probing deeper into how a virus carried by a number of mammals made its way into human bodies? Do we want to turn our attention to the space of a lab, of a seafood market, or of the forest? Do we want to think about deforestation, the

meat industry, and how nonhuman animals are trafficked and circulated as consumer goods?

Engaging more deeply with temporality when queering death might also mark a turn towards the methods and materials of historical research, which can inform and enrich the methodological and theoretical repertoire of queer death studies as an emerging discipline. For example, focusing on understudied or neglected areas of medical and scientific history might reveal much about how the physical labor of maintaining life and caring for the dying is unevenly carried out by those with lower social status, whereas the emotional labor of mourning might be reserved for the more privileged. Similarly, a focus on the historicity of materials and object practices offers tangible, concrete evidence of their contingency and relationality, and the necessity of linguistic and epistemological systems in order to produce and circulate knowledge. Issues of epistemic justice, of access to care, and of the right to live and the right to die, are all salient from both a temporal and historical angle. Thinking about covid-19 in relation to AIDS is also to revisit ancient temporalities, still reverberating today both in highly specific, localized geopolitical contexts, and in the global dissemination of more standardized biomedical knowledge, crucial for contemporary understandings of disease, death, vulnerability, disability and debility, as well as the bio(in)securities of risk and prevention gripping the attention of nation states.

Or are the multiple temporalities of the pandemic better described in physiological terms, as viral particles enter a vast range of living human bodies through the mouth and nose, in bodies more or less hospitable to it, more or less prone to forming an immunological response, more or less capable of hosting it, more or less likely to form alliances with it, more or less likely to handle a full-blown immunological response of high fever, respiratory symptoms, increased heart rate, possibly with ensuing neurological symptoms? Or should we turn to the epistemological temporalities of viral models of pathogenesis within the history of immunological and biomedical knowledge production? Which temporalities do we (me and anyone reading these words) prefer, which ones matter most to us and why? A queer thanatology has to articulate how the queerness of living and dying is implicated in the daily fabric of social life from the very concrete lived experiences and vastly disparate demands on living bodies.

Attending to the multiple temporalities of the pandemic matters. Accounting for the long geological histories of viruses on earth alongside the biotemporalities of body time or the interconnected genealogies of epidemic, contagious, transmissible disease. It exposes networks of in/organic, non/human phenomena distributed across time and space, material linguistic nodes. how embodied phenomena are deeply intertwined with structural exclusions, how disparate geopolitical regions and epochs are in fact closely related, how the illusion of the autonomous, rational, able-bodied subject of modernity has harmed those who cannot enact it. The historical repetitions of racist exclusions, the racial and gendered division of care labor both in clinical and domestic settings, the classed economic privileges of physical distancing, confinement and containment. Understanding these histories enables more situated, embodied responses. Every living body carries these histories in their genetic makeup, in their physiological responses, in the environments they inhabit. It is remarkably important to keep retelling these stories, to keep reciting the long histories they are embedded in. Queer death studies mobilizes an arsenal of transdisciplinary theoretical strategies to (un)do temporality in myriad ways, considering how death as a crucially temporal phenomenon relates to the haunting of historical time, geological time, body time, material time, affective time, outer space time. Virality is an ongoing, unfolding process, as volatile and unbearable as death/life itself.

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RECALCITRANT BY NATURE:

QUEERING DEATH THROUGH BIOLOGICAL ART PRACTICE

Writing about biological art practice and its inherent connection with queering death in times of the COVID-19 pandemic is an unsettling endeavour. As a practitioner in the field and PhD candidate, I have encountered a series of converging impairments caused by the pandemic that prevented me from hands-on practice in biological laboratories that I would otherwise do for both doctoral research and exhibitions. I have not accessed a biolab for more than a year. In the meantime, the world outside has become

familiar with the language, ideas and rituals of laboratories. Protocols that characterize work with biological materials – such as the now famous method of washing hands, avoiding touching one’s face, using disinfectant, or wearing gloves – have become everyday companions outside the lab. Scientific jargon has crept into mundane conversation.

Biological arts remains a field with morphing boundaries. Its core moves along multiple trajectories that traverse engagement with living biological matter, including ethics (ZURR & CATTS 2004), multispecies ecologies (BATES 2013), manipulation of organisms or parts of them (MENEZES 2003), entwinement with biotechnology (GESSERT 2010; ALISTAR & PEVERE 2020), and more-than-human agency (SCHUBERT 2017; RAPP 2020).

A queer reading of biological art practice may draw upon the theorization of the “non/living” (RADOMSKA 2016) as a category that transgresses normative understanding of life as opposed to death, and hence opens a space where both are intertwined processes. Biotechnologically supported artworks, but also entities such as viruses, fall into this non-normative space. Theorizations of the queer character of nature (HIRD 2004; GIFFNEY & HIRD 2008; MORTIMER-SANDILANDS & ERICKSON 2010; BATES 2019) further expand the focus from sexuality and gender, while acknowledging it, to an ongoing process of challenging normativities and binaries otherwise applied to the understanding of what many still call nature. By focusing on the perverse intimacies of biological matter, human and more-than-human agency, biotechnology, and contamination, biological arts may act as a lens that blows up and enacts diffraction (BARAD 2007) along these lines.

Death traverses biological art practice. One inoculates cultures and kills them; artworks involving living matter are exposed to death, contamination, unruliness, resistance. One can negotiate with biological matter, yet it remains recalcitrant. There is always the possibility that it may suffer from parasites and pathogens, get sick, die, rot (PEVERE 2018). If we expand the focus from the agencialities of human and more-than-human kinds at play within a single artwork, and look at biological material in the piece within broader naturalcultural imbrications, it becomes clear how it is not only the biomaterial which “may suffer from parasites and pathogens, get sick, die, rot”. Other entities, including symbionts and pathogens, may steer the story of one art piece. This happened with one of my recent artworks from the series *Wombs*. This series ponders possible environmental implications of hormonal contraceptives by weaving together the leaky character of

my body and of more-than-human others, such as asexual bacteria and hermaphroditic slugs. The plural form of the title refers to multiple manifestations – of bodies and the artwork. *W .02*, one piece from the series, features a hybrid culture of epithelial cells extracted from my vaginal duct and slug egg series: a non/living artwork.

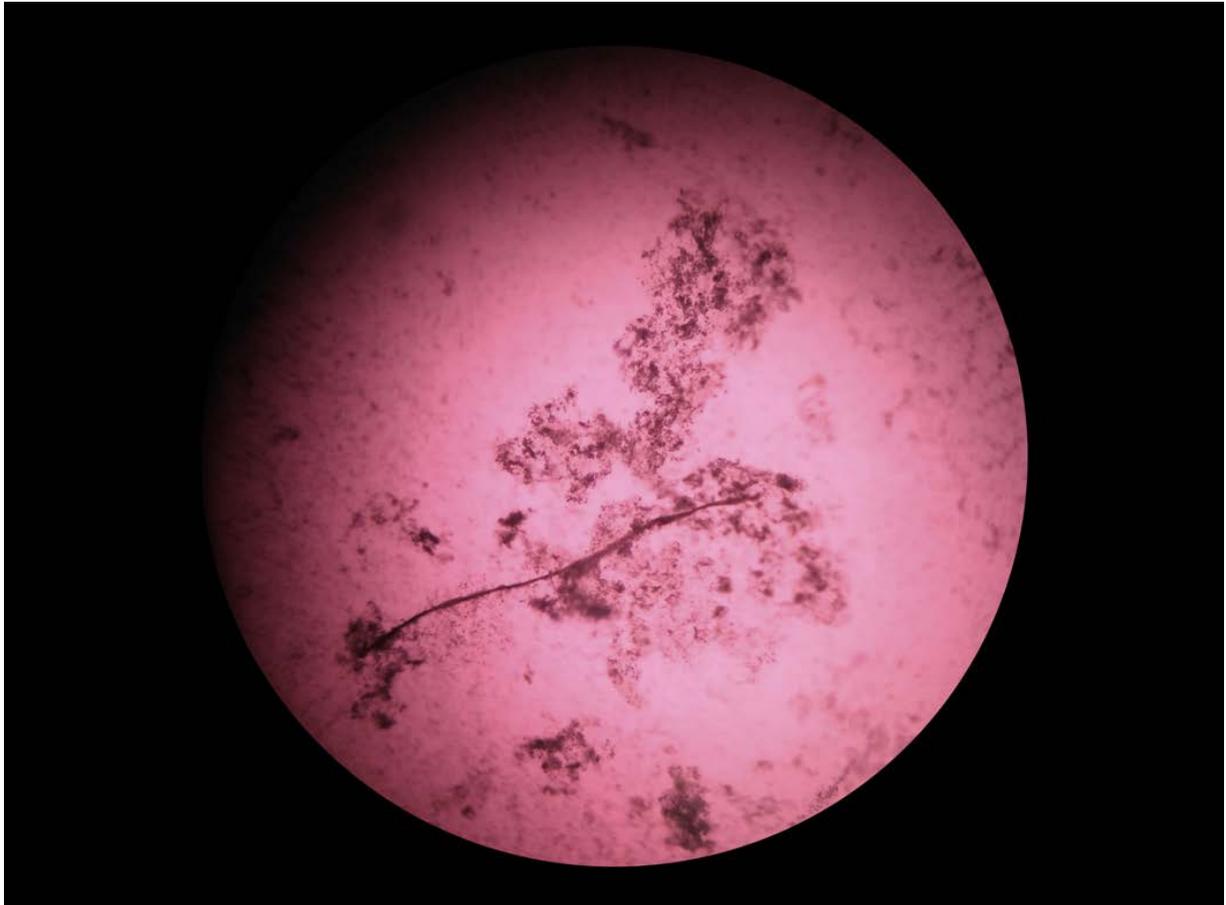


FIG. 1 – From the series “Wombs”. Epithelial cell forming tissue under microscope. Picture credit by Margherita Pevere 2019.

Because of converging impairments that prevented me to work in bio-labs, *W .02* has remained interrupted. No batches of living cells were left after the first exhibition, and the plans to prepare and stock new batches are shattered by the current ecological complexity. There is an irreducible ambivalence in this situation, which is both a bitter halt to my research and the “problem” of a privileged person. The pandemic affects human cohorts with severe consequences to the lives of many – human and non-human. The impossibility of exhibiting an artwork that involves human and slug cells may remain marginal to many. Yet, this impossibility of working

reveals precisely the naturcultural fabric the piece operates in: an interweaving of ecological, sanitary, political, and jurisdictional realities. This impossibility reveals and amplifies the specific imbrications expressed in biological arts.



FIG. 2 – From the series “Wombs”. Details of vials with dried cells. Picture credit by Margherita Pevere 2021.

Yet, this sounds like an all-too-human dimension. The impossibility of exhibiting one artwork or continuing research around it may be frustrating if one thinks in human terms. The looming deaths of fellow humans remains tragic, obviously. I still cultivate the hope to retrieve and exhibit *W.02* again in the future, however the complexities unveiled by biological arts and the radical openness articulated by queer theory (GIFFNEY & HIRD 2008; DELL’AVERSANO 2010; RADOMSKA *et al.* 2019) conjure a different way of thinking to what happened to the artwork. The artwork has manifested itself differently, and by doing so has opened a critical space of reflection and performativity. An artwork which cannot be exhibited reveals vulnerability (SHILDRICK 2002; DAIGLE 2018; RADOMSKA *et al.* 2021) and calls for negotiations, rather than being a failure.

A queer reading of the experience and processuality of more-than-human death in biological art practice may help sketch a mode of embracing the recalcitrant performativity of biological and biotechnological matters. Symbionts, chimeras and holobionts manifest their intricacies in the process of dying. In all its complexity and ethical ramifications, such awareness may help celebrate, cherish, and care for the commonalities that living, non/living, and dying beings are part of.

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What do we talk about when we talk about queer death?

4/ Queering death in the medical and health humanities

ABSTRACT: This is part 4 of 6 of the dossier *What do we talk about when we talk about queer death?*, edited by M. Petricola. The contributions collected in this article sit at the crossroads between thanatology, queer studies, and the medical/health humanities and tackle questions such as: how can queer death studies deconstruct the health-illness binary? How can we rethink the experience of cancer from the perspective of queer death studies? How can this discipline help us focus on “peripheral” deaths like fetal death and pregnancy loss?

The present article includes the following contributions: – Kirey-Sitnikova Y., Bridging queer death studies with public health science; – Böcker J., Queering fetal death and pregnancy loss; – Werner A., Re/orienting to death: queer phenomenology, terminal cancer, and anticipatory regimens; – Tzouva P., Towards a queer death: breaking free of cancerland; – Clay S., A queer account of self-care: autopoiesis through auto-annihilation.

KEYWORDS: Thanatology, Death Studies, Queer Studies, Medical Humanities, Health Humanities.

BRIDGING QUEER DEATH STUDIES WITH PUBLIC HEALTH SCIENCE

As a trans/queer activist with 11 years of experience, I have seen enough criticism directed at health practitioners. For several years I was among the few persons in Russia speaking against trans pathologization, gatekeeping practices and compulsory medical interventions, finding inspiration in trans/gender studies, critical theory, social sciences and humanities in general. Unfortunately, much of this criticism misses its target, as many health practitioners, even those acting with the best intentions, lack training to understand the complex language in which their faults are explained by the activists and academics. Mutually incommensurable theoretical frameworks and worldviews make it virtually impossible to establish constructive dialogue between adherents on both sides. Getting an education in public health thus became an extension of my activism aimed to understand the

field I have been critical of and practice this science in a more meaningful and responsible way. The following is my attempt to bridge the fields of Public Health and Queer Studies via Queer Death Studies (QDS) in a number of ways which came up during my present research in trans health.

1. WHAT IS DEATH IN PUBLIC HEALTH AND HEALTH ECONOMICS?

The science and art of Public Health is grounded in the understanding of health as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION 1947). This definition reintroduced a holistic approach to health which for three centuries since the Cartesian revolution had been subsided by a positivist understanding of a disease as a deviation from the biological norm (AHMED *et al.* 1979). Both health and disease are biosocial constructs that do not exist in a binary opposition towards each other but include many dimensions articulated differently depending on, for example, class and culture (*Ibid.*). This deconstructionist mode of thinking parallels the blurring of the life/death binary found in QDS.

However, when trying to operationalize and quantify “health”, we still find ourselves in a familiar continuum in which more health means less disease, and vice versa. The opposite endpoint of imaginary “perfect health” is “death” which for Public Health is understood as a special type of a disease – the worst “disease” one can get. Two common metrics of health illustrate this point.

Disability-adjusted life years (DALY) is used to measure population-wide disease burden (MURRAY 1994). It is calculated as a sum of *years lived with disability* (YLD) and *years of life lost* (YLL). To calculate YLD, one uses *disability weights* which are tabulated for common diseases (disabilities) in a range between 0 (perfect health) and 1 (death). A related, utility-based metric called Quality-adjusted life years (QALY) also relies on weights in a range between 0 and 1, but 0 is assigned to “death” and 1 to “perfect health” (TORRANCE & FEENY 1989). Interestingly, QALY weights might go down below zero – indicating that certain health states may be perceived as “worse than dead”, raising a number of philosophical and practical issues (ROUDIJK *et al.* 2018).

Morbidity and mortality go hand in hand in many other ways. For example, the International Classification of Diseases began as a list of causes of death, while non-fatal conditions were added in later revisions (ANDERSON

2011). To provide another example, in health economics evaluation, Markov models are widely used. In these models, individuals move between health states with certain transition probabilities. Among other health states, the model usually includes “death” – the probability of staying in this state is 100% once you get there. Aggregation of morbidity and mortality has been questioned on the grounds of their incommensurability (SOLBERG *et al.* 2018), but the mode of thinking delineated above still prevails.

2. IS NECROPOWER A USEFUL CONCEPT IN PUBLIC HEALTH?

If death is considered among the health conditions, how can theoretical concepts of QDS be applied to issues of health and disease? Public Health and especially its subfield of Epidemiology has for decades been criticized for not accounting for power relations in its practices of data collection, categorization and calculation (LUPTON 1995). Its theoretical approaches were called into question for focusing on an individual body as a problem separate from social relations in which it is immersed (WING 1994). This critique is partly out of date, as insights from social sciences are increasingly incorporated into the theory and practice of Public Health, including the development of social epidemiology, integration of intersectional analysis, embodiment theory, to name a few trends (WEMRELL *et al.* 2016). Political epidemiology has emerged as a subdiscipline aimed to account for the role of political factors (political systems, political economy) in shaping health inequalities (BECKFIELD & KRIEGER 2009). While the latter research incorporates the notion of power, the concept of biopower in its Foucauldian sense is lacking. Several factors might explain epidemiologists’ reluctance to employ biopower analysis in their work. First, despite Public Health becoming more interdisciplinary than ever, humanities are still too far away, and biopower in particular is too vague a concept to be operationalized. Second, the concept of biopower has been (and continues to be) applied against the science of Public Health itself, which is rendered as an instrument of control over populations in the name of life and health.

On the other hand, necropower as a power that drives living beings closer to death might better align with epidemiological thinking focused more on risk factors than protective factors. Sovereignty is not only exercised through letting certain people die while making others live (as in the mainstream analysis of biopower), they also expose them to conditions leading to disease and death (MBEMBE 2003). Whereas Mbembe’s analysis

focuses on more visible articulations of violence, a related concept of slow violence (NIXON 2011) considers mundane, everyday exposure to factors detrimental to one's health, such as environmental degradation. Both concepts can be used to explain causation, especially in fields such as environmental and social epidemiology where studies need to rely on observation while experimental designs are often impossible. While several frameworks for incorporation of qualitative research into epidemiology have been proposed (Bannister-TYRRELL & MEIQARI 2020), their practical implementation remains a distant future.

Transgender issues are a good example to illustrate the gap between the current state of epidemiology and QDS. Some epidemiological studies show effectiveness of trans-specific medical procedures, such as hormone replacement therapy and surgeries, in improving psycho-social outcomes and mental health (MURAD *et al.* 2010; COSTA & COLIZZI 2016). Focusing narrowly on medical interventions, this research routinely excludes social context in which trans people live outside the gender clinic, such as pervasive discrimination and violence leading to slow death. On the other hand, necropower has been invoked in relation to trans lives in other academic texts (e.g. SNORTON & HARITAWORN 2013). However, I was not able to find a study where these two modes on looking at trans issues intersect. It would be interesting to examine how medical interventions aimed to alter one's perception in a certain gender act as protective factors against necropower of everyday transphobia. Which social (and not just biomedical) pathways lead to improved mental health? How medical diagnosis of transsexualism/gender dysphoria renders some trans individuals exposed to necropower while disciplining others through biopower?

3. COUNTING ALL DEATHS EQUALLY IN HEALTH ECONOMICS

A different intervention inspired by QDS brings us closer to Health Economics. Cost-effectiveness analysis (CEA) is the most common type of health economics evaluation, aimed to compare different types of treatment, or in many cases treatment and no treatment. Differential costs of two types of treatment and their effectiveness (often expressed as DALYs or QALYs) are used to calculate incremental cost-effectiveness ratio (ICER):

$$ICER = \frac{cost_1 - cost_2}{effect_1 - effect_2}$$

ICERs are commonly calculated in two so-called perspectives: a healthcare

perspective includes costs and benefits for the healthcare system, while a societal perspective is broader and additionally encompasses costs and benefits for other spheres, such as employment, education, criminal justice, etc. But none of these perspectives addresses environmental impact of health interventions. In the “effect” part, quality and longevity of life is calculated for humans only. Likewise, the “costs” part covers costs for humans. That means that deaths of animals during drug development are not accounted for, just as degradation of habitats as a result of environmental damage associated with the production of drugs and medical equipment. To account for these consequences, one might modify the equation above as follows:

- a. Costs. In line with ecological economics thinking, ecological damage should be included not as “externalities” but as environmental costs.
- b. Effects. Non-human deaths and disability should be included in the calculations of effect (for example, in calculating DALYs).
- c. Both of the above approaches may be combined.

To determine cost-effectiveness of a treatment, we further need to compare the resulting ICER with the willingness-to-pay (WTP) which is the maximal amount the society is ready to pay for prolonging life and improve health of an individual. Several countries now have standardized WTP: for Sweden it is 500,000 SEK/QALY, for the UK – between £20,000 and £30,000/QALY. But if environmental costs are included, will WTP stay the same? And who is responsible for determining how many non-human lives we are willing to sacrifice per QALY of a human being?

4. CONCLUSION

Aforementioned are just two ways in which QDS could enrich Public Health Science. Bringing together these diverse conceptual frameworks is a tricky endeavor complicated by disciplinary barriers. Those can be overcome at an individual level by emerging oneself in the theory of a field one has no formal training in. But a structural change in academia is needed to facilitate transdisciplinary research of this kind.

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QUEERING FOETAL DEATH AND PREGNANCY LOSS

On a naïve social constructionist starting point I began to research experiences of miscarriage and stillbirth for my PhD project some years ago. I considered the terms miscarriage and stillbirth to refer to clear medical facts – foetal deaths at different points during pregnancy or birth – and I thought only the ways of dealing with the incident would differ by history, culture and biography. Using a grounded theory approach, I ended up studying how, in fact, a miscarried or stillborn foetus is perceived, (de)constructed, and dealt with as a deceased human being, a *child* lost by its *parents*. I had to let go of my assumptions on the factuality of (death at the) beginning of a human life.

I realized there is a “cultural void” (SAWICKA 2017: 233) surrounding pregnancy loss experiences like miscarriage, stillbirth, late termination and perinatal death. They go along with stigma, isolation and communicative taboos rather than with social routines and rituals. In ritual theory abrupt and ‘unsuccessful’ endings of pregnancies can be seen as incomplete rituals, leaving the formerly pregnant person and the foetus in a “liminal space between different states of being” (KUBERSKA *et al.* 2020: 150). Both have an uncertain status, the stillborn foetus may be seen as “something between a baby and ‘human tissue’” (*ibid.*). According to the modern subject-object dualism, it will be either buried or disposed with clinical waste.

Below, I share some observations of heteronormative (necro)politics, connected with pregnancy loss activism, that aim for official recognition and for parental rights to decide about foetal remains (BÖCKER 2021). Based on this, I point out what queering death and loss around the beginning of a human life could mean instead.

HETERONORMATIVE (NECRO)POLITICS OF PREGNANCY LOSS ACTIVISM

In many countries all over the world activism accounts for filling the social and ritual void surrounding pregnancy loss. In Germany, where my research focus lies, it ranges from local support groups of volunteers who sew small-size clothes for stillborns out of wedding dresses to nation-wide networks and activities to raise awareness around pregnancy loss and to change clinical standards and federal laws.

One of these initiatives, “Petition Sternenkind [Angel babies]”,

achieved a change of the Civil Status Law.¹ The married couple Barbara and Mario Martin – who lost three children during pregnancy – brought in a draft law via the petition committee of the German Parliament in 2009. The draft law was meant to establish a civil status for miscarried fetuses. The goal was for parents to have the choice to officially register and to bury them. Until then, pregnancy tissue and miscarried fetuses were usually discarded as clinical waste and no official record was kept. More than 40,000 people signed the petition. In 2013 the draft law was unanimously adopted by the German parliament. The decision was accompanied by standing ovations for the Martins who had lobbied for the amendment many months.

Miscarried fetuses now can be legally recognised. Bereaved parents may name, register them at a local Civil Registry Office and bury them. Although the law amendment might have enforced overdue parental rights, it implies heteronormative implications and consequences on which I will now expound.

First, there is a new obligation for hospitals to inform about funeral rights and possibilities in case of a miscarriage, whereupon individuals must decide about the foetal remains. Women and couples experiencing a miscarriage might be troubled in a new sense now: they now must legally decide if they want to bury what they have, or will have, miscarried, a foetus or unborn child, with which they may or may not have bonded. At the same time, they are confronted with a growing cultural expectation to do so: to name, bury, and mourn the unborn, their child, and consider themselves as *bereaved parents*.

My research indicates a hegemonic discourse and practice of informing that is foetus-centred and implies foetal parenthood (BÖCKER 2021). The actual decision-making process is accompanied by feeling rules and role expectations, especially those of a *bereaved mother*. To put it more drastically, every failed pregnancy may mean a deceased child and bereaved parenthood now. There is also, to some extent, a rhetorical proximity to anti-abortion activists who use the concept “death of an unborn”. Some Catholic hospitals, especially, use *pro-life* rhetoric to inform about new funeral options and services related to “gravesites for unborn life”.

¹ The Civil Status Law, in German “Personenstandsrecht”, regulates every person’s family status including name, date of birth and date of death. The law distinguishes between live-birth, stillbirth, and miscarriage.

Second, if effected individuals decide against a funeral – that is they don't arrange an individual funeral themselves – hospitals are legally obliged “to collect and to bury miscarried foetuses and unborn children under dignified conditions”. Mostly in practice, the hospitals collect the miscarried foetuses and pregnancy tissue, and local Christian communities organise a cremation and burial as well as a small funeral service. This, by the way, also applies to foetuses who were miscarried by Muslim women.

Third, the requirement to officially register a miscarriage reveals how firmly legal parenthood is still bound (bound again?) to the idea of biological parenthood. The minimum requirement to legally declare the foetus as a family member, and to give it a prospective name, is proof of a former pregnancy and a medical professional's attestation about its end. Since, in Germany, married homosexuals have to adopt their (partner's biological) child after birth, live-birth to be precise here, for homosexual parents there is no legal way for both to be registered as the parents of a miscarried child. On the other hand, since in most German states every *parent* can arrange a funeral after any kind of pregnancy loss, a husband – who is the father of his wife's children by law – is now legally enabled to arrange a foetal funeral, regardless of his wife's wishes. Miscarried children of married heterosexual couples seem to be, to put it in the words of Butler (2004: 30), “more grievable than others”. This is especially startling because the amendment was praised in media as a concession of individuals' rights to self-determination after pregnancy loss.

QUEERING FOETAL DEATH AND PREGNANCY LOSS ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Effected women, couples, and the extended families, have to give meaning to the situation, define the miscarried/stillborn/child, define what life/death means to them, find a parental/non-parental identity, and decide on the next steps – all against the background of being responsible for self-care, future feelings of regret and a successful bereavement process.

Queering death around a human life's beginning means to understand to whom that life held meaning – its planning, hoping and preparing for, its coming into being – and to define *what* was that meaning. In this regard, we need queer forms of recognition and acknowledgement after pregnancy loss. The subject-object-dualism applied to the foetus still opposes an officially registered *death of an unborn child* who is buried with dignity to *human tissue* that may be disposed as clinical waste.

In fact, many effected subjects have highly individual, sophisticated and ambiguous conceptions and feelings of what they have lost. For example, they consider their miscarried/stillborn child somehow magical, a kind of divine encounter, acknowledging non-human personhood. Or they might be in a situation to await their beloved child *and* decide for a late termination due to medical reasons. So far this is a moral contradiction, but we need ways to acknowledge these losses as significant without tying them to foetal personhood. After loss some parents want to write a memorial card for their aborted child and send it to friends and family, yet many won't because they feel – and may be held – responsible for their not coming into being.

Non-normative practices of mourning miscarried and stillborn babies, like this, are sanctioned in two ways. On the one hand, they are still “unacknowledged and stigmatized loss[es]” (WERNER-LIN & MORO 2004) because the unborn isn't seen as a human being and grievable loss. On the other hand, some of the recent changes in official recognition seem to reserve bereavement and mourning after miscarriage and stillbirth for those who are considered *real parents*. Apart from the question, what a valuable and grievable life and loss is, we therefore also have to discuss *who has a right to grieve*.

Thus, we also talk about acknowledging “reproductive loss” (EARLE *et al.* 2012) in non-mainstream families and communities. Losses by members of the LGBTQIA* community are likely to be acknowledged less, because they match a mainstream expectation that they won't become biological parents. However, single-mothers, surrogate mothers, lesbians and trans men have miscarriages and stillbirths, too. Their pregnancy losses are often especially painful because the efforts and costs to conceive are particularly high. Members of the queer community may not want to go for an official state record of their miscarriage or a birth certificate, but it is striking they don't have the same legal right to do so.

In Berlin Schöneberg there is “an enchanted cemetery ... where the Grimm Brothers, stillborn babies and gay men are resting in peace” (LAMBDA PROD 2016). The old graveyard is famous for being a last home for many (well-known) gays who died from HIV/AIDS in the 1980s. Today, it is also famous for its beautiful “Garten der Sternenkinder [Garden of Angels]”, a gravesite for stillborn children. It looks a little bit like a playground and is sometimes used like one by siblings of the dead. Offering a place for

the invisible and stigmatized – dead and mourners alike – the graveyard enables community-building and a re-evaluation of what can be considered grievable losses.

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RE/ORIENTING TO DEATH: QUEER PHENOMENOLOGY, TERMINAL CANCER, AND ANTICIPATORY REGIMES

My partner and I drive 3 and a half hours from our remote rural town to the regional cancer centre where I meet my oncologist once a month to discuss my treatment, my blood tests and scan results. We leave the home we hand-built together, drive through farmland, climb a winding forested mountain pass, and emerge from the forest onto the Monaro plain – a barren, brown landscape of huge granite boulders, wind-tortured gum trees, skinny sheep grazing, dead and decaying road-killed wombats and kangaroos lining the sides of the highway.

On the drive we are encapsulated. Physically in our car, hurtling down a highway towards a destination that only exists for us as a site of medicalised examination and information-gathering. We are also encapsulated emotionally and temporally. We are absorbed in our grief and anxiety, knowing that one day we will make this drive together and my oncologist will tell us that the treatment that is currently keeping my metastasised cancer ‘under control’ has stopped working, and that the cancer will now continue spreading until it consumes me and I am gone.

The knowledge that this news is coming, one day, maybe soon, fills us with dread and also with wonder. It orients our time, inscribes the ways that we imagine our futures. In the days leading up to the appointments we are gentle with one another. We don’t often speak about what might be revealed at the appointment, but we feel its maybe-immanence thick in the air, in our embraces, when we fuck. We try to shield our children from our anxiety, try to make their life ‘normal’, arrange play-dates for the days we are at appointments, to distract them/us from what will come.

Our anxiety peaks as we turn off the highway into the outskirts of the city. The road weaves through bland outer suburbia, ringed by desolate

hills, closer and closer to the hospital. We share a Valium. We pass through the covid checkpoint and check in at hospital reception. My appointments are on clinic days at a public hospital: a day full of appointments for all of the patients who don't have private health insurance. It's incredibly busy (so many people, so much cancer), so we wait, sometimes for a long time, smiling at the chemo patients, nodding knowingly at other patients waiting, averting our eyes and choking back tears when we see someone leaving an appointment in tears. We hold hands, knit, read, chat and wait.

The waiting... is... heavy.

I ponder this waiting, I ponder what I'm now waiting for. I *feel* Margaret Waltz's assertion that medical waiting is a site of "temporal domination" which upholds power structures, most significantly those related to class and gender (2017: 818). My class determines my access to medical treatments, access to doctors. As a public patient, my wait times are long, and my appointments are short, as my oncologist rushes to get through all of the patients she must see in a clinic day. But perhaps more than the physical embodiment of waiting in waiting rooms, I am cognizant of, and haunted by, the *waiting for death* that a terminal diagnosis orients me towards. In this, I *feel* Dylan Trigg's observation that temporal experience is bodily and, more acutely, that "the drawn temporality of waiting has less to do with the objective status of the environment, and more to do with a projection *toward the future*" (2012: 31 emphasis added).

As I make these long drives and do my daily, sometimes all-consuming waiting (in waiting rooms, in doctors' offices, in scanning machines, in hospital, on the phone, in bed at 3am, alert with pharmaceutical- and anxiety-induced insomnia) I ponder the ways that I have, upon receipt of this strangely solid and also nebulous diagnosis, been reoriented. The time frame imparted to terminal subjects by our doctors, the expected number of weeks/months/years, imposes limits on the ways we imagine our future, with a concomitant habituation towards medical institutions and the clinical gaze of medical professionals.² The cancer-industrial complex in general and processes of prognostication in particular, yoke terminal subjects to a vanishing future that is simultaneously fuelled by hope and also inherently hopeless. Medical institutions (both as physical structures

² Katherine Kenny points out the very important ways that the 'terminal subject' "derives its ontological being" from the medical establishment and associated institutional gazes (Kenny, 382)

and socio-cultural phenomenon) and terminal diagnoses (as literal numbers which redefine the ways that terminal subjects may imagine our lives *and* as socio-cultural phenomenon which are attended by a series of inscribing narratives) orient terminal subjects within the phenomenological complex of body, place and time (SCHMIDT 2018).

Sara Ahmed, in her work on queer phenomenology, asks us: “What difference does it make what we are oriented toward?” (2006). While Ahmed is talking specifically here about orientation towards objects, I would like to expand this question to consider other orientations, such as those enforced by the anticipatory regimes of late capitalism. As Vincanne Adams describes, under neoliberal late capitalism, anticipation is an “epistemic orientation toward the future” (2009: 254) which enables “the production of possible futures that are lived and felt as inevitable in the present, rendering hope and fear as important political vectors” (2009: 248). We are socialised to orient ourselves towards certain things: straightness, as Ahmed points out, but also ‘the future’, as in Adams’ “politics of temporality” (2009: 246). But the future we orient towards seldom includes death, which is of course the ultimate future certainty. Ahmed points out that “orientations are about the directions we take that put some things and not others in our reach” (2006: 552). A terminal diagnosis orients a patient towards death, and puts an adherence to future-oriented chrononormativity ‘out of reach’. If, as Ahmed suggests, queering may be understood as the making visible and taking notice of that which is invisible or overlooked, then the diagnosis of terminal illness and the associated prognostication of life expectancy is a deeply queering phenomenon.

For a life to count as a good life, it must return the debt of its life by taking on the direction promised as a social good, which means imagining one’s futurity in terms of reaching certain points along a life course. Such points accumulate, creating the impression of a straight line. To follow such a line might be a way to become straight, by not deviating at any point. (AHMED 2006: 554)

Terminality presents an oblique slant to this heteronormative line, thereby queering the life course. Ahmed suggests that queer moments (or in this case, the queering processes of terminal diagnoses), in their obliquity, inhibit the actions of the body, thereby limiting its capacity to “extend into phenomenal space,” forcing the body to straighten, in order to continue

its occupation of that space, since spaces are oriented around the straight body, and exclude other bodies. (2006: 561). Heteronormativity then, is a “straightening device, which rereads the ‘slant’ of queer desire” (AHMED 2006: 562). Similarly, teleological anticipatory modes which exclude death from life narratives, exclude terminal subjects from being able to imagine life. Future orientation, whereby anticipation becomes a “moral economy” (ADAMS 2009: 249) excludes terminal subjects.

Dylan Trigg articulates a sensation of disempowerment and a crisis of vulnerability for self-identity as a result of facing the uncanny, when we “*no longer feel at ease within ourselves*” (TRIGG 2012: 47 emphasis added). This sense of dis-ease is deeply familiar to me. Cancer, and specifically terminal cancer, produces this effect, especially for subjects who are not “ill”. I ‘know’, because of multitudes of medical tests and examinations, that I have a number of cancers in my body that will, in the not-distant future, bring about my death. But I do not experience these cancers. What I experience is an orientation towards death, and an orientation towards the cancer-industrial complex, in the form of daily, weekly and monthly medications, injections, blood tests and scans. Because of this orientation I experience a slanting away from the chrononormative life-lines offered to me by future-oriented late capitalism and a (further) queering of my life course. As Ahmed, following Frantz Fanon, points out, such disorientation calls into crisis my involvement in the world (2006b), and results in what Katherine Kenny calls “precarious selfhood” (2017: 374). My ability to normatively imagine a future for myself, as I have been culturally compelled to do, via the cultural narratives and moral imperatives of “working towards”, “saving for”, “waiting for the right time”, “preparing for”, has been interrupted by terminal diagnosis. A distinct absence of cultural narratives around preparing for or waiting for death means that my own existence within the “timescape of terminality” is characterised by a sense of wading through “thick time³” (NEIMANIS 2014), or a sense of being “out of time” (ADAMS 2009: 255). To some degree I ‘know my future’ (I will soon die from cancer), but I am also living in a state of disturbed stasis, characterised by the heavy waiting, and the temporal and affective incoherence

³ Neimanis articulates thick time as a “transcorporeal stretching between present, future and past”. While her conceptualisation refers to human responses to and interactions with climate change, I think the notion is also useful when considering the spatio-temporal implications of living in prognosis and navigating terminality within the cancer industrial complex.

which Kenny identifies as being fundamental to the experienced reality of cancer. Such radical estrangement from the body that I, as a terminally ill, queer subject experience, is a result of the disorientation offered up by the phenomenal experience of living in prognosis (JAIN 2007).

Time is muddied by prognostication. I am disoriented and reoriented by this muddiness. While Ahmed encourages us to consider sexual orientation as a phenomenological question, I extend this to consider future orientation as a phenomenological question, especially when considered in relation to the bodily experience of terminal illness and associated processes. Queer phenomenology, Ahmed argues, functions as a “disorientation device... allowing the oblique to open up another angle on the world” (2006b: 172). Prognostication does this to death, and as such, it queers our relationship with the end of life. It also, perhaps more significantly, draws attention to the ways that neoliberal regimes of anticipatory thinking, future orientation and chrononormativity exclude terminally ill subjects from participation, further dislodging the terminally ill subject’s sense of self.

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TOWARDS A QUEER DEATH: BREAKING FREE OF CANCERLAND⁴

In their article, “Queer Death Studies: Death, Dying and Mourning from a Queerfeminist Perspective”, Radomska, Mehrabi, and Lykke (2020) explain that “to queer issues of death, dying and mourning means to unhinge certainties, to ‘undo normative entanglements and fashion alternative imaginaries’ beyond the exclusive concern with gender and sexuality that is often associated with the term ‘queer’” (88). They go on to specifically criticize “‘proper’ responses to biopolitical regimes of health- and life-normativity [...] and normative demands to consider life-threatening diseases from the perspective of a heroic battle against an ‘enemy’” (ibid), as it happens with breast cancer. In this context, a “search for different articulations, silenced narratives and marginalised/alternative stories” is important in order to “question(s) and

⁴ This research was supported by the Estonian Research Council (GRANT 1481), by the European Regional Development Fund (Center of Excellence in Estonian Studies), and by the Foundation for Education and European Culture.

deconstruct(s) the normativities that often frame contemporary discourses on death, dying and mourning” (ibid:89). Such articulations and voices, in the mainstream of breast cancer understandings and narratives are few and far between⁵, a fact that points to the need of looking more closely at what happens in the territory of *Cancerland* (EHRENREICH 2001).

In breast cancer culture, women are dispossessed of their own death, dying, and mourning by the same necropolitical, profit-oriented, life-negating structures⁶ that have turned breast cancer into a highly lucrative industry (KING 2006; KLAWITER 2008; SULIK 2011; STRACH 2016). Structures that, moreover, bear the responsibility for circumventing research for the environmental causes of cancer (ibid; see also: BRENNER 2016; RICHTER 2019) and for the marketing of breast cancer in particular as an opportunity to reinvent yourself, re-discover your femininity, and connect to the fighter within (EHRENREICH 2001). This happens not abruptly, but as a natural consequence of a lifetime of necropolitical socialization in the western values of neoliberal individualism and a specific type of white, middle class, heteronormative femininity – a socialization that nearly kills whatever existing possibilities for people to imagine life differently and act upon it. In this context, and in due course, death, dying, and mourning are

⁵ For example, Christina Middlebrook’s *Seeing the Crab. A Memoir of Dying Before I Do* (1996). Middlebrook’s memoir dispenses with linearity, destabilizes chronology, and recreates in the text the author’s experience of fragmentation (RIMMON-KENAN 2002: 19-20). Middlebrook castigates the attitude of health professionals who do not call things by their proper name (1996: 7) and attacks “the well-entrenched American denial system” (1996: 135) that radically refuses the reality of illness and death. She asks for recognition (BAENA 2017: 6-11) and expresses her fury at the outrageous social expectations to suppress negative emotions and be glad she looks good again after a long time, while she knows she is dying (*Ibid*: 99). A couple more of those rare instances are Miriam Engelberg’s *Cancer Made Me a Shallower Person: A Memoir in Comics* (2006), which I have examined elsewhere (Tzouva, forthcoming), and Anne Boyer’s *The Undying: A Meditation on Modern Illness* (2019) – see Nellie Hermann’s very interesting review (2020).

⁶ This is what Breast Cancer Action refers to as *the cancer industry*: “The cancer industry consists of corporations, organizations, and agencies that diminish or mask the extent of the cancer problem, fail to protect our health, or divert attention away from the importance of finding the causes of breast cancer and working to prevent the disease. This includes drug companies that, in addition to profiting from cancer treatment drugs, sometimes produce toxic chemicals that may be contributing to the high rates of cancer in this country and increasing rates throughout the world. It also includes the polluting industries that continue to release substances are known or suspected to be dangerous to our health, and the public relations firms and public agencies that protect these polluters. The cancer industry includes organizations like the American Cancer Society that downplay the risk of cancer from pesticides and other environmental factors, and that historically have refused to take a stand on environmental regulation” (BREAST CANCER ACTION (undated))

owned by pink-washed, infantilizing, unabashedly hypocritical and corporate-supported institutions and, therefore, are understood and performed according to their scripts, which promote breast cancer as nothing other than a *bildungsroman* story. In the ultra-prolific genre of breast cancer memoirs (abounding with epiphanies and, in turns, shallow sentimentalism and neoliberal manifestations of a self who will win the battle and emerge more resilient and powerful) breast cancer is imagined as an opportunity for self-development and affirmation of one's will over an insidious invader⁷. All these are set in a world of pink ribbons (and all things pink), teddy bears, marathons for awareness (still awareness?!), snug support groups and comfy sisterhoods, medals for the survivors and survivors' parades, and the most unbearable to watch – because so pitiful and disturbing – commemoration of the dead. Death, dying, and mourning as actions that, in the context of breast cancer, could be charged with political, activist, and ethical presence, are cancelled and disowned as they are appropriated by and put at the service of the necropolitical machine that spreads and exploits people's demise.

Death doesn't seem to really matter, since steps are not taken to effectively address the environmental causes of cancer, even though there is by now serious evidence that environmental factors are linked to the disease (STEINGRABER 2000; SEAGER 2003; BROWN 2007; GRAY *et al.* 2017). Instead, the emphasis is put on individual responsibility and one's personal lifestyle choices (EHRENREICH & BRENNER 2001). Despite cancer's

⁷ One example of such tendencies – a feel-good narrative from a white, upper middle class, heteronormative, and hyper-feminine position – is Marisa Acocella Marchetto's best-selling comic book *Cancer Vixen: A True Story* (2006). The very first sentence already sets the mood and lets the reader know what this is all about: "What happens when a shoe-crazy, lipstick-obsessed, wine-swilling, pasta-slurping, fashion-fanatic, single-forever, about-to-get-married big-city girl cartoonist (me, Marisa Acocella) with a fabulous life finds: A LUMP IN HER BREAST?!? She kicks its ass, of course – and does so in killer five-inch heels" (2006: 1). Another instance, from a very similar perspective, additionally, accentuating the significance of breast prosthesis and motherhood for a woman to be complete, is GERALYN LUCAS' *Why I Wore Lipstick to My Mastectomy* (2004). Lucas' memoir begins with a section titled "The Lipstick Manifesto: Have Courage, Wear Lipstick", which the author closes as follows: "And maybe applying red lipstick is a simple act of courage – to imagine yourself as someone or something you never thought you could be, and somehow, in a carefully applied swipe of beeswax, to become her. Maybe wearing lipstick is the beginning of a revolution inside your head?" (ibid:xv). It, unsurprisingly, ends with a post-reconstruction comment of the delighted protagonist who, having completed her journey, poses topless for the *Self* magazine: "I have finally learned how to strip" (ibid:193). Lucas' story was made into a TV movie (2006) nominated for an Emmy Award. Marchetto's book is going to the screen, as well. For an excellent analysis of both narratives, see Waples' work (2013 and 2014, respectively).

“inexorable increase [...] in industrialized nations” (EHRENREICH 2001: 48) and its occurrence to “women migrants to industrialized countries” who “quickly develop the same breast-cancer rates as those who are native born” (ibid), some of the major players in Cancerland, such as the Komen Foundation and the American Cancer Society, simply do not share these concerns. The money from the donations at the disposal of these institutions amount to an annual budget of millions of dollars, yet the sum that is allocated to research for the actual prevention of cancer is limited to an absolute minimum⁸, and the same goes for federal breast cancer funding (RICHTER 2019: 4). In the meanwhile, “miscellaneous businesses – from tiny distributors of breast-cancer wind chimes and note cards to major corporations seeking a woman-friendly image – benefit in the process, not to mention the breast-cancer industry itself, the estimated \$12-16 billion-a-year business in surgery, “breast health centers,” chemotherapy “infusion suites,” radiation treatment centers, mammograms, and drugs” (EHRENREICH 2001: 51).

Dying, then, turns into a commercial enterprise feeding the machine that keeps killing women while stuffing the social imaginary with images of fierce battles, heroic survivors, and a revelatory, empowering experience that merits one’s gratitude. And, startlingly enough (much more than enough), even an experience not to be missed (EHRENREICH 2001: 49). In this pink, meek landscape, there is no room for “negative” emotions, such as anger, indignation, or outrage, which would have been not only useful in terms of inspiring collective action, but also perfectly justified. On the contrary, the directive is towards their suppression – preferably elimination – and definitely not their expression, which is seen as pathological and as requiring urgent counseling (ibid:50). And while healthy and warranted emotions are restrained, what *is* emphasized is the ultra-feminine character of breast cancer, the importance of looking good as you go through this body-and-soul consuming trial, and the chances you’re offered to benefit from initiatives such as the “Look Good... Feel Better”

⁸ Karuna Jaggar, executive director of Breast Cancer Action, asks: “If Komen is committed to funding research on causes and prevention of breast cancer, why do they allocate less than 4% of the \$1.9 billion (yes, billion) they have raised to these areas?” (Breast Cancer ACTION 2011). See also: Jill Moffett’s article (2003: 293-295) about what kind of research gets the lion’s share of the funding, due to the corporate affiliations of major breast cancer advocacy groups. Watch the 2011 documentary *Pink Ribbons, Inc.* by Léa Pool, based on Samantha King’s book (2006).

program by the American Cancer Society⁹. In the meantime, proud and cheerful, dressed in pink, and conforming to the mainstream of Cancerland, women are dying. They are, or could be, dying at the same time as they have been declared “survivors” and been given a medal and bask in the glory of their presumed victory, for we know very well that such a thing as a guaranteed victory over cancer does not exist, and metastases can occur at any point. Yet, at this “marketplace” (ibid:45) dying has no more weight than that, and the attitude towards the dead is not much better either.

Mourning is absolutely not of the kind that would have decency, honesty, and an actual and valuable purpose: to commit people to change things. What it is instead, is the deplorable, despicable combination of kitsch and vulgarity Ehrenreich describes in *Welcome to Cancerland*: “They are said to have “lost their battle” and may be memorialized by photographs carried at races for the cure – our lost, brave sisters, our fallen soldiers. But in the overwhelmingly Darwinian culture that has grown up around breast cancer, martyrs count for little; it is the “survivors” who merit constant honor and acclaim” (ibid:48). This attitude towards the dead is confirmed once more later on in her text, and it is, I believe, no accident that she has chosen precisely this as a closure for her report. At a fund-raising event she attends in her town, survivors parade to music and to loud announcements of their years of survivorship and she wonders: “At what point, in a downwardly sloping breast-cancer career, does one put aside one’s survivor regalia and admit to being in fact a die-er?” She thinks then again of the dead and reports back to us from that event a deeply upsetting image: “For the dead are with us even here, though in much diminished form. A series of paper bags, each about the right size for a junior burger and fries, lines the track. On them are the names of the dead, and inside each is a candle that will be lit later, after dark, when the actual relay race begins” (ibid:53). The idea is to commemorate the dead but, in the context of the pink cult, the result can only be superficial, coarse, and deeply disrespectful. This is a case of “how mourning can be reduced to a mere nostalgic, sentimental or utilitarian process – a process that does not challenge or

⁹ This program offers workshops of beauty tips and free beauty kits to women in treatment for cancer. The emphasis on looking good distracts the women from realizing what is at stake and from taking relevant action, and the free cosmetics in the pink bags given to them are full of carcinogens (BREAST CANCER ACTION 2015).

change the intersecting necropowers that cause planetary-scale death and destruction”, as Radomska, Mehrabi, and Lykke assert (2020: 95).

CONCLUSION

Breast cancer as a contemporary phenomenon has very broad ramifications and consequences: ethical, political, economic – ultimately, related to power (DeSHAZER 2013). Writing about it and taking any position through one’s affiliations/organizing/public role of any kind should, thus, reflect this acute ethico-political character and the need for urgent and concerted action. A growing number of theorists from areas such as feminism, disability studies, queer theory, and crip theory (Garland THOMSON 1996; McRUER 2006; KOSOVSKY SEDGWICK 1992; SANDAHL 2003; CLARE 2015) suggest a teaming up of different fields in order to give a joint answer to the coming-together of oppressive discourses that strengthen each other. This is unmistakably necessary in the case of breast cancer, which is predominantly an issue of social justice (<https://bcaction.org/about/social-justice/>). In this light, “the breast cancer movement could forge links with other social justice movements, such as the anti-globalization movement, the peace movement and the environmental justice movement” (Moffett 2003: 287). This activist vision points towards going “beyond breast cancer [...] to highlight the extent to which links between toxic substances and health problems exist [...] and to bring about a more comprehensive implementation of preventative efforts in daily life” (LEY 2009: 201-202).

Such concerns and approaches are not alien to the interdisciplinary field of queer death studies, which “investigates and challenges conventional normativities, assumptions, expectations, and regimes of truths that are brought to life and made evident by current planetary scale necropolitics and its framing of death, dying and mourning in the contemporary world” (Radomska, Mehrabi, & LYKKE 2020: 81). The breast cancer cause is “directly linked to the environmental crisis, capitalist and post/colonial extractivist necropolitics, material and symbolic violence, oppression and inequalities, and socio-economic, political and ecological unsustainability” (ibid), which is precisely the focus of queer death studies. This, then, could be the field that could function as an intellectual and activist springboard to give a collective answer and take collective action in an era “of life made for death [...] Where female death, racially motivated death, disabled,

death, LGBTQ death still do not seem to register as their own nations” (MacCORMACK 2020: 108-109).

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A QUEER ACCOUNT OF SELF-CARE: AUTOPOIESIS THROUGH AUTO-ANNIHILATION

In recent years, discussions of self-care have become overwhelmingly dominated by neoliberal values. Articles from mainstream media tend to frame these ideas as desirable and encourage us to engage in consumerism, become “our best self”, and adopt a positive and disciplined mindset. Brianna Wiest (2021) from *Thought Catalog* urges us to be “the hero of [our] life, not the victim” and suggests *real* self-care ‘is often doing the ugliest thing that you have to do, like sweat through another workout or tell a toxic friend you don’t want to see them anymore or get a second job so you can have a savings account...’ Caroline Shannon-Karasik (2018), among others (NAZISH 2017; O’NEAL 2019), take a similar approach to Wiest and presents self-care as practicing yoga, drinking water first thing in the morning, keeping a journal, sleeping, “hav[ing] a mini dance party”, shopping, and enjoying food.

Scholars have been quick to identify the neoliberal ideals in this materialistic and vacuous conceptualisation of self-care: responsibility and personal health outcomes are highly individualised, self-worth becomes measured through economic productivity, and bodies, identities, and human life are commodified in highly efficient ways (AJANA 2017; DILTS 2011). The conceptualisation of health within neoliberal forms of self-care draws heavily from the biomedical model. This problematic health model urges individuals to follow normative lifestyles, ensure their body functions in the “correct” way, aspire to an athletic and slim physique, and to be a passive and obedient consumer of the health industry (METZL 2010; WADE & HALLIGAN 2004).

It is clear that a new approach to self-care is needed, one that not only resists the trap of neoliberalism but also seeks to unravel this system of violence. I offer a queer form of self-care based on Felix Guattari’s (1995) notion of “autopoiesis”. Guattari describes how we should strive for autopoiesis, a

form of self-becoming that involves incorporating the Other and our surrounding environment to become something greater. We are all connected through this continual state of becoming that affords unexpected connections and creates new assemblages of possibility. Autopoiesis is the “realisation of autonomy” (GUATTARI 1995: 7) because we are no longer bound by rigid ways of being, opening space for creativity and potentiality to flourish. To engage in autopoiesis is to pursue new experiences and examine the world in alternative ways. It is about resisting and dismantling forms of systemic oppression to create an emancipatory future (GUATTARI 1995). A queer self-care praxis based on autopoiesis would incorporate all of these ideas, with an emphasis on the pursuit for agency, embodying personally defined expressions of good health, forging connections with others, and self-becoming.

If we accept this notion of autopoietic self-care as a set of practices grounded in pursuing agency, well-being, connection, and self-becoming, what about self-care practices that involve self-destruction? What might autopoiesis through auto-annihilation look like? Using “viral sex” among gay and queer men as an example, I argue that practices designed to shatter and destroy the self are paradoxically ways that individuals care for themselves and engage in a process of becoming. Self-destruction as a self-care practice is queer in a number of ways: it resists normative definitions of self-care, ruptures preconceived notions of what care might look like, and contributes to the established connection between queerness and the death drive (e.g., DEAN 2008; EDELMAN 2004).

THE VITALITY OF VIRAL SEX

One of the principal health concerns gay and queer men face is HIV infection. There have been international efforts by public health organisations to curb the rate of infection by promoting condom use and regular testing, and encouraging “healthy” lifestyles. However, what about men who desire HIV and position this virus as the erotic focal point of sexual encounters? Gregory Tomso (2008) describes this kind of eroticism as “viral sex” and presents how it is used by queer men as an identity, lifestyle, and tool of resistance against medico-state powers that seek to regulate bodies and identities. Men who desire HIV-infected semen are often identified as “bug-chasers”; those who consensually infect others or provide infectious semen are “gift-givers” (REYNOLDS 2007).

It is by virtue of antiretroviral drugs, pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP)¹⁰, and other effective HIV therapies that viral sex has become a growing phenomenon in the Western world. This tension between breaking away from medico-state powers whilst also becoming more dependent on these same problematic systems poses a number of issues. Chad Hammond and his co-authors suggest this fraught relationship may aggravate the sense of subjugation some bug-chasers and gift-givers feel, prompting them to seek out more radical and transgressive forms of sex (Hammond, Holmes, & MERCIER 2016). Adding to this, Tomso argues that viral sex creates a significant ethical and philosophical dilemma because “caring for those at risk of HIV infection can be seen as a violent limitation of gay men’s freedoms” (2004: 89) in addition to creating a public health and biopolitical crisis that ruptures the “state-sponsored violence” of neoliberal governance (2008: 269).

The increasing scholarly work on this unique erotic subculture details the way some queer men use viral sex as an emancipatory practice by actively choosing to become infected with HIV, and then use this new identity as a radical source of queer pride (REYNOLDS 2007). The erotics of HIV transmission is deliberately abject, and leans heavily on imagery of sexual deviancy, “toxic” or “hazardous waste”, “breeding” and becoming “pregnant” with HIV, and re-appropriating HIV-related fear and stigma as tools of empowerment (GARCÍA-IGLESIAS 2020; REYNOLDS 2007). However, viral sex is not just about engaging in transgressive sexual acts to resist and protest the medicalisation of queer bodies and identities by public health; it radically reconfigures the limits of erotic desire and carnal sensation, pushing them to the extreme and creating bodies that “splutter” into a state of suspended meaning and liminality (LONGSTAFF 2019). The erotic exchange of HIV-positive semen can also produce a perverse kind of kinship or “cummunion” (FLORÊNCIO 2018): desire and infectious fluids flow between bodies and orifices, displacing the self, dissolving ego-based boundaries, and welcoming in the foreign and strange.

Viral sex is a praxis of necropolitics that seeks to breach the boundaries between life and death (PALM 2019), affirm bodily autonomy, and open up unimagined pleasures and desires. Leo Bersani describes how these unimagined sensations of queer sex can “shatter” the self in a *jouissance*

¹⁰ This is a preventative treatment available to HIV-negative “high risk” individuals and can reduce the likelihood of HIV transfer by up to 99% (ANDERSON *et al.* 2012).

of exploded limits” (2010: 24). That is, queer sex disturbs our psychic relationship to the world and other people, dissolving our sense of self in profound ways. The act of deliberately infecting the body with a virus also becomes a form of self-shattering because it permanently and significantly alters someone’s body, identity, and relationship to the world: “[viral sex] is, teleologically considered, the renunciation of what Jean Laplanche has spoken of as the sexual ecstasy of the death drive; it is the ascetic discipline necessary in order to be replaced, inhabited by the other” (BERSANI & PHILLIPS 2008: 50-51).

Viruses jump from body to body, mutate and infect, and establish an invisible yet tangible rhizome of connections. To become infected by a virus is a deeply intimate act, and for bug-chasers and gift-givers, it can be a “utopian practice” that “gives a new breath of life” and releases them from the emotional and psychological fear of accidentally contracting HIV (ROBINSON 2013: 120-121). Through the incorporation of alterity and the Other into the body and self, viral sex becomes a form of autopoiesis: the uninfected body is lost, the self is disturbed and unsettled, and the limits of eroticism and the queer body are broken open.

CONCLUSION

It may sound paradoxical, counter-intuitive, and problematic to argue that individuals can practice self-care through actively engaging in self-destructive behaviours. However, this is clearly possible. I suggest self-care is fundamentally grounded in the pursuit for agency, well-being, embodiment, and becoming something greater, and therefore a form of autopoiesis; to practice self-care is to become yourself and move beyond your sense of self. Autopoietic self-care examines how we use our surrounding environment and intimate connections to nurture ourselves and feel more at home in our bodies. This queer approach to self-care seeks to undo systems of oppression and marginalisation, and to resist normative definitions of health, well-being, and “good” lifestyle choices.

Viral sex is a contentious and socially-fraught practice, but it contains a range of emancipatory potentials. Practicing viral sex can be a legitimate form of queer self-care because it provides individuals with a unique way of performing autopoiesis, gaining a sense of agency, and establishing unexpected social connections. It is also grounded in the pursuit of alternative expressions of well-being that might deviate from normative models

of health. This autopoiesis, paradoxically, comes about through auto-annihilation. The self is shattered so that it may become more. We die so that we may feel alive.

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What do we talk about when we talk about queer death?

5/ Writing and filming queer deaths

ABSTRACT: This is part 5 of 6 of the dossier *What do we talk about when we talk about queer death?*, edited by M. Petricola. The contributions collected in this article sit at the crossroads between thanatology, critical animal studies, and the posthumanities and tackle questions such as: how can we re-interpret literature, film, and media products through the lens of queer death studies? And how can we rethink death, dying, and disposal through literature, film, and media?

The present article includes the following contributions: – Adair J.G., The corpse comes out : spectral sexualities and the biographer’s impulse; – Berry S., The queer death binary of *Giovanni’s Room* remodeled as space for navigating oppression; – Bigongiari G., Queering the life/death dualism through barely alive literary characters; – Hogan M., The promise of a queer afterlife: a counter-proposal to preserving normative singularities in the cloud; – Corradino A.C., Notes on female necrophilia.

KEYWORDS: Death Studies, Queer Studies, Media Studies, Memoir, English literature.

THE CORPSE COMES OUT:

SPECTRAL SEXUALITIES AND THE BIOGRAPHER’S IMPULSE

I mine memoir to talk about queer death; biography too often betrays.

For his mother, he wasn’t queer until he killed himself. She didn’t acquire this knowledge through conversation – we who knew didn’t feel inclined to call him out – but rather by way of the clues he carelessly (carefully?) left behind. An assemblage of my letters, micro-Speedos, photos, and an engraved ring left her the unwelcome impression that her son had never truly been straight with/for her. In the absence of a formal declaration that she considered her due, she claimed the right to ventriloquize her dead and newly queer (to her anyway) kid.

When we speak of its death we kill the chimera that is queerness. No longer a slippery, sneaky subjectivity masquerading as a self, death does for some what queer life cannot: solidify. Never mind that the ventriloquist

cannot – and often wishes not to – know the incoherencies, the inconsistencies, the impossibilities of performing our pretended personhoods. And, if a certain sector of the audience didn't see or experience the performance for themselves, can said subject be called queer anyway?

Not that he actually did; he always wriggled away from demands to self-identify, to solidify. That's not to say he didn't own the lack of coherency his mother had always commanded. He reveled in making little sense in the world she engineered by ignoring or willfully misinterpreting nearly everything she encountered experienced. She worked to make each day exactly as the last; to live in a dust-free house; to iron bedsheets into an expansive perfection unsuitable for sleeping, procreating, or perverting.

She wanted a son as unsullied as her sheets; not so much someone as some *thing*.

She objectified others by insisting they stay forever static, as biographers often do. In her mind, he was still the child who had appreciated his *Transformers* toys enough to know they were best left preserved in their packages. To take them out – let alone transform them – ran the risk of danger, damage, even destruction. Anyway, she didn't care for those toys' innate ability to become totally unrecognizable; she couldn't find comfort in a world where tape cassettes transmogrified into troopers without warning.

She never felt closer to him than five years after that gunshot when she collected nearly \$10k in a single day from all those perfectly preserved *Transformers* toys in pristine original packaging selling on eBay. Her perfectly predictable son did her proud that payday by demonstrating his grasp of her zeal for life survived under hermetic seal. Of course the price for him had been a debilitating case of OCD that culminated in self-murder, but at least she profited from her original investment.

When we talk about queer death we frequently omit cause – it discomforts. That which refuses to make so-called sense doesn't usually survive the story others construct about us. Memoir and its brother biography, in their current configuration, render othered existence orderly by way of exorcism and excision.

She intuitively understood how to be one such surgeon; she'd operated by that instinct her whole life. By the time that cash came in, she had already cleaned up his causes – and his queerness. She had tried to inhabit his incomprehensibility from 2002-2004, but it proved a sheet too wrinkled to iron out.

He hadn't been feminine. He wasn't even that fancy. In fact, he had even once had a female fiancé, however briefly, and that fact felt more fixed. She felt fixed – and she imagined he did too – by that f(act).

Though this ventriloquism might not have been vindictive, it certainly left only her feeling vindicated.

She didn't know what to do with his ominously “doubled life” so she refused to leave him divided, divisive in death – people and/as possessions ought to be absolutely predictable, their states of being not necessarily separable. In that way, the casket becomes a closet in which the coherency and razor-straight linearity idealized and loved by so many of the living may be imposed upon our unruly queer dead.

Biography, in its traditional form, un-queers us by quieting our contradictions and complexities; in death we need much more than a linear narrative. In its place, we must propagate possibilities, pluralities, and problems. Queerness and death necessitate narration in the interrogative – even the subjunctive – mood. Our deaths, despite current commemorative paradigms, cannot become declarative or definitive.

Why can't the story of his lives span hundreds of years like Woolf's Orlando? Shouldn't we all be read through the lens of the life to come, as Neil Bartlett read Wilde in the context of the AIDS crisis? I, for one, hope someone has the sense to ask my possessions – both literal and figurative – what they have to say about me, as Richard Klein does in his anti-memoir, *Jewelry Talks*. And, of course, Wayne Koestenbaum could surely teach a master class in how to capture – and then release – queer subjectivity in life and death.

When we talk about queer death, we must talk about who *and what* died – and all those remains. He died by self-inflicted gunshot sometime after midnight and before dawn on August the thirteenth. He left behind a slew of honest, authentic contradictions that two decades have not reconciled. I hope they never do; life is no balance sheet.

He failed to make sense; he assaulted my senses. He served as a constant reminder of the rich, generative possibilities inherent in incomprehensibility, the rewarding realization that linear narratives of life and lives lived are always lies. Congruity does not *become* queer, even in death.

What we lose in queer death, and that I am attempting to regain in some small part here, is senselessness. In death, by default, we cede our ability

to interrupt the ways we are narrated by the people who surround us. We forfeit all that is silly, incomprehensible, unpredictable, incongruous and defiant to become a straightforward story someone else tells. The part of his story in which he acted – because of course it continues now with a few other narrators – ended in suicide. To me, that particular mode of queer death seals his refusal to assimilate into his story because no matter how seamlessly she recounts it, she can't avoid that conclusion without delivering an outright lie.

What we talk about when we talk about queer death is always, in part, our own demise(s). I first died along with him; I spent two years as a specter that had to learn about the life of a widow before we had any rights. I could not inherit because he killed himself a week in advance of his will-writing appointment; I could not lay claim because marriage then (as now) was still totally straight. His long-estranged father claimed half his estate thanks to the indifference of the law, his mother took the rest. She disposed of the artifacts that came across as queer and took what fit the narrative she intended to tell. She Ziploc-ed and Post-It-noted them with her version of his events; then she Rubbermaid-toted those satisfying remains into the crawlspace under her split-level staircase where they are sealed to this day.

I walked away with a few relics and a strong sense of disillusionment. I discovered death isn't that deadly; queer re-creation comes in time as do other deaths, small and large. I resurrect him in my writing and with my words; we others construct him just as we continually (re)construct ourselves. What we talk about when we talk about queer death is the way that control of our construction belongs as much to those observing the performance as those doing the dance. We're all left to wonder how we will be talked about in our own queer death, just as we recognize the relative worthlessness of words to capture, even adequately (if feebly) something with an absolute absence of stability.

When we talk about queer death, we talk to make illusory sense of something utterly insensible. It's all a question of perspectives – probabilities and possibilities – wherein no positionality or potentiality necessarily receives primacy over another. I have written his death – biographed him – many times in the last nineteen years. Each time I revisit and write anew, I find different subjectivity and objectification.

I write today from the perspective of a narrator who now knows, for example, how his grandmother died. His life puts forward new lessons

– unknown even to him – when we consider that the great Covid-19 pandemic would kill her nearly two decades after his death. She had said there was no point in persevering after his exit; some will say she found new purpose postmortem. Others, of course, might just quip about the sincerity of her desire to quit this life over love.

Queer corpses may be buried, but that fact does not stop them from continuing to come out. They continue to become even as we work to foreclose their futures in favor of fixity. They are specters that haunt; subjectivities more suited to Choose Your Own Adventure-style studies than anything so stolid as biography. Perhaps Carla Freccero (2013) asks it best when she ponders, “[What would we] see and hear were we to resist identitarian foreclosures and remain open to ghostly returns[?]” (339).

Each time he – reappears – at every conjuring – I find him reinvented and reinvigorated. In turn, I see the specters of myself from ten, twenty, thirty years ago and find myself unable to make much sense of some of those stages, prismatic in their possibilities. In that way, queer death proves little more than a hypothesis, a problem in need of new representation rather than its all-too-pervasive appropriation.

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THE QUEER DEATH BINARY OF *GIOVANNI’S ROOM* REMODELED AS SPACE FOR NAVIGATING OPPRESSION

I never had a childhood. [. . .] I was born dead

James Baldwin¹

Queer death in literature and film, since the end of the 19th century with the *Picture of Dorian Gray*, has been characterized by the Bury Your Gays trope, which then permeated popular culture through 1950s and 60s lesbian pulp novels. The predictable routine includes some of the following: a same-gender romantic couple falls in love; they have sex; and, shortly after, one of

¹ From the unpublished 1974 interview *Je n’ai eu jamais d’enfance James Baldwin: Entretien* by Christian de Bartillat as quoted in James Campbell’s *Talking at the Gates*.

them dies, often leaving the living partner contemplating their temporary lapse of judgment in attraction (Hulan 17). These narratives are hardly a reflection of real life, where research suggests that “mortality risks among sexual minorities and heterosexual individuals may be highly similar, contrary to beliefs that minority sexual orientation shortens lives” (Cochran). While more authentic representations of queer life in literature and popular media are on the rise, this queer death stereotype persists within heteronormative systems -- real-world systemic oppression that contributes to higher mortality rates for minority groups (see, for example, BRIDGES 2020).

Yet, staying alive is as essential as death to the queer narrative. James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room* is an example of queer literature because it tells a story about homosexual and bisexual characters, including the complexities of their relationships and the spaces in which they work and live. It is also a story told by a renowned queer author, which could promote a sense of irony as the protagonist David rolls through the expected steps of the Bury Your Gays trope. While in Paris as an American ex-pat, David questions his heterosexual relationship. He meets and falls in love with a man, Giovanni. Shortly after sleeping together, David flees, questioning his motives and future, and attempts to patch things up with his fiancée, Hella. She is finished with him and returns to America. David then rejects Giovanni, who enters a relationship with his former boss and the owner of a gay bar. Later, Giovanni is accused of killing this man and is then sentenced to death by guillotine. David suffers a similar queer death fate -- left alone, he is adrift without a country to belong to, and he feels responsible for the death of his lover and the loss of his fiancée.

As much as the narrative provides an opportunity to examine queer death, it is also about the search for places and spaces to belong and with which to identify. David initially leaves America for Paris to run from the family and cultural rejections of his queer identity. He finds a place to belong in Paris in the gay bars, gay friends, and Giovanni’s room, the titular space-as-metaphor of both queer love and queer death. But, whether in America or Paris, he can never fully embrace himself as a bisexual or homosexual person. He cannot participate in anything other than the cycle of rejection he has learned from home. He knows no other narrative to enter into, which is made evident by his disgust and mocking of Giovanni after their break-up as having “fairy’s mannerisms” and behaving “giddy, and girlish” (147). Earlier in the novel, David describes the feminized behavior

of the les folles that Giovanni has joined:

I confess that [their] utter grotesqueness made me uneasy; perhaps in the same way that the sight of monkeys eating their own excrement turns some people's stomachs. They might not mind so much if the monkeys did not – so grotesquely – resemble human beings. (27)

The binary of being either masculine or feminine--good or bad--leaves David searching for someplace to belong. He cannot find this place in Giovanni, or his room, because he sees that space as grotesque. He cannot be satisfied with his relationship with Hella, whose body he also describes as “grotesque” (158). Within the binary, David does not belong in either space, because he “decided to allow no room in the universe for something which shamed and frightened” him (20). His disgust and mocking come from the shame and fear he experienced growing up as a queer boy in America. Baldwin described this aspect by saying rather than being about homosexuality, the novel is about “what happens if you are so afraid that you finally cannot love anybody” (Baldwin 205).

The fear and inability to love oneself and others that Baldwin's novel presents is key to unpacking what we *actually* talk about when we talk about queer death. Rather than participating in a stereotype or a trope, Baldwin's novel provides evidence of what happens when people are systematically marginalized. As their relationship dissolves before him, Giovanni says to David, “If you cannot love me, I will die” (137). Oppression works by pushing the inhabitants of a system to the edges and extremes. In David's case, he leaves his country for Paris, where he also finds himself living on the edges of the heteronormative society. Giovanni similarly flees his country of Italy, after his child is delivered stillborn. Being pushed as far to the edge as possible by their families and cultures, Giovanni and David end up pushing each other away. Trapped within supramaximal systems of oppression and without a way to change themselves or the systems, they cannot imagine a way to love one another or themselves. They simply cannot stay alive. Giovanni and David both experience a queer death, one physical and one metaphorical, which is the only escape that their systems allow. As readers, their deaths provide us with a warning. To stay alive, the oppressed individual must figure out how to navigate the systems in order to change them or to create new ones.

Queer death in *Giovanni's Room* and in the Bury Your Gays trope is ultimately a paradox, an unavoidable pattern from which characters never stop running. Queer death is both a result of and a way out of oppressive systems, which is one of its long-term appeals to the dominant culture. As a source of analysis, queer death stands as an antidote to systematic change, drawing on what Baldwin called the “wet eyes of the sentimentalist” to incite feelings of pity rather than motivation to action (14). The trap of the either/or perspective has caused criticism of the novel, placing its failures on the character of David as a “negative, confusing, embodiment of the homosexual experience” (Sylvander 85). Applying a postcolonial feminist/poststructuralist lens to this queer death narrative reveals that David’s binary perspective leads to an incomplete reading of the novel. For example, Chela Sandoval theorizes in *Methodology of the Oppressed* that to achieve wholeness and survival one must experience the “fragmentation” caused by the oppressive system from a “critical distance” (32.3). To achieve critical distance, Sandoval describes five oppositional stances that have distinct ideologies and goals: equal rights, revolutionary, supremacist, separatist, and differential. She argues that the most effective way to create change in oppressive systems is by adopting differential consciousness or the ability to move through any and all of the other four while using and adapting them as necessary. Sandoval argues that this state of oppositional consciousness is vital to survival. In the light of this theory, David is not the embodiment of a negative and confusing queer experience. He is an example of someone who has not mastered the differential and therefore cannot navigate all of the contexts that push him to the margins.

David and Giovanni cannot transcend the binaries of their worlds. They are trapped by their systems of oppression and limited by their binary ultimatums. As readers, we enter a relationship with Baldwin’s narrative, with the characters, the places, and with queer death itself. Baldwin’s novel breaks down the first four states of oppositional consciousness. David flees America for Paris seeking equality. Instead, he finds that his shame at being in love with a boy is part of the “dreadful human tangle occurring everywhere, without end, forever” (62). Publication of a novel with homosexual content in 1956, 13 years before the Stonewall riot, was revolutionary, and Baldwin was advised to burn the manuscript (Weatherby 119). David’s character exudes white American masculine supremacy, which we experience through his constant judgment of others, especially regarding their

behaviors and appearances. Giovanni points out this quality of supremacy when he says that if David had encountered him in Italy, he would have passed on by “shitting on us with those empty smiles Americans wear everywhere” (144). In Giovanni’s room, David attempts to separate himself from the forces of the outside world. At first, the separation works, and he describes the space as being on a different plane of existence filled with joy, but “beneath the joy, of course, was anguish, and beneath the amazement was fear” (81). The narrative illustrates how each of these oppositions work to create oppression, fear, and shame. On their own, these oppositional forces lead the characters to destruction rather than to power. As readers, we maintain the critical distance necessary to see these systems at work throughout the novel and to enter the differential consciousness that is unattainable to our fictional characters.

The critical distance also allows us to theorize a third meaning for queer death that extends its purpose outside of the stereotype or the sentimental. The queer death narrative acts as a potential catalyst propelling the reader into oppositional thought and activism where the possibility exists to reclaim, reform, and rename queer death in our real-world systems. This lens needs to be applied in queer death studies to break the pattern of the Bury Your Gays trope and to make possible new interpretations of queer texts that appeal to contemporary audiences.

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QUEERING THE LIFE/DEATH DUALISM THROUGH BARELY ALIVE FICTIONAL CHARACTERS²

So then, he wants to die, so that’s what he wants. I wouldn’t wonder much about that, if only he were alive. Look, such an emaciated body and such powerless limbs and such dull eyes, and he thinks he has something left to kill. Do you think you have to be lying stiff and cold, nailed under a coffin lid, to be dead? Don’t

² I thank Davide Burgio and Maria De Capua for reading a first draft of this piece.

you think I can see how dead you are, Gösta Berling?

Selma Lagerlöf, *The Saga of Gösta Berling*

Talking about death through a queer lens leads to questioning the existence of a rigid categorical divide between the living and the dead. In fiction we sometimes find this divide challenged by the existence of ‘undead’ characters. But there is another sort of characters, which I will call the ‘barely alive’ ones, who are not dead nor alive. They find themselves halfway between death and life, thus queering the dualism: but they are also ‘queer’, socially marginal characters whose death might take up a scapegoating, sacrificial function.

In *The Simpsons*’ episode “A Star is Burns” Barney Gumble, who is usually the butt of the joke, films a movie about his tragic experience of alcoholism. At the end of the film, he addresses the audience with the line: “Don’t cry for me, I’m already dead”. The protagonist of Quentin Dupieux’s film *Le Daim* is so alone that he can dump his phone into a trash bin, perhaps one of the ultimate signs of social death. The last person he calls is his ex-wife: “you don’t exist anymore”, she tells him. He will go on an absurd murdering spree shortly after, thus blurring the boundary between social and physical death. In Fennell’s *Promising Young Woman*, the protagonist Cassie apparently commits ‘social suicide’, dropping out of medical school and going back to live with her parents after her friend Nina commits suicide in the aftermath of rape. Both characters have in truth been murdered, socially and/or otherwise, but they will haunt the murdering living until they get justice.

Though the examples above can be described as ‘social deaths’, on a general level I employ the expression ‘barely alive’ to maintain a distance with the concept of social death as it has been developed in social sciences (see KRÁLOVÁ 2015 for an overview of the field). The categories isolated in this field – Králová describes instances of “loss of social identity”, “loss of social connectedness”, and “loss associated with the body’s disintegration” – are a very useful theoretical toolbox for mapping these characters, but fiction, and especially speculative fiction, can explore kinds of death and of subversion of social categories in ways that feel fantastic, not strictly realistic. While I am not saying that this cannot happen in reality, fiction can explore possibilities that are usually outside the ‘realistically’ thinkable

and, by doing so, bring them into the area of the thinkable.³ Moreover, through the study of the reactions assigned to the implied reader (ISER 1978) we can try to trace what reaction barely alive characters are supposed to elicit – sympathetic or otherwise, for example –, and ask ourselves why this happens. For these reasons, I think that it is best to employ another term to refer to the study of fictional characters, while keeping in mind that research in social sciences is extremely helpful for the study of fictional characters.

In a lecture in which he examines telephone calls made by suicidal people, sociologist Harvey Sacks argues that “I am nothing” is what people say when they lack the things that members of the social categories they belong to are supposed to have at a certain stage in life: “So there’s a notion of a stage in life in which you’re entitled to say whether or not you have nothing on this or that value. When persons 25 years old say in assessing themselves that they’re unmarried, they’re told, “No, you can’t say that yet.” That’s not anything that counts as ‘nothing’ at this point. These things are standardized; it’s a matter of certain formal properties, that your age has to be X before Y counts as ‘nothing.’ (68). If the conviction of “being nothing” can lead to suicide, it is possible to imagine that it implies a feeling of being ‘already dead’.

In some pieces of fiction, the character tempted by death, not at ease in the community of the living, can take up a role that resembles that of the scapegoat, in the terms in which it was defined by Girard. According to Girard, society relies for its correct functioning upon the existence of differences in degree amongst its members. A society in which this system of differences is put into question will precipitate in a condition of crisis. Since all members feel equal, and therefore entitled to have the same things, each of them starts desiring the same objects: but these are not available to all, and violence becomes pervasive and reciprocal. The crisis is solved, at least temporarily, by the choice of a scapegoat that catalyzes universal violence upon itself alone. Girard talks about the return of the dead amongst the living as one of the possible configurations of a differential crisis. Normally, the dead and the living belong to separate realms. In times of crisis, the two realms blur:

³ This way of thinking about the fantastic is inspired by a forthcoming work by Carmen Dell’Aversano.

In certain cultures the gods are either absent or insignificant. In such cases mythic ancestors, or the dead, take the place of the missing divinities and are seen as the founders, guardians and, if need be, disrupters of the cultural order. When incest, adultery, and other social ills begin to proliferate, when family relationships begin to crumble, the dead are displeased and visit their displeasure on the living. They bring nightmares, madness, contagious diseases; they provoke discord among relatives and neighbors and instigate all sorts of perversions. The crisis assumes the form of a loss of difference between the living and the dead, a casting down of all barriers between two normally separate realms. We have here the proof that the dead incarnate violence; exterior and transcendent violence when order reigns, immanent violence when things turn bad and maleficent reciprocity walks abroad. The dead do not want the total destruction of an order that is after all basically their own. After they have brought about a paroxysm of sorts in the community they are willing once more to accept the homage of their descendants; they cease to haunt the living and withdraw to their usual retreats. If they do not go into exile of their own accord, they allow themselves to be led into exile by the community's ritual observances. The difference between the living and the dead is thereby restored. (254)

Girard regards the dead as ambiguous, both benevolent and malignant, when the society of the living is working properly, and malignant in time of crisis – to become again benevolent when their expulsion reinstates pre-crisis social order. This ambivalence is typical of the scapegoat according to Girard.

Literature offers many examples of outcasts that long to be absorbed by the community of the dead, or that see such absorption as a liberation from the society of the living, or that, perhaps involuntarily, feel drawn towards it. These characters cannot be said to belong to the dead entirely; they are not dead at the beginning of the action, nor undead. By dying, these liminal figures might be performing an important role in the sacrificial event that eventually reinstates the difference between the living and the dead. The thought that they might always have been unsuited for life might be reassuring to 'us', the murdering living. My hypothesis is that the judgment of being 'socially' dead, whether uttered by an external authority or internalized and self-assessed, might not be just chronologically preliminary to actual death, but can perform the task of preparing the scapegoat for the sacrifice. This is in line with the findings of research undertaken in the social sciences which maintain that ostracism can increase thoughts of death (STEELE, KIDD & CASTANO 2015). This might be the case of characters

who are openly instigated to suicide, but as a mechanism it might also be working in subtler ways – maybe nobody tells these characters to kill themselves, but we might have the sense that they are universally antagonized or considered worthless. Girard states: “Whatever the cause and circumstances of his death, the dying man finds himself in a situation similar to that of the surrogate victim vis-à-vis the community” (255). It is possible that ‘socially’ dying people can be pushed to act like, and therefore to become, biologically dying people. ‘Barely alive’ members of the society of the living might be a casualty to the reinstating of a rigid difference between the dead and the living. If, on the other hand, the barely alive characters continue acting upon the community of the living, they can perhaps be considered as subversive of the social pressure that would like to posit them amongst the dead: scapegoats who strike back. The importance that the idea of the contagiousness of violence in times of crisis has in Girard’s theory can also help us make sense of ‘socially’ dead people who become killers, as happens in the abovementioned film *Le Daim*.

Another example of this kind of character that comes to mind is Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*. Himself sharing in many of the characteristics of the scapegoat, he inhabits a society which presents not few of the traits that Girard sees as typical of crisis, above all generalized reciprocal violence. Eventually, he will die, leaving the heirs to the Heights the possibility of breaking the circle of violence in which they are caught. But this expulsion has some peculiar elements. Nobody kills Heathcliff. he dies affected by a mysterious illness, unable or unwilling to eat, and having lost interest in torturing his relatives. He says of himself:

With my hard constitution, and temperate mode of living, and unperilous occupations, I ought to, and probably *shall* remain above ground, till there is scarcely a black hair on my head – And yet I cannot continue in this condition! – I have to remind myself to breathe – almost to remind my heart to beat! And it is like bending back a stiff spring ... it is by compulsion, that I do the slightest act, not prompted by one thought, and by compulsion, that I notice anything alive, or dead, which is not associated with one universal idea... (269)

Heathcliff is ‘above ground’, not living. From a Girardian point of view, it is interesting to notice that Heathcliff dies after two of his victims, Catherine Linton and Hareton Earnshaw, form a bond which excludes him, and

which might lead to the instauration of a new society at the Heights, in which Heathcliff will no longer have absolute power. He dies so quietly that my reading is that he just chooses the company of the dead Cathy, who haunted him – whom he had exhorted to haunt him – over that of the living. Furthermore, one might ask, if Cathy “is” Heathcliff, as she so famously states in a pivotal moment in the novel, was not Heathcliff himself ‘already dead’ all along, after her death? The pattern of hauntings in *Wuthering Heights* is too ample to be discussed here, but to my aims it is relevant to point out that, on the one hand, Heathcliff seems to choose the company of the dead; on the other, he and Cathy were so deeply entwined that perhaps after her death Heathcliff was already dead all along.

Another example of a character who feels drawn from ‘our’ world to another is Eleanor Vance in Shirley Jackson’s *The Haunting of Hill House*, with her decision never to leave the titular haunted, and haunting, house. Eleanor has nowhere else to go, she has no home, no friends, no job, and only relatives she despises. She will eventually die by voluntarily crashing her car. Another example of a haunting house, inhabited by socially isolated characters doomed to death, is to be found in Poe’s *The Fall of the House of Usher*.⁴

Examples proposed above do not claim to be analyses, as many other factors that should cooperate in determining the function absolved by the ‘barely alive’ characters, nor we should assume all these characters to be scapegoats. The sketching of a taxonomy of barely alive characters, and the functions they absolve, might be an interesting project to pursue. Relevant questions which come to mind are: who passes the judgment on characters’ being ‘already dead’? Why? Are there recurrent features, and are they depicted as social, or natural, or supernatural? Do we side with or against the barely alive character, and why?

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⁴ I thank Mattia Petricola for this suggestion.

THE PROMISE OF A QUEER AFTERLIFE: A COUNTER-PROPOSAL TO PRESERVING NORMATIVE SINGULARITIES IN THE CLOUD⁵

There are many men motivated by their own fear of aging and dying who dedicate much of their late professional years to countering the inevitable. Most often this is done as Science – within media and technology industries, or academic disciplines – and most often under the guise of advancing healthcare, optimizing wellness, or precision medicine. As a kid, I distinctly remember hearing a rumour that when Walt Disney had died, he had been frozen. Being cryogenically preserved, I now understand, is hoping to be revived in the future, based on the theory that the brain can hold memory and personality intact until defrosted. Men like Disney, do not want to die forever; rather they wait in death for technology to catch up and to redefine the living.

Cryopreservation still exists, and feeds off of and into a very specific understanding about the embodiment of human life. Decades later, there are experiments harnessing brain waves, uploading them to inter-communicating computers. This is done by scanning, mapping, and digitally reconstructing the trillions of synaptic connections of the embodied brain. But, as Jeffrey Sconce observes: “this quest to evacuate the meat puppetry of the pre-anthropocene may have a few detours in store for us” (2015: 3). Specifically, Sconce (2015) outlines the few imagined options for digital avatars: there is the repurposed ‘brain-in-a-vat’ model (at the bottom of the hierarchy), and there’s the ‘hologram-like avatar’ (at the top), with the ‘artificial brain’ being somewhere in the middle. All models, however, demonstrate the centrality of the individual’s brain in the creation of digital avatars. The western-settler (or, allopathic) scientific understanding of the body – i.e that the mind and body are separate, and that the brain largely constitutes the individual’s individuality – means that the body is an appendage to the mind (which lives exclusively in the brain) rather than constitutive of the body (and vice versa). Since the late 90s, only the dogma of the gene competes with (or completes) this vision; our genomes become a deterministic blueprint, software for the body. Brought together – the magnetic signals of the brain, and the easily sequenced human genome – make for the perfectly re-encoded human model. All attention

⁵ Big thank-you to Crystal Chokshi, Sarah Sharma, and Andrea Zeffiro in helping me with this piece.

is placed on the faithful reproduction of the individual. This reproduction of the individual is key, and it forms the basis for a counter-proposal, against storing normative singularities, in favour of centering a complex network of and for queer intimacies.

While critical scholarship of Science (such as STENGERS 2000; LATOUR 2004; HAYLES 2008) has demonstrated that the brain and the rest of the body are better thought of as environmentally co-produced, symbiotic, dynamic, ever-changing, etc., dominant views of science and technology persist, rooted in settler-western dualities, and continue to push forward the fantasy that life is best extended, or slowed down, and controlled by big data. Examples of this abound: Dr. Aubrey de Grey, co-founder of AgeX Therapeutics aims to “completely eliminate aging” (The Quantified Body PODCAST 2015). Similarly, co-founder of PayPal and Facebook investor Peter Thiel set out to find “the key to eternal life” (CHA 2015). Amazon’s Jeff Bezos is backing Silicon Valley scientists working on “a cure for aging” (ZALESKI 2018). Google is spending billions on projects “solving death” (TOTT NEWS 2019). And, Microsoft recently announced that it would “resurrect the dead” into chatbots (KNEESE 2019; LINDER 2021). There are many more manifestations of these anxieties in Big Tech, and on various cusps of scientific exploration (HAYWORTH 2012). However, “[m]any digital immortality startups are in fact vaporware, or novelties that are more theoretical than utilitarian”, as digital death scholar Kneese (2019) reminds us.

Vaporous or not, one of the most persistent industry voices on this topic of digital immortality has been Ray Kurzweil, author of several books on transcendence into machines, and Director of Engineering at Google (KURZWEIL 2000; 2005; 2012). According to Kurzweil, the singularity is:

[...] a future period during which the pace of technological change will be so rapid, its impact so deep, that human life will be irreversibly transformed. Although neither utopian or dystopian, this epoch will transform the concepts that we rely on to give meaning to our lives, from our business models to the cycle of human life, including death itself. (KURZWEIL 2016 in WOLNY *et al.* 2018)

He imagines this time of ‘singularitarian transcendence’ to be 2045... 24 years from now. This is also why there is a foundation called “Global Future 2045” (2045 Initiative).

While anxieties about aging and dying have motivated scientists and CEOs alike, science has in turn given fodder for popular cultural representations of this ‘singularitarian transcendence’ – the idea that people can be at once human and wholly duplicated and uploaded to a machine in order to either straddle the two worlds, or live seamlessly in and out of a virtual rendition. We might think of this as a ‘digital afterlife’. This model, however, focuses so much on the individual avatar being faithfully replicated, that it deeply complicates ‘the social’ by not factoring complex relations into the design. Sociotechnical imaginaries of the digital afterlife are literally self-centered. How might a queer reading redress this normative anxiety-driven future? (EDELMAN 2004) What do relations, connections, and love mean in the afterlife? How are these to be archived in all their complexities? (TALLBEAR 2020) How might our connections to others – human and non-human – thwart the hype of the singular? And why is this kind of derailment important?

There are a few key insights from popular culture that might help us think beyond the digital afterlife as it’s currently being presented to us; be it through *Upload*’s (2020) Lakeview, or *Forever*’s (2018) Riverside, or *Black Mirror*’s (2016) San Junipero. All three television series are about ‘passing over’ to a boutique – and seemingly eternal – virtual afterparty (though *Forever* functions slightly differently). The worlds of Lakeview and San Junipero are always tethered to a reality (i.e. what we think we are living in now, but in 20+ years) by data centers. In *Upload*, the entirety of the digital afterlife is maintained in the server room of an old-timey industrial building, one that is (remarkably) smaller than what currently serves Facebook (for example). In contrast, San Junipero is generated in a vast data center; location-less, automated, and sleek. In *Riverside*, we’re not told exactly what the afterlife is, or how its magic is maintained, and this serves a necessary reminder that seamlessness is also an ideal outcome of the afterlife experiment.

Beyond questions of technology and infrastructure, the ‘living dead’ in each of these digital afterlives are also tethered to normative notions of what a post-living life retreat might include, usually as imagined for upper/middle class white folks: a small, quiet community, beaches, hotel service, access to nature, convertible cars, nightclubs, good weather, endless buffets, and so on. These are markers of physical and material comforts, but – intentionally or not – they invoke little more than enduring boredom.



FIG 1 – Screen grabs of Lakeview Data Centre and server room (*Upload*, 2020).



FIG. 2 – Screen grab of San Junipero Data Centre and Tucker Systems servers (*Black Mirror*, 2018).

The characters seem eternally lonely, though less as a plot point and more as a byproduct of the paucity of imagination that constitutes those worlds – to have created an afterlife with neoliberal capitalist ideals, only to realise that (we) the living are never fulfilled by these either. Eternal boredom plays an important role in the affective registers of the afterlife.

This affective register – which could be likened to a “projection space for nostalgia” (NIEMEYER 2014: 19) – instantiates and mobilizes psychic relationships to ‘the past’ for a wide range of ends. This is perhaps most obvious in *Upload* and *Forever*, but it is through *San Junipero* that the importance of this point is made about the eternity of that boredom, nested in nostalgia. We learn that *San Junipero* is a computer simulation functioning as ‘immersive nostalgic therapy’ for old, dying people. One (Yorkie) of the two main ciswomen characters (the other being Kelly) ends up in a simulation because she died in a car crash at the age of 21, right after coming out to religious, abusive parents. She didn’t live to enjoy being a lesbian in the ‘real world’, so the simulation is all she has to render this future for all times. She falls for Kelly, a woman who has lost her husband and daughter, and is therefore ready to explore her attraction to Yorkie in this simulated world. The boredom, in that case, is in part about being trapped in this kind of interpersonal dynamic – a suffocation of lesbian desire, to the cuttings room floor – but also about nostalgia itself, said to

be the emotional engine of the simulation, a consequence of and a defense against time itself (TANNER 2021).

In the digital afterlife, the living dead are designed to be perfect replicas of their living selves, but usually, or ideally, arrested at their ‘prime.’ Disabilities are ‘corrected’ either by erasure or recoding. Youth is assumed to embody the perfect forever body. Queerness, especially, is indulged on the other (dead) side, but in real (living) life – as we’re reminded with laboured dialogue – supports the real labour of heterosexual marriage. The lesbian romances in *San Junipero* and in *Forever* are possible only by living out a fantasy in death. Gender and race are also flattened because these worlds were not created with collectivities or relations in mind. Bodies, avatars, and ‘uploads’ belong to the companies that sequence, host, and archive their data, and ownership falls into regular patterns of earthly inheritance, only gently subverted for our entertainment. Basically: if you have money in real life, and you own your self, you can pass over. You don’t have to die forever. The technofix has you covered.

The central battle at the heart of each character’s death, however, isn’t grieving or dealing with death itself. It’s love: their ability to love and be loved. And the litmus test for love, it seems, is the ability to grapple with and tame the promised foreverness of the afterlife in the digital realm. Each show ends with a sense of that impossibility, the failed programming that imprisons them into a world where they cannot afford love; where love simply cannot be in a world created for perfect individual replication and nothing else. In each case, desire and temptation belong in a different place from love – away from it, a seedy underbelly (the *Quagmire* of *San Junipero*/the *Grey Market of Upload*) or luxurious debauchery (*Oceanside* of *Forever*) – a place to travel to and away from. Boredom is a feature, not a bug, in a program that focuses solely on replicating the self rather than on extending the deep bonds and complicated intimacies that we form and contend with, if we are to be in relation with others.

One of the (many) problems with singularitarian transcendence is that it’s motivated by heteronormative patriarchal anxieties. As Sarah Sharma writes: “The white patriarchal penchant for exit rears its ugly head at any hint of having to live with one’s supremacy in question. For most populations on Earth, you might say that living in a world of human constraint and limited conditions is just part and parcel of living” (2017: np). In other words, those who stand at the margins are better able to imagine the

limitations of our current (social, political, technological) imaginary from which they are either excluded or exploited, while those around which the imaginary has been centered and constructed are unable to face the slightest discomfort or inconvenience; the apparatus was conceived to persistently avoid this very thing.

On the other hand, as a counter-proposal, radical queer reimaginings put into question such a focus on the future, at least in so far as this future aims to contain and reproduce sameness for its own sake, and that sameness is equated with being worth preserving, and reproducing again and again (LEWIS 2019; HOBART & KNEESE 2020). Rather than violent future visions that perpetuate heteronormative patriarchal anxieties in this way, radical ‘archival’ approaches can offer alternatives to the rigid infrastructures of data centers that host these fantasies. The radical gesture, then, is not to debate the timing or potentialities of digitally replication, nor to opt out in hopes of an analogue ‘heaven’, but to recentre connections to the myriad contexts – elemental, energetic, animal, political, environmental, spatial, spiritual, etc. – that constitute our interselves, and keep our deaths away from all heteronormative capitalist quests that determine future imaginaries just as poorly as they do the present.

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NOTES ON FEMALE NECROPHILIA

This brief contribution aims at introducing some contemporary critical perspectives on female necrophilia and, at the same time, suggesting possible future developments in this field of enquiry. Far from claiming any unquestionable truth, the present paper should be read as a starting point for deepening further investigations on the subject, by unveiling some of the main still open questions related to necrophilia in general, and to female necrophilia, specifically.

One of the issues related to the representations of female necrophilia is their potential to undermine many of the cultural assumptions which construe normative horizons of meaning in nowadays societies. For instance, the active and desirous instance of female subjectivity (which is central in

female necrophilia) is seen as deviant within a normative, still widespread, cultural paradigm that assigns to women the role of objects of desire in sexual relationships. Also, there is an overall misrecognition of other practices aside penetrative sex, that are often considered ‘non-sexual’. According to this last claim, sexual intercourse with a dead man without a penile erection is not accepted as such. This is also due to a broader assumption regarding the ways in which female desire and sexuality are represented as relegated to perpetual absence. Overall, it seems that female necrophilia has the potential to disturb and disrupt such claims, and can therefore be used as a hermeneutically valid tool for the analysis of the ways in which female desire is both positively and negatively represented.

It is widely known that necrophilia, as other so-called ‘perversions’, has been systematically condemned and stigmatised as deviance in order to downplay its subversive potential since the very beginning of its occurrence. The term ‘necrophilia’ was first used by the Belgian physician Joseph Guislain in a lecture presented in 1850 and published two years later (cited in DOWNING 2011: 210). However, it was only in 1901 that the first extensive medical treatment of necrophilia as a disease was elaborated in a treatise by Alexis Épaluward, a former student of the French criminologist Alexandre Lacassagne. His thesis was a medical report inspecting several cases of interaction with the dead: *Vampirisme, Nérophilie, Nérosadisme, Nérophagie*. The text is a nosography that catalogues and classifies the case studies based on the different interactions with the victim: cases of non-violent sexual activity with corpses (necrophilia/la nécrophilie); cases in which the victim is killed in order to be turned into a corpse and therefore mutilated (necrosadism/la nérosadisme); and lastly, cases in which mutilated body parts are ingested (necrophagia/la nécrophagie) (*Ibid.*). Épaluward reports eight cases of necrophilia, all of which are cases of male necrophilia. As this study confirms, unfortunately, female necrophilia does not seem to feature in psychiatry and has overall been absent from the cultural horizon of understanding, until recently. This is also due to the fact that as other perversions, female necrophilia has always been seen as exclusively and strictly a male phenomenon.

Underlying this observation, there are many other considerations that can be added. First of all, necrophilia *tout court*, seen as any kind of erotic and/or sexual relationship with a corpse, intersects with and at the same time exemplifies many of the most deeply rooted cultural taboos

in Western cultures. One taboo is that of the dead body perceived as an untouchable object. Such a taboo is also validated by religious beliefs surrounding life after death and the handling of corpses. A common sexual taboo prescribes that valid relationships occur only between living beings, although, in the prospect of male dominance, no reference is ever made to mutual consent. One last taboo relates to gender roles: as Lena Wånggren (2012) highlights, “[f]emale necrophilia then might be seen as not only transgressing boundaries of life and death [...] but also as transgressing prescribed gender roles” (71).

Therefore, it can be stated that not only necrophilia is considered the most monstrous of perversions, as Krafft-Ebing (18894: 223 - 4) pointed out, but that it is also strongly marked at the level of gender performance. Numerous are the studies on male necrophilia that often confuse necrophilia and necrosadism and analyse the most violent aspects of sex-death connections as part of a broader discourse on the violence inherent in the representation of male sexual relations. Similarly, much space has been occupied by male necrophilia in horror, snuff and gore films, as well as in horror literature, starting from Poe’s famous quote “[t]he death [...] of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world”. Here, the representation of necrophilia revolves around the “perverse mesmeriser” who places his reifying gaze on “controlled” and “obedient” female bodies. Consequently, necrophilia is not framed merely as a sexual practice but also as a practice involving the gaze in the first place. In fact, much feminist research has connected male necrophilia to the objectifying male gaze on the female body. It is worth mentioning, in this sense, Elisabeth Bronfen’s book (1992), *Over her dead body*, that has greatly contributed to the studies on male necrophilia, alongside Lisa Downing’s research, an essential starting point for investigating necrophilia in the context of French *fin-de-siècle* literature (2003).

Although female necrophilia is yet to be fully addressed in critical studies due to the above-mentioned taboos still affecting research in this field, however, some references should be made. Among these, in film criticism, the study by Patricia MacCormack, *Necrosexuality* (2011), and the isolated records of soft-core necrophilia in contributions by Downing on women’s writing (2003b) and on some explicitly necrophilic films (2002). None of the above, though, attempts to explore systematically all the representations of female necrophilia in its various manifestations, broadening the

spectrum from visual practices, such as figurative representations of dead male bodies eroticized by a female spectator, to forms of necrophilia as possession and domination over a totally passive or passivised body. Curti and Laselva (2015 3ed.) pointed out that a localised and rapid appearance of necrophilia in horror film productions is that provided by Jörg Buttgeit in *Nekromantik* (1987) and *Nekromantik 2* (1991) for female necrophilia especially, although necrophilia soon became a side element in horror film plots. This is the case, for example, of Nicolas Winding Refn's *The Neon Demon* (2016) where female and lesbian necrophilia intertwine with forms of necrosadism and cannibalism.

Because of its interstitial nature, necrophilia is a very complex practice involving a series of connected sub-practices, all of which rely on the body-death-eros connection. Such a 'ménage à trois' can be fully grasped by means of a thorough analysis of the concept of necrophilia itself and its multilayered forms. For instance, necrophilia could be ascribed to the sphere of pornography. In this regard, performances of bodily obscenity and the so-called "body genres" in films, as Carol J. Clover (1987) and Linda Williams (1991) first theorised, come to mind. Such performances have also narrowed a *summa divisio* between the modes of male porn and the modes of female porn, creating a constant tension between visual necrosadism along with genital and bodily dissection, on the one hand, and the maintenance of bodily integrity in its sacredness, on the other. In the latter case, the necrophilic act occurs with no explicit violence. Lynne Stopkewich's *Kissed* (2006) provides an example of a nonviolent, highly erotic, though not explicitly pornographic form of female necrophilia, lacking necrosadic connotations.

The issues raised by research on female necrophilia are varied and lead to some interesting questions that can be profitably addressed through a queer perspective for several reasons: on the one hand, female necrophilia overturns some very specific polarities in gender performances and subverts the normative erotic desire; on the other, it questions the boundaries between body and desire, and their correlated meanings, since the dead body becomes the product of secularised and depathologised subject dissolution.

A number of questions also arise in order to effectively analyse female necrophilia today. What firstly needs to be addressed is a still debated question regarding the very concept of necrophilia and female necrophilia

and what these phenomena mean nowadays, at a time when the clear-cut pathologies provided by Épaluad or von Krafft-Ebing no longer seem to offer valid taxonomies. Necrophilia is often associated with other ‘pathological’ perversions, resulting in new forms of eroticism that involve bodies and dead bodies, along with their changing definitions and understandings. We might, therefore, wonder to what extent forms of interaction with bodies that we consider dead can be labeled as necrophilic practices. At the same time, we might question the pathological limits of necrophilic desires.

Another urgent question concerns how necrophilic desires intersect with the construction of gender identities and how these identities are interrogated by erotic perversions. Such issues require further assessment and delineation of the connections linking desire, identity, gender, and sexuality, along with their boundaries.

Lastly, the study of female necrophilia can be a useful tool for understanding certain representations of masculinity, especially when it comes to heterosexual female necrophilia, and the connected instances of power that underlie it. For instance, a sexual intercourse between a woman and a dead man body overturns the normative representation of masculinity that therefore shifts from an active into a passive role, thus deviating from the commonsensical reality that associates femininity with passivity and masculinity with activity. These passive masculinities partly overlap with what Kaja Silverman (1992) classified as “male subjectivity at the margins”. Such subjectivities recognize castration, otherness and specularity as constitutive elements of their own identity, and, moving beyond these categorisations, are necessarily passive and totally objectified.

To conclude, female necrophilia is a hybrid space that ends up questioning its own nature. As a matter of fact, we may wonder whether the adjective “female” still makes sense, and if necrophilia can be separated from its pathologisation so as to be used as a hermeneutic tool in the broader analysis of subject-object, active-passive relations, as well as of living-dead body relations. In so doing, it might become a useful rhetorical device also to analyse these radical changes, act as a spectrum of anti-normative erotic relations in the history of culture, and ask new questions about very sensitive issues, in ways that are also controversial. Necrophilia symbolises the reshuffling of gender polarities that have assigned to men the role of sole active agents of erotic desire. Our hope is that this brief contribution

may broaden the ongoing critical debate on necrophilia and encourage the inclusion of the above issues.

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What do we talk about when we talk about queer death?

6/ New perspectives in queer death studies

ABSTRACT: This is part 6 of 6 of the dossier *What do we talk about when we talk about queer death?*, edited by M. Petricola. The contributions collected in this article seek to open new frontiers in queer death studies from the most diverse perspectives, from death positivity to psychedelics, from digital death to extreme embalming, from ethnography to philosophy.

The present article includes the following contributions: – Kristinnsdottir A.L., Death positivity: a practice of queer death; – Haber B. and Sander D.J., Death is a trip; – Nowaczyk-Basińska K., Queer (digital) death?; – Ramírez Rodríguez S.M., colony and the “velorio insólito:” contesting conventional death practices in puerto rico through extreme embalming; – Brainer A., Caring for queer bodies and spirits in and after death: research notes from Taiwan; – Newman H., Notes on living after death: a queer pitch for philosophy.

KEYWORDS: Death Studies, Queer Studies, Ethnography, Hallucinogens, Death Positive Movement.

DEATH POSITIVITY: A PRACTICE OF QUEER DEATH

The human lot is to be mortal. Like all things, we are stamped with expiry, motivating us to seek ways in which to put it off. Creams, surgeries, diets: all are measures taken to defer the inevitable, the impossible—the end of the self. So concerned are humans with our need to remain conscious and *doing* that we seek to colonize other planets, upload our consciousness, freeze our bodies in the faint hope that *someday, someone* might revive us (MORE 2013; O’CONNELL 2017). So, in many ways, even talking about death is queer. Not as in an individual marker of identity, but as in engaging in “unsettling (subverting, exceeding) binaries and given norms and normativities” (RADOMSKA, MEHRABI & LYKKE 2019: 6). Death is a truly unsettling phenomenon in the modern Western imagination—as explored for example by Philippe Ariès’ *The Hour of Our Death* (1991), Thomas Laqueur’s *The*

Work of the Dead (2015), or Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject (1982)—and to embrace its evils, its violence, its ruthless presence, is unimaginable and, to some, immoral (DE GREY 2013).

And yet. The death positive movement, a primarily Anglophone-world movement of protest against modern “death phobia” (ORDER OF THE GOOD DEATH 2021), challenges the way we think about this life/death binary. Most noticeable is the naming of the movement itself, juxtaposing words that are so oppositional as to not even be comprehensible together at first sight. How can one be positive—that is, happy, contented, inspired—about death, a phenomenon of loss? The movement draws inspiration from other positivity movements, such as sex and body positivity (DOUGHTY 2018) which seek to break down normative boundaries that entangle embodiment and morality. Death positivity does the same, with the expressed mission to dismantle the idea of the dead body as an inherently sullied object, the abject reminder of the borders that are drawn between the human as subject and object (KRISTEVA 1982).

In her 2016 book of the same name, Donna Haraway calls for practices of “staying with the trouble” (10) to dismantle borders drawn up between the Anthropocene human self—usually a cisheternormative, noncolonial subject—and its others. Death positivity takes up the mantle to champion this cause and emerges as a practice of what Haraway imagines as “partial recuperation and getting on together” (2016: 10). The movement shies away from utopian goals of Frankensteinian resurrection or digital immortality, and instead proposes that we simply embrace the fact that we are mortal and act accordingly. This means that we should consider the impact our post-death rites may have on the environment, understanding our material reality as inherently linked to the larger world around us beyond the cultures of the human.

Prominent death positive activist Caitlin Doughty writes about how ownership of the body can be expressed through allowing bodily decomposition, stating that as a woman “[t]here is a freedom found in decomposition, a body rendered messy, chaotic and wild. I relish this image when visualizing what will become of my future corpse” (2017: 136). Doughty appeals to a mode of post-mortem being here that exerts power and subverts the idea that power necessarily comes with consciousness and conquest, in stark opposition to any popular futurisms of the human. She also subverts Kristeva's concept of the abject body by enjoying rather than

being horrified by the challenge the decomposing body poses to the delimitation of subjectivity/object in the human self.

To embrace death in the death positive way is to accept what Haraway calls “not “posthuman” but “com-post”” (2016: 11) being, to materially and figuratively realize the interconnectedness the carbon-based life-form “human” has with its surroundings, despite its placement above and beyond such categories as nature. Death positivity emerges as a normatively disruptive practice of death, for the ways it enables us to reimagine, to *queer*, our relationship to death.

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DEATH IS A TRIP

In 1975, Michel Foucault dropped acid for the first and last time in Death Valley, California. Simeon Wade (2019), who was there and whose account of the trip was published posthumously, attributes the significance of this psychedelic experience to a turn in Foucault’s work from concerns around human finitude – portrayed famously at the end of *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* as man being erased “like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea” (422) – to arguably more hopeful, ethical concerns around self-fashioning. This rupture in Foucault’s thought between the institutional and the individual speaks to philosophical inquiry into the post-apocalyptic and the post-human – into what Eugene Thacker (2011) calls the “world-without-us” – and to the increasing medicalization of the psychedelic experience.

There are some obvious resonances between the phenomenology of psychedelics and queer thinking about the subject. Even before reaching anything like ego death, the boundaries of the everyday world quickly fall away during a trip – self/other, subject/object, life/death – the categorical cleaving of the world into difference suddenly doesn’t seem so obvious. Tripping blurs, trips up our sense of the world and the self – of the worldly self – so clarity, if and when it comes, can feel all the more shocking.

The YouTube classic “1950s Housewife on LSD” (RALEIGHARTIST 2012), documents a time when psychedelics were regularly administered to

human subjects and other animals as part of research experiments. Discovered by a reporter and uploaded to YouTube, the video went viral after it appeared in a CNN segment. In it, the aforementioned housewife – whose “husband is an employee here at the VA” and was suggested because the study was “looking for normal people” – suddenly waxes poetic about the interconnected nature of everything and the overabundance of potential that overwhelms the routinized limits of the subject.

“Can’t you see it... everything is so beautiful and lovely and... alive... *you shouldn’t say anything about anything not being... this is reality*”

And later... “I wish I could talk in technicolor”.

If this 1950s housewife stands as an avatar for the lead-up to 1960s and ‘70s psychedelia, the *aliveness* that opens up to being *anything*, contemporary drug culture might be suggesting a newly potent encounter with death and nothingness. The pleasure and liberatory potential in that synesthetic moment of technicolor speech is now the default condition of contemporary life, senses bleeding hopelessly as we talk over/through/around each other online; our voice in oversaturated technicolor is now the mandatory labor of the gif economy. Can we dissociate from a hallucinogenic capitalism invested in boundary upheaval as big data market making? We can try, but as Melinda Cooper has said, “[t]here is no form of social liberation, it would seem, that the neo-liberal economist cannot incorporate within a new market for contractual services or high-risk credit (2017: 8).”

Nowadays, rather than entailing the philosopher’s pilgrimage to an extreme and sacred locale or a housewife’s awakening in a lab, one is likely to casually and banally ingest a microdose of psilocybin or ketamine en route to their open office. Kyle Chayka (2021) describes this latter experience in his description of HBO’s *Industry*: “The show zooms in on the faces of these aspiring members of the economic elite, but their expressions are usually frozen into affectless flatness, eyes wide, staring at nothing, glamorously disconnected. I couldn’t tell whether it was a side effect of the drugs or just the characters’ slow realization that their individuality and sensual lives would be ground down until they, too, become cogs in the machine of global capital.” The point being, perhaps, that the Goop-ification of turning on, tuning in, and dropping out is but another instance of accelerationism. Grinding down individuality does not necessarily have to come at the expense of sensuality, though, and could lead toward a reinvigorated queer vitalism rather than the dovetailing of the death drive and capitalist expansion.

Queerness and psychedelics share an interest in instability and process, a resistance to easy instrumentalism, and a foundational relationship to death. Queer theory and its orientation towards self-shattering – the deconstruction of easy boundaries between body/world/self/other – resonates with the transcendent, death-adjacent experiences of hallucinogens. While queer theory was born in and through a mass queer epidemic, its purview has expanded rapidly, and death is no longer so central, or at least, the queer gaze has been refracted towards a kaleidoscopic range of norms and practices related to relationality, identity, and embodiment. The slow mainstreaming of psychedelics from countercultural to clinical significance, in contrast, has been squarely focused on death, anxiety, and subject-threatening trauma: treatment resistant depression, PTSD, and especially end of life therapy have been notable clinical success stories (SLATER 2012).

This success in easing fear of death and helping to reintegrate dissociation from life has come despite the mechanism of action being indeterminate, context sensitive, intention based, and fundamentally opaque; in other words, we don't know exactly how psychedelics work. Perhaps, though, we might understand it as a queer encounter with corporeality that resists categorization. Psychedelics reveal the fundamental strangeness of embodiment and can denaturalize, deconstruct, and distance us from the fixed boundaries that tether us to the traumas of environmental/historical circumstance. While the clinical work on psychedelics will importantly expand access and attention, we propose that the time is right for a different kind of inquiry to run alongside, underneath, and above: a promiscuous encounter between psychedelic and queer studies on the topic of death.

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QUEER (DIGITAL) DEATH?¹

The concept of queer death usually leads us to think about a vast space of open-ended anti-normative and anti-conventional concepts related to death and a dead body. Queer death mostly refers to organic human and non-human bodies as well as different forms of dying and mourning. Despite a growing body of academic literature on the phenomenon of queer death, its relation to digital technologies has hitherto drawn little attention. In particular, there is a lack of nuanced discussion that go beyond a radical critique, or even rejection, of death-related digital technologies in the twenty-first century. An increasing number of researchers have spotted that digital culture is gradually changing the parameters of death, dying, and mourning over the last two decades, mainly due to the emergence of the internet and the accelerated use of social media platforms (KASKET 2020; SISTO 2020; GRAHAM *et al.* 2013; MOREMAN *et al.* 2014; O'NEILL 2016). Consequently, this essay will argue in support of the inclusion of 'digital death' (SISTO 2018) in the framework of queer death as a significant component of the contemporary process of dying and mourning, especially in technologically determined western cultures.

There is much to be said about the role of technology in changing the cultural performances related to death, much more than I would fit in this short contribution. Thus, I will focus on two problems that I termed 'the right to be forgotten' and 'the right to be remembered'. These two contradictory perspectives sketch the bigger horizon of queer actions one may take in terms of digital death.

Many of us, over the course of our lives, build up intentionally or accidentally a substantial amount of data that stick around after our death. Some researchers call it 'digital flesh' (GIBSON & CARDEN 2018; YOON 2019). Digital flesh is not merely a container of information; it is not given or transcendent, but materializes itself in reality through our performative actions (YOON 2019). Digital flesh should not be perceived as an external sphere, separate from our organic bodies, but rather in dynamic relation to it. As Luciano Floridi and Carl Öhman argue: "we should relate to private data as being ours in the sense of 'our body' rather than 'our car'. We are our own information and our personal data are our informational bodies" (FLORIDI

¹ This work has been supported by the National Science Center (Poland) within the UMO-2020/36/T/HS2/00010 grant funds.

& ÖHMAN 2017). Therefore, if digital flesh is ‘our own body’, it is reasonable to ascribe to it the same level of importance and care we give to dead bodies; or at the very least we should make conscious and responsible decisions regarding it.

We are living in a culture that values the idea of legacy preservation, looking for its noble legitimacy in the antiquity tradition of *non omnis moriar*. However, preservation may not be the only option. An interesting perspective has been provided by Ewa Domańska in her latest book *Nekros. Wprowadzenie do ontologii martwego ciała [Necros. Introduction to death body’s ontology]*. „The idea of keeping forever [like immortality] seems to be thoughtlessly regarded as a positive value, as if [all] people have a desire to endure forever. Such an assumption is as rhetorically attractive as it is difficult to accept in its universality, and even dangerous” (DOMAŃSKA 2017: 285, Pl. tr.). This idea creates space for a new way of thinking about ‘digital flesh’. A way that allows for its liberation from the dominant model of sustenance and preservation for the future generation. The subversive practice might be to think in a category of anonymity and annihilation, with a sense of individual living and the desire for total decomposition without leaving footprints (DOMAŃSKA 2017) in both the digital and non-digital sphere. Subversive queer practices might help to carefully plan and prepare a performance of postmortem disappearance.

The right to be forgotten can be understood as a form of resistance to the regime of remembering as the dominant, straight cultural production. Particularly important in the context of the right to be removed from internet searches is the fact that online afterdeath presence is mostly mediated by commercial platforms (FLORIDI & ÖHMAN 2017). This raises a practical but also ethical question: who has the right to own, control, and manage these data? According to a prediction of Carl Öhman from Oxford University, if the use of technologies continue to grow, there will be 5 billion deceased persons’ profiles on Facebook by the end of the century. This prediction leads one to imagine what would happen if postmortem disappearance is taken on a mass scale as a subversive queer action.

On the other end of the digital death spectrum is the right to be remembered. I believe that the right to be remembered would still be valued positively if it was given as a choice rather than a forced upon people by political or commercial forces. In this case, queer perspective may help to reconceptualize death, dying, and mourning in a technologically mediated environment.

In digital culture, the border between life and death has been blurred and might be seen more as a process of transformation or entering another phase, than a fixed moment. Death seems not to be perceived as the end of relations, but rather as a change in its modality. As Jennifer Huberman noticed, what we are witnessing now is a shift from ‘the remembering paradigm’ to ‘the communication paradigm’ (HUBERMAN 2017). In other words, we stop talking *about* the dead and start talking *to* the technologically mediated dead (KASKET 2020; SISTO 2020; STOKES 2021). There is an ongoing discussion about how to design technologies that would, on the one hand, effectively acknowledge the death of the user, but also open up a space for new forms of existing. “Technology has the capability to ease suffering or to disturb sensitivities through its strangeness and irreverence”, claims HCI researcher Michael Massimi (MASSIMI 2020; MASSIMI & CHARISE 2009). Inventors and researchers, as Massimi further points out, should engage in the process of creating a tech-environment that would support users who are coping with loss and not cause additional pain and hardships. However, this radical cultural, social and psychological change provokes numerous questions including: what is the status of posthumous technologies, from memorialized Facebook account to personalized avatar? will it be just an interactive archive, or possibly a technologically mediated doppelgänger? are ghosts remaining in technology are human elements that embody everything machines?

Also worth raising is a question about grief in the context of emerging technologies. New technologies challenge Sigmund Freud’s classical distinction between mourning and melancholia. Healthy mourning, in his rationalistic and normative approach, means a gradual, linear process of accepting the loss of a beloved. The latest studies show that there is no single right way to deal with grief, and some kind of final closure in relation with the dead is not always needed (KAKSET 2020; DOKA 2017; KLASS *et al.* 1996). This makes room for the creation of an entirely new culture of grief that is not constrained by the normative notion of ‘proper’ mourning. Digital-death-related technologies challenge also the western model of grieving that is dominated by hyper-individualism and self-sufficiency, enabling the creation of new collective practices. Are we entering a new phase of a technologically mediated version of companionship? Could we consider such novel technologies as a tool for creating deeply affective relationships? Could using those technology, and resting in sadness

because of the loss might be understood as a resistance to health-normative discourses on happiness? (LYKKE 2018). These are some urgent questions that must be considered from the queer death perspective.

It is clear that themes of identity, loss, mourning, connection, and memory as well as the idea of disappearing and annihilation are deeply affected by digital culture. I believe that queer death studies, as an emerging field of research that “overcome the difficulties of conventional death studies” (Radomska *et al.* 2020) has a potential to provide new theoretical and conceptual tools that will aid in our understanding of the shift in our attitude towards death, dying and mourning and the impact of digital technology on this shift. Queer death may also help to highlight crucial aspects of death, dying and mourning in the contemporary world and introduce the possibility (and right!) of making your own choice.

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COLONY AND THE *VELORIO INSÓLITO*:
CONTESTING CONVENTIONAL DEATH PRACTICES
IN PUERTO RICO THROUGH EXTREME EMBALMING

No quiero que nadie llore
si yo me muero mañana
ay que me lleven cantando salsa
y que siembren flores, allá en mi final morada.

Cheo Feliciano, “Sobre una tumba humilde”

A white plastic table with matching chairs, dominoes laid out. People take their turns and set up the pieces, all the while chatting with other players. This is a regular scene at many plazas and balconies in Puerto Rico. However, this particular domino session is an exception; there is one player that hasn't left the table for any of the rounds. These will be Carlos A. Méndez Irizarry's last games, and everyone wants to make sure they get to sit with him one more time. Once the last round is played, he will be cremated. After all, Méndez Irizarry is dead. Before passing away at age 79, he had told his family that he wanted his wake to be just like a domino game,

and they obliged. That is how in December of 2019, the municipality of Isabela in Puerto Rico became the place where they had “*el muerto jugando dominó*,” the dead man playing dominoes. However, Méndez Irizarry was not the first to have “one last game” before leaving. In October 2015, Jomar Aguayo Collazo was dressed in a royal blue Adidas tracksuit, accessorized with a pair of sunglasses and a gold chain, as well as a drink and a pack of cigarettes close by. He waited for his friends and family at the domino table by the jukebox at Bar Carmín in Río Piedras. Aguayo Collazo and several of his friends had been murdered shortly after his 23rd birthday. It is unknown if he had specifically requested this type of wake, but his mother reached out to Marín Funeral Home, a mortuary business in the San Juan area, who are known for their work in extreme embalming.

Méndez Irizarry’s and Aguayo Collazo’s wakes are not alone in their use of unique ways of remembering the deceased in Puerto Rico. In the past twenty years, Puerto Ricans have been involved in a number of “*velorios insólitos*” or “unusual wakes.” The Orlando Sentinel lists sixteen funerals that presented the dead in “exotic” ways, but no one can be entirely sure that these are the only funerals that were “nontraditional.” According to Cintrón Gutiérrez, stories of unusual wakes began in 2008 with Ángel “Pedrito” Pantoja Medina. Known as “*el muerto para’o*,” or “dead man standing,” Pantoja Medina was embalmed in an upright position and viewed in his own living room. Pantoja Medina’s, Aguayo Collazo’s and Méndez Irizarry’s wakes inspired the Boricua community on the island and in the Diaspora. Various men and women requested unique viewing experiences or were prepared in such a way at the request of their families. Others chose to provide a final send-off to their pets in a similar fashion. These events became media fodder, with news coverage of these funerary practices extending to mainland United States, Europe, and Asia; a discussion began to develop regarding Puerto Rico and its dead. Media reports on these wakes range from factual to manifesting a degree of shock and horror. Others projected sensationalized disgust, such as the Daily Mail. Its headline stated “Dead gangster’s body is propped up playing one last game of DOMINOES at the same bar where he was murdered days before,” which is not only grotesque, but factually incorrect. Aguayo Collazo was murdered at El Regreso; his wake was at Bar Carmín, which belonged to his mother.

Having originally visited Puerto Rico to write about the *Día Nacional de la Zalsa*, Alfonso Buitrago Londoño ended up being fascinated by these

mortuary practices. Upon learning of these incidences of extreme embalming, Buitrago Londoño thought that they were more extravagant than curious, “as if those embalmed dead were the call of a people at the brink of a battle against death.” He also wonders if it is a sign of Puerto Rico’s colonial history. While embalming and burial have been the apparent norm for generations, Buitrago Londoño is not wrong when connecting these unique wakes to the island’s colonized past and present. Having been under the rule of not one, but two foreign countries, Puerto Ricans have been forced to change their lives as well as their deaths. Prior to the arrival of the Spanish, indigenous Puerto Ricans known as the Taíno had a more accepting view of mortality. Instead of viewing death as abhorrent, the Taínos believed the dead never left; they simply became part of their community (López Rojas, 21). They may have feared it, but they saw it as a part of their life cycle. Death was “*el Gran Areyto*” or the great feast, and it was another form of life in which death was just a part of the process. Death was a form of cultural renewal in the community, as well as the reconciliation between its past and present (López Rojas, 20-21).

Since the Taíno believed that people and their dead could, and should, communicate, this led to a “culture of conservation” in regards to the deceased, both as a body and as an idol. Taínos did not believe that the dead left their bodies entirely, which led to whole or partial conservation of the body. López Rojas notes that chroniclers observed this funerary practice across the Antilles (22). The *cemí* also played a key role in Taíno culture. Rocks were used as vessels for ancestral spirits of Taínos past as well as deities; they were brought to life via carvings on these stones. *Cemís* were protected, as they were important symbols; Taínos would even fight over who had the right to keep them (López Rojas, 21). All of this came to an abrupt halt with the arrival of the Spanish; López Rojas states, “Spain imposed its civilizing order and with it, the Spanish sensitivity to death was enthroned (24).” No longer would there be natural burials for bodies or any corporal conservation. The *cemí* did not escape scrutiny either; it was eliminated as it was considered to be part of pagan polytheistic practices. The ideological imposition on mortuary processes was official in 1513 via the *Ordenanzas para el tratamiento de los indios*, which stated that any sick Taínos must be assisted and brought to confession. If they were to die, they must be properly buried, with a cross on top of the grave. If any *encomendero* refused, they would be served a four dollar fine (25).

The Spanish, hindered by the elements and by disease, were struggling to colonize the island. Even though the Taínos were spiritually destroyed and no longer allowed to commune with their dead as was tradition, they continued to fight against the colonizers. However, indigenous Puerto Ricans were decimated by illness and slavery; Taínos were soon replaced by enslaved Africans brought to Puerto Rico. In turn, the enslaved were also subjected to these colonized expectations of life and death. “The Burial Policies of 1539” further regulated death, stipulating that all bodies had to be buried within church or monastery grounds (López Rojas, 26). Not even in death could the force of the colonizer be avoided. Yet, as Puerto Rico’s population grew, so did fringe movements contesting social norms and mores. This also applied to death practices. The enslaved, as well as the peasants, began to celebrate death. Unlike a conventional wake, this was an occasion for “song and dance.” The utmost expression of this was the *baquiné*, or little angel’s wake. In the 1700s, the death of a child was “a cause for celebration, the child’s death was a symbol of collectivity (López Rojas, 33).” The *baquiné* was then a representation of the community’s “pain, death, and rebirth in hope for a life beyond (33).” While some may see the *baquiné* as a form of denial in regarding a child’s passing, López Rojas sees it as the formation of popular culture outside of established or official norms. Peasants and enslaved communities were facing death and responding to it, in contrast to the noble and law-abiding sectors of Puerto Rican society (35-36). The *criollos* practiced a different kind of good death; one that relied on prayer, repentance, and last rites, as well as a plot at a proper church or Catholic cemetery. Followers abided by Catholic practice, and so they held wakes at church, paid for *rosarios* and *novenas*, and left charitable donations to ensure their spots in heaven.

Cintrón Gutiérrez states that the body becomes a dominant ritual symbol during the wake, which draws social attention. At the same time, the cadaver also assumes a performance that forces death to commingle with life and family until the time has come to bury (or cremate) the deceased. Citing Laura Panizo’s “Cuerpo, velatorio y performance”, he adds that embalming and cosmetology practices go one step further in order to help the body present a “beautiful, healthy, and youthful” aesthetic (6). Extreme embalming takes this beyond, as traditional funerary practices have bodies as static entities lying in a coffin, as if asleep. Instead, these unique wakes present the body in imitation of dynamic everyday situations. In addition to wakes

in which the dead are ready to play domino, or are waiting for visitors in their own living room, there have been deceased that have been presented as driving ambulances or taxis, playing poker, or simply sitting in their rocking chairs at home, as they used to do. Puerto Ricans have also done this in the Diaspora: Julio López, deceased at age 39, was embalmed and presented “riding” his motorcycle at his wake in Philadelphia. Like the *baquiné*, the “*velorios insólitos*” break with tradition as they do not separate the dead nor do they spend their time in prayer for the deceased. They play and chat with the dead; they even take pictures so they have a physical or digital reminder of the moment. Extreme embalming allows these families to remember their dead, but also to celebrate them. This is a contestation of the colonized cultural norm that calls for a traditional wake, church service, and burial.

In a piece for *Cuadernos Inter.c.a.mbio sobre Centroamérica y el Caribe*, Cintrón Gutiérrez describes extreme embalming funerals as a type of wake that demonstrates how the deceased never surrender or give up. He also adds that it is a way of “making history.” Within the context of marginalized spaces, making history is being able to transgress invisibility (17). These individuals were able to transcend accepted colonial norms and connect with past practices that made life and death inseparable. Perhaps the best example of this is not just how they are presented in dioramas that depict everyday situations, but how the community went about in normalizing these wakes. Méndez Irizarry’s viewing took place at a funeral home, but people went up to him and sat down, talked, or played a game. Aguayo Collazo’s wake took place in a bar, and whilst his friends and family went there to pay their respects, the bar was operational. People were playing pool and drinking close by. This is a new kind of *baquiné*, wherein people celebrate the deceased and erase the line between life and death, even if it is just for a little while.

These approaches gain visibility and urgency in the wake of tragedies such as Hurricane María, rising cases of femicide, and hate crimes against the LGBTQ+ community. Post-hurricane, Puerto Ricans suffered and died in their homes due to inexistent government aid at local and national levels. Treated as second-class citizens, islanders were left without power for almost a year, amid resource scarcity and a leptospirosis outbreak. If the living had been ignored, the dead had been forgotten. Bodies piled up in malfunctioning storage as families struggled to reclaim their loved ones so they would give them proper burial. Since relatives had no bodies to mourn, memorial

marches, murals, and vigils began to occur. Puerto Ricans were once again finding ways of facing death on their own terms. Likewise, memorialization of victims to hate crimes has become increasingly visible to national and international media. After the murder of Alexa, a young trans woman, art, protest, and music were crucial components of the people's mourning. Trap and rap artist Benito Antonio Martínez Ocasio, better known as Bad Bunny, involved himself in the protest toward official handling of the crime by donning a shirt that said: "They murdered Alexa, not a man in a skirt."

López Rojas stated that the corpse belongs to the political apparatus (43), but Puerto Ricans refuse to let this be so. Extreme embalming and radical memorialization have become a part of Puerto Rican culture on the island and in the Diaspora as a contestation of colonization and marginalization. Méndez Irizarry's, Aguayo Collazo's, and Pantoja Medina's wakes, along with artistic memorialization and protest, assert that conventional approaches to death and dying are an option, not the norm. They signal a refusal to conform to imposed processes implemented via colonization. When traditional funerary approaches such as embalming are used, they are pushed to the limit: the dead are forceful and involved. Furthermore, these contestatory acts are relatively accessible to the public. They are not reserved for the upper echelons of society; this group usually aligns with colonial funerary practices that entail religious rites. For those who engage in "extreme embalming," protest, and memorialization, death is another instance of protest. It is another way of asserting cultural and queer identity.

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CARING FOR QUEER BODIES AND SPIRITS IN AND AFTER DEATH: RESEARCH NOTES FROM TAIWAN

Beginning my research career about one decade ago, I did not expect to talk about queer death. I had just begun my fieldwork with LGBTQ+ people and families in Taiwan, and death was far from my mind. But in tuning in to queer lives, I also learned about queer experiences of dying. I witnessed the end of life and afterlife care that people offered one another within systems that were not designed for them. I listened as people talked about death

candidly with their families. Parents, especially, referenced their own and their children's (future) deaths to frame their responses to queer issues.

In this note, I offer a small number of examples to start a conversation about queer death that is rooted in Taiwanese culture and society. I am eager to see work at the nexus of queer kinship, family, and death studies in a wider variety of cultural contexts. I also hope to see more talk about queer death that bridges academic, activist, and community spaces.

END OF LIFE AND AFTERLIFE CARE

As with other forms of reproductive labor, who cares for spirits, and who *is cared for*, reflect and reproduce the gender norms and values of a society. This holds implications for queer and trans people that scholars have only begun to explore. It is important to recognize that ancestors and spirits are not a niche or disappearing part of our cultures. They continue to matter to many people in ways that cross class and generational lines, and intersect with the relations among living family members². Queer thanatologies are uniquely suited to explore these relations and practices through the lenses of gender and power.

The following vignette is an example of how end of life and afterlife care can become intertwined with queer personhood as well as queer practices of friendship and solidarity. My interlocutor, An, recounted this story about her best friend, Lin, whom she lost to cancer when both were in their late teens. An and Lin shared in common a transmasculine or *T* identity, and issues of gender integrity arose in death just as they had in life. Lin had been training at the police academy and convinced her family to clothe her body in her police uniform, managing in this way to avoid the indignity of a dress. However, the family did lay her out in very feminine shoes.

At the funeral, An spoke aloud to her friend's spirit. "I'm sorry about the shoes, man," she said. "Don't worry. I have your favorite sneakers. I'm going to burn them, and you can put them on as soon as you get them."

As items burned for the dead are widely understood to reach them in the afterlife, An used this practice to intervene – a quiet rebellion against

² There is a large body of work showing the present day salience of ancestral spirits. See, for example, Buyandelger (2013), Fonneland (2017), Heng (2020), Kanai *et al.* (2019), Mackenzie *et al.* (2017), and Santo (2018) writing about contemporary Mongolia, Norway, Singapore, Japan, the African diaspora in Australia, and Cuba, respectively.

the shoes, a final act of care³. Some grieving families do recognize the alternative genders and sexualities of their children. But in many cases, like this one, it is queer friends who step in to create a more gender-respectful memorial (for another example, see Ho 2005).

Gender concerns did not end with Lin's funeral. As an unmarried and childless daughter, Lin was not recognized as part of the family line nor as an ancestor. Ancestral status, ensuring social continuity and care after death, is conferred to men through their natal families and to women through their marital families (SHIH 2010). For this reason, Lin's family did not bring her home, but instead placed her remains in a temple, where her spirit would be cared for by outsiders⁴. Describing this to me, An said, "I always thought this was so unfair." I felt her voice harden, like a thin sheet of ice across a lake. "I told my mom, if I die first, and you put me in a temple, my ghost will come back to haunt you." A haunting ghost is a spirit that is suffering, without the anchor of home or kin. Couched in these terms, An's message to her mother was crystal clear.

Gay and bisexual men also intervene in end of life and afterlife care in creative ways. An interviewee in his seventies had created a small altar to his boyfriend, similar to the family altars that populate most Taiwanese homes. There he burned incense and placed food for his boyfriend's spirit. Elsewhere, I write about Hong, a heterosexually married gay man who purchased columbarium niches for himself and his boyfriend of twenty years. They would be placed together with his mother, while his wife would be housed on a different floor of the same columbarium tower (BRAINER 2019: 24-26). On one hand, this example shows queer agency. Hong arranged for his boyfriend to be with him in death in a way that had been unattainable in life. At the same time, it shows how easily women can be excised from the family. Gay men had, on average, more opportunities to create space for themselves within existing systems. Lesbians, and *Ts* in particular, faced some of the most severe obstacles at the end of their lives⁵. Their precarity as women living apart from men became all the more visible in death.

³ For the meanings and reach of this practice, see Blake (2011).

⁴ For a description of such temples, see Shih (2007).

⁵ The LGBTI Elders Group is a subcommittee of the Taiwan Tongzhi Hotline Association (<https://hotline.org.tw/>, <https://hotline.org.tw/english>). The short film *其他人 (Others)* is available on their YouTube channel: <https://youtu.be/dG-rpIQDsUw>, retrieved January 2021.

DEATH AS A RHETORICAL TOOL WITHIN FAMILIES

Death can also be a point of reference or rhetorical tool in family negotiations surrounding sexuality and gender. This came up rather often in my interviews and fieldwork. Some parents referenced their own deaths in an effort to compel children to become heterosexual or at least to subdue their queer identities for a period of time. This took two main forms: parents who said that having a queer child would hasten their death or make them want to die, and parents who told children to wait until elder family members or they themselves had died in order to come out or undergo gender transition. Both strategies carried weight. Some adult children did consider waiting, although this proved enormously difficult. In the final chapter of my book, I quote the elder sister of a gay brother as saying: “I think it’s better if my brother can wait until after my parents have gone [passed away] to come out. But that is such a long time from now, with many difficulties in between” (BRAINER 2019: 119).

I’ll never forget the first time I presented this topic to a mostly heterosexual audience. One woman gasped, “These people want their parents to die!” I was stunned by her interpretation. Some people had waited years, a lifetime, at times in crushing loneliness, to protect their parents from knowledge that could hurt them. I realized then that the sacrifices queers were making were not visible to many heterosexuals. The perception of queerness as selfish and unfilial is one we must continue to work to dismantle. This work includes creating a social environment in which a parent’s life does not (appear to) depend on their child having a heterosexual marriage and family.

Other parents feared that their children would die because they were queer. This notion was two-edged. Fear of HIV/AIDS and isolation or social death did propel some parents to try to change their children’s sexualities in order to safeguard them. At the same time, in support group meetings and other gatherings for parents of LGBTQ+ children, I often heard moms say to other moms that death by suicide is a possibility if the children are not supported. Thus, suicide became a part of the narrative that parents used to explain why they supported Taiwan’s LGBTQ+ movement and their own queer and trans children, and to urge others to do the same.

My research suggests that talking about queer death with parents and families is not something to be avoided or feared. Parents themselves are already thinking and talking about these things. Scholars working in queer

death studies can contribute meaningfully to these conversations. This will require, however, that we make our work accessible, as I discuss last.

POSTSCRIPT: HOW AND WITH WHOM DO WE TALK ABOUT QUEER DEATH?

In 2013, the LGBTI Elders Group in Taipei self-produced a short film about a lesbian couple's struggle to stay together at the end of their lives. The film, based on real stories, culminates with the femme partner's death and her lover's isolation in grief. During the funeral, family members are called to pay their respects according to gender and kinship role. Gradually the funeral proceeds through other socially recognized relationships, such as neighbors and coworkers. The woman's lifelong partner stands alone in the final group, *qí tā rén* or "others." This word – others – became the title of the film and a touchstone for the alienation and precarity that queer people experience in and after death. Group members used the film to showcase issues that their years of organizing had shown to be important. The scripts for funerals, and what transpires after, are rooted in the same gendered kinship system that many queers struggle with throughout their lives.

I opened this note with my hope to see more talk about queer death that bridges academic, activist, and community spaces. The work by the LGBTI Elders Group is one place where such talk is happening. These activists have spent enormous amounts of time and energy on all of the issues I have raised here: gender disparities in funeral rites and rituals, gendering of bodies in and after death, concerns raised by parents and families, and more. One of the most important things Queer Death Studies can do is listen to and learn from this work. It is wonderful that this journal is open access. I urge us collectively to remove not only the financial barriers, but also the barriers of disciplinary jargon that keep our ideas siloed in the academy. In this way we can support efforts to improve the quality of queer lives, deaths, and afterlives, now unfolding around the globe.

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NOTES ON LIVING AFTER DEATH: A QUEER PITCH FOR PHILOSOPHY

I.

None knew so well as I:
 For he who lives more lives than one
 More deaths than one must die.

Oscar Wilde, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, 1897: §III, l. 394-396.

What does Oscar Wilde talk about when he talks about queer death? When he was sentenced to hard labor in Reading Gaol – condemned not so much for having loved another man as for having dared to let it be known – Wilde returned his thoughts to a central theme of *Dorian Gray*. Queer life means living more lives than one, figured in the novel by the division between Dorian’s body and portrait, which mirrors that between his daylight and nighttime lives. (Already: nightlife as the *real* life of queer people, standing to daytime as writing does to speech, writing as testament of death: each morning an occasion for mourning, departure from one life the (re)turn to another.)⁶ Recall, as well, the moment just before Dorian’s “mad prayer” is answered (1891: 174), when Lord Henry awakens him, for the very first time, to his own beauty – and with it, to a new world of possibilities, a new life. Yet with this life’s dawning, the old life ends: “For he who lives more lives than one/More deaths than one must die”.

Call this less a scene of coming out than of instruction. (Reading Wittgenstein, Stanley Cavell calls philosophy “education for grownups” (1979: 125), answering to our found need for a new form of life. Call this a queer pitch for philosophy.) Nevertheless, it captures a truth of coming out. In coming into my queerness I leave my old future, my old life, for my new one. That this entanglement of life beginning and life ending entails I mourn myself, I am apt to learn only belatedly. But when and should I look, I will find that who I was I am no more. Carla Freccero writes of “queer spectrality” figuring the traumatic touch of our history “in the form of a haunting [...] whose ethical insistence is to ‘live to tell’” (2007: 195). Like Dorian I, too, am spectral. Like Wilde, living on death’s other shore, I too am called to live on to tell.

⁶ These connections of “morning” to “mourning” and to “testament” as “writing in view of one’s death” (1989: 106), I borrow from Stanley Cavell’s writing on Emerson in *This New Yet Unapproachable America*, writing which I take to register Cavell’s responsiveness to Derrida (CAVELL 1988; 1994).

II.

Death, as the end of Dasein, is Dasein's ownmost possibility – non-relational, certain and as such indefinite, not to be outstripped. Death is, as Dasein's end, in the Being of this entity towards its end.

Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 1927: 258; Eng. tr. 1962: 303.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger pictures the human as *Dasein* and *Dasein* as being-towards-death. Before death and its untraversable singularity, we find our absolute limit, and so our ownmost end, and so our ownmost possibility. The task of life is one's call to stand before this singular possibility of *our own* impossibility – which we can never experience, only anticipate – *resolutely*. “Here I stand, I can do no other”:⁷ to say as much sounds rather like coming out. It bears, however, an opposite relation to death and so to life. Coming out, I acknowledge not that I *will* die, but that I *have already* died – and so now live differently, anew. My resolution in coming out is not before the death I anticipate, but the death I have traversed. And so before a death that is mine but also not mine; in no way my ownmost possibility. Death not as an end, but as a beginning – for joy as for mourning, for work as for love. I should say: One who dies more deaths than one more lives than one must live.

III.

You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing.

Hélène Cixous, *The laugh of the Medusa*, 1975; Eng. tr. 1976: 885.

The history of queer death is of queer blame, of being blamed for our own deaths: for the pink triangle and for the AIDS crisis, as if genocide were our choice; for Matthew Shepard and the interminable murders of trans women, gay men, butch lesbians, and, in the end, whomsoever dares defy the tyranny of heteronormativity; for countless suicides, seen and unseen, known and resolutely unacknowledged. Blamed as if our choosing love were, in truth, choosing death.

When we come out, we are apt to be met by similar recriminations. What we may not be ready to hear in our words of coming out, those who

⁷ Among others, John Van Buren has noted the importance of this (apocryphal) formulation of Martin Luther's to the development of Heidegger's early philosophy (1993: 133).

love us may well hear, that this new life I announce entails that the old one has ended. The morning of one life entails the mourning of another. What, hearing this, they may well accuse us of is less suicide than murder: I stand before you, having put an end to the life of the one you love. As if it were not me who died so, with you, to live. As if in choosing to love, and in so doing choosing life, I chose death.

But again: that life is over, and here, now, I am.

In *No Future*, Lee Edelman (2004) takes this accusation with utmost seriousness as just what homosexuality means in our heterosexual world. In refusing reproductive futurity, we are for society its death drive. We figure the foreclosure of expectations and disruption of life's given anticipations, opposed to the child who *is* the future. As if every moment of not being-towards-children were a being-towards-death.

This, Edelman claims, we ought to embrace: accepting the mantle of the death drive is our (ownmost) task. Queerness means: *Achieve the negative!* As if our call – the destiny and message of our original becoming what we are, inscribed transcendentally as death, the not-to-be-bypassed – is less to stand resolutely *before* death, than *for* death. As if born-becoming-Medusa, deadly in our laughing.

IV.

The preconceived idea of crystalline purity can only be removed by turning our whole examination around. (One might say: the axis of reference of our examination must be rotated, but about the fixed point of our real need.)

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 1953: §108a.

“Where do we find ourselves?” (1844: 266) – so asks Emerson in mourning his son, after (and so before) his death. Finding one's life thus disrupted, one's straight path lost, turned by another's death, or in traversing one's own – finding oneself lost as if awoken in sunless woods: On finding ourselves so disoriented, we are apt to pull out our maps, expecting there to find ourselves and so our paths. But just this is what must needs averring.

To go scrounging among the maps we carry in our books and in our heads, Eve Sedgwick describes as “paranoid reading” (2003). Beginning and ending beneath long shadows cast by AIDS, Sedgwick draws our attention to the pervasive conviction that there awaits a hidden, total map wherein

all is found, a key by which all may be read, a transcendental and total system of significance. The hope which births belief: All things might be foreknown and so forestalled – foreseen because already drawn, foretold because already told. As if we might find already said all that’s gone unsaid, might yet account all our deaths uncounted.

Suppose we found such a map and so the account we seek: “what would we know then that we don’t already know?” (2003: 123). What would we know that we don’t already know about our deaths and how to mourn them? About the work of dying and living after death? In this sunless, dis-oriented place, what could a rightly-oriented map say? How would a map from ten-thousand feet say where, now, to place our feet?

What we need is what Wittgenstein found when the silence following the *Tractatus* proved insufficient: “the axis of [...] our examination must be rotated, but about the fixed point of our real need.” Not according to the orientation of a transcendental system of heteronormative preconception, as if *their* prejudice constituted crystalline clarity of just the way things are. You want to know what we mean when speak of “queer death”? No map already drawn will tell you. Rather, go, “*look and see*”: “To repeat: don’t think, but look!” (1953: §66).

V.

What do we talk about when we talk about queer blame, when it is said that for our deaths we are responsible? I spoke earlier of philosophy as education for adults, and of claiming this as a queer pitch for philosophy. What do such accusations teach us that we must unlearn so as to learn differently and anew? So as one another to teach?

To be blamed is to be called either to justice or to repentance, to suffer consequences – disdain, marginalization, violence, death – or to seek forgiveness. What we are taught when we are taught that for our deaths we are to blame is that we must either accept our abjection or seek forgiveness for the lives we chose; and that this forgiveness cannot be given, save we forgo our lives. The charge: for your one death another.

We are apt to respond with righteous indignation, to accuse our accuser and so to say it is *they* who need forgiveness. Or, recognizing that this will not be well-met, to respond by accepting the charge while yet refusing to pay: “For death I do stand; I will do no other.” But what if, instead, we turn our words about the fixed point of our need?

Do I need to be forgiven? Edelman is right – this I do not need and for this I should not ask. Does the world need my forgiveness? It is immaterial, a question for *their* investigations. (Am I saying they and us are not a we? Only sometimes: to know when, we must look and see.) What *I* need is not to be forgiven but to forgive: to forgive *their* accusations and so forgive *myself* their charge. Call this resolution before injustice, not to be outstripped.

But why should I forgive absent repentance? Can there be forgiveness without reconciliation? So claims Derrida: “forgiveness forgives only the unforgivable” (1999: 11; Eng. tr. 2001: 32). We forgive when justice cannot be attained, when the reconciliation of accounts we must forgo. And so I hope to go on, living less and less a ghost.

When we speak of queer death we speak of the unforgivable and so of what must be forgiven and so of our need to forgive. To forgive whom? The world? Ourselves? I take this last as our ownmost task: the work of mourning, and so of morn-*ing*, of living after living death. Call this learning to forgive queer death an education for queer life. Call it dying to live on and live to tell.

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