FANTASTIKA JOURNAL

FANTASTIKA

EDITOR'S NOTE

"Fantastika" - a term appropriated from a range of Slavonic languages by John Clute – embraces the genres of Fantasy, Science Fiction, and Horror, but can also include Alternate History, Gothic, Steampunk, Young Adult Dystopic Fiction, or any other radically imaginative narrative space. The goal of *Fantastika Journal* and its annual conference is to bring together academics and independent researchers who share an interest in this diverse range of fields with the aim of opening up new dialogues, productive controversies and collaborations. We invite articles examining all mediums and disciplines which concern the Fantastika genres.

This special issue of *Fantastika Journal*, *Queering Fantastika,* was inspired by our first digital symposium, LGBTQIA+ Fantastika Graphics, which considered representations of the LGBTQIA+ community, relationships, and full spectrum of identities in a wide range of graphic forms. Held in October 2021, the symposium took the form of pre-recorded podcasts with the conference itself serving as a series of round table discussions via videochat and Discord. The multimedia format was our attempt to re-envision academic discussion. Due to Covid-19, academia had to adapt the traditional in-person conference format to fit the regulations of lockdown and quarantine. We saw many shift to a digital conference by trying to recreate the traditional (physical) conference via video chat. It did not work. Watching people on screen deliver mini-lecturers for a full day or longer is exhausting and, frankly, a bit boring. Abiding by the host's time zone also does a discourtesy to those who wish to take part internationally. Media is changing, technology is changing, and the way we tell stories and communicate with each other is also changing. At *Fantastika*, we wanted to embrace the advantages of the digital age – with all the bells and whistles that come with it. We hoped that podcasts would allow us to break out of the academic space and reach an audience made up by fans and consumers of the work under discussion. We were blown away when one of the podcasts was retweeted by the original author of one of the texts, expressing gratitude that the academic discussing their work saw and understood their purpose in communicating various LGBTIQIA+ identities and anxieties. That has been the goal of *Fantastika* since its inception in 2016, to create an inclusive and welcoming space which invites dialogues and discussions from anyone interested in the source material. It was interesting, challenging, and perhaps a bit cruel, to see how academics would discuss graphic mediums through verbal discourse (without the use of PowerPoint presentations). But the combination also led to considerations of accessibility and inclusivity, which, we think, should have been part of the conversation about conference accessibility before Covid -19 restrictions brought them to the forefront. Digital media can be a levelling field, not only for those with disabilities, but also for those who need to consider location access (international travel), economic costs, carbon footprint, and are carers or have other forms of responsibilities. Being able to attend a conference is a privilege; while the enthusiastic repertoire and collegiality of in-person conferences can not be easily replaced, there are a host of other accessibility issues to consider with digital mediums. We hope that the 'good' balanced out the 'bad' for our digital symposium. We certainly found it to be a lively event, one that generated lots of conversation and ended too quickly.

This *Queering Fantastika* special issue expands outside the graphic medium to all forms of Fantastika narratives. It has been a long process to get to the publication stage, two-full years after the symposium. What we discovered through the process is that there are simply not enough LGBTQIA+ scholars, especially those who are simultaneously knowledgeable about the Fantastika fields. We also appreciate how conscientious the scholars working in this area are about the topic. We often use 'LGBTQIA+' as a catch-all phrase, trying to capture all variations of identity in order to ensure that no one is left out. But that does not mean that all identities can speak for one another; we quickly found that an academic bio might read "LGBTQIA+" but finding one who can speak directly to the A or I or T was another matter. We want to thank our peer reviewers for their diligence and conscientiousness with their reports. We also want to thank anyone who took the time to offer suggestions and point us in the direction of another scholar, like a treasure hunt or game of 'hot-

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cold' as we got closer to our goal of finding the perfect peer reviewer for each piece. Thank you for adding to our community.

In addition to the general challenges of trying to publish a peer-reviewed journal during pandemic chaos, within that two-year process, our editing board also went through a number of changes, and the team we started with is a different one from where we are today. The journal itself has negotiated its own series of identity crises, not at the gender and sexuality level, but as an open-access journal that is run entirely out of pocket (and with the generous support of donors; thank you!) and by a team of volunteers who are/were – for the most part – out of academia themselves (or perhaps hovering on the sidelines). After seven years of attempting to gain affiliation, I can confidently state that it is IMPOSSIBLE to get a toe-hold into achieving a permanent position as a university lecturer. Myself and my Co-Head-Editor, Kerry Dodd, continue running the journal without any university affiliation and while juggling other responsibilities (a job, a family), and I am eternally grateful to both Kerry and our reviews editor, Ruth, for keeping us afloat while I moved across the Atlantic for the third time in ten years. I am not entirely sure what the future of *Fantastika* will be. But I want to thank everyone who has been part of our story: for helping us forge our identity as an open and welcoming community and for supporting us as we try to figure out who we are and who we want to be. A thousand thank-yous.

Chuckie
Dr. Charul Palmer-Patel, she/her
Co-Head-Editor, *Fantastika Journal*

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Bridging the fields of Science Fiction (SF), utopian studies, queer/trans theory, and media studies, this article offers a conceptualisation of a subgenre of SF – Trans-SF – through two recent examples of trans-authored and trans-centred SF cinema/television – the Netflix series *Sense8* (2015-2018) and an independent omnibus film *Transfinite* (2019). Trans-SF visually and structurally embodies trans aesthetic through what the author terms border-hacking elements, which include cinematic techniques, narrative choices, and subversion of genre expectations. The author argues that Science Fiction has the potential to not only represent various gender identities and sexual orientations but embody queerness and transness as theorised by queer/trans scholars — as a radical refusal of hegemonic binary thought and oppressive hetero-patriarchal systems in favour of other forms of being and relating to one other.

The graphic novel works by Kay O'Neill (they/them) present a diverse range of ethnicities and hybridities through the anthropomorphised animal and fantastical races that populate their fictional worlds. Additionally, they depict a range of physical abilities, identities, and orientations across their works. O'Neill's whimsical tales deal with brokenness, grief, loss, and finding one's place and purpose in and through the support of queer communities. Throughout their series, O'Neill presents worlds where individuals are not empowered through violence or power, but by their strength of character, kindness, ability to accept themselves, and the encouragement and acceptance of others. Their series repeatedly shows how inclusive communities can be possible through their presentation of deaf, genderqueer, homosexual, and disabled individuals all existing in provincial and urban Fantasy spaces. These spaces embrace rather than ostracise, presenting potentialities: worlds with loss and pain, but also support and healing. Applying José Esteban Muñoz's definition of a queer utopia, this article argues that O'Neill's graphic novels *Princess Princess Ever After* (2016, *PPEA*), *The Tea Dragon Society* trilogy (2017-2021, *TDS*), and *Aquicorn Cove* (2018, *AC*) present different ways queer community spaces are utopias-in-progress that shape individuals' ability to recover, accept themselves, and find purpose, presenting "blueprints of a world not quite here" to inspire readers and present a "realm of educated hope" (Muñoz 97; 3).

By Emma French

While the queering of Fantasy is not a recent project, the convergence of social justice discourse with critical analysis within various fandom spaces in the twenty-first century has encouraged a renewed focus on LGBTQIA+ representation amongst writers, readers, and fans. The comic book series *DIE* (2019-2021) by Kieron Gillen, Stephanie Hans, and Clayton Cowles is a queer negotiation of Fantasy genre culture, represented here through the microcosm of a tabletop roleplaying game (TTRPG). Through the journey of the genderfluid protagonist Ash, Gillen implies that queer voices are one means of 'saving' the Fantasy genre - however, the queer subject must first understand and celebrate their own authority.

This article examines *DIE*'s use of the TTRPG to encapsulate a snapshot of contemporary Fantasy genre culture, before exploring how and why the queer subject is treated as newly empowered within this imaginative ecosystem. Gillen utilises TTRPGs' capacity as a metatext to comment on Fantasy's history, traditions, and contemporary climate, and positions Die itself as a 'grimdark' setting, treating this subgenre as the epitome of the trends of hypermasculinity within Fantasy's canon. The comics then explore Ash's struggle against the self-imposed limitations that result from existing as boundlessly queer within a subculture working to limit them. It is only through Ash's disruptive manipulation of desire, and acceptance of themselves, that they can progress in *DIE*'s final quest, take on the mantle of hero and author, and save the world that stands for Fantasy itself. TTRPGs are therefore shown to not simply enshrine Fantasy's legacy, rather they enable players to also respond to it transformatively. Alongside the context of Ash's queer subjectivity, *DIE* implies that a generative future of Fantasy lies with these newly empowered creators, who grapple with the genre's conservative traditions and remake them anew.

By Pedro Lauria

Suburban fantastic cinema is a subgenre that was originated in the 1980s and is marked by male, heterosexual and white bodies as protagonists. Their narratives often involve young people overcoming disruptions caused by exogenous elements while telling coming-of-age narratives associated with the hero's journey. Due to the nature of these hegemonic bodies in the protagonism of this subgenre, suburban fantastic cinema has an inherently reactionary syntax – where the elimination or assimilation of what is different is necessary for the re-establishment of the status quo of the suburban middle class. With the return of the subgenre

in the 2010s, new works began to bring new bodies into the spotlight of these narratives – such as, for example, that of women, blacks, Latinos, and members of the LGBTQIA+ community. In this present article, I investigate how these new heroines affect the syntax of suburban fantastic cinema and bring new potentials and horizons to the subgenre. For this, I will analyse the *Fear Street* trilogy, which brings a black and lesbian woman to the forefront of the narrative. Then, I will discuss what are the peculiarities and new possibilities brought by these films and how this compares with classics of suburban fantastic cinema starring white men.

"WEYRBRED IS BEST FOR GREENS": CONTAINMENT AND WORLD-BUILDING IN ANNE MCCAFFREY'S *DRAGONRIDERS OF PERN*   69
By Nathaniel Harrington

This article considers the treatment of queerness and especially male homosexuality in Anne McCaffrey's *Dragonriders of Pern* series (1967-2012) in order to explore the gaps between its explicit statements and its actual portrayals of queerness and queer characters. The imaginative possibilities opened by Science Fiction allow *Pern* to portray spaces where queer sexualities and desires are not only accepted but expected, and these spaces – and, by extension, queerness – are consistently centred within the series' narrative. At the same time, however, the series constantly undermines the utopian elements of its world-building with significant intra- and extratextual homophobia. The result is a tension between the series' obvious homophobia and its consistent foregrounding of male homosexuality, in particular.

Through a detailed examination of the ways in which homophobia structures *Pern*'s world-building, focusing on *Dragonquest* (1971) and *Red Star Rising/Dragonseye* (1996/1997), this article argues, first, that several of Pern's core world-building elements serve as containment strategies for queerness, and, second, that these containment strategies ultimately fail, instead drawing attention to the centrality of queerness to *Pern*'s world. I argue that this failure illustrates the ways in which world-building is simultaneously shaped and limited by the social context in which authors are writing and also has the potential to move beyond that context in unexpected ways, including ways authors might consciously reject, and that close attention to failures of this kind may reveal unexpected, if circumscribed and limited, elements of radical possibility even within conservative or reactionary texts.

of the ontological instability of sex, a queer reading of these texts demonstrates the multitude of ways in which Fantasy can be a highly effective medium of exploring queer experience, deconstructing gender, and critiquing fixed notions of embodiment.

In this article, we examine DC's *The Snagglepuss Chronicles* (2017-2018), a six-issue comic written by Mark Russell and illustrated by Mike Feehan. The comic rewrites the initially coded queerness of animated cartoon character Snagglepuss (of *Yogi Bear Show* fame) and transforms him into a famous gay playwright who is blacklisted during the McCarthy era and who also channels United States playwright Tennessee Williams. In Russell and Feehan's adaptation, whose storyline develops between 1953 and 1959, humans and anthropomorphic animals live side by side during the Lavender Scare, a dark time in American history when alliances are fragile, conformity is brutally preserved, and difference is swiftly punished. In this context, Snagglepuss is recovered as a canonical queer coded character with added flamboyance, swagger, and a penchant for spending time at a gay bar evocatively named the Stonewall.

We ask what the recuperation and rewriting as a "sexy gay daddy" (as *The Advocate* described him) of both Snagglepuss and Tennessee Williams contributes to the cultural memory of the gay community persecuted during the Lavender Scare. We inquire how the cultural hierarchies at play in the United States as depicted in the comic can help readers understand the potential of popular culture (more specifically, animation) to foster political subversion, dissent, and create a shelter for gay creators persecuted during the 1950s and after. We also consider how DC's Snagglepuss's strong masculinity is visually and verbally constructed in the comic – against the softer masculinities of the initial two characters incorporated in him – and whether it acts as a corrective of these alternative masculinities as it is proposed as a site of resistance and political dissent.

Science Fiction (SF) cinema abounds with depictions of the posthuman. While the term posthuman encompasses a wide array of cyborgs, Artificial Intelligence and androids, the posthuman of SF cinema has largely been portrayed as the female-coded gynoid. In posthuman theory, both Donna Haraway and Rosi Braidotti describe the posthuman disrupts humanistic hierarchies, due to its liminal existence between human and machine. As a result, the posthuman

offers a liberatory potential for marginalised groups. Despite this, the filmic treatment of the posthuman often fails to capture this potential, instead portraying the posthuman in ways which uphold racism and misogyny, through objectification and sexualisation. However, this stereotypical portrayal has been challenged in recent years. Indeed, as cultural attitudes have grown increasingly distasteful of such blatant Othering, particularly over the last decade, recent trends in SF cinema have seen an attempt to refrain from such practices. In theory, this allows for portrayals of the posthuman which remain true to its theoretical potential. Indeed, both Spike Jonze's *Her* (2013) and Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* (2014) feature portrayals of female-coded posthumans which challenge the norm of posthuman objectification, by fundamentally altering the expected subject/object relationship of visual narratives. However, due to the conventions of genre fiction, these more recent portrayals remain limited by the conventions of both genre and medium. Indeed, while evoking the tropes of objectification and sexualisation, albeit in an attempt to subvert them, the evocation of these tropes appears to reimpose the restrictive language of psychoanalysis. I incorporate a theoretical framework of posthuman theory from Donna Haraway and Rosi Braidotti, as well as the schizoanalytic theory of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Doing so, I examine to what degree *Her* and *Ex Machina* can accurately portray the liberatory potential of the posthuman while also engaging the tropes of filmic Othering.

NON-FICTION REVIEWS

SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLES

TRANSING SCIENCE FICTION: BORDER-HACKING AND QUEER UTOPIAS OF *SENSE8* AND *TRANSFINITE*

ksenia fir

To write Science Fiction (SF) – to imagine other worlds and futures – is always a political act. As feminist SF scholarship has demonstrated, the genre's unique ability to both perpetuate the *status quo* by extrapolating upon contemporary inequalities and offer liberatory potentialities that act as powerful tools of resistance (Imarisha 3-4; Vint 10-12). Queer SF scholars have also underscored the genre's capacity to make the familiar strange, including its visions of other worlds that question and refuse normatively gendered bodies and nuclear family structures, that makes the genre primed for queer and trans readings (Keegan 3; Lothian 15-16). In its orientation toward futurities, SF resonates with the ways queerness has been conceptualised by queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz as a way to "dream and enact […] other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds" (1). Media theorist Cáel M. Keegan draws an explicit connection between SF and transness, arguing that "[l]ike science fiction, trans* is about how what could happen haunts the present, asking us to consider where elements in reality might lead if permitted to reach" (3). SF, thus, has the potential to not only represent various gender identities and sexual orientations but *embody* queerness and transness as theorised by queer and trans scholars — as a radical refusal of hegemonic binary thought and oppressive hetero-patriarchal systems in favour of other forms of being and relating to one other.

Bridging the fields of Science Fiction, utopian studies, queer theory, trans theory, and media studies, this article offers a conceptualisation of a subgenre of SF – *Trans-SF* – through two recent examples of trans-authored and trans-centred SF cinema/television – the Netflix series *Sense8* (2015-2018) and an independent omnibus film *Transfinite* (2019). Trans-SF goes beyond being *about* queerness and transness, or even *by* queer and trans creators – though these elements are certainly important to both examples. Instead, it visually and structurally embodies trans aesthetics, affectively evoking what Keegan refers to as "the *feel* of transition" (114; original emphasis) and what Muñoz, drawing on Ernst Bloch, identifies as queer "utopian impulse": a "doing in and for the future" (26). In both *Sense8* and *Transfinite*, such affect is achieved through what I term *border-hacking* elements, which include cinematic techniques, narrative choices, and subversion of generic (used herein to mean 'of the genre') expectations.

By connecting 'Trans' and 'SF' with a hyphen, I am building an assemblage – which, as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari conceptualise in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), "in its multiplicity, necessarily acts on semiotic flows, material flows, and social flows simultaneously," refusing the borders between the material 'reality' and 'representation,' as well as resisting the static formations of a unity (22-23). Instead, the focus is shifted toward the relationality of the elements – the spaces and formations in-between and the unlimited potentialities they may offer. In their introduction to "Trans-," a special issue of *Women's Studies Quarterly* (2008), Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore offer the hyphen as one that "marks the difference between the implied nominalism of 'trans' and the explicit relationality of 'trans-,' which remains open-ended and resists premature foreclosure by attachment to any single suffix," inviting "categorical crossings, leakages, and slips of all sorts" (11). These categorical "leakages" and intentional border crossings are crucial to Trans-SF.

Queer theorist Jasbir Puar utilises Deleuze and Guattari's assemblage to augment the notion of intersectionality, central to feminist, critical queer theory, and critical race studies scholarship (Eng et al. 1; Chen and cárdenas 473). Introduced in the 1980s by legal theory scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw to describe the intersection of racist and sexist oppression experienced by Black women, the term intersectionality has since been expanded to include "the mutually co-constitutive forces of race, class, sex, gender, and nation" (Puar, "I Would Rather" 49-50). Puar, however, points out the limitations of the intersectional model in its fixed framework, proposing to expand it with an assemblage model that "account[s] for time and transition" (cárdenas 75). Puar's intervention offers to rethink the intersectional approach to include spacio-temporal orientation as inseparable from understanding one's positionality. By framing Trans-SF as an assemblage, I aim to point toward the multiplicity of processes involved in the creation, distribution, and reception of a Trans-SF work, – which should not be seen as static or limited to a particular understanding of what constitutes 'transness' or 'SF' as categories, but rather as a multitude of shifting formations and not-yet-imagined possibilities – while foregrounding the materiality of any such work and its entanglement with the capitalist, hetero-patriarchal, and other oppressive structures under which it exists.

The two cinematic works discussed in this article differ greatly in their production scale, visual and structural approach, and subject matter, signalling toward the multitude of forms Trans-SF can take. *Sense8*, a big-budget Hollywood series created by the Wachowski sisters with J. Michael Straczynski, tells the story of eight people from around the world who become connected to each other through a psycho-physical bond, forming a 'cluster' of 'sensates.' In a rather conventional SF blockbuster fashion, the main plot revolves around the sensates being hunted by a secret organisation that wants to use their abilities for its own nefarious agenda. The sensates' power, however, is inherently queer in its affect as they can inhabit each other's bodies, share their physical sensations and memories, and quite literally see the world through each other's eyes. In turn, *Transfinite,* directed by an indie filmmaker Neelu Bhuman, is a collection of seven independent stories created through a unique form of collaboration between several queer artists of colour. The segments do not share an overarching plot. Instead, they are woven through Bhuman's visual aesthetics, which include animation elements mixed with live action, and their overarching premise where each collaborator was asked for their story to explore a political idea and for the main characters – all of

whom are queer and trans people of colour – to possess some form of superpower and not to die. Queer survival, pleasures, and kinships, thus, are central to both *Sense8* and *Transfinite*'s narratives as Trans-SF works orientated toward trans futurities.

Generic Transgressions

Science Fiction is notoriously hard to define. Discussing the history of American SF literature, Gary K. Wolfe argues that it "persistently failed to cohere as a genre" and began to "disassemble itself" as soon as it was shaped by the publishing industry into an identifiable category (21-22). In the foundational text in SF film studies, *Screening Space* (1980), Vivian Sobchack notes that, while lacking stable iconography, SF is often described as having a specific "look" or "feel" that is recognisable to the audiences when they encounter it (87). As mass media products, SF films are particularly affected by the audiences' expectations, built on prior experiences of the genre (which typically mean big-budget Hollywood blockbusters). SF film scholars often identify the genre as a "cinema of attractions," emphasising the importance of special effects and the "spectacle" on its affective impact on the viewers (Bould 61). Identifying cinematic SF with spectacle, however, becomes an issue when discussing indie, low-budget, and non-Hollywood productions, where special effects might not be an attainable or desired aesthetic (Feeley and Wells xii).

Historically, the debates around SF's denotation were focused on whether the definitive element of the genre is the "science-focused extrapolations" or "politically engaged visions of the future" (Vint 8). An influential definition of SF from the latter perspective – as literature "of cognitive estrangement" – was provided by Science Fiction and utopian studies theorist Darko Suvin in the 1970s (15). For Suvin, what is central to SF is its transformative potential, where radical imaginaries are "tethered to a practical possibility in the material world" (Vint 10). Furthermore, postcolonial approaches to SF studies problematise the connection of the genre to 'science and technology,' questioning the hegemonic understanding of what constitutes either outside of the Global North and the supposed 'universality' of the 'scientific language' – a colonial humanist notion that has been and continues to be used to erase the Global South and Indigenous knowledge and practices (Vint 72; Feeley and Wells xviii). Similarly, Queer SF challenges us to expand the hegemonic understanding of what can 'qualify' as SF. For example, Alexis Lothian identifies Queer SF cinema through temporality, arguing that its "futuristic orientation is marked not by technology but by an alternative mediation and reproduction of political and social life" (176). To refuse to rely on Western notions of science and technology as markers of the future and transformative change is an ontological shift that is embraced by Trans-SF.

SF's political power to imagine and potentially inspire social change necessarily connects it to utopian studies. In fact, Suvin identifies Utopia as a "sociopolitical subgenre" of SF (76). In addition, Wolfe points out SF's propensity to "evaporate," both in the sense of instability of its generic borders and its ability to influence other cultural forms and to have a material affect on the 'real' world (23, 50-51). "Science fiction is better conceptualized as a tendency," writes Vint, drawing on Wolfe (6). In explicitly social justice-oriented SF – what Walidah Imarisha terms Visionary Fiction

(3-4) – this 'tendency' can be seen as a form of utopian *potentiality*: "a certain mode on nonbeing that is eminent, a thing that is present but not actually existing in the present tense" (Muñoz 9). Although Muñoz, in his theorisation of queer utopias, does not mention SF, his understanding of utopia as an act of *doing* toward different, more just worlds – in other words, as a *praxis* – echoes the conceptualisations of SF as a genre uniquely fit to do just that. Lothian, in turn, identifies Queer SF as "a form of utopian writing that makes the queer future imaginable" (16). Following queer and trans SF scholars, I see Trans-SF as necessarily connected to the queer utopian thought – not in the sense that it prescribes blueprints of 'ideal' societies but as an act of *doing* toward trans futurities.

Trans studies can offer critical additions to the theorising of SF. In her influential essay, "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttransexual Manifesto" (1987), Sandy Stone considers gender as a genre, offering to see trans as "a set of embodied texts whose potential for productive disruption of structured sexualities and spectra of desire has yet to be explored" (164). Building on her work, Keegan proposes to reverse the order and think "about how genre is like gender" (Bailey et al. 79). Genres are gendered texts, but their gender expectations can be subverted and refused – can be *transed*. Drawing on queer theory's notion of 'queer' as a verb, Stryker, Currah, and Moore propose "transing" as a type of "practice that assembles gender into contingent structures of association with other attributes of bodily being, and that allows for their reassembly," offering a "pathway toward liberation" (13). To *trans* a gender/genre is also to *hack* it (and vice versa): to make the binaries short-circuit, revealing the endless possibilities between the zero and one.

The question of gender/genre also brings up the issue of 'passing.' For queer, trans, and GNC (gender non-conforming) folks, especially trans people of colour, passing is always associated with safety and survival. Passing is a performative, subjective process, the outcome of which depends on the complex set of variables, most critically on 'the eye of the beholder.' As media and trans studies scholar micha cárdenas argues, "[p]assing involves both the modulation of visibility by the person who is passing and the reception of that image by the viewer, who makes a decision about whether or not a person fits into a particular category" (78). As material products, generic works that do not pass as 'belonging' to their announced generic category are always at risk of not getting published and distributed, not reaching the intended audiences, and failing to enter the cultural archive. Furthermore, passing is a continuously negotiated process, not an atemporal event. Works that do pass at one point (such as, for example, in promotional materials) may stop doing so during another (the final work or a specific plotline), leading to confusion and even anger from certain audience members who are expecting a particular form of pleasure from it, based on the presumed generic conventions. To abruptly stop passing is a potentially life-threatening situation for many queer/trans people, where the queerphobic anger over being 'misled' often leads to violence. In terms of media, certain SF fans – most typically cis-straight white men who may feel possessive toward the genre and what, in their view, it is 'supposed to' represent – might express a related reactionary impulse, such as accusing the work of not being 'real SF' or even harassing those involved in the production for 'ruining' the film or franchise (commonly due to diversified casting and increased representation of the minoritised communities). Underscoring the materiality of cultural products, including Trans-SF, helps us see such reactions to 'failure to pass' as existing on the same

spectrum of reactionary gatekeeping, though each individual situation may differ drastically in scope and consequences.

The two Trans-SF works I discuss occupy a contested space, being both legible and illegible as SF, which has material consequences for their production and distribution. Trans-SF cinematic aesthetics, such as temporal shifts and generic ruptures, often prevented these works from fully passing as SF, making them 'unsellable' to wide audiences. The director of *Transfinite*, Neelu Bhuman, shared with me in an interview that "it has been a massive challenge to 'sell' the film for distribution, even to LGBTQ+ venues […] Ninety-nine per cent of the distributors said they don't know where to place this film and so wouldn't know who the audience would be." *Transfinite* was eventually acquired for international distribution by trans-owned and queer-operated Mattioli Productions. Meanwhile, while *Sense8* was able to use the fame of the Wachowskis sisters as established SF directors to its advantage to get greenlit and funded, the series' Trans-SF aesthetic elements, in particular its queer temporality, disrupted the expectations of the audiences used to certain SF temporal rhythms, leading to common complaints about the series as "slow and confusing" (Quigley 1). The series was consequently cancelled on a cliffhanger after two seasons and resurrected for a final movie-length episode after a worldwide fan campaign. "You have to deal with the reality that you are a part of a smaller group, a smaller subculture, and, yes, your story is just as valid and your story matters, but it doesn't produce revenue in the same way that a large audience produces revenue," commented Lana Wachowski (Keegan 132). Generic passing centres the [assumed cis] observer and their pleasures, as well as the market forces that dictate generic definitions, and is in opposition to Trans-SF's utopian orientation.

In *Poetic Operations* (2021), cárdenas offers the concept of "shifting" as an alternative to passing (78). Unlike passing, shifting gives agency to the trans/GNC person rather than the observer preoccupied with gendering/categorising them. Shifting, cárdenas posits, "invites one to imagine gender beyond binaries, as an infinite field of expressive texture. In place of rigid categories, the ability to modulate gender at will points to a future in which gender can be a multidimensional, multi-spectral field of play" (73). Trans-SF works like *Sense8* and *Transfinite* 'shift' to survive under a capitalist heteronormative system and reach the intended audiences without succumbing to the market demands to fit into a generic mould. They utilise SF's malleability and offer radical queer-utopian potentialities and glimpses of other futures, even as they run into the restrictive realities of the 'here and now.' *Sense8*, for example, uses the strategy of both hailing queer audiences through its narrative choices and aesthetics while continuing to appeal to mainstream audiences through more 'palpable' plotlines and recognisable generic protagonists, such as Will-the-cop. A low-budget production, *Transfinite*, in turn, prioritises the 'niche' audiences through distribution strategies of screening at queer festivals and working with queer distribution companies. Both, furthermore, rely on the community's support to be completed and distributed, such as *Sense8*'s fan campaign and *Transfinite*'s financial support from queer and trans organisations. As is discussed in the latter section, some of these strategies, however, have limitations and can even be in direct opposition to the texts' transformative potential. As material objects under global capitalism, Trans-SF works cannot escape this tension, remaining utopian both because of their inability to be fully

realised in the 'here and now' and their unwavering persistence to try.

Border Hacking of *Sense8* and *Transfinite*

"'Hackers Unite to Destroy Borders' is a call or a mantra for all who are working to disrupt oppressive dominant methods of world-making."
— Neelu Bhuman, personal interview, May 2021.

Figure 1: Utopian praxis of *Transfinite*'s "Bahari." Screenshot by the author.

The border-hacking elements of *Sense8* and *Transfinite* include hacking of the generic conventions and structures through generic jumps and animation ruptures, respectively; temporal shifts that refuse "straight time" create queer-utopian "ecstatic time" (Halberstam, "Queer Temporality" 5; Muñoz 32); and narratives of geo-bodily border crossings that refuse the racialised state control over trans people's embodiment and movement. It is important to note that the border-hacking techniques discussed should not be seen as fully descriptive of Trans-SF, nor should their absence be counted as a sign that a cinematic work is not Trans-SF; rather, they serve as examples of the many ways the genre can manifest itself. In other words, my focus is not on the exact parameters that could define Trans-SF aesthetics but rather on what it can *do*, meaning its affect and power to embody queer utopian potentiality.

Hacking, in the case of this article, is used to reference both narratives which feature trans characters who hack government structures to secure needed documents and ensure the safety of trans, undocumented, and otherwise minoritised people, as well as to signal toward the utopian futurities glimpsed in these stories – ones where queer and trans liberation does not stop at a checkpoint. The word hacking evokes an association with a transgressive and often political activity ('hacktivism'), which signals the agency and intentionality behind the hacker's actions. Halberstam suggests that, "[q]ueer subjects constantly recode and, within limits, rebuild the worlds they enter.

Since the world as we know it was not designed for queer subjects, then queer subjects have to hack straight narratives and insert their own algorithms for time, space, life, and desire" ("Queer Gaming" 187). Trans-SF aesthetics hack the structure and visual language of generic mainstream cinema, transing it and writing queer and trans lives, pleasures, and kinships into the future(s).

As demonstrated in the previous section, SF, as a whole, is a malleable genre. Wolfe argues that it has a unique ability to "colonize" other genres, using its own tropes "as instrumentalities for moving the narrative into a different mode altogether" (35). Reframing Wolfe's argument, one could see the process as transing other genres, refusing the borders between them and creating assemblages – a sum greater than its parts. That is to say that there is always *something trans* – and queer – about SF. Trans-SF, however, takes things further, intentionally playing with other genres and forms in a promiscuous manner as a commentary on genre/gender. Thus, Trans-SF can embody the radical trans politics of disrupting "spatio-temporal orders that determine and regulate the borders of knowledge, life/death, embodiment, movement, and social value established to secure the heteropatriarchal white settler state, liberal civil society, and the territories of the national body" (Chen and cárdenas 472). Furthermore, through the lens of cárdenas's concept of shifting, Trans-SF transcends binaries and borders, shifting in and out of recognisable genres/genders to offer a kaleidoscope of new generic formations.

In his book on the Wachowski's *oeuvre*, Keegan argues that *Sense8* intentionally positions its characters in predictable, racialised and gendered generic bubbles in order to burst them whenever the characters utilise their sensate powers, or, as I would put it, whenever Trans-SF takes over (116). For example, sensate Lito, a gay Mexican actor, exists in the generic world of a Telenovela; Korean sensate Sun is in a Martial Arts story; trans sensate from San Francisco, Nomi, occupies a Hacker Thriller – and so on (116). When the characters are 'reborn' at the beginning of the series, becoming a 'cluster,' they gain the ability to visit one another by either sharing another sensate's body (and consequently gaining access to their feelings, memories, and knowledge) or by something akin to an astral projection that allows the sensates to interact in one space, jumping from the location of one to another, essentially participating in an 'unauthorised,' unrestricted and unpoliced form of immigration. The sensates' newfound abilities thus subtextually hack geo-bodily and generic borders which are subverted by the sudden jumps from one location/body to another. Jumping into variously gendered bodies transes the sensates as well as their genres; or, as Genevieve Newman argues, the "genre and gender become indistinct, leaving only the body as bearer of excess" (Bailey et al. 78). Crucially, temporal rhythms change depending on the generic conventions (the slow pace of a Melodrama may suddenly be replaced by an Action sequence), causing disorientation in the viewers to mirror the characters' and thus allowing the viewers to affectively experience the transition rather than simply observe it.

Sense8's use of temporal subversions – specifically, queer and trans cinematic temporality and utopian ecstatic time – is an important aspect of the series' Trans-SF aesthetics and its radical potential as a queer utopian work. Conceptualised by Halberstam, queer time is in opposition to straight time, the latter focused on heterosexual reproduction and linear movement from the past

to the future, which maintains the *status quo* of capitalist production, heteronormativity, and state power ("Queer Temporality" 5). Queer time, instead, "lingers or refuses, flashing up in moments of ephemeral utopia or doubling back to reanimate the pleasurable and/or painful past" (Lothian 3). Similarly, Muñoz offers the concept of ecstatic time – which is queer utopian – as one that "is signaled at the moment one feels ecstasy, announced perhaps in a scream or grunt of pleasure, and more importantly during moments of contemplation when one looks back at a scene from one's past, present, or future" (32). Such refusal of the temporal linearity and one-directionality toward a prescribed vision of the future is further echoed in Chen and cárdenas's theorisation of trans temporality as multidirectional and sometimes disjunctive (473-475). In cinema, the multidimensionality and multidirectionality of queer and trans times can be represented visually through techniques of queer cinematic temporality, such as that of intentional slowness that, as film scholars Karl Schoonover and Rosalind Galt explain, "wastes [the viewers'] time, asking us to spend time in visibly unproductive ways, outside efficient narrative economies of production and reproduction" (261, 277). *Sense8* utilises cinematic devices of slow-motion, commonly employed in its prolonged scenes of sexual encounters, dancing, and other seemingly 'unproductive' acts. Furthermore, sensates' encounters frequently evoke queer time through their 'reanimation' and sharing of past experiences, which allow a sensate (and the audience) to affectively re-live and re-feel another's past: such as, for example, when Nomi shares with Lito a queerphobic assault committed against her in her childhood ("Death Doesn't Let You Say Goodbye"), or when the sensates, who have all been born simultaneously, remember and re-experience their own and each other's physical birth ("What Is Human?"). Furthermore, one of the series' defining characteristics is its mind-orgy scenes, in which sensates engage in group pleasure by both utilising their powers to interact with each other's bodies (without needing to share a physical space). Analysing their visual language, Keegan argues that its slow-motion cinematography envelops the viewers in an ecstatic time (111). The mind-orgy scenes hack generic borders, removing cluster members from familiar generic bubbles and their established temporal rhythms and into a queer space-time, such as when a macho gym workout of Will, a straight male detective sensate, suddenly morphs into a queer pool/bedroom sex scene with Nomi, Lito, and Wolfgang ("Demons").

In turn, *Transfinite* creates cohesion through the overall aesthetics and the narrative foci, each story focused on queer and trans kinship and empowerment through SF elements. Each of the segments includes stop-motion animation ruptures, which introduce a fantastical interference into the characters' lives, embodying a queer/trans utopian potentiality. The animated elements include a physical transformation into another being ("Najma"), another world where lovers can meet without needing to cross physical borders ("Bahari"), or a futurity that provides rights and freedoms to marginalised communities ("Viva"). I further posit that the stop-motion animation used in the film cinematically represents queer and trans temporality and ecstatic time through its disjunctive movements, utopian imaginaries, and contemplative reflection on one's "past, present, or future" through estrangement from the 'reality' of the live-action. Examining animation as a queer cinematic form, Halberstam points out its ability to let the audience "enter into other worlds and other formulations of this world" (*Queer Art of Failure* 181). In *Transfinite*, such animated alternative formulations of the characters' worlds are inseparable from the film's utopian visions of trans and

queer liberation, making this cinematic choice an example of a Trans-SF aesthetic. Halberstam points out stop-motion's explicit disjunctiveness and its reliance on "the relations between stillness and motion, cuts and takes, action and passivity" (*Queer Art of Failure* 178). Unlike the classical Hollywood cinematic approach that aims to present itself as a seamless, sutureless progression of images (recalling Halberstam's straight time in its 'productive' linear movement), stop-motion animation makes explicit the pauses, transitions, and disjunctions between frames, embodying trans temporality. In *Transfinite*, stop-motion animation sequences hack the borders of the live-action narratives, disrupting its temporalities and transporting the viewers into a world made otherwise – a utopian vision of trans of colour futurities offered by the author of each segment.

Finally, both *Sense8* and *Transfinite* incorporate narratives of border-hacking through the inclusion of trans hacktivist characters who aim to ensure trans safety and resist racialised, queerphobic, and gendered violence perpetuated by capitalist forces and state agents, such as the police and border control. In *Sense8*, San Franciscan trans protagonist Nomi is a former hacktivist whose narrative role is to free herself and others from the state's surveillant gaze. Nomi can 'hack' the borders of states and corporations by creating fake documentation and often uses her skills to save the cluster by allowing them to gain access to otherwise restricted places. In the past, Nomi has been arrested for creating fake IDs for trans people like herself. She remains criminalised, hunted by the FBI in addition to the dangers posed to her by the enemies of the cluster. Importantly, Nomi's ability to hack and countersurveil is central to the cluster's safety – in contrast to the police character, Will, who has to leave law enforcement, unable to maintain split loyalty. Will also becomes 'the weakest link' of the cluster at the end of the first season, when the main antagonist, Whispers, is able to look through Will's eyes in order to spy and hunt the cluster members. Symbolically, then, Will's positionality makes him most prone to being compromised as an unwilling tool of the surveillant security state. The only way for Will to resist this exploitation is not only to leave his job in law enforcement but cross legal boundaries, becoming a fugitive reliant on the illicit drug trade to keep himself subdued and purposefully disoriented. This de-powering of a straight white male cop protagonist is another twist on the generic conventions of both SF and Procedural/Mystery (the generic world which Will originally occupies), where such characters commonly remain front and centre.

Transfinite's segment "Bahari" offers another vision of trans border-hacking. The story focuses on Neruda, whose love for a Swahili poet Bahari, who is undocumented, cannot be stopped by the border patrol – they meet in dreams, travelling outside their bodies to share moments of intimacy. The lovers' encounter shifts between live-action and stop-motion animation, as Bahari reads Neruda their latest poem: "Panapo Majaaliwa, tutaishi kwenye dunia isiyo na mipaka, tuwe huru kupendana, bila vizingiti / I wish us a future in a world with no limiting borders, to freely love each other, with no obstacles" (28:50-31:15). These transitions and ruptures of generic borders, once again, connect geographies and bodies to escape both limitations through a utopian vision. Neruda's dedication to a future without borders continues to empower their partner Dave, a hacktivist working to make such a world a reality. The last shot of the segment zooms in on Neruda hugging Dave. Neruda is looking straight into the camera, their expression one of clandestine confidence, as if they are letting the audience in on a shared secret – a world without borders is not only possible

but imminent. Here, the breaking of the fourth wall creates an affectual response in the viewers, aiming to inspire in them the same conviction. As Trans-SF, "Bahari," thus, is committed to not only imagining but *doing* for the future – a trans utopian praxis.

When Utopias hit a Wall

The inherent contradiction of a queer utopia, however, is its inability to co-exist with the "prison house" of the "here and now" (Muñoz 1), where cinematic interpretations are bound to run into the capitalist realities of production and distribution. Neither *Sense8* nor *Transfinite* can escape relying on tropes or defaulting to plotline resolutions that tether them to the 'here and now' of neoliberalism which glosses over structural issues in favour of blaming an individual while offering 'quick fixes' of reformism and legalism. While *Transfinite* has yet to receive scholarly attention, *Sense8* has been critiqued extensively for its various limitations, such as problematic racial representation and unquestioned class privilege of most cluster members (Bailey et al. 80-81, Keegan 116, Lothian 168). In my critique, I draw on the work of critical queer and trans studies scholars such as Dean Spade, who offers critical trans politics as one that "demands more than legal recognition and inclusion, seeking instead to transform current logics of state, civil society security, and social equality" (1). Spade's framework is explicitly abolitionist and aligned with the work of abolitionist feminists who recognise that the safety of people of colour, queer, trans, and GNC people, and other marginalised communities around the globe is always in an inverse relationship with state powers such as the police, the carceral system, and the military-industrial complex. Such approaches recall Puar's assemblage method in their relation to temporality by not seeing liberation as a defined, static point in the future but as a continuous practice that is "already unfolding" at the same time as it remains in a utopian not-yet (Spade 2, Davis et al. 15).

Will's character remains at the forefront of *Sense8*'s reluctance and the eventual failure to fully acknowledge the "historically situated struggles" of minoritised people it aims to represent (Muñoz 3). His positionality within the cluster as a white police officer, now with irrevocable access to everyone's memories and private lives, is never addressed in terms of power dynamics, especially considering that at least three of the sensates – Nomi, Sun, and Wolfgang – are criminalised. Instead, *Sense8* continuously reinforces Will as a heroic cop dedicated to saving the innocents, blames 'bad apples' for police transgressions, and goes insofar as to add another detective to the mix as a love interest for Sun. Though Will's compromisation by Whispers subverts generic tropes, his continuous status as the cluster's 'protector' derails the queer potentiality of the series. One of the most egregious examples of a false equivalence of oppression comes in the Holiday special episode ("Happy F*cking New Year"), where a series of juxtaposed images lists the slurs used against the sensates. Here, Will being called a 'pig' is equated to the other sensates' experiences with racist, queerphobic, and misogynistic verbal violence. Ultimately, the series remains stuck in a neoliberal call for unity through erasure of difference rather than critically examining and untangling the complexity and messiness of a cluster formed by forcing together eight strangers from different worlds into each other's bodies and lives.

Lisa Duggan coined the term homonormativity to describe queer liberalism that "does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them" (179). Puar develops the concept further, proposing *homonationalism*, in which homonormativity is inseparable from US imperialism and militarised violence aimed at the Global South ("Mapping US Homonormativities" 68). *Sense8*'s homonormativity and erasure of difference is evident in the finale's 'happy ending,' where all the sensates come to Paris to share a traditional Western wedding ceremony between Nomi and Amanita. A Parisian wedding, thus, is framed as a universal celebration of love: an act of homonationalism that centres and universalises white cultures and experiences and positions Western Europe as the apex of queer international tolerance. Moreover, Amanita and Nomi's wedding ceremony is held by the new head of BPO – the 'Biologic Preservation Organisation' that hunted the sensates for two seasons, serving as an easily identifiable metaphor for conversion therapy. The newly 'reformed' BPO is positioned as a 'queer ally,' however, and thus given the power to symbolically confirm Nomi and Amanita's viability to corporate capitalism, which, in exchange, 'allows' them legal rights and freedoms. While Nomi and Amanita are legitimised by the state through gay marriage, other sensates, in a deus-ex-machina way, 'just stop' being poor and criminalised in order to participate in this ceremony. Though Nomi is capable of hacking borders, she is only shown to do that for Sun and not Capheus, a matatu driver from Nairobi, who somehow is able to both afford the trip and get an urgent Schengen visa, soon followed by his mother, girlfriend, and best friend. This is another unfortunate missed opportunity where the series could have utilised Nomi's skills as a hacktivist to explicitly address the issues of racialised border control, criminalisation, and class inequality.

Transfinite's concluding segment, "Viva," revolves around Honey, a Black trans woman with superpowers of persuasion. Honey seduces and 'hacks' a sleazy President with her powers, making him issue executive orders to enact radical changes: "No more mass incarcerations, deportations, or immigration bans. Return stolen lands to Native people. Gender liberation for all trans people. Free and un-whitewashed education for all. No more lynching of Black people. Free healthcare for all. Unbiased gun control." An animated sequence of the segment demonstrates a scene at the White House, where the President reads the executive order to the crowd cheering, leaving us to imagine what the world would look like tomorrow, after the ink has dried up and the orders, presumably, become enforced. While powerful in its defiant and recognisable political commentary (the film was made and released during Donald Trump's presidency), the conclusion also ends up reifying the same political power it sets out to critique. The simultaneous vagueness and specificity of Honey's demands, combined with the forcefulness of an executive order, become prescriptive in its utopian vision: a blueprint that is, perhaps, unnecessarily limiting in a film that otherwise offers so many visions of queer utopian potentialities.

Yet, such 'failures' of utopian imagination, as Fredric Jameson argues, are not unavoidable but inherent to the SF genre, whose "deepest vocation is to bring home [...] our constitutional inability to imagine Utopia itself: and this, not owing to any individual failure of imagination but as the result of the systemic, cultural, and ideological closure of which we are all in one way or another

prisoners" (289). Jameson finds the greatest power of SF exactly in its utopian failure that makes our "ideological imprisonment" tangible and in its capacity to inspire new texts, ones that aim, perhaps, to amend or expand on the limited vision of their predecessor – to offer another way out (xv). It is interesting to note, then, that *Transfinite*, released the year after the finale of *Sense8*, was filmed in the San Francisco Bay Area (California), where Nomi and Amanita's adventures take place, and the productions shared several cast and crew, including *Transfinite* stars D'Lo (*Sense8*'s minor character "Disney") and Tina D'Elia (*Sense8*'s "Dyke #1"). In this way, the film is akin to a spin-off about minor characters of *Sense8* who were sidelined by the white-centric Hollywood gaze. Despite its narrative shortcomings and failure to escape the grasp of Hollywood's heteronormative and imperialist vision, a popular, globally-watched *Sense8* – with its queer cinematic temporality and other Trans-SF visual aesthetics that discomfort the audiences conditioned to a specific ('straight') *look* and *feel*; its explicit representations of queer and trans pleasures and kinships; its trans authorship behind and in front of camera – quite likely opened the doors for works like *Transfinite* to not only be imagined but materialised.

To imagine trans futurities is, in itself, a form of radical resistance. In the wake of the rising neo-fascism, assault on bodily autonomy, and transphobic violence, a call to focus solely on neoliberal representational politics of adding 'visibility' and diversity in the media falls short: scholars of colour Kara Keeling and micha cárdenas have connected increased media presence of minoritised people with increased risks of violence and surveillance such communities face, thus questioning its value as an intersectional praxis (cárdenas 75-76). Instead, we need more works that push beyond representation and challenge established conventions and ways of seeing; that disturb and question what is understood as 'pleasurable' in a genre or a form of media; that refuse capitalist straight temporality, chipping away at its borders that dictate our pasts, presents, and futures. No genre is better suited than SF to bring us one step closer to abolishing the borders of the 'here and now' – and to a space-time made otherwise.

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QUEER COMMUNITIES AS UTOPIAS OF POTENTIALITY IN THE GRAPHIC NOVELS OF KAY O'NEILL

Rebecca Jones

Introduction

The graphic novel works by Kay O'Neill (they/them) present a diverse range of ethnicities and hybridities through the anthropomorphised animal and fantastical races that populate their fictional worlds. Additionally, they depict a range of physical abilities, identities, and orientations across their works. O'Neill's whimsical tales deal with brokenness, grief, loss, and finding one's place and purpose in and through the support of queer communities. Throughout their series, O'Neill presents worlds where individuals are not empowered through violence or power, but by their strength of character, kindness, ability to accept themselves, and the encouragement and acceptance of others. Their series repeatedly shows how inclusive communities can be possible through their presentation of deaf, genderqueer, homosexual, and disabled individuals all existing in provincial and urban Fantasy spaces. These spaces embrace rather than ostracise, presenting potentialities: worlds with loss and pain, but also support and healing. Applying José Esteban Muñoz's definition of a queer utopia, this article argues that O'Neill's graphic novels *Princess Princess Ever After* (2016, *PPEA*), *The Tea Dragon Society trilogy* (2017-2021, *TDS*), and *Aquicorn Cove* (2018, *AC*) present different ways queer community spaces are utopias-in-progress that shape individuals' ability to recover, accept themselves, and find purpose, presenting "blueprints of a world not quite here" to inspire readers and present a "realm of educated hope" (Muñoz 97; 3).

Queer and Utopia

'Queer,' 'queering,' and 'queerness' have come to mean many things, but this article follows Sara Ahmed's and Jack Halberstam's understanding of these labels. In *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (2006), Ahmed acknowledges queer's origins drawing from its etymology "from the Greek for cross, oblique, adverse" to first use it "as a way of describing what is 'oblique' or 'off-line'" apart or different from the norm (161). She goes on to then acknowledge its more contemporary use, to "refer to those who practise nonnormative sexualities which as we know involves a personal and social commitment to living in an oblique world, or in a world that has an oblique angle in relation to that which is given" (161). Similarly, in In a *Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (2005), Halberstam defines queer as, "nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time" (6). Here we see how 'queer' describes that which is deemed as apart yet can describe people coming

together. At the core of queer is an understanding of what is 'normal,' a society's 'norms,' or what it deems as 'normative,' without which there can be no understanding of the queer.

O'Neill flips these understandings by presenting queerness as the norm within their narratives. Their worlds are populated by different beings all living together in accommodating communities made of disparate peoples who welcome new and old members with empathy and kindness. Yet, to most readers, these worlds are queer because they are both different but also like our own. Their ethnic, gender, and sexual diversity is akin to anglophone countries' populaces, yet the harmony of those communities and the normalcy of their relationships, interactions, and family groups are queer because, despite the diversity found naturally within our reality, our societies other individuals and groups rather than embracing a diverse populace. This establishes the lie that one group is 'normal' while others are not. What O'Neill shows their readers is a queer world that accommodates and empathises rather than seeking antagonism through othering. Through this, they present utopic spaces that show us potentialities: a world that could also be ours.

In *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2019), Muñoz explores the potentialities and meanings of a queer utopia with a hopeful optimism for the future akin to those in O'Neill's works. His text and arguments are greatly focused on the experiences of American, homosexual, predominantly cisgender men before the AIDS epidemic, while unfortunately ignoring the lived experiences and utopian ideals of the rest of the queer community. This perspective shapes his ideas around what makes a queer utopia and what such utopias should be and do for us now. The loss of consequence-free love and the grief that the AIDS epidemic brought to his community leads Muñoz to acknowledge the need for stories "of loss and despair," but also the need to be able to dream of a *better* and even *idealised* future (111). He wants the queer community to be able to actively dream of a future "where queer youths of color actually get to grow up" (96). This optimism, while uncritical of its origin and the idealism it calls for, nevertheless resonates with O'Neill's work which likewise presents hopeful tales of communities coming together reflecting the kind of utopia-in-progress that Muñoz calls for. For Muñoz, a queer utopia is "an ideal, something that should mobilize us, push us forward" he is not trying to be "prescriptive" but instead looking for "potential blueprints of a world not quite here, a horizon of possibility" (97). He finds "it is productive to think about utopia as flux, a temporal disorganization, as a moment when the here and the now is transcended by a then and a there that could be and indeed should be" (97). Thus, he is calling us to dream, and dream big, about a future that "is not here yet, […] a could be, a *should* be" (99, my emphasis). Utopias are impossibly unachievable in their fully idealistic form; nevertheless, they can show us something better than the here and now and, as Muñoz states, this "should mobilize us, push us forward" to make those kinds of communities a reality (97). With this framework of queer utopia as a process, a goal that mobilises and something that is hoped for, this article examines the communities depicted in O'Neill's works and argues that they are examples of this "should be" that Muñoz asserts, just as optimistic but more critical of our reality through their normalising of queerness and the process, goals, and hopes that their queer communities go through, achieve, and realise (97).

Diversity in Comics and Fantasy

There is a long history of minority figures being on the fringes of anglophone comics and the graphic novel industry, with censorship codes and book bannings playing a large part in keeping it that way.[1] Fantasy is meant to be a space where all things are possible. Thus, excluding certain people from that space rejects their viability as both potential fantasies and viable citizens of a Fantasy world. Yet, as Caitlin Herington notes, "The tendency for narratives in Fantasy fiction to preserve and reproduce traditional patterns of gender and cultural mores is high," speaking to a hegemonic presence within our media that perpetuates a 'norm' within spaces that should be open to all (55). As Pulitzer Prize-winning author Junot Diaz states "if you want to make a human being into a monster, deny them, at the cultural level, any reflection of themselves" (qtd. in Donohue, para. 5). Thus, within the fantastic, these "mirrors" (Donohue, para. 5) of presence or absence speaks as much to the continuation of "gender and cultural mores" as it does to who is deemed appropriate Fantasy figures for audiences (Herington 55). Yet, within this restricted and often hegemonic space, some instances defy the norm to present queer potentialities and those examples are growing in number.

One such space is within juvenile and young adult (YA) fiction where the harsher lines of genre are not enforced but sit side-by-side on the shelf as publishers and booksellers find the age grouping more relevant than the genre of the work. Such fiction abounds with rule-breaking and explorations of the fantastic because, as Anne Balay argues, "it is not taken seriously" (925). Additionally, the rise in graphic novels within these fictions has further increased the instances of diverse characters being *seen* as well as read, leaving no ambiguity about ethnic, racial, or physical appearances and capabilities. This format, as Kate Kedley and Jenna Spiering argue, "reveal[s] subtleties and nuances about gender and sexuality that without the interplay of text and image might otherwise be invisible" because they make readers *see* these characters leaving no room for mis-reading a characters' race or identity (55). By presenting a visualisation of diverse peoples, these works create mirrors for some and windows for others, through which these groups can be seen, accessed, and better understood rather than seeming absent, other, or incomprehensible. These stories, by writing for younger audiences, carry with them the hopefulness of youth, which can become jaded but can also be confident in the face of insurmountable odds. By telling their stories through the graphic medium and to a juvenile and YA audience, O'Neill's works break with convention, presenting playful tales of queer spaces while still dealing with heavy subjects of grief, harm, and finding one's purpose all while *showing* a world filled with diversity that is naturalised rather than othering.

If, as Ursula Le Guin asserts, "the use of imaginative fiction is to deepen your understanding of your world, and your fellow [humans], and your own feelings, and your destiny" (43), then denying people the "mirrors" that Diaz describes means a lack of understanding about our "fellow" humans, ourselves, and what we can become (qtd. in Donohue, para. 5). As Carolyn Cocca argues, "when an underrepresented group of people is repeatedly reduced to objects, when the narrative's point of view is consistently at that group instead of from that group, the objectified group's story is not being told" (5). This is why organisations like We Need Diverse Books and Disability in Kidlit exist

to help raise awareness of existing works while also challenging publishers and media producers to do better. Thus, representations, in all genres and narratives, are vital to our understanding of the world. O'Neill's works, and the range of representations and the queer communities they depict, are a key part of the change happening for the past decade within comics and graphic novels where more diverse and inclusive stories are being told. Within the recent boom of diversity within anglophone graphic media and narratives, O'Neill's utopias fall within the camp of works that use Fantasy to present how our world could be if we embrace queer communities, ethnic, racial, and mental diversity, and accessibility. Their queer settings lack the threat of our world's discriminating oppression, leaving their characters the freedom to grow into themselves through and with the support of others rather than in spite of them. O'Neill, a New Zealand illustrator and graphic novelist, presents diverse ethnicities and races through their characters' range of skin tones and appearances. Additionally, their world is co-populated by anthropomorphised animal and hybrid characters who are also equal members of these communities and in relationships with the humans of the world. O'Neill's characters present a range of sexual orientations, all of which are shown and reacted to as natural rather than abnormal or taboo. Finally, they include characters with physical and mental disabilities to create a queer utopic space where all are welcome and accommodated without seeming to be a burden or unwanted. These queer communities are not utopian in the sense of being conflict-free, but rather they present a queer utopia of possibilities that Muñoz describes as a force to mobilise us.

O'Neill's Queer Utopian Communities

O'Neill uses their queer utopias-in-progress and adolescent characters to present how empathising and understanding people, especially individuals deemed as 'other,' is the best way to deal with conflict. This is seen in *PPEA*, a story where O'Neill deconstructs stereotypical princess and hero Fantasy tropes, when Prince Valdric and Princess Amira, both trying to be 'heroes,' argue how best to slay an ogre who is destroying a nearby town. While they are busy arguing, Princess Sadie just walks up to the ogre, says "Excuse me," and informs him that "You need to stop dancing, okay? You're a great dancer, but can't you see you're scaring everyone away?" (25, panels 1, 3). Amira starts to shout that the ogre is not dancing when the ogre replies, "Actually, I often wonder if my lack of creative fulfilment is because I never have an audience" (25, panel 7). Sadie's unique experience and sheltered life lead her to an innocent assumption whereas Amira's adventuring and the pressure Valdric is under to be a certain kind of prince lead both to assume violent intent. O'Neill subverts the tropes of a princess's rescue, heroic actions, and terrorising monsters, queering readers' expectations. This presents O'Neill's "nonnormative logics" of Fantasy, by queering Fantasy tropes to present non-violent methods of problem-solving that favour understanding and empathy over threats and harm (Halberstam 6). This emphasises the value of such queer, "nonnormative logics," and how a reorganisation around accommodation, understanding, and empathy helps a community become a utopia-in-progress (6). Alternatively, in the *TDS* series, O'Neill presents how, in *The Tea Dragon Festival* (*Festival*, 2019) and *The Tea Dragon Tapestry* (*Tapestry*, 2020) Rinn's village, Silverleaf, is willing and *wants* to learn and adapt for the sake of one member. When Aedhan, a guardian dragon awoken from an 80-year slumber, asks about Silverleaf's use of sign language Rinn replies, "A few of the older generation still aren't so confident at it. But after Lesa was born, I think

everyone wanted to learn. I grew up with it" (*Festival* 72, panel 2). This accommodation reflects Muñoz's idea of utopia as an ongoing process. O'Neill shows "a moment when the here and the now" a society that, like ours did not broadly speak sign language, "is transcended by a *then* and *there* that could be and indeed should be," shown through the community's willingness to learn and accommodate just one of its members (Muñoz 97, original emphasis). In *Tapestry* Silverleaf is mentioned as altering its route into the village and some of its buildings so that Erik, who is in a wheelchair at this point, can visit and access his home. That the entire village is not only willing but *wants* to accommodate individuals with accessibility needs presents a queer utopia-in-progress where the majority are happy to learn and act to ensure the inclusivity of its spaces and society. This level of both acceptance and accommodation presents spaces where individuals are valued and loved for who they are, not whether they are perceived as contributing members of society. Through Silverleaf's accommodations, all its members can flourish rather than being discounted or excluded because they lack certain abilities. Thus, O'Neill "nourish[es] our sense of potentiality […] by presenting] a critical modality of hope" through a queer society that changes for its members presenting the utopia-in-progress Muñoz sees as a necessity for queer visual culture (Muñoz 111).

O'Neill's stories show how people can thrive if given the chance and the correct tools to do so. In the *TDS* series, Minette also is a neurodiverse individual because she suffers from short-term and long-term memory loss. Considered a seer with great power, Minette felt pressured to always push herself to see more until she went too far and it backfired, filling her mind with too much foreknowledge. In response her mind erased everything, leaving her with memory loss and struggling with information retention. Throughout the first and third books in the series, Greta and Minette's relationship grows with Greta promising to look out for Minette and it is her acceptance of Minette the way she is and the support of Hesekiel, Erik, and the rest of the community that helps Minette feel like she can begin to find a way of living with her condition. Through examples like Erik and Minette, O'Neill presents some of Diaz's "mirrors," characters who are often absent from Fantasy spaces, but furthers this through their inclusive, accommodating worlds that change to help the few because the many *want* to ensure they have equitable access and opportunities (qtd. In Donohue, para. 5). By telling these stories *from* the perspective of these underrepresented groups, not just at them, these narratives exemplify the change that Cocca calls for, and empowers these characters by making them the subjects of their story instead of objects within it (5). This presents the kinds of queer "potentiality […and] critical modality of hope" Muñoz calls for in queer stories and is on the rise within graphic novels (111).

The age of O'Neill's characters presents the innocence of youth and suggests that adolescents' goodness, instilled in them through the queer communities that raise them, allows them to seek solutions through empathy and understanding rather than threat or violence. These intergenerational communities present "the realm of educated hope," a space full of possibility that should inspire our communities (Muñoz 3). While O'Neill's works are fantasies, the communities they present show how it is not magic that makes a better world, but the people's choices to accommodate, welcome, and grow with each other, that creates a utopia-in-progress. Significantly, O'Neill's characters are raised by queer communities that reflect these sentiments and speak to a

potential utopia where this kind of rearing results in caring youths who seek to understand others rather than viewing them as threats first. In the *TDS* series, Rinn's accommodating village and the community that is fostered in the city through the members of the Tea Dragon Society all create and present spaces with supportive, diverse partnerships that, in turn, support the other members of the community. For example, Greta's parents are a human-looking man who is lean, bookish, and dark-skinned and a goblin-blooded mother who is a head taller than her husband and much more muscular as a result of that lineage and her blacksmith trade, in addition to her bull-like horns, tail, and bottom canines which are prominent like tusks. Hesekiel is an animal-like humanoid who is lean, grey fur-covered, and scholarly. His partner Erik is the brawn of their bounty-hunting duo and retains that upper-body strength through his wheelchair use and occasional sword practice while his lower body is shown with atrophic musculature. In *Festival* Rinn and Aya are shown living with their Gramman and the village accommodates not only Lesa in her sign language, and Erik with his wheelchair, but also Rinn in their gender fluidity which is never explicitly stated and only hinted at in *Festival* then confirmed in *Tapestry* when they and Aedhan visit Erik and Hesekiel and are referred to with they/them pronouns. All of these examples challenge the graphic novel industry, the Fantasy genre, and juvenile fiction to similarly present this kind of natural diversity in their fantastical spaces. O'Neill exemplifies Muñoz's "modality of hope" by showing the kinds of accommodating and inclusive communities that "indeed should be," but which are queer to us because of their normal, naturalised, inclusive diversity (97). While there is a need to tell stories that depict the reality of discrimination, racism, and the too-often violent acts that groups suffer, O'Neill's works present a simple hopeful message that we need to learn from those stories of hurt and work towards a utopia-in-progress where accommodation, acceptance, and support become a reality as we rewrite our future to be one of hope and possibility where diversity will seem natural and normal rather than a point of tension and reason for discrimination.

Significantly, O'Neill's worlds and communities are utopias-in-progress, the "potentiality or concrete possibility" Muñoz calls for (1). This process is presented within each work through a central problem that must be overcome, with the resolution of each issue exemplifying a fostering community that moves them towards being a utopia-in-progress. For example, the harmonious connection between nature and human spaces comes under brief moments of threat in the *TDS* series when creatures grow hungry and attack. This is seen first in *The Tea Dragon Society* (*Society*, 2017) when Greta is walking home from the market and sees some black wolf shapes cornering Jasmine, Hesekiel's tea dragon. The panels, using some of the darkest pallets in the book, show the wolves' lean forms and drooling mouths which emphasise their threat (11, panels 1-2). The next panel shows Greta at first angry at their aggressive actions, then, in the same panel, her dawning realisation (11, panel 3). Rather than acting violently or threateningly towards them, Greta empathises and understands why they are acting aggressively noting that their leanness and drooling mean "they're starving," and O'Neill has Greta's speech bubble over the image of the wolves now from a different perspective to reflect Greta's understanding (11, panel 4). Rather than scaring them away or getting help, Greta pulls out the meat cuts she has in her bag and leaves them for the wolf shapes to eat, smiling as the wolves perk up and seem more like eager dogs at dinner time than the threatening wolves previously shown (11, panel 5-8). By having this moment early in the story, O'Neill sets

the tone for their series, showing how understanding others is the solution to conflict rather than responding with threats or escalations. However, the *Tea Dragon* world is not without threats that cannot be reasoned with, as seen in *Festival* when a raptor-bat creature attacks Rinn and Aya while out in the open field outside of Silverleaf. Aedhan fights the creature to keep the two children safe but is wounded in the process. Nevertheless, neither combatant is killed: the creature is only scared off from the field, while Aedhan, in his human form, is next seen being tended to by Rinn. This sequence juxtaposes with a later moment in the book when Hesekiel and Erik, adventuring bounty hunters, seek out the creature that has been putting people, and Aedhan, to sleep. When they finally meet it rather than kill it, as with Greta in *Society*, they empathise and understand that it puts people to sleep so they can dream of its forest as it once was, wanting only to share its memory. They explain to it that a few hours are more than sufficient rather than the eighty years that Aedhan was under (*Festival* 96, panels 3-4). Thus, O'Neill shows these violent adventurers also practising empathy and reasoning with creatures where they can, reflecting Muñoz's "realm of educated hope" through a community where understanding is valued above and used before violence and threats (3).

This trend of empathetic understanding also occurs within their other series. In *AC* the conflict of the story comes from an Australian fishing village finding a balance between the village's dependency on the ocean and the damage that overfishing and pollution have on the reef and ecosystem. It is Lana, a young girl who is visiting the village with her father, who mends the rift between the reef and the village. Both spaces are represented in the figures of Aure and Mae. Aure is a magical being from the sea who looks after the reef and the Aquicorns who live in it and keep it healthy. While Mae, Lana's aunt, still grieves the death of her sister, Lana's mother, at sea and is determined to keep the village alive despite how their plastic nets have resulted in overfishing the reef. Both women are firm in their determination to preserve the spaces they represent, despite their love for each other, and it takes Lana going to Aure and Mae going to find her, to finally allow the rift between sea and land to be healed. O'Neill uses this queer pairing to show the need for compromise and communication within and between communities. Mae, worried because another storm is racking the village, protests that one village's actions can do little to stem the tide of pollution and overfishing, Lana counters by saying: "I know our village is small, and we can only do small things to help the sea. But I still think we should do them. [... because] if the reef dies, I think our village will die too" (75, panels 5, 7). Here O'Neill uses Lana to be a voice of empathy and understanding to bridge the gaps of resentment and hurt to call for responsibility and action even in the face of problems that are much bigger than just one village. All of O'Neill's series show young women stepping forward proposing empathy rather than selfishness and further misunderstandings in the face of conflict. This breaks with the norm of fantastical narratives where the 'other,' monsters, and violent creatures, are defeated through destruction or ostracising. Instead of othering these creatures, O'Neill presents them as parts of nature, showing a queer understanding of them as beings with equal rights to existence. These queer voices, actions, and spaces present the kinds of utopias-in-progress, the "realm of educated hope" that can come to be if empathy and understanding are the main recourse to problem-solving, rather than erroneous presuppositions, proud stubbornness, and threatening reactions (Muñoz 3).

Healing and Wholeness through Community

O'Neill's communities are not without their misunderstandings, but these conflicts are solved through cooperation and solidarity rather than isolation or blame. O'Neill's Fantasy spaces are communities of connection and support, queer utopias-in-progress, that show how fostering and supporting individuals allows them to discover themselves and understand what it means to be who they want to be. For example, in the *TDS* series, the main characters are presented at liminal moments where they are deciding what their trade will be and O'Neill uses this as a metaphor for each character's journey and sense of identity and self. In *Festival*, Rinn is discovering their trade, beginning the story wanting to be a cook, but is frustrated by their lack of ability. Through their time with Aedhan, and the support of the Silverleaf villagers, they realise that they do not want to be a cook. While foraging with Aedhan, he comments, "You know, you're extremely skilled at gathering food from the earth," to which they reply, "It's nothing special—it's easy" (82, panel 2). Aedhan replies, "Just **because** something comes easily to you, does not mean it has no value. You find it effortless because you love it, and that is why it is your gift" (82, panel 3, emphasis in original). Here O'Neill shows how queer communities allow for new perspectives, see individuals, and what they can do, and supports and values those traits and individuals for it and by extension comments on the prevalence of normative ideas around modes of production and acceptable careers within our reality. O'Neill uses this arc to present how a queer community can support and encourage young people to explore their abilities and find a trade that makes them happy rather than pressuring them into 'acceptable' careers.

The *TDS* series also shows how queer communities are places of healing. Erik and Hesekiel appear in all three works showing readers how the couple lived before and after Erik is paralysed from the waist down. The couple's meeting, adventuring, adversity, and starting a new life in the tea shop are presented in *Society* through Jasmine's and Rooibos' (their tea dragons) tea leaves. Hesekiel and Erik trust Greta enough and want to share their story with her and so brew the tea and share that intimate part of themselves with her. Through that sharing the audience sees how they met, grew to love one another, and how after Erik's injury he felt like he was holding Hesekiel back saying, "This isn't what you signed up for. [...] You shouldn't have to give up exploring and adventuring because of me. You loved that" (45, panel 6, 8). Rather than Hesekiel leaving Erik now he is in a wheelchair and needs care, Hesekiel tells him, "I signed up to fight by your side. To treat your wounds, to never abandon you. [...] It was never the adventure that I loved" (45, panel 7, 10). When she returns to the present, Greta sees Hesekiel and Erik looking lovingly at one another (46, panel 2) and Erik comments, "running the tea house turned into an adventure of its own" reflecting how he is not bitter at his new lot in life and the contentment that they share exists because they stayed together and were able to find a new purpose and way of living (46, panel 4). Here O'Neill again deconstructs the stereotypes around heroes, as seen in *PPEA*, only now showing an alternative to the thrill of action and violence to instead show the quiet domesticity and community of the tea shop as something that is challenging and satisfying. This is confirmed in *Tapestry* when they are shown tending their garden and Erik comments, "I never stuck around in one place long enough to find [out that he has a green thumb], 'til we lived here" and while he misses his family from Silverleaf he feels that they "found a lovely [new family] out here" (51 panel 1; 52 panel 4). This statement

reflects the common trend within queer communities to have chosen families, a group of people who come together as friends and form a closer bond as a family they have chosen rather than being born into. Here O'Neill shows us how queerness can "be about a desire for another way of being in both the world and time, a desire that resist[s] mandates to accept that which is not enough" (Muñoz 96). While Erik's family has not rejected him (often the reason a chosen family is formed) his new chosen family is still a product of disparate people coming together to support one another, again reflecting how O'Neill's queer communities do not form in opposition, but out of a desire to have a space to call home and feel like they belong. The magic of the tea dragon leaves allows him to be able to share his story with Greta but also means that Rinn can bring him leaves from the Silverleaf tea dragons so that he can catch up with his family there. Showing how the communities *want* to stay connected with their members even when they have moved to a new home and have created a new community. Again, O'Neill's utopic queer community is built on accommodation and connection, acting as a template for us to follow.

The healing that an accepting and accommodating community can provide is shown by Minette's character, who begins as an outsider with her neurodivergent memory loss making her feel broken and a burden to others so that she self-isolates. However, through her interactions with the Tea Dragon Society members, she feels accepted, supported, and able to heal her mind, though not completely. O'Neill uses Minette's development as the climax of *Tapestry* as Minette begins to have dreams of her ancestors and Ancestor god which culminates in it telling her, "Everything that happens is part of your wholeness. The sadness the loss, the hurt, as well as the joy, the love, the friendship—it is all part of your tapestry. [...] Minette... remember that you are already whole" (100, panels 1, 3–4). This message of wholeness is poignant within this series as all of O'Neill's characters are shown beginning in liminal positions where they need to make decisions that will shape the rest of their lives or adapt to circumstances that are beyond their control. Through the *TDS* series, O'Neill shows how it is through a community's acceptance, accommodation, and empathy towards its members and outsiders that enables it to become a kind of utopia, and how we need only choose to live that way to make it a reality.

O'Neill's queer communities extend beyond the *TDS* series and repeatedly present how a supportive social structure enables individuals to discover themselves and heal. In *AC* O'Neill presents how communities heal individuals through the support they give. After Lana's mother died at sea, her father moved them to the city. Lana tells the reader:

> Dad was busy trying to start our new life, and he was hurting too. I needed help, but I didn't know how to ask. I didn't know how to explain I needed help with the small things. The things I never noticed before, until suddenly they took effort. Sometimes I feel like I just want to go to sleep for a while, and wake up when I'm stronger or things are different somehow. (33)

O'Neill shows how grief affects people differently and how hard it can be for both parent and child when a spouse is lost. Lana likes staying with Mae in the village because she "takes care of me. I want to feel like a kid, like a little fish in a rock pool. I want Mom" (35). In the city, she feels alone and unable to ask for help, whereas in the village Mae is there looking after her without being asked due to her looking after everyone in the village. As the story progresses and Lana learns about the Aquicorns, the damage to the reef, and Aure's request that the village stops overfishing, she sees that her aunt Mae also needs help, that there are others who, like her, need help but cannot ask for it. She becomes the voice for the reef, calling her aunt to change and when she leaves, she states: It's not like I'm excited to go home, but I feel like I can face it now. Seeing how strong Mae and Aure are, how they fight for their ways of life...makes me think about what I want to protect as well. I think it's time to learn how to be a guardian to myself, and my feelings. Gentle and strong—like Mom. Coming to the village let me feel safe and protected for a while. Now I have strength to face the harder things. (86–87, panels 5-6, 1–2)

Through Lana's character, O'Neill shows how a community's support and empathy allow individuals to heal and be strengthened to face changes, figure out who they want to be, and process grief. However, this community must also be willing to change when necessary for the sake of others, even just a single member, simply because it is the right thing to do. O'Neill again shows their readers a queer utopia that "should mobilize us [and] push us forward" through their accommodating and adaptive communities (Muñoz 97). These communities are places where wrongs are forgiven rather than dwelt on, just as Aure forgives Mae her stubbornness to change. They must be places that are willing to make changes, in this case, to restructure their economy for the sake of the natural reef that protects them. Through this forgiveness and compromise, Lana sees how strong people can be, but also how vulnerable and dependent they are on one another. O'Neill's worlds are queer utopias-in-progress, where humans, nature, and the magical all intermix harmoniously because the communities within them are willing to accommodate one another and the needs of the few, who in turn enrich the community through their unique abilities.

Conclusion

O'Neill's graphic novels tell simple stories in idyllic spaces, with young protagonists who are finding their way to adulthood responsibility through the kindness and acceptance of the communities around them. These communities support and want to adapt to accommodate individuals' needs and by doing so present queer utopias-in-progress where everyone is looked after, supported, and thrives, enriching the community in turn. O'Neill's worlds show how these queer spaces of healing and acceptance allow people to find their purpose and the strength they need to face the challenges of their lives. Telling these whimsical stories presents the "critical modality of hope" that Muñoz calls for and "renders potential blueprints of a world not quite here" but one "that could be and indeed should be" (111; 97). We need to encourage individuals to find what they are passionate about and encourage them in those pursuits, not just to follow expectations but to allow them to question the why of their industries and find answers to reveal the purpose behind their labour. O'Neill's characters create a diverse range of "mirrors" for their readers to see themselves in, challenging

the Fantasy genre to include the full range of the human experience and to have spaces that do not discriminate based on who one's partner is, how they look, or what perceived disability they might have (qtd. in Donohue, para. 5). Instead, they want communities to look for ways to encourage, accommodate, and educate so that they grow and learn rather than stagnate, or remain restrictive and oppositional towards their members and others who might seek to (re)join it.

O'Neill's stories are aimed at a younger audience as they hope that perhaps these readers might, like Lana, be the voices for those who cannot ask for help or are not heard when they do. O'Neill's adult characters likewise call their readers to be better than many of us are, to be welcoming to those in need, forgiving to those who have abandoned or hurt us, and to know that when we love it should not be limited by our partner's physical ability or health. O'Neill's utopias are fantasies, but ones which we could make a reality by working at it, much like Mae and her village must work to find a better way to maintain their livelihood without harming the reef that keeps them safe. While there is still very much a need for stories that speak to the realities that so many queer individuals experience, there is also an urgency to tell fantastical stories that show us a better way from what is or has been; a utopian goal to reach for, beyond the hate and hurt that we are so often surrounded by. O'Neill's simple stories are all the more powerful for their idyllic spaces and communities because they seem effortless to attain. Their queer communities present a systemic template that could be followed so that we too might have accessible, inclusive, and thriving spaces for all members of our communities.

NOTES

1. As of 2017 the Cooperative Children's Book Center at the University of Wisconsin–Madison's, "statistics indicate that the overwhelming numbers of graphic novels targeted toward young readers do not feature— nor are they produced by— people of color" (Medina 346-347). Additionally, in 2021 *Gender Queer* (2019) was the most banned book in the United States of America due to its depiction of nude characters, sexual acts, and menstruation as it tells the autobiographical story of a young, genderqueer individual coming to understand their identity (Harris and Alter). Even as these works are on the rise, this increase and acceptance is still very tentative and recent.

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BIONOTE

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DETOXIFYING MALE FANTASY: QUEER NAVIGATION OF A HOSTILE GENRE LANDSCAPE IN THE COMIC BOOK *DIE*

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While the queering of Fantasy is not a recent project, the convergence of social justice discourse with critical analysis within various fandom spaces in the twenty-first century has encouraged a renewed focus on LGBTQIA+ representation amongst writers, readers, and fans, and introduced a new lexicon through which to articulate such issues. The comic book series *DIE* (2019-2021) by Kieron Gillen, Stephanie Hans, and Clayton Cowles is a queer negotiation of fantasy genre culture, represented here through the microcosm of a tabletop roleplaying game (TTRPG). Utilising the unique relationship TTRPGs hold to wider Fantasy media, *DIE* confronts a cis-heteronormative canon of Fantasy, portrayed as a hostile landscape that the queer subject must traverse and conquer, in the manner of a questing TTRPG adventurer. Through the journey of the genderfluid protagonist Ash, Gillen implies that queer voices are one means of 'saving' the Fantasy genre, challenging its historical focus on a white, heterosexual, male subject. However, the queer subject must first understand and celebrate their own authority. Ash's agency struggles against self-imposed limitations that result from existing as boundlessly queer within a subculture working to limit them. TTRPGs are portrayed as metatexts that can comment on Fantasy's history, traditions, and contemporary climate, portraying dominant trends of hypermasculinity and cis-heteronormativity within its canonical and mainstream works. They also allow players space to experiment – both with their identity and sexuality, as well as their authority and narrative voice. This article examines *DIE*'s use of the TTRPG to encapsulate a snapshot of contemporary Fantasy genre culture, before exploring how and why the queer subject is treated as newly empowered within this imaginative ecosystem.

While not unique in the tradition of writing back against a perceived conservative tradition of Fantasy, *DIE* utilises TTRPGs' self-conscious embodiment of genre culture to transform this metatextual challenge into the structuring principle of the characters' own heroic quest. It is implied that, in this informal and transformative space, marginalised voices such as Ash's have power to renew Fantasy, which Gillen, Hans, and Cowles represent as desolate and dying.

TTRPGs and Fantasy Genre Culture

Although queer communities have always existed within Fantasy and other geek subcultures – such as gaming and tabletop roleplay – these are still often considered the province of cis-heterosexual, white men. In *Toxic Geek Masculinity in Media: Sexism, Trolling, and Identity Policing* (2017), Anastasia Salter and Bridget Blodgett note that a constructed white, heterosexual "hypermasculine

geek" identity has long dictated the visual representations and active practices of geek subculture. Salter and Blodgett argue that this mode of hypermasculinity combines "visions of geek-as-victim and geek-as-hero," creating an identity "forged by rejecting both feminine-marked culture" and "traditional athletic male aesthetic," while reproducing the latter as a power fantasy in media designed to appeal to the male "geek" demographic (6). This "seemingly harmless focus on wish-fulfilment as dictated by a heteronormative, cisgendered male fantasy" impacts "the accessibility not only of geek spaces to women and other marginalized identities, but also to the accessibility of those fields characterized as 'geek' dominated" (13). In literary and subcultural Fantasy communities, straight male voices have been privileged: they have been enabled to be the most vocal or assigned the most canonical weight.

Following an adventuring party who become trapped in the fantasy world created by their Dungeon Master (DM) Sol, *DIE* is a comic about TTRPGs. However, it is also concerned with Fantasy subculture at large, making intertextual references to a broad range of media. Lines such as "since when did you become Aragorn meets Wolverine?" demonstrate the variety of sources it uses (*Vol. 3*).[1] *DIE* presents Fantasy as transmedial through details such as: the similarities between Chuck's character design and that of the *Dragon Age* character Varric Tethras; the use of iconic TTRPG dice to signify key magical powers in the party; metafictional references to dungeon crawling and other gaming conventions; and panels recognisably imitating sequences from Science Fiction and Fantasy movies. These intertexts exist in a secondary world structured around canonical literary Fantasy, populated by author figures who act as provincial rulers over each facet of a 20-sided planet. *DIE* encompasses what Helen Young refers to in *Race and Popular Fantasy: Habits of Whiteness* (2015) as "fantasy genre culture": a term which acknowledges the transmedial nature of contemporary Fantasy, and "places [its] textual practices within a wider set of social processes that include not only Fantasy conventions, but the behaviours of authors and audiences, the ideological arguments that circulate around the texts, and the meaning and location of Fantasy within a political economy" (5).

DIE's extensive intertextuality emphasises the self-conscious nature of the TTRPG medium itself. In *The Fantasy Roleplaying Game: A New Performing Art* (2001), Daniel McKay argues that players' performances in a TTRPG are composed "self-contained, decontextualised tropes" known as "fictive blocks," which include famous imagery, motifs, and direct quotes from other Fantasy texts (92). Transmedial references mimic the colloquial way TTRPG players talk and construct narrative. *DIE* also uses the visual cues within panels as a shorthand to provide emotive and dramatic context for its intended reader, exactly as players and DMs use their own intertextual awareness of the Fantasy genre when building narrative. In *Shared Fantasy: Roleplaying Games as Social Worlds* (1986), Gary Alan Fine referred to this as "idioculture": a "system of knowledge, beliefs, behaviours, and customs" (136) that enable meaning-making for participants around a table, usually "loosely based upon someone else's imaginative system: a game designer's world, the Tolkien mythos, […] [or] a science fiction novel'" (144). Innate intertextuality is a result of the TTRPG's relationship to genre culture. Game manuals and paratexts are often intended to encompass a genre or mode in its entirety. TTRPGs condense down the key signifiers of a popular genre such as Fantasy, creating a lexicon for players and DMs to utilise to recreate the stories they have enjoyed as readers. In "Fantasy

After Representation" (2017) Ryan Vu characterises the rubrics of TTRPGs as "convention boiled down to its essence, ordered by a probabilistic system of rules and statistics" (280). This sentiment is echoed directly in *DIE* as Gillen states that TTRPGs are "at their core, mechanics: conventions, given shape" (*Vol. 4*). TTRPGs distil the mores, practices, expectations, and conventions of Fantasy into a single text, becoming a living document of that genre culture's textual and, to some extent, social practices.

TTRPGs act as microcosms of genre culture and *DIE* uses this to portray the biases of canon formation, reflecting Fantasy gaming's own role in securing a male-dominated literary canon. Antero Garcia notes in "Race, Gender and Critical Systems" (2021) that *Dungeons and Dragons* (*D&D*) reflects "implicit cultural values that these primarily white male American designers [at TSR and Wizards of the Coast] carried into the game" (4). For instance, in the *AD&D Dungeon Master's Guide* (1979), Gary Gygax's 'Appendix N: Inspirational and Educational Reading' presented a Fantasy canon of his own invention, comprising authors such as J. R. R. Tolkien, Jack Vance, H. P. Lovecraft, Roger Zelazny, and Lord Dunsany, with only one woman mentioned, Margaret St. Clair (224). This fostered status and subcultural capital for *D&D* players that had read such 'educational' works, further securing the dominance of male voices in both literary and TTRPG circles. TTRPGs such as *D&D* cement Fantasy into a certain mould and term it as universal 'convention', where examining this process exposes the structures of power at work within that genre culture. In *DIE*, Ash meets several of Appendix N's seminal figures, forcing them to confront who has determined what is 'essential' to this particular world(view) of Fantasy. *D&D* is supposedly designed to appeal to the prototypical Fantasy reader, but what results is stereotypical: like its creators, the ideal or intended reader is presumed to be white, male, and straight.

DIE's protagonist, Ash, seems at first to conform exactly to this image. As Dominic Ash in the 'real' world, they present as a white man in a heterosexual relationship. It is only upon entering Die and assuming the body of Ash, a beautiful, seductive woman, that these assumptions begin to break down. Their friend Chuck notes: "you spent all of your time here swanning around in your ballgowns […] You never seem to be interested in boys, except here. What's going on with that?" (*Vol. 1*). As Ash goes forward in their quest and begins to confront that question, *DIE* also begins exploring a disconnect within Fantasy itself. Firstly, between the genre's supposedly unbounded freedom and the voices it allows to dominate, as well as those it has excluded. Secondly, the gap between Fantasy's intended and its actual reader – those actually participating in its community. Sol claims that Die was made "for" Ash (*Vol. 1*), but it is characters like Chuck, who enact a power fantasy built around a hypermasculine version of charisma, who are most at home: "as long as he does things with the right swashbuckling devil-may-care approach, it'll likely turn out okay. At least, for him" (*Vol. 1*). The qualifying sentence "for him" suggests that while Chuck might enjoy Die as is – as his powers require of him – others cannot engage with this version of Fantasy unthinkingly. Ash, now inside a female body and struggling with their queer identity, finds themselves fighting to survive within a world supposedly created to solely celebrate and entertain them (or the man they were assumed to be). Unlike Chuck, their embodiment of charisma makes Ash feel that they must constantly assess the boundaries of their agency and self-police their actions – because this world

was not designed for an empowered queer subjectivity and can be easily broken or unbalanced as a result.

Fighting for a Voice in Fantasy's Hypermasculine Landscape

When Die's creator Sol delivers the following set of expectations: "you have no idea how good this will be. This is fantasy for grownups," Ash notes that, "with that, we were sold, […] deluded enough to think that's what we actually wanted" (*Vol. 1*). Sol promises his players a mature, Adult Fantasy campaign, placing *DIE* in the Grimdark Fantasy genre. Adam Roberts (2014) defines "grimdark" as a term derived from the wargame *Warhammer 40,000*, now used in literary marketing to denote "fantasies that turn their backs on the more uplifting, Pre-Raphaelite visions of idealized medievaliana," claiming greater historical accuracy while also encapsulating a "sense that our present world is a cynical, disillusioned, ultraviolent place" (39). As with Sol's distinction of his own game, grimdark's realism and violence means it is typically promoted as Fantasy 'for adults.' When discussing the subgenre by its other name, "gritty fantasy," Young notes that while "constructed in opposition to Tolkien-derived High Fantasy by creators and consumers alike," Grimdark has retained "High Fantasy's medievalist Eurocentricity" (63). Young lists its well-known authors as "George RR Martin, Joe Abercrombie, R. Scott Bakker, and Steven Erikson" (63), and claims that the genre has "traditionally been the domain of young white men, who often assume their own normativity" both in its representation of history and of "realism" (79). Often asserted as 'authentic' medieval representation, Grimdark's adherence to a medieval aesthetic that empowers the white male subject at the expense of others makes it a hypermasculine mode typically reliant on uncritical replications of patriarchy. Young notes that critics of the genre "take issue with [its] sexism, violence, and racism," 'critiquing the notion that these are "historically authentic"' (63).

Die is not composed solely out of these works. However, presenting its totality as a Grimdark world implies that this is the ultimate destination of the accumulated hypermasculine convention across Fantasy's history. Like the TTRPG, Die encapsulates all of Fantasy genre culture, guiding the party and reader through a historical canon of immersive fantasy worlds spanning from the Brontës, through H. G. Wells and Lovecraft, to Tolkien, onto gaming itself. The party encounter this history physically, with each author 'echo' ruling a facet of the planet that encapsulates their work. Even Gillen's canon is skewed towards a white, male-dominated perspective on Fantasy, based primarily on a history of *D&D* proposed by Jon Peterson in his text *Playing at the World* (2012), which Gillen cites as an inspiration for *DIE* in paratextual essays about the comic's creation (*Vol. 1*). This male-dominated canon produces a Grimdark landscape: a secondary world permeated with violence, specifically hostile towards the non-male subject. Die is continually at war, continually enacting violence on itself, facet against facet. This performs Grimdark genre convention, while also reflecting the dominance of combat in TTRPG narrative, inflecting 'Die' with new meaning. Suffering is not confined to Ash within their female body, but affects all those on the margins: grief knight Matt, a black man, derives his power from suffering; meanwhile, their sister Angela suffers dismemberment as a result of her participation in the fantasy. When contemplating their travels through Die, Ash muses: "I used to think '*dungeon*' didn't make sense. Who goes to a dungeon

voluntarily? Dungeons have one purpose: to keep people captive. Oh, I get it now. The world is a dungeon, […] [an] endless warzone" (*Vol. 1*, original emphasis). Once presented with the realities of being immersed, Ash and their party become desperate to escape: "we'd never be trying to make our way across this hell if the other options weren't worse" (*Vol. 1*).

Hypermasculine violence pervades all facets of Die: it is not confined to the contemporary Grimdark moment, but shown to be an insidious momentum that has inflected this version of Fantasy's history. When Ash finds themselves in the trenches of Tolkien's facet, it too is a perpetual warzone in which not a single woman is present. Upon meeting Gillen's imagined 'echo' of Tolkien, his statement that "this whole place is an orcish mockery of my elvish tale" (*Vol.1*) draws attention to the undertones in Middle Earth's construction that Robert Stuart (2022) argues enforced "the racialist Othering so characteristic of the fantasy genre he [Tolkien] so empowered" (126). Similarly, when Ash encounters Wells, they face misogyny while inhabiting their feminine body, objectified and talked down to as an "incompetent" "young lady" and "a most intelligent type of girl" (*Vol. 3*). Both authors lament Die's violence, reflecting the pacifism of their real-life counterparts, but still cannot stop themselves enacting it, engaging in Die's endless war, and relegating non-white, non-male voices to the corners of the text. This trend is present even before the party meets Lovecraft, the final author they must confront. The need to stop Die's embodiment of genre culture from self-destructing and prevent its violence from bleeding into reality is what drives Ash and their friends onward through the hostile landscape. However, in *Fantasy Heartbreaker*, Ash's adventuring party of predominantly non-white, non-male subjects remains at Die's mercy, locked within the cycle of violence that claimed their friend Sol. They are unable to escape or enact change, until they find a space where they have control and agency. For Ash, this space is Angria: a world based in Gothic Fantasy, later proven to be the intellectual property of the juvenile Brontë siblings.

"Love Me, Without Limit" – The Destabilising Power of Queer Authority

Within Die Dominic becomes Ash, presenting as feminine, conducting relationships with both men and women, and is capable of becoming pregnant. This feminine appearance augments the powers they hold in their role as a 'Dictator'. Associated with the D4 (4-sided) dice, the Dictator persona was designed by Gillen to embody many aspects of a TTRPG party Face – that is, a "character with a high charisma score, that also has proficiency in one of the social skills like deception or persuasion" (*Dungeon Solvers*, 2022, para. 33). However, these abilities have sinister implications. As Gillen notes in the TTRPG manual he wrote to accompany the series, *DIE: A Roleplaying Game* (2019), "do not give [this role] to anyone you think doesn't understand the seriousness of a character who messes with people's emotions" (31). As a Dictator, Ash uses their voice to ensnare and control those around them, binding others physically and mentally to their will. Ash's Dictator powers are intrinsically tied to their queerness, reflecting the intersections in their gender and sexual identity. Notions of performativity within Angria's court intrigue underpin the strengths of a person whose gender identity is fluid. From a more negative perspective, accusations of deception are something which trans individuals face in media representation and real life. Ash's agential manipulation of thought and desire for their own benefit also plays into negative stereotypes prominent in popular

culture's articulation of bisexuality. In 2015, GLAAD noted that the 'depraved bisexual' trope had become a prominent and doubled-edged aspect of bisexual visibility in media. In "The Trope of the Evil Bisexual," Spenser Kornhaber (2015) notes bisexual characters are more likely to be "depicted as untrustworthy, prone to infidelity, and/or lacking a sense of morality"; to use sex "as a means of manipulation," and to engage in "self-destructive behaviour" (para. 6).

TTRPGs often compile 'decontextualised tropes' or 'fictive blocks' into their storytelling, as players are consumers of many aspects of a genre culture and often indiscriminately mix intertexts. When bisexuality is also reduced here to a 'trope,' examining its framing is crucial. When applied to Ash and others' perceptions of their queerness, notions of amorality, promiscuity, and manipulation are particularly prominent. As a Dictator, they can reshape the world around them through their speech. As a bisexual person inhabiting a female body, they also steal Izzy's partner in what they admit is partly a 'power fantasy.' The following off-page argument, described by Ash as "everything phobic," entails an accusation from Izzy that they "had used [their] powers on him" (*Vol.2*). Beyond such superficial parallels, it is true that Ash's voice performs seduction in the name of political power. While Chuck encompasses the hypermasculine seduction typically seen in Fantasy TTRPGs and video games, where the conquest of multiple lovers can be treated as a checklist, Ash's real acts of conquest also contain a sexual element. In their takeover of the Brontës' facet, the language through which they command the desires of male leaders and government officials is erotic. They annexe Glasstown through the command "all your heart is leans towards me [sic]" (*Vol.1*), order Angria's own dictators to "love me, without limit" (*Vol.2*) and later claim Angria's leader, the vampire Zamorna, through the oath "Zamorna the unhumbled, will be my humbled servant" (*Vol.2*). This final pact results in a diplomatic marriage in which the phrase "one ring to rule them all" is uttered (*Vol.2*), recontextualising the staples of Fantasy genre culture into a new queer, feminine, and implicitly romantic context.

The recontextualisation of Fantasy's imagery and language through queer perspectives is explored in the next section, but it is implied that Ash's ability to control the romantic and sexual desires of those around them is akin to Sauron's tyranny. This would be accurate if Ash themselves were portrayed as wholly evil – in the TTRPG handbook, Gillen constructs the 'balance' of the Dictator class as reliant on the player themselves: "The Dictator includes themes of consent and emotional violation. The Dictator's challenge […] is mainly one of navigating these boundaries and deciding what is acceptable" (110). He even claims that "there should be a reluctance to use the abilities in some situations" (111). Self-policing is expected of a 'good' Dictator, as represented through Ash's refusal to sleep with Zamorna while he is bound by her in *The Great Game*: "that I set your heart aflame is the reason I can't" (*Vol. 3*). These are valid criticisms of the Dictator's powers but are also bound within the text to Ash's exploration of queerness. Ash cannot fully celebrate their identity without guilt and continual self-conscious limitation. This entrapment is mostly self-generated, but also a result of how queerness is figured in the worldview promoted by Grimdark genre culture. Ash's conquest by seduction goes hand-in-hand with their beautiful, hyperfeminine presentation and so becomes overlaid with anxieties surrounding transgressive femininity, queer sexuality, and threats to patriarchal structures. Their voice places them in a liminal space where they become both the

subject and object of desire. They exist as a sexual object for the desires of men but command that objectification, thus forcing the world to accept the authority of their own desire, their relationships, and their presentation through the absolute agency their voice gives them. However, the rules by which a dictator's power operates – only being able to bind a target once if they are unwilling (*Vol.2*) – means that Ash must also be wary of taking up too much space or asking for too much.

However, their voice allows them to rule Angria, the only facet pictured that belongs to a female author, Charlotte Brontë, and belonging to an audience that does not fit the mould of heterosexual geek masculinity. Angria's leader Zamorna notes that although he resides in a position of power, he and his territory are subject to "what you all wished": he does not ultimately have power over his own domain, and instead remains a fantasy "of seventeen-year-old girls, crafted by a teenage girl" (*Vol. 2*). Angria is the only country designed to serve a non-male reader and the Gothic mode provides space where it is safe to indulge the kinds of desires Ash's powers give voice to. Although Ash is certainly a hypersexualised, promiscuous, and manipulative bisexual person, their leadership provides the only meaningful counternarrative to the Grimdark hypermasculine mode – one which glorifies many of the same impulses, so long as they remain for the male gaze. Ash's voice makes them an author figure: they can control and command the actions and emotions of the characters around them. A new route is offered to the party and to Fantasy through them, one not of violence but of articulation and expression – yet it holds a sinister aspect. It is only in the final volume, *Bleed*, that fears surrounding this authority are faced and revealed to be partially produced by their own anxieties surrounding queerness. Queer voices are one means by which Fantasy can be saved, but only once they shed the constraint of a canon and worldview that has cast them as monstrous Other.

Queer Voices: Celebrating Agency and Rejuvenating a Barren Landscape

DIE's final volume reprises another staple trope of TTRPGs: the dungeon crawl. The party must first travel with Lovecraft's echo through horror, down into a dwarven ruin whose illustrations specifically mimic Peter Jackson's staging of Tolkien's Moria in *The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001). Intertextuality is deliberately invoked to show that the heart of Fantasy has been reached: "we're delving too deep," "a tomb. A book. A well. We all get this one" (*Vol. 4*). As the centre of Brian Attebery's (1992) "fuzzy set" of genre (12) and an intertext that Ash presumes "we all get," Tolkien's imagery becomes exemplary of canonical authority. Thus, Ash's final struggle with their queerness and authority in this setting is also a struggle with genre. The acknowledgement of queer identity becomes framed as integral to the renewal of Fantasy that Gillen sets as the series' final goal.

The struggle between marginalised voices and canon is presented as the main preoccupation within *Bleed*. The party's encounter with Lovecraft results in his death at the hands of the party's cleric, Izzy, as commanded by one of her gods: "this Master of Dreams has ruled this realm for long enough. The length of his vision stretched to this moment, but no further. He is needed no more. Kill him" (*Vol. 4*). Through Lovecraft's murder at the hands of a woman of colour, this goddess states that genre culture should stop venerating the problematic aspects of its history, instead acknowledging marginalised voices and remedying the injustices against them. The phrase "to this moment" implies that Gillen sees now to be the turning point, gesturing towards contemporary efforts within

current genre culture following RaceFail 2009, such as #OwnVoices and #WeNeedDiverseBooks. In *The Dark Fantastic: Race and Imagination from Harry Potter to The Hunger Games* (2019), Ebony Elizabeth Thomas describes these movements as "a compelling example of restorying work" (162), aiming to challenge the predominantly white and heterosexual lens of genre fiction publishing. Thomas argues that this work is mainly done by fans, the same position Ash and Izzy occupy, thus "mainstream[ing] conversations about author identity, positioning, and privilege" by democratising access to these discourses (129). Although attempts to decolonise Fantasy predate social media, it has only recently become a greater concern in TTRPG culture. Gillen thus reframes the quest to save these two worlds as political. The party – made of both fans and creators – are not just choosing to save Fantasy *as is*, but curating what to take forward with them and what to cull and leave behind.

The statement made by Lovecraft's murder contextualises the second confrontation of the text: that of Ash with the version of themselves they have come to fear. A dragon wearing Ash's face supplants the Balrog in *DIE*'s recreation of the Mines of Moria and is the next monster that they must, presumably, defeat, to travel onward. Ash is faced with a destructive vision of themselves as woman, encompassing all the negative connotations surrounding their queer identity: "it's not that you need to delve too deep. If you delve at all, she's there. Everything I love. Everything I hate. Everything that I hate that I love, all mixed together. My beautiful serpent, she'll be the death of me" (*Vol. 4*). Rendering this dark mirror or antagonistic double as a dragon is a deliberate choice. When Ash first uses their power within *DIE*, they say: "it's so easy. It's like breathing. It's like breathing fire" (*Vol. 1*), establishing this metaphor for their agency and queerness. The image of the dragon has an extensive and established nexus of meaning within Fantasy genre culture. Dragons are not only powerful, but they hoard power: their stockpiling of wealth makes them greedy, exactly as Ash is perceived when claiming territory, hearts, and minds. In *Beowulf: the Monsters and the Critics* (1936), Tolkien's gloss of dragons as "a personification of malice, greed, destruction (the evil side of heroic life), and of the undiscriminating cruelty of fortune that distinguishes not good or bad (the evil aspect of all life)" recalls the transgressive and morally dubious light that Ash's queerness has been painted in during their time in Angria, even as it enables them to survive (17). Dragons are also embodiments of want and desire: another line from Tolkien in *On Fairy Stories* (1947) – "I desired dragons with a profound desire" – frames Ash's confrontation with themselves as an encounter that is too overwhelming and consuming to simply mean one thing (55). In *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (1981), Rosemary Jackson states that Fantasy's "association with imagination and with desire" are precisely what makes it "difficult to articulate or define" (2). Dragons are an icon of Fantasy and thus encompass such amorphous and threatening potential. Although both good and bad in *D&D*'s lore, 'evil' dragons also remain iconic antagonists in most *D&D* campaigns, an image so synonymous with the genre that it is implied here that one cannot take place without (defeat of) the other. Here, the dragon is Ash's queer self, and thus central to the fantasy in which they have been participating. Yet Ash also sees her as destructive and avaricious. To "love me [your queer self], without limit" (*Vol. 4*), a line that the dragon here repeats and transforms into a motif, is deemed dangerous.

Following this first face-to-face meeting, Ash comes out to their friends and the sinister cast that Ash's queerness and magical authority have held is revealed to be compounded by unreliable narration. Their speech focuses on how their queer desire and gender presentation could be interpreted as power hungry: "wishes are real, I guess, no matter how idle. And that's the problem. You've seen how I've acted here, to all of you. I feel I could do anything" (*Vol. 4*). Being *unapologetically queer* – without guilt or restraint – is revealed to be Ash's power fantasy. But it is also a fantasy operating within the boundaries of the world they inhabit: the hypermasculine, heteronormative mode of Fantasy that replicates the assumptions that patriarchal societies hold against women and queer people. This monstrous queerness is a product of Ash's own anxieties but shaped by the hostile world around them. The idea of 'limits' recurs as they realise they can break through the constraints of genre and in doing so also break the power structures that genre is replicating. It makes them too powerful because it goes beyond the realms of the imagination they inhabit, into new realms of overwhelming possibility: "she'll let us past, if I'm *everything* she wants me to be" (*Vol. 4*, original emphasis).

In finally accepting themselves as queer and genderfluid, Ash begins to take on the potential to save Die and thus Fantasy from destruction: not following in the footsteps of the white cisgender male they have been presumed to be, but as a genderfluid individual who can bring a new, generative perspective to the genre they have fought to be part of. This is demonstrated in the sequence that follows their acceptance of a new identity: Ash walks out onto a bridge over darkness; grapples with their fiery, serpentine queerness and tugs it over the edge of a precipice, into the pitch black below. Parallels between this set piece and *The Fellowship of the Ring* have already been drawn, and as Ash seemingly sacrifices themselves the intertextualities at play are not subtle: "fly, you fools" (*Vol. 4*) is quoted directly. The reader therefore knows what to expect when, a few pages later, having struggled with and accepted their boundary-breaking queerness, Ash triumphantly returns, transformed, and clad in white. They have defeated the monster, but that monster is not their queer self. It is the negative associations of queerness they have internalised from existing within a cis-heteronormative world. Gillen states clearly that: "destruction isn't solely negative. It can do many things. Including set people free" (*DIE Vol. 4*).

Jackson (1981) argues that "in expressing desire, fantasy can operate in two ways": it can "tell of, manifest or show desire," "it can expel desire, when this desire is a disturbing element which threatens cultural continuity," or perform both functions at once (2). Ash assumes their draconic queerness must be expelled, particularly as it has destabilised the world around them as they have passed across the facets of Die, only for this to be disproved. Furthermore, Jackson states that Fantasy's exploration of desire typically "opens up, for a brief moment on to disorder […] on to that which lies outside dominant value systems" (2). Yet desire is articulated here within a scene that exemplifies the dominant values of Fantasy. Ash's queerness is affirmed not only through rebirth imagery, but through an iconic Fantasy work that many take to embody genre tradition. Their expression of desire is "using the language of the dominant order," as Jackson expects (2). Instead of showcasing "the limits of that order," their combination here however argues for compatibility (2). Fantasy can be reimagined to include Ash's experiences within it. While their queerness might be

disruptive to narrative and social order, it is not ultimately expelled: the dominant order is challenged to instead accommodate them.

DIE once again utilises TTRPGs' abilities to reference and construct secondary worlds from snippets of any and all works of a genre culture. Overt mimicry of Tolkien also emphasises their status as a transformative work, working to highlight its parallel functions to other participatory texts such as fanfiction. In *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Roleplaying Games* (2010), Jennifer Grouling noted the similarities between the two forms as a fannish "response to literature and a way of interacting in literary worlds" that is personalised and potentially subversive (xix). This means that, like fanfiction, TTRPGs can empower the voices and perspectives of what Henry Jenkins (1988) terms "marginalised subcultural groups" (87). This includes the perspectives of queer people, whose vocality in transformative works and participatory culture is discussed by scholars such as Young and Thomas, as well as Anna Llewellyn (2021), Diana W. Anselmo (2018), and C. R. Berger (2010). *DIE*'s use of intertextuality compounds the links between queerness and creative agency by stressing that TTRPGs are an informal and experimental fictional space where the "restorying" work (162) Thomas identifies in Fantasy's diverse reader and fan communities can also be completed.

As they transform into Ash the White, Ash states: "if you think about it, all of Narnia is the closet. And eventually, you have to come out. The place brings everything to the surface to be examined. That's what it tries to do. You learn from it." (*Vol. 4*). Fantasy is defined by them as an experimental space, one that, as Jackson argues, "recombines and inverts the real, but it does not escape it" (12). The colloquial tone of the closet metaphor stresses TTRPGs as an inherently personal and transformative response to genre. With fewer barriers to entry, identities and narratives can be tried on and changed in a small, localised setting, until something fits. In the same way that Izzy's killing of Lovecraft represents a political decision of what to take forward into Fantasy's next era, so too does Ash's transformation. Acceptance of themselves and Fantasy's ability to articulate their true desires is what ultimately allows them to take a place as a true authority within Die. Although a transformative response, Ash the White is not an imitation, but instead embodies Fantasy in epitomised canonical form: after struggling against a hostile canon, in *Bleed* they are now, finally, operating on equal footing.

It is therefore implied that all of Fantasy is at a tipping point. While writing back against Fantasy's hypermasculine mode is not isolated to the contemporary moment, that is where Gillen chooses to locate it. When the label gender fluidity is offered to Ash, it is by Izzy, a schoolteacher: "kids in class talked about it, I looked into it. It's a thing." (*Vol. 4*). Ash thinks in response: "I'm more than a little jealous of the kids […] we didn't have words for any of these complexities, and since then, there's been all these expansion packs about character classes…" (*Vol. 4*). Perhaps this affection for "expansion packs" and "classes" explains the kinship Ash feels with labelled categories for their own queer identity, while also alluding to how long-running TTRPG systems such as *D&D* have only just begun to hastily unpick the canonical biases that are encoded and intensified by their rules. While debates around marginalised voices in the Fantasy community are long-standing, Gillen's representation of them as a contemporary concern may reflect the TTRPG community's own

timeline. In *Diversity and Dungeons and Dragons* (2020), Wizards of the Coast note that "making *D&D* as welcoming and inclusive as possible has moved to the forefront of our priorities over the last six years" (para. 1), marking it as a relatively new phenomenon. Therefore, the challenge *DIE* hopes to pose to the cis-heteronormative and hypermasculine mode of Fantasy is partially specific to TTRPG subculture which, having condensed Fantasy's textual practice down into immutable rubric, has also experienced a delay in deconstruction. While the events of *DIE* culminate in 2020 partially because of the significance of the number twenty within TTRPG culture as a 'critical hit,' it also fortuitously aligns with this first official acknowledgement by Wizards of the Coast of *D&D*'s own problematic role in Fantasy genre culture and their newly emphasised aim to "to depict humanity in all its beautiful diversity" (para. 3). *Bleed* closes with a call to action: to move out of the era of Fantasy that Die enshrines and into a new one. Ash and Izzy are the primary means by which Fantasy is saved but in a final flourish, Chuck, the white misogynist who has thrived within the Grimdark setting – and the only traditionally published Fantasy author amongst the group, canonically legitimised by the genre's current structure – is the only party member to remain trapped in Die, enjoying and participating in this particular fantasy. This unsubtle act of sacrifice signals an end to Fantasy's previous heteronormative and male-dominated history, now fully reckoned with, and a movement towards a more diverse and generative future in which the staple tropes that compose Fantasy are given new meaning and life through the unique voices of those who encounter them.

Conclusion

DIE literalises how TTRPGs function as microcosms of the genres they playfully imitate. Fantasy TTRPGs draw on a tapestry of shared intertexts for players to refer to when communicating with each other and *DIE*'s art style similarly utilises iconography from Fantasy works to convey its meaning. TTRPGs also compile genre convention into presumed 'universal' norms. *DIE* highlights the exclusionary politics that have underpinned this process, reinforcing the (incorrect) assumption that the quintessential Fantasy reader is male, straight, and white. *DIE* first exposes the heteronormative, patriarchal power structures that have historically permeated Fantasy, and then attempts to overturn them through Ash.

As a presumed male reader of Fantasy who does not fit the dominant mode because of their queerness, Dominic Ash struggles with negotiating this condensed version of Fantasy genre culture. A character like Chuck, performing a hypermasculine power fantasy, fares a lot better, living a literally charmed life because he more easily fits into the gender roles provided by the genre's mainstream. Meanwhile, Ash and their other marginalised party members must fight tooth and nail to be heard. Ash finds it easiest to exist in Angria, a desire-driven and feminine mode of Fantasy steeped in the Gothic. They derive their agency from Dictatorship, a magical power inherently tied to both their queerness and to authorship, as all their power is derived from word and expression. While Dictatorship initially seems to be a monstrous representation of queerness, it offers a way forward in Fantasy's future when all other authorities are faced with widespread and imminent destruction. In fact, Ash's powers are rendered threatening partially through Ash's own narration: a product of their anxieties and shame from enjoying a queer fantasy in which they exist "without

limit."

It is only through their disruptive manipulation of desire, and through their acceptance of themselves, that they can progress through *DIE*'s final quest, take on the mantle of hero and author, and save the world that stands for Fantasy itself. TTRPGs are not simply a place to enshrine Fantasy's legacy: they enable players to respond to it transformatively, with the power to shift its focus away from the canon and its white male subject. In *DIE*'s final volume it is implied that the canon Ash has fought against must now be left behind and that Fantasy as a genre can progress into a new era of creativity and productivity, rather than simply stagnating. In the closing pages, Ash says: "You were perhaps hoping we'd defeat Die. How can you defeat something like that. All you do is make peace with it. And the peace you make with it is your own" (*Vol. 4*). The queer subjectivity presented in Die cannot erase Fantasy's past, but it can take that history, and the building blocks of meaning inherited from every text that has come before, distilled down into a discrete lexicon. With these tools in hand, Ash and their party look towards the future of Fantasy, with the hope of either remaking it or building something new.

NOTES

1. The published volumes of *DIE* do not contain page numbers.

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BIONOTE

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NEW BODIES IN SUBURBAN FANTASTIC CINEMA

Pedro Lauria

After its first decades of consolidation, cinema began to produce media with increasingly elaborate narratives. As a natural consequence, movie theatre became a place where it is possible, for a few hours, to live great adventures, discover different places, and look at the world from new perspectives in an audiovisual experience shared with dozens or hundreds of other viewers. Despite its narrative power specific stories and perspectives have been largely ignored, particularly within mainstream western cinema. This is the case of the history of homosexuality, marked by invisibility as stated by Katharina Lindner in *Film Bodies* (2018). As Lindner points out, this perspective is prior to the idea of representativeness, stating that even though historically underrepresented, women were hypervisible in cinema, while queer bodies were practically absent (22). The historical difficulty with which queer professionals in the industry can be open about their identity has at times caused stories and representations of LGBTQIA+ bodies in mainstream cinema to be ignored or told primarily by people who do not identify as queer.

This ongoing under/misrepresentation has an important effect on the constitution of entire cinematographic genres and subgenres since they consolidate narrative, aesthetic, semantic and syntactic elements that define them. For example, many action and Western films are marked by androcentrism and heteronormative romance, as discussed by Barna Donovan in *Blood, Guns and Testosterone* (2009) and Roderic McGillis in *He Was Some Kind of a Man* (2009), as this is an intrinsic part of such genres. To this day, these (mainly the Western) are still recognised by elements such as the virile male hero and the 'damsel in distress,' with narrative and syntactic structures marked by violent problem solving, in which the protagonist proves his value by defeating the villain physically. Such elements are so tied into these genres that any text which does not repeat this pattern is usually considered innovative or subversive.

In the present work, my attention turns to a newly categorised cinematographic subgenre, the suburban fantastic cinema, to demonstrate how the narrative and syntactic elements were historically tied to a male and heterocentric narrative where the 'Other' was pushed to the periphery as an element that should be feared or assimilated. I demonstrate how productions from the last decade present horizons of change in the subgenre as new films and television (TV) series incorporate LBGBTQIA+ bodies into the suburban fantastic cinema for the first time, re-reading it through a more critical nostalgia. This is the case of the *Fear Street* (2021) trilogy, which shows, a black lesbian teen as the protagonist in a retelling of the story of another queer character who was treated as a villainous 'Other.' This article demonstrates how a queer reading of the classic suburban fantastic provides a change of perspective, aesthetic and syntactic elements which are taken as an inherent

part of the subgenre in its genesis. In so doing, I expose how this necessary freshness challenges the historical forms of representations of the subgenre and helps it to stay more relevant to contemporary contexts.

The Suburban Fantastic Cinema

The suburban fantastic cinema encompasses a set of films that begin to appear in the 1980s such as *ET – The Extraterrestrial*, (1982), *Gremlins* (1984), *Fright Night* (1985), *The Goonies*, (1985) and *Home Alone*, (1990). According to Angus McFadzean, who first proposed the subgenre in *Suburban Fantastic Cinema* (2019), it encompasses movies in which mostly pre-teen and teenage boys living within the suburbs are called upon to confront a disruptive fantastic force (1). Semantically, the subgenre is born from an amalgamation of elements linked to middle-class daily life and extraordinary events that affect the environment in which the protagonist lives (usually the suburbs).[1] Despite the name, these semantic elements do not necessarily need to be linked to the suburbs, and they do not even need to be fantastic (although they do have to confront some norms of the protagonist's daily life and/or environment). Such characterisation is mainly derived from the precursor film of the subgenre: *E.T.*; however, over the years, new texts have expanded its semantic range. Narratively, the subgenre usually fits in the American Monomyth structure analysed by Robert Jewett and John Lawrence (1977):

> A community in a harmonious paradise is threatened by evil; normal institutions fail to contend with this threat; a selfless superhero emerges to renounce temptations and carry out the redemptive task; aided by fate, his decisive victory restores the community to its paradisiacal condition; the superhero then recedes into obscurity (215).

Syntactically, the subgenre usually links this structure to the protagonist's maturation narrative, typical of Bildungsroman dramas (which focus on the psychological growth of the protagonist from childhood to adulthood). In other words, the maturation in these films depends upon the protagonists performing heroic acts, such as saving aliens, the suburbs, or even the world, and not on their emotional development.

From its emergence in the early 1980s until its decline in the mid-1990s, the subgenre privileged male protagonists, specifically white, cis, middle-class, and heterosexual ones. This scenario becomes even more poignant if we consider that such films, due to their presentation of the youth culture, are often tied in with nostalgic feelings. (McFadzean, 26). In general, queer experience is marked by contradictory feelings about the past. On a personal level, when an individual's trajectory may be marked by family trauma and experiences of violence, and also, on a historical level, when intolerance against LGBTQIA+ bodies were even more ubiquitous. In this regard, Gilad Padva's perspective on nostalgia in *Queer Nostalgia in Cinema and Pop Culture* (2014), is encouraging:

> The idea that the past is needlessly deterministic and that sometimes dreadful experiences can be nostalgically transformed into pleasurable fantasies has been revealed to me as inspiring and empowering. The power of queer nostalgia is the power of fantasy that creates better existentiality for queer in their quest for new horizons, somewhere over the rainbow (231).

The experience of finding emotional and nostalgic elements in the past can be an instrument to regain control over or strengthen your own narrative. Therefore, when a subgenre with nostalgic characteristics denies an entire social group the possibility of also starring in their stories, it allows us to infer that feeling nostalgia in these films is positioned as a heterosexual exclusivity. In addition to not considering that certain feelings are inherent to childhood and adolescence, the classic suburban fantastic cinema does not consider that the past for a queer person is a moment full of discoveries and understandings of their own identity – processes that are part of the subgenre's narrative.

The protagonist of the suburban fantastic cinema is crucially not compelled to transform society but rather returns it to its previous status. Such restitutive interests, in turn, are easily explained if we consider the protagonist's gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and class since 'he' is privileged by the constitution of a white-centred and patriarchal society, whose reaffirmation (re)assures his privileges (McFadzean 56). It is worth pointing out that demographically post-war American suburbs were inhabited mainly by a white middle-class and the protagonists are rarely shown in severe financial difficulties or suffering serious social problems.[2] As John Ehrman explains in *The Eighties: America in the Age of Regan* (2005) "even suburbanites became connected to the wider world, they were expected to remain inward-looking in important ways" and "would not have much concern for addressing broader social issues" (30). Instead, the difficulties and dissatisfactions of the suburban fantastic protagonist are usually caused by feeling misunderstood by authority figures around them – whether family members, teachers, or police officers. Thus, 'his' journey involves establishing 'his' presence and reaffirming 'his' point of view, while gaining the respect of these figures.

To achieve 'his' goals, the protagonist of the classic suburban fantastic narratives must deal just with a disrupting 'Other' – annihilating, expelling, or assimilating it to the social order. That is why Ian Wojcik-Andrews (2000) posits a Marxist reading that the 'Other' (or the fantastic) in these films is a commodity with a narrative function linked to the realisation of certain patriarchal and capitalist rites to achieve what capitalist society privileges: heteronormativity, monogamous relationships, private property, class status or success (127). For example, at the end of *E.T.*, Elliot is recognised as a hero by his mother, friends, and even authorities, after being reprimanded by them during the film. The young man, who did not feel heard at home, is finally seen with respect and admiration, elevating his social status. Even more symbolic is Marty McFly's story in *Back to the Future* (1985), since he not only restores suburban normality but also manages to improve his financial condition by the end of the film. Despite having contact with fantastic elements – whether

an alien with regenerative abilities or a time machine – Elliot and Marty have no concerns about how their knowledge could positively impact society. A very different outcome happens in *The People Under the Stairs* (1991), in which Pointdexter (potentially the only black protagonist of this first decade of the suburban fantastic cinema) after defeating the villains, shares the riches with the community around him. In this way, classic suburban fantastic cinema does not just ignore the narrative of minorities, especially LGBTQIA+ bodies, but it also uses the figure of this 'Other' that does not comply with the hegemonic order of 1980s America and its patriarchal values as a commodity, as is the case of the queer body. As Chris Weedon suggests in *Feminism, Theory and the Politics of Difference* (1999) the queer movement challenges the very ideas of normality which underpin social institutions and practices (73). After all, the queer body, when going against such strict codes of performativity, sexuality, and affection naturally clashes with these definitions.

It is essential to position suburban fantastic origin within the context of Reaganite entertainment, defined by the production of high-concept works with striking visual elements that generated the 'excitement' of going to the cinema and criticised as part of the 'escapist entertainment' of the Reagan Era, as stated by Andrew Britton (101). The films of this conjecture usually did not delve into social and everyday issues but focused on grandiose and fanciful events. In the end, almost as a rule, the spectators went home feeling that everything was resolved and the world was safe, which could be true if they were part of the same demographic as the protagonist – typically middle-class, white, cis, heterosexual and male. This concept is particularly interesting because, as Robin Wood states in *Movies and Mass Culture* (1996), works from Reaganite entertainment presented a repetition of structures and elements that aimed "to diminish and disarm all the social movements that gained momentum in the 1970s: radical feminism, black militancy, LGBTQIA+ liberation and the attacks on patriarchy" (204). In short, by giving primacy to the repetition of the figure of the heterosexual white man as a hero, no space was given to the representation and subjectivity of other bodies. Considering that a large part of the works of suburban fantastic cinema was aimed at children and young people, this conservative and excluding culture was already instilled by this media since childhood. It is important to point out that this is a susceptible period in the formation of the identity of the queer individuals, which evidently impacts the development of certain perceptions about the world.

Suzan Jeffords explains in *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (1994) how the Reagan period was marked by blockbusters whose protagonists were the hyper-performative, cis and heteronormative conception of the male hero, which she calls the 'hard body' – the one who could physically solve all problems and save the world. Although most of her analysis delves mainly into films with 'one-man armies' *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), *Rambo* (1982), and *Die Hard* (1988), the author also cites suburban fantastic films in her argument. For example, she compares George McFly's 'training' in *Back to the Future* with Reagan's measures to teach America to stop being a coward in the face of communism and the Islamic revolution (70). Thus, even if Jeffords' book shows us the excess of male bodies as protagonists of the American cinema of the 1980s, it does not diminish the particularly intense machismo present in suburban fantastic cinema. For example, among more than sixty films from the 1980s and 1990s categorised in my PhD thesis (2022), only

five have female protagonists and, even so, they share their narratives with a male/masculine co-protagonist as is the case of *Short Circuit* (1986), *Beetlejuice* (1988), *Karate Kid 4* (1994), *Casper* (1995) and *Casper and Wendy* (1998). Due to this scarcity of female narratives and protagonists, McFadzean claims that suburban fantastic cinema, at least in its origins, is an androcentric subgenre (52), a similar perspective to which Catherine Lester points out in *Horror Films for Children* (2021 107).

After the aforementioned decline of the subgenre in the 1990s, its return in the early 2010s emerged in a cycle that McFadzean calls "reflexive suburban fantastic cinema" (115) headed by nostalgic works set in the 1980s such as *Super 8* (2011), *It – Chapter 1* (2016), and *Stranger Things* (2016-present). The return of the subgenre can be read in several ways: as a decline in the traditional Fantasy franchises that marked the 2000s, such as the *Lord of the Rings* (2001-2003), *Harry Potter* (2001-2011), and the *Chronicles of Narnia* (2005-2010); as part of a nostalgic generational cycle where young people who watched suburban fantastic films in the 1980s are now old enough to produce their work – as is the case of J. J. Abrams (*Super 8*) and the Duffer Brothers (Stranger Things); and as a response to the 2008 housing crisis, as the suburban lifestyle was in real danger, and consequently, the suburbanite's desire to restore it to normalcy. As for this last reading, it is worth mentioning Donald Trump's successful reuse of Reagan's slogan, "Make America Great Again" as a nostalgic and restorative motto. However, even in the face of the greater influx of non-white, non-heterosexual, and non-male bodies in Hollywood these new suburban fantastic works continue to centre their narratives on hegemonic bodies; a process that can be explained, in part, due to the exclusion of non-hegemonic bodies from the subgenre in its first decade. Such a contemporary perspective questions whether these androcentric characteristics would be constitutive of the suburban fantastic cinema itself and not just a hallmark of films made in the Reaganite era.

Nevertheless, other works conceived during the return of the suburban fantastic cinema of the 2010s go against this maxim, presenting new possibilities of protagonists for the subgenre. This is the case in films like *Kin* (2018), *See You Yesterday*, (2019) and *Vampires vs. The Bronx* (2020) that move female, black, Latino, and LGBTQIA+ bodies to the centre. In so doing, these films also migrate their settings from middle-class suburbs to urban peripheries, bringing new elements (police violence, gangs, greater sense of community) to the fore.[3] Such representations raise questions about the syntax of suburban fantastic cinema, which is no longer restricted to restorative narratives dominated by a suburban and white American middle-class and start to highlight other perspectives and possibilities. Consequently, I will delve into three of these works: *Fear Street 1994*, *1978* and *1666* (2021), a trilogy of films which bring a black lesbian woman to the centre and frames sexuality as an intrinsic part of their identity and maturation process. By reading the trilogy in relation to both Gothic and queer criticism and comparing its elements to others from classic suburban fantastic films, I demonstrate how contemporary iterations assist in a re-visiting the subgenre's original conservative ideologies. In such a way, it is feasible to study the narrative and syntactic possibilities allowed by the entry of these new bodies into the subgenre and ascertain by going against the idea of androcentrism, heteronormativity, and whiteness as constitutive elements of suburban fantastic cinema as pointed by McFadzean in 2019.[4] Thereby, this work aims to prevent such characteristics become intrinsic to the suburban fantastic, avoiding the phenomenon that happened with the Western. After all, it is challenging to dissociate the genre today from its androcentrism and

heteronormative characteristics. This argument becomes even more valuable if we consider the potential of the suburban fantastic to show and celebrate the underrepresented childhood and adolescence of non-hegemonic bodies.

Fear Street: Ancestry and Reparation

In 2021, Netflix released in the same month the Fear Street Horror trilogy: *Fear Street: 1994*, *Fear Street: 1978*, and *Fear Street: 1666*. Each film permeates a different subgenre: the suburban fantastic cinema, the slasher, and the American Gothic respectively. A larger narrative connects all these movies: the story of Shadyside, a working-class suburb in Ohio, and the curse of Sarah Fier, a woman killed in the seventeenth century, based on an accusation of witchcraft. According to the legend, Fier left a curse before her execution in which every fifteen years her vengeful spirit would take possession of a Shadyside dweller, beginning a killing spree. The curse makes Shadyside unable to develop economically, unlike its wealthy neighbour, Sunnyvale. The first film's story begins in 1994, with the most recent murders in Shadyside. The protagonist, Deena, is a black and lesbian teenager that becomes involved in the plot when her ex-girlfriend, Sam, becomes the target of Fier's curse. By itself, the choice to opt for a queer and black protagonist is undoubtedly significant considering the history of the subgenre as there is no other suburban fantastic film with a protagonist with this profile among more than a hundred works that I have analysed since its origin. Furthermore, the choice of Deena as the protagonist brings semantic, syntactic, and narrative innovations – since both the ethnicity and the sexuality of the character are important in the course of the plot, bringing up a series of subjects never discussed with such a focus by the subgenre. The trilogy addresses such topics as racism, police violence, social inequality, bigotry, and homophobia, contributing to a Gothic perspective where the suburbs are already dangerous for the protagonist. As Ashley Carranza explains in *The Rebirth of the King's Children* (2018), these narratives show a "world where young people are savagely murdered and their parents are unable (or unwilling) to do anything about it" making the protagonists "learn to rely on one another protect themselves and future victims" (15). This construction is almost antithetical to classic suburban fantastic cinema, where the world is calm and predictable before the disruption caused by the 'Other.' Importantly, this tone is typical of more contemporary and violent suburban fantastic works like *It*, *Stranger Things*, and *Summer of 84'* (2018) that have a more suburban Gothic world-building. This subgenre is categorised by Bernice Murphy in T*he Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture* (2009) as:

> A subgenre concerned, first and foremost, with playing upon the lingering suspicion that even the most ordinary-looking neighborhood, or house, or family, has some- thing to hide, and that no matter how calm and settled a place looks, it is only ever a moment away from dramatic (and generally sinister) incident. (2)

In comparison, while suburban Gothic brings a more critical reading of the suburban middle-class, suburban fantastic generally focuses on a more light-hearted perspective in which restoring the

situation to a previous moment of order and harmony is possible. As much as there are these tonal differences between the suburban Gothic and the suburban fantastic, it also has narrative similarities. McFadzean explains that it is not uncommon for films to mix both subgenres, such as *Poltergeist* (1982), *The Burb's* (1989), and *It* (1990) in which the initial portrait of the suburbs is already disharmonious, but it is the fantastic element that forces the protagonist to act (12). In such a way, even when the disruption is resolved at the end of the narrative, the suburb does not become peaceful – because it never was in the first place. Alexandra Warwick explains in "Feeling Gothicky?" (2007) this possibility of proximity between Gothic and other genres, pointing out that "Gothic is a mode rather than a genre" and "that its defining characteristics are its mobility and continued capacity for reinvention'' (6). In such a way, it is expected that as suburban fantastic productions abandon a more innocent perception of the suburbs and begin to look at it more critically, they start to use more Gothic tones in their narrative. This perspective was still developing in the 1980s, but became a trend in the 2010s as these films speak to a millennial generation that is no longer a child.

Victoria Carrington states in *The Contemporary Gothic: Literacy and Childhood in Unsettled Times* (2011) how the Gothic approach is efficient in showing how contemporary childhoods are not lived in a glow of innocence and "often there is no more innocence to recapture" (306). This Gothic perspective opposes the escapism of Hollywood cinema and the first suburban fantastic films in the context of the Reagan era. Despite showing a nostalgic portrait of the past, these contemporary works also point out how the inefficiency of parents and authorities can lead children and adolescents to death. The difference is that in *Fear Street*, by focusing on a black and lesbian woman, the authoritarian disregard is no longer seen only from a neoliberal perspective of state inefficiency but also from a perspective of social violence. For example, showing the police corruption in arresting and framing a black man for a crime he did not commit or the homophobia suffered by queer characters in different generations. Nonetheless, in the case of the *Fear Street* trilogy, it becomes impossible to separate the violence suffered by the protagonist and her friends from the history of violence against non-hegemonic bodies. In *Fear Street 1978*, we are introduced to Ziggy, a survivor of a massacre at a summer camp in the 1970s. To tell the story of how she survived, the director, Leigh Janiak, chooses to migrate from the suburban fantastic to a slasher, highlighting the proximity between the two subgenres. After all, as Isabel Pineda points out in *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasures of Horror Film* (1997), the slasher is also primarily a suburban subgenre marked by the disruption of everyday experience and the protagonist's attempt to restore normalcy (72). In addition, the slasher also brings the 'Other' as the disruptive force that does not fit within a hegemonic model and puts it at risk. Crucially, David Green's queer reading in T*he Finalizing Woman: Horror, Femininity and Queer Monsters* (2011) proposes that the slasher villain could be understood as "an enemy of the heterosexual order, which the Final Girl […] rises up to protect" (173). Green brings up this perspective by stating that slasher's villains are usually male figures who do not fit the heteronormativity model and primarily kill young teenagers at the height of their sex lives (167). In the end, like the gremlins, vampires, and killer clowns of classic suburban fantastic narratives, the slasher's antagonist must be annihilated since his existence cannot be accepted within that social order of which the protagonist is a part.

There is, however, a gender bias that needs to be considered between both subgenres. If suburban fantastic protagonists are primarily male, slashers almost always have female heroines. Moreover, this gender difference has implications in the syntax of the subgenres as the protagonist's journey to restore the *status quo* is not done through a coming-of-age narrative but through survival and counterattacking (or becoming active). Carol Clover, in *Men, Women and Chainsaws* (2015) explains how this narrative is an attempt to impose on women a kind of 'masculinisation's journey' in the slasher films as "the moment at which the Final Girl is effectively phallicised is the moment that the plot halts and horror ceases" (50). Thereby, both suburban fantastic and slasher are marked by narratives in which the protagonist needs to 'become' a man, either through maturation or through masculinisation. However, in *Fear Street 1978*, Janiak manages to subvert this narrative by changing the expected outcome of the film, as she does not propose an escapist narrative in which the protagonist emerges victorious after reproducing violence against her stalker. On the contrary, the film ends with a tragedy in which Ziggy's sister sacrifices herself to save her in an act of fraternal love – a non-heteronormative kind of love that makes a thematic link with another sacrifice that occurs in *Fear Street 1666*.

In the third film, set in 1666, the story behind Fier is revealed when Deena is transported to her body one day before her death. The audience discover that Fier was a lesbian teenager used as a scapegoat by a man, Solomon Goode, who made a satanic pact to achieve economic success for himself and his heirs. To get rid of the blame for the tragedies in the settlement where he lives, Goode accuses Fier of witchcraft, taking advantage of the settlers' prejudice against her sexuality. To save her girlfriend from the same fate, Fier accepts the accusation and claims that she was bewitching her partner. The revelation of the real cause of Fier's death and the necessity to tell her story is what makes Deena's maturing process complete in the second part of the film – set back in 1994. As Padva states, "retelling the past is a major part of the creation of a gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender heritage with its own role models, icons, symbols, emblems, and glorified imageries" (6). After all, Deena, as a lesbian teenager, is inspired by the discovery that Fier was a romantic and tragic heroine to save her girlfriend from having the same fate. Deena understands herself alongside Fier as an 'Other' to a white, patriarchal, heteronormative society that she has to face to tell their own stories. In this sense, *Fear Street* diverges the classic narrative of *Back to the Future* as if in the 1980's film it is necessary to go to the past to change the present, in *Fear Street*, going to the past is essential to rather *understand* the present. In *Back to the Fifties* (2015) Michael Dwyer draws attention to how Marty McFly learns "to quickly navigate geographically and socially through the 1950s, suggesting that generations become superior to antecedents" (39). Marty indeed teaches his father how to deal with his problems and even steals the Rock'n'roll authorship from a black musician. In contrast, Deena does not follow the fanciful narrative of altering the past, let alone demonstrating superiority to her predecessors. On the contrary, she uses the opportunity to learn from them and change her present. Likewise at the end of *Back to the Future*, Marty, a cis, heterosexual, white boy, alters the past to make financial gains for himself and his family in the present. In parallel *Fear Street*'s villain is precisely a cis, heterosexual, white man who curses the following generations to ensure financial gains for himself and his heirs. This shift in perspective

demonstrates how both films have different judgments between comparable actions from similar figures. In *Fear Street*, the white man's act of mischievously altering his social status is not considered harmless or innocent. On the contrary, Salomon Goode's curse can be seen as an allegory for the colonisation process and its consequences, establishing a system where hegemonic bodies had better resources to the detriment of other communities.

The solution offered by the narrative to oppose the oppressive structures solidified in time is given precisely by understanding how they began. In this sense, it is interesting to relate the witch's figure as a scapegoat of this colonisation process as described by Silvia Federici in *O Calibã e a Bruxa* (2017). Federici points out how witch hunts were part of a predatory colonial expropriation project that laid the foundations of capitalism. Among its methods of appropriation of the female body were the attempts to control her reproductive process (203). As Lester explains, the onset of puberty is usually treated as the moment when girls start to develop the "monstrous feminine" qualities that dominant patriarchal ideology considers abject and frightening (108). In *Fear Street: 1666*, it is precisely when Fier matures by asserting her sexual identity that she starts to be treated as a witch which is a visible double standard given that this is the moment when the heterosexual protagonist of classic suburban fantastic films starts to be treated as a hero. In *E.T.*, for example, this occurs in a scene when Elliot decides to act against his school, freeing the frogs from his science class and, in the end, kissing his love interest. Crucially, Fier chooses not to 'pass' as straight, asserting her queer identity even if it puts her at risk by making it clear that she does not want to be controlled by a husband and, consequently, subjugated to being a mother against her will. As Cheryl Clarke notes in *El Lesbianismo* (1988), being a lesbian in a country such as the United States is an act of resistance because "women cannot be colonised when they cannot limit their sexual, productive, reproductive prerogatives and their energies" (99). Fier confronts all forms of patriarchal control over her body, being punished with her execution. Moreover, despite having her destiny set by a straight white man, the director Janiak gives Fier some agency over her destiny – such as when she refuses to become Solomon's wife, denying the subjugation of her body to the heteronormative institution, and when she chooses to save her beloved, Hannah Miller, from the same fate as her. Thus, in the second part of *Fear Street: 1666*, set back in 1994, Deena also understands that it is not enough to end the fantastic element to restore harmony as in classic suburban fantastic films. In Janiak's trilogy, the protagonist must break with the structures and cycles of oppression that allowed the fantastic element to appear in the first place, a process anchored in the erasure of narratives of non-hegemonic bodies and the naturalisation of a system of legal and socioeconomic inequality, where certain subjects are doomed to have less access to rights and resources.[5] An objective that, in a representative way, Deena achieves alongside a group formed entirely by other black people and other women.

The trilogy demonstrates that, contrary to what the suburban fantastic films released in the Reagan period showed, American society was never in harmony – at least for certain bodies. Even so, it is necessary to discuss *Fear Street* from the perspective of a dispute over nostalgia. After all, even if the periods portrayed in the films were not peaceful for non-hegemonic bodies (arguably, no period ever was) – they still bring iconic moments and happy feelings that should be

remembered. As Padva states, "nostalgia does not necessarily hide or underestimate painful history but rather plays its part in mediating and modifying the past in order to make it more bearable" (228). In this sense, the suburban fantastic as an inherent nostalgic subgenre seems ideal for telling queer narratives as, according to Padva, "nostalgia like queerness is informal, unfixed, dynamic, transgressive, and negate dominant classifications and structures of meaning (229)." For this reason, it is representative that the *Fear Street* trilogy portrays past decades through the eyes of bodies that were excluded from these narratives in this very past, as is the case of the suburban fantastic films from 1980s. However, this nostalgia is not the same 'simple and pleasant' historical perspective of the past that Dwyer points out in the *Back to the Future* trilogy, which excluded any panorama of social tensions and civil movements (21). As Janelle Wilson states in *Nostalgia: Sanctuary of Meaning* (2014), choosing what you want to be remembered for results in an erasure of memories – causing past decades sometimes to be remembered as less 'troubled' times (42). This nostalgia also is not the utopian past that Reagan evoked from his slogan "Make America Great Again." The past on *Fear Street* is a place of inequality, violence, and confrontation, but also of identification, empathy, and resistance. A past whose stories of peripheral bodies need to be retold as Janiak provides by bringing these bodies to star her films.

Final Considerations

If Eric Lars Olson wrote about the "great expectations" (2011) that exist on the protagonists from suburban fantastic cinema, the spectator must place them in the context that they were, for decades, almost entirely white, young, and heterosexual men. The protagonist's maturation of these films turns out to be closely linked to the maintenance of the privileges of their class and social group. By performing as heroes, they also concretise the myths of supremacy that serve as flimsy justifications for the meritocratic discourse of the middle-class that inhabits the American suburbs and that were inflated during the Reagan years. That is why, by concluding their journeys and re-establishing the *status quo*, these heroes reaffirm the perpetuity of the 'American Dream' that consolidated these suburbs since the post-war period.

However, this 'dream' and the suburb have always been based on excluding other bodies. As Jonathan Keane argues in *Aids, identity and the Space of Desire* (1993), black, Latino, and queer bodies are constantly positioned by cultural hegemony as its negative element (the 'Other') and never have the possibility to live in an imaginary realm of coherence that the middle-class suburbs historically are claimed to be by the hegemonic media (382). In this sense, *Fear Street* represents a step in the process of historically claiming their voices. By placing a lesbian, black woman as protagonist of a suburban fantastic film, the director begins to meet a social demand of these groups to occupy prominent roles in such narratives. As Janiak claims, the films "were an opportunity to tell a story where a queer romance drove the events of the narrative" and that the very base material, R. L. Stine's stories "were very white and very straight" (Frederick 2022). It is important to note that these changes are also present behind the scenes of these productions themselves, as is the case of Janiak and her concern in scaling a cast not only ethnically but also sexually diverse.

As Teresa De Lauretis explains in *Technologies of Gender* (1971), some activities and behaviours are seen by the "unconscious of the patriarchy" as masculine (1). On a more metalinguistic analysis, by understanding gender technologies as practices and discourses we realise how the film genres and subgenres itself are part of this mechanism. After all, as it happened with the Western, the suburban fantastic has consolidated itself as being 'unconsciously' androcentric and, thus, associating man with the ideal of heroism. That is why the very existence of a queer woman as protagonist claims the right of non-male and non-heterosexual characters to be part of a subgenre so tied to masculinity and heterosexuality and – more than that – helps to dissolve the capacity of a film industry to impose such dichotomies. The trilogy appears in a conjuncture where the 'Others' claims the hegemonic means to tell what terrifies them. The use of the Gothic tone helped to bring a less naive and more heterogeneous perspective of the world, reflecting its ability to mirror contemporary tensions felt by the non-hegemonic groups. No wonder these works deal with topics that are unusual in the history of suburban fantastic cinema as prejudice, gender violence, and police corruption.

Importantly, these changes are not punctual but part of the film and TV industry natural transformation. A process that seems very similar to what is happening in a still timid way with the superhero genre in series such as *Ms. Marvel* (2022) and the later *Echo* (2024). In addition to being an inclusive measure, it can also provide the necessary narrative depth so that the subgenre remains relevant, unlike what happened in the late 1990s. However, beyond these questions of identification and representation, familiar to contemporary cultural discussions, the reflexive suburban fantastic has a rare opportunity: the power to "reinsert in the past" the non-hegemonic bodies it ignored in its classic films. In other words, giving the voice to those generations of non-hegemonic bodies that were silenced by Hollywood cinema during the boastful Reagan years. Groups that have been under-represented and misrepresented by entire film genres and sub-genres for decades. As it must be our concern as spectators, researchers, and, above all, members of society to prevent this exclusion from still occurring in the coming decades, we should also see in films and TV series the possibility of restoring some of the rights that were taken from previous generations. In this way, Deena's journey could serve as an example that repairing the present injustices may only be possible after dealing with the injustices committed in the past.

NOTES

1. In these movies, the suburban ambiance is usually significant, given that, much like the stage of adolescence, the suburb is a liminal space "always separated from, but adjacent to, the larger adult world" (McFadzean, 13).

2. As Berenice Murphy points out in *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture* (2009), there is a diversity of genres that bring the perspective of suburban families beset by financial problems. Particularly Horror films involving haunted houses, which show the anxieties involving financial losses relating to owning doomed homes.

3. Despite the name, suburban fantastic films are not restricted to suburban or small-town locations. Movies like *batteries not included (1987) and Home Alone 2: Lost in New York (1992) are set in New York, while Back to the Future 3 (1990) is set in the wild west.

4. It is important to note that such characterisation of the subgenre by McFadzean took place in a book released in the year in which the main works featuring non-hegemonic bodies as protagonists began to appear. In such a way, it would be impossible for him to have, at that time, the most contemporary reading proposed by this article.

5. Fear Street 1994 takes place in a working-class suburb that makes the economic context crucial to note, especially as there seems to be a more widespread concern among recent works in the subgenre – such as Super 8, It, and Stranger Things – which also feature characters from these areas. McFadzean ponders these portraits may chime with broader audiences, especially after the 2007-8 crash (116).

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BIONOTE

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"WEYRBRED IS BEST FOR GREENS": CONTAINMENT AND WORLD-BUILDING IN ANNE MCCAFFREY'S *DRAGONRIDERS OF PERN*

Nathaniel Harrington

The representation of sexuality in Anne McCaffrey's *Dragonriders of Pern* series (1967-2012; henceforth *Pern*) is complex and problematic.[1] In this article, I examine the representation of male homosexuality in *Pern*, which has been largely neglected in existing scholarship, in order both to draw attention to world-building gaps between what the text *says* and what the text *does* and, at the same time, to attend to elements of this representation that the text disavows. I argue that, while *Pern*'s treatment of homosexuality is undoubtedly homophobic, the fissures in its portrayal reveal the limits of its attempts to repress homosexuality in its world-building. I argue that, in fact, homosexuality is *central* to *Pern*'s world-building, such that any attempt to describe the dynamics of sexuality within the series is necessarily incomplete if it does not address the role of homosexuality in shaping the sexual and social dynamics of *Pern*'s world.

I am driven here by my desire to understand my own affective connection to the series as a gay reader despite the extent to which its world is structured to exclude me. My critical approach is guided by what Stefan Ekman and Audrey Isabel Taylor have called "critical world-building" (8). As Ekman and Taylor describe it, critical world-building entails a careful attention to "how an imaginary world is constructed (critically) as a dynamic interplay of building-blocks and their web of implications and relations" (8). My analysis focuses on the implications of the treatment of sexuality as one specific aspect of "the way in which world elements are presented" in *Pern* (Ekman and Taylor 11), bracketing the narrative, its explicit theoretical concerns, and aspects of world-building not directly related to sexuality.

Ultimately, I echo Alexis Lothian's observation that while "[f]ictional speculation often opens up alternative possibilities only to close them down into futures that are all too predictable to dominant logics," nonetheless "the failures of speculative fictions' radical possibilities do not invalidate their meaning, their interest, or their capacity to make a difference" (20). My reading of *Pern* extends this point even to works that were *not* written with the radicalism of queer or feminist futurisms and which in fact actively seek to limit or undercut radical possibilities. I am arguing that attending to the aspects of a text that it wants its readers *not* to think about and the places where its conservative and reactionary impulses are most explicitly evident can be a productive avenue of analysis and may reveal unexpected spaces of possibility. In this case, focusing on both incidental or implicit and explicit and substantial references to homosexuality serves to drive home the extent to

which it structures the world of *Pern*, while at the same time revealing the failures and limits of the series' heteronormativity and the ways *Pern* implies possibilities for (specific kinds of) queer life in spite of itself.

Within *Pern*, there is sharp division between the conservative sexual mores of 'Holds' and 'Crafts' and the more liberal mores of 'Weyrs,' the communities of the titular dragonriders. Weyrs are, ostensibly, sexually open, having "long since disregarded sexual inhibitions" (*Dragonquest* 20). Where homosexuality, in particular, is marginalised in Holds and Crafts, the sexual dynamics of dragons and their riders mean that sexualities and desires we would identify as 'queer' are not only accepted in the Weyrs but *expected*. I argue, however, that this division between dragonriders and others functions as a containment strategy for non-normative sexualities. At the same time, I argue that the failure of *Pern*'s attempts to fully contain the possibilities opened by Weyr sexuality tells us something about the ways in which speculative world-building, while shaped and limited by the context in which authors are writing, retains the potential to move beyond that context in unexpected ways – including ways authors might consciously reject. Ultimately, I argue that, despite – or perhaps because of – the fact that the series is obviously homophobic, queer readers may nonetheless find in *Pern* an unexpected freedom to manoeuvre: the lengths to which the series goes to position queerness as negative and to relegate it to the background serve instead to highlight the extent to which queerness and queer characters are unequivocally and explicitly present as an essential part of the textual world. This contested space of, to borrow a phrase from Hari Kunzru, "vertiginous and troubling possibilities" that *Pern* is forced to either confront or – more often – evade is where this essay dwells (147).

To explore the complexities of *Pern*'s representation of sexuality, I first outline *Pern*'s setting and consider its treatment of sexuality generally. I then undertake a close analysis of the representation of homosexuality particularly in *Dragonquest* (1971) and *Red Star Rising/Dragonseye* (1996/1997). I approach Pern in the same way that Sofia Samatar describes her relationship with the work of Tayeb Salih:

> There's no point in asking a loved one, "Why do I love you?"
> The person is likely to feel uncomfortable, even attacked, as if
> the question conceals a criticism. Books, however, invite this
> question. You open them, reopen them, analyze every line. [...]
> unlike a loved one, these incessant questions won't translate to
> "I don't love you," but "I do, I do." And so the word "criticism"
> has two meanings. (24-25)

If, as Toril Moi suggests, literary criticism begins from the question "Why this?" and an attempt to "get clear on something" (193), then I am trying to answer two variations on this question: first, why is homosexuality represented in *Pern* in the ways that it is, and what do these representations do? Second, why do I as a queer reader love *Pern* so deeply, despite its many flaws?

A Note on Terminology

Throughout this article, I regularly use the term 'homosexuality' and the adjective 'homosexual' when discussing characters and sexual practices in *Pern*, sometimes in addition to and sometimes in preference to 'queer'; I want to briefly elaborate on this choice. While the referent of 'queer' is (strategically) vague, encompassing a wide range of sexualities, genders, and sexual practices, this essay is concerned specifically with sexuality between men as the kind of queerness most readily visible within *Pern*. While I would welcome, for example, a trans reading of the series, to simply call the characters and sexual practices I examine 'queer' would be to imply a much broader intervention than my analysis actually makes. 'Queer' also implies that the sexualities, genders, and social practices it refers to are non-normative. While it is true that within our primary world sex between men remains *non-normative*, its status in *Pern* is more complex, as we will see. The use of 'homosexual(ity)' to pathologise people and sexual practices through scientific and medical discourses is also reflected both within the series itself – where "homosexual" is the only specific term for sexuality between men that appears (*Dragonseye* 70) – and in McCaffrey's own statements about sexuality within *Pern*. Some of these statements have become infamous because they reveal a deep homophobia that regarded homosexuality precisely as something pathological.[2] With this in mind, I sometimes use 'queer' in order to emphasise the non-normative aspect of sexualities and sexual practices *within* the world of *Pern* or when considering the ways in which readers might situate characters and sexual practices in relation to primary-world configurations of sexuality, but I also, in order to clearly bound my argument, use 'homosexual' as a logistical descriptor for sex or relationships between men (some of whom may be heterosexual or bisexual), and to describe men who primarily or exclusively engage in sex or relationships with other men.

Sexuality in *Pern*

Pern covers a period of 2,500 years in the history of the human colony on the titular planet. Pern periodically experiences 'Threadfall,' the raining of a spore-like life-form known as 'Thread,' which consumes any organic matter it touches; the colonists combat Thread with fire-breathing 'dragons,' closely resembling mythological dragons, which permanently telepathically bond with (or 'Impress') their riders upon hatching. Over the centuries, Pernese society develops both feudal and corporatist elements. The majority of people live in 'Holds,' agricultural communities governed by a feudal 'Lord Holder,' while a smaller proportion belong to 'Crafts,' politically independent guilds providing specialist labour and art. My focus in this essay is on the several 'Weyrs,' communities organised around dragons.

There are five dragon colours, indicating gender and relative size: the largest are gold or 'queen' dragons, who are female and always Impress women; then bronzes, who are male and always Impress men; then browns, male with male riders; then blues, male with male riders; then greens, female with male or (rarely) female riders. Green dragons make up approximately half of the dragon population. Weyr society is organised according to an internal hierarchy: at the top are the 'Weyrwoman,' the rider of the senior queen dragon, and the 'Weyrleader,' the rider of the bronze

dragon who most recently mated with the senior queen; below them are other queens and bronzes, then browns, then blues, and finally greens.

Dragon mating is central to the social structure of Weyrs – "the dragonriders and everybody else concerned spend a lot of time thinking about sex and playing at it" (Monk 218) – and is also at the core of my argument. Dragons are represented as exclusively heterosexual, with sexual activity limited to a cycle of 'mating flights' initiated by female dragons. These flights involve an airborne chase, with a female dragon attempting to outfly her male pursuers. When the female dragon is caught, the mating dragons' instincts overwhelm their riders through their telepathic bonds. The result is that the riders of mating dragons will themselves be compelled to have sex with each other, regardless of the degree of sexual attraction between them under normal circumstances and with, effectively, no possibility of refusal or revocation of consent: "when dragons rose in mating flight, the condition of your partner counted for nothing" (*Dragonflight* 153). New riders may find the experience overwhelming or violating: the bronze rider F'lar describes his first sexual encounter with the queen rider Lessa during a mating flight as "violent" and explicitly compares it to rape (*Dragonflight* 152). Mating flights also have a broader impact on a Weyr's inhabitants:

> A mating female dragon broadcast her emotions on a wide band. [...] Herdbeasts within range stampeded wildly and fowls, wherries and whers went into witless hysterics. Humans were susceptible, too, and innocent Hold youngsters often responded with embarrassing consequences. (*Dragonquest* 20)

For this reason, dragonriders have "long since disregarded sexual inhibitions" (*Dragonquest* 20), and this sexual freedom distinguishes life in Weyrs from life in Holds:

> Weyrwomen can't be bound by any commoner moralities. A Weyrwoman has to be subservient to her queen's needs, including mating with many riders if her queen is flown by different dragons. Most craft and holdbred girls envy such freedom... (*Dragonquest* 168)

Young women who are brought to a Weyr for hatchings often stay on regardless of whether they Impress – in fact, "[g]irls beg to come to the Weyr" (*Dragonquest* 100). One candidate's desire to stay is explicitly framed in terms of sexual freedom: "Kylara had found certain aspects of Weyr life exactly suited to her temperament. She had gone from one rider's weyr to another's. She had even seduced F'lar—not at all against his will, to be sure" (*Dragonflight* 154). Where Holds are sexually and socially conservative, oriented towards "hav[ing] enough children to extend their legitimate holdings or establish new ones," Weyrs are open, creating space for sexualities and relationships that would be regarded as non-normative within Holds (*Red Star* 74).

Existing *Pern* scholarship on sexuality has focused on heterosexual relationships and gender politics. Patricia Monk situates Weyr sexuality in relation to the concept of marriage, suggesting that

"[f]or McCaffrey, the key to solving the problems of the gamos [i.e., the (heterosexual) married couple] is the shifting of the emotional commitment of the gamos to the pairbond" between dragon and rider (218). In her reading of F'lar and Lessa's relationship, Jane Donawerth notes that the violence with which it begins "indicates the alienation of their relationship," where sexual contact occurs only as a result of their bond with their dragons, and with no opportunity for Lessa, who "does not expect this outcome" to refuse the encounter (54). F'lar and Lessa ultimately develop a relationship of apparently mutual love and respect by virtue of Lessa's refusal to "become the victim that F'lar desires" (Donawerth 55), essentially forcing him to treat her as an equal. Robin Roberts suggests that ultimately F'lar and Lessa "show their fellow Pernese and the reader an alternative model of supportive heterosexual love" (48), but the inciting moment of violence nonetheless raises questions about the dynamics of heterosexual relationships in the series. Mary Brizzi highlights the element of "feminine supremacy" in the hierarchy of dragons but also the "markedly sexist" portrait of domestic life and gender relations (46, 45). She also identifies the sadistic-masochistic element of Kylara's sexual relationship with the Lord Holder Meron, who "demonstrates his manhood by leaving bruises on his sex partner" (48); a comment in *Dragonquest* that "men, conditioned to respond to Kylara's exotic tastes, would brutalize" a sexually inexperienced woman suggests that this reflects Kylara's desires as well (169).

Despite the Weyrs' ostensible openness to sexual promiscuity, *Pern*'s protagonists all settle into monogamous, heterosexual relationships – F'lar with Lessa, F'nor with Brekke, K'vin with Zulaya *et cetera* – and promiscuous dragonrider characters like Kylara are negatively portrayed. F'lar, for example – notwithstanding his own prior encounter with Kylara – is "immensely pleased" that Lessa "d[oes] not, indeed, dally with any man" other than himself (*Dragonquest* 23). In this respect, *Pern* reflects what Samuel Delany has called "the traditional liberal dilemma" where "[o]ur conservative forebears postulated symmetrical spaces of possible action for women and men and then declared an ethical prohibition on women's functioning in that space" such that even when a "liberal generation [...] wishes to move into the prohibited space, change the values, and repeal the punishments," the result is that "at the level of praxis the *conflict* is repressed, and with it all emblems of the existence of the space in which it takes place" ("To Read *The Dispossessed*" 119, original emphasis). The Weyr is described as a sexually open environment but this claim conceals the persistence of conservative sexual norms. That Kylara's promiscuity is ultimately "*punished* (by law, by society, by God)" with the traumatic loss of her dragon emphasises this (Delany 119, original emphasis). The disconnect between the series' explicit *statements* about sexuality, both in interactions between characters and in focalised narration, and its *portrayals* of sexuality is repeated in its treatment of homosexuality.

While both the series and the majority of scholarship on sexuality in *Pern* focus on heterosexual relationships, by demographics the vast majority of mating flights involve female greens with male bronzes, browns, or blues. While both Brizzi and Roberts briefly allude to the representation of homosexuality, neither discusses it in depth. Brizzi notes that "when the green dragon flies to mate, her [male] rider [...] is impelled to engage in homosexual intercourse with the rider of the dragon who flies her" and identifies (but does not analyse) "several sympathetic portrayals of homosexual love" in *Moreta: Dragonlady of Pern* (46, 50). Roberts cites Brizzi and links

the portrayal of homosexuality to the description of Weyrs as sexually open, observing that "[e]ven in terms of sexual relationships, flexibility is required" (47), but she does not offer any sustained analysis.[3] At the time of *Pern*'s main narrative, all or almost all riders of green dragons are male, and, as a result, sex between men is an ordinary part of Weyr life; as we see beginning in the second book, *Dragonquest*, this extends beyond mating flights. McCaffrey said in interviews that bronze dragons Impress heterosexual men, browns heterosexual or bisexual men, blues bisexual men, and greens exclusively homosexual men (or, occasionally, heterosexual women), and while this division of sexuality is not specifically delineated within the series, elements of it are alluded to throughout.[4] This ranges from oblique assertions that "Weyrbred is best for dragonkind. Particularly for greens" (*Dragonquest* 27) to one character's observation that it "was to be expected" (*Masterharper* 74) that a particular prospective rider Impressed a green. Despite *Pern*'s narrative focus on heterosexual relationships and the marginalisation of homosexuality within its narrative, then, male homosexuality is central to its world-building. To explore the effects of this centrality, I examine three particular moments in the series: first, the representation of the first identified same-sex couple in the series in *Dragonquest*; second, the hatching sequence in *Dragonquest* and the implications of the hierarchy of dragon colours; and, finally, the assessment of male green riders in *Red Star Rising/Dragonseye*.

"Dragons don't like bullies": Villainous, Effeminate, Lesser

While the first *Pern* book, *Dragonflight* (1968), focuses on the relationship between a bronze rider and a queen rider, avoiding the question of sex between men, *Dragonquest* begins with a confrontation between the brown rider F'nor and two male riders from another Weyr: the green rider T'reb and the brown rider B'naj. We are introduced to them through their dragons:

> *Beth and Seventh from Fort Weyr*, Canth told his rider, but the names were not familiar to F'nor.
>   [...]
> "Are you joining them?" he asked the big brown.
>   *They are together*, Canth replied so pragmatically that F'nor chuckled to himself.
>   The green Beth, then, had agreed to brown Seventh's advances. Looking at her brilliant color, F'nor thought their riders shouldn't have brought that pair away from their home Weyr at this phase. As F'nor watched, the brown dragon extended his wing and covered the green possessively (14, original emphasis).[5]

The dragons here form a heterosexual couple – and one that Canth's "*They are together*" and F'nor's oblique "at this phase" imply may be close to mating, a possibility ultimately borne out by the text – but readers of the series should, by this point, already be aware that their riders will both be men. While *Pern* emphasises that dragons' riders do not decide their dragons' choice of sexual partners, this image of the draconic couple sets up the relationship between T'reb and B'naj: T'reb

tells F'nor to "warn [his dragon Canth] off Beth" (16), which the narration, focalised through F'nor, takes as confirmation of their relationship, describing B'naj as T'reb's "Weyrmate," a term which is used through the series to indicate romantic and sexual connection (16). F'nor further describes T'reb as "a rider whose green's *amours* affected his own temper," and T'reb ultimately attacks F'nor with his belt knife when F'nor attempts to stop him from appropriating a decorated knife commissioned by a Lord Holder; the characterisation of green riders as emotional and unstable persists throughout the series (16, original emphasis).

It is not a coincidence, I think, that T'reb and B'naj are the first representatives of the 'Oldtimers,' dragonriders who were brought forward in time at the end of *Dragonflight*. The plot of *Dragonquest* follows the political conflict between the Oldtimers and the Holds, Crafts, and dragonriders of the series' present. Where *Dragonflight* saw the Oldtimers as heroes, *Dragonquest* portrays the most prominent Oldtimers negatively: they are conservative, obsessed with 'tradition,' and unable to accept the changes in Pernese culture in the four hundred years between their past and the present they have arrived in. This dissatisfaction ultimately turns violent. That the first Oldtimers we meet are this unflatteringly portrayed same-sex couple serves to emphasise that there is something not quite *right* about the Oldtimers in general.

T'reb's attempt to claim the decorated knife in the opening scene of the novel is also a reminder of the particular status of Weyrs within *Pern*'s social world: as defenders of all life on *Pern*, dragonriders are traditionally entitled to certain privileges, including the right to appropriate luxury goods from Holds and Crafts. The sexual openness of Weyrs is another aspect of this privileged social and economic status, both resented and desired by Holders, who are at once reliant on the Weyrs for protection and suspicious of dragonriders' freedom of movement, freedom from manual labour, and distinct social and sexual mores. The privileged status of dragonriders as the highest class of Pern's highly stratified society is a central point of contention in *Dragonquest* and, indeed, throughout the series.

T'reb and B'naj introduce a key aspect of the homophobia that underlies *Pern*'s representation of homosexuality: the specifically *moral* hierarchy, even within the Weyr, that positions heterosexual relationships and heterosexual men as the 'best' and homosexual relationships and homosexual men as morally inferior. This is made explicit later in *Dragonquest*, when Jaxom, a young Lord Holder, and his friend Felessan attend a hatching, during which Felessan makes a significant offhand comment: "Didja see? Birto got a bronze and Pellomar only Impressed a green. Dragons don't like bullies and Pellomar's been the biggest bully in the Weyr. Good for you, Birto!" (279). Given how emphatic the series is that dragonriders cherish their dragons above all else, an unconditional love that dragons reciprocate, the implications of this moment are incredibly striking. Felessan – born and raised in a Weyr – can be taken as representative of dragonriders' attitudes towards dragon colours: Birto's bronze marks him as both heterosexual and *morally superior* to Pellomar, who is marked as homosexual by virtue of being "only" paired with a green, apparently a *punishment* for "the biggest bully in the Weyr."[6] This hierarchy is complicated, however, by the apparently essential role that green dragons – and so, by extension, sex between men – play within the social and sexual culture of the Weyr. When the aging leaders of the last group of villainous Oldtimers make a final attempt to seize political power, one of their complaints is precisely that the Weyr they have been exiled to lacks

green dragons: "Our queens are too old to rise: there are no greens to give the males relief" (*White Dragon* 255). When an Oldtimer who is reconciled to the present political situation volunteers to take charge of his fellows, his first request is similar: "I'll need some greens" (*White Dragon* 281). Although Weyr society sees green riders as morally inferior, then, it requires green dragons, and so, by extension, their riders: homosexuality is sexually and socially necessary for a Weyr to function as it is supposed to. It becomes remarkable only when it is *absent*, or when the Weyr's sexual culture is being contrasted with that of Holds and Crafts: the affirmation that "Weyrbred is best for dragonkind. Particularly for greens" marks an awareness that prospective riders raised in a Weyr are more likely to be unperturbed by the dynamics of Weyr sexual culture (*Dragonquest* 27).

Since *Pern* was published over a period of more than forty years, it is unsurprising that its representation of homosexuality shifts. Where T'reb and B'naj are somewhere between unpleasant and actively villainous, later green and blue rider characters are more sympathetically portrayed. The prequel novel Moreta: Dragonlady of *Pern* (1983) includes a blue rider, K'lon, who plays a significant supporting role and the novel positions the Weyrleader Sh'gall's homophobic attitudes as a Hold prejudice inappropriate to his position: Sh'gall "had never developed any compassion or understanding of the green and blue riders and their associations" (57). This alienates some riders, including K'lon, whose "discontent with the change in leadership had been aggravated by Sh'gall's overt disapproval of K'lon's association with the […] green rider A'murry" (118). K'lon and other blue and green riders are positively represented, and their "associations" – including one between a green rider and a male non-dragonrider – are treated comparably to heterosexual relationships within the Weyr. Nevertheless, the hierarchy established in the early books remains in effect: bronze riders, as heterosexual men, are the 'best' dragonriders, and all others, but especially green riders, are inferior both socially and still, to some extent, morally. K'lon, for example, is described by a bronze rider – someone at the top of the sexual hierarchy – as "a good fellow," but this is qualified by the observation that "I don't say that about just any blue rider" (245). It is telling that, except for the late prequel *Red Star Rising* (published in North America with some textual alterations as *Dragonseye*) and a single scene in Moreta, the narrative is never focalised through a blue or male green rider: even when they play significant roles in the narrative, characters like K'lon are side characters, not protagonists.

Even *Red Star Rising*, where part of the narrative *is* focalised through a blue rider, also includes one of the series' most explicitly homophobic passages. First, the bronze rider K'vin reflects on the lack of female candidates for new greens during a hatching:

> Only five girls stood on the Hatching Ground vying to attract the
> attention of the greens. [...] As K'vin thought that a good third
> or even half of this clutch might be greens, he hoped there'd
> be enough suitable 'lads' to impress the green hatchlings. (73)

That K'vin's narration places "lads" in quotation marks raises the possibility that he sees these prospective riders, who have "demonstrated homosexual preferences in their holds" (*Dragonseye*

70), as *not* male, but something else, paralleling *Moreta*'s description of the bronze rider Sh'gall as "[f]ully male" (*Moreta* 57), in contrast to blue and green riders. The rest of the passage emphasises that this distance from heterosexual masculinity is negative:

> His study of Thread fighting tactics also indicated that greens with male riders tended to be more volatile, apt to ignore their Weyrleaders' orders in the excitement of a fall: in short, they tended to unnecessarily show off their bravery to the rest of the Weyr. [...] There had been a monograph on the advantages of female over male green riders in Threadfall. Although the text allowed the reader to make his own decision, K'vin had fallen on the side of preferring females when Search provided them. Certainly their personalities were more stable and they posed fewer problems to the Weyrleaders. Young male green riders could go into emotional declines if they lost their weyrmates and be useless in Fall, sometimes even suiciding in their distress. (*Red Star Rising* 73)

K'vin clearly distinguishes between female green riders and male green riders, who are unstable, "apt to ignore their Weyrleader's orders," and overly emotional to the point of suicide. While *Red Star Rising/Dragonseye* includes a sympathetically portrayed blue and green rider couple, with the narrative focalised through the blue rider at several points, this passage serves as a reminder that despite a level of tolerance, male green riders are still regarded as *lesser* than both female green riders and other male riders. Even if some of the latter are themselves homosexual – "[blue riders] don't generally like girls" (*Dragonseye* 250) – they are nonetheless understood to be "definitely male" ("An Interview"). Tellingly, the version of this passage published in *Dragonseye* (68-69) is significantly abridged (roughly one third of the passage is cut), deemphasising the temperamental differences between male and female green riders and removing the suggestion of same-sex relationships; while we can only speculate about the reasons, the extent of the abridgement highlights the homophobic elements of the original version.

That *Pern*'s portrayal of homosexuality is fundamentally homophobic is clear. I argue that the explicit and implicit homophobia that runs through the series functions as a containment strategy for sexual difference. Heterosexuality and homosexuality in *Pern* appear to be organised hierarchically in a similar way to our primary world, where, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick puts it, the apparent binary opposition of heterosexual/homosexual "actually subsist[s] in a more unsettled and dynamic tacit relation" within which "the ontologically valorized term A actually depends for its meaning on the simultaneous subsumption and exclusion of term B" (10). In order to maintain the privileged position of heterosexuality, which relies on homosexuality to constitute itself, *Pern* must bracket homosexuality in a manner closely paralleling the primary world, where homosexuality is socially constructed in order "both to delineate the boundaries of acceptable behavior for all men and to contain the threat of deviance, at once stigmatizing it and suggesting that it is confined to a 'deviant' minority"

(Chauncey 22-23). Intratextually, homosexuality (along with non-normative heterosexual practices) is acknowledged, but it is narratively isolated and geographically contained within the speculative space of the Weyr, where it exists alongside dragons. It remains unspeakable within Holds and Crafts, which resemble a historical medieval setting. The presence of homophobia and the marginalisation of homosexuality also serve to deemphasise aspects of the text that might otherwise have drawn negative attention in the extratextual world. I suspect, for example, that it is neither a coincidence nor an error that Lytol, a former dragonrider, is identified in *Dragonflight* as having been "a green rider" (16) – and thus implicitly homosexual – only to have his dragon referred to in *Dragonquest* as "his dead brown" (224). This rewriting occurs as Lytol becomes a major supporting character in his role as guardian of the young Lord Holder Jaxom, one of the main characters of *Dragonquest* and subsequent books in the series, whom Lytol raises from infancy. Repositioning Lytol as a brown rider situates him more securely in the realm of heterosexual masculinity, making him an 'appropriate' role model for a young boy and, as unfortunately emphasised by the present political climate, avoiding the homophobic association of homosexuality with paedophilia. My point is that *Pern*'s intense anxiety about homosexuality paradoxically serves to foreground it as an integral aspect of, as Ekman and Taylor put it, "the world's architecture" (12). The result is that despite the denigration of homosexuality, readers are constantly confronted with its *presence* – it is a necessary implication of McCaffrey's construction of dragon biology and the gender distribution of dragonriders, even as it is relegated to the margins of the textual world.[7]

The fact remains, however, that homosexuality constantly escapes these various structures of confinement. *Dragonquest* begins with T'reb and B'naj literally escaping the Weyr with their dragons, bringing their sexuality into the public sphere of Hold and Craft: T'reb's dragon Seventh's mating flight nearly begins while T'reb and B'naj are at a Crafthall. It is telling that when the Weyrleaders gather to address the altercation between F'nor and T'reb, their primary concern becomes whether T'reb was wrong to bring "a green in mating heat outside her weyr" (30-31). In context, the underlying concern appears to be that the mating flight may remind non-riders of, and possibly implicate them in, the sexual dynamics that are supposed to be contained within the Weyr: "A mating female dragon broadcast her emotions on a wide band. Some green-brown pairings were as loud as bronze-gold. […] Humans were susceptible, too, and innocent Hold youngsters often responded with embarrassing consequences" (20). Even without Weyr intervention, there are indications that there is some consciousness of homosexuality in Holds and Crafts. When the Crafter father of the protagonist of The Masterharper of *Pern* (1998) comments that it "was to be expected" that a particular Hold boy Impressed a green, he offers no explanation, but the observation implies both an awareness of homosexuality and the sexual dynamics of the Weyr and also the presence, even if disavowed, of homosexuality – and perhaps a normative value judgment that renders it as *queerness* – outside the Weyr (74).

These references highlight *Pern*'s anxiety about homosexuality. Despite the homophobia that accompanies them, their frequency sets the series in contrast to some more neutral or positive portrayals of queerness in twentieth-century Fantastika fiction. In particular, I think we can productively contrast *Pern* with Delany's reading of Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974),

which is contemporary to the early *Pern* books. Where *Pern* is anxious about homosexuality, *The Dispossessed* treats it, ostensibly, as an unremarkable part of everyday life, with the society of Anarres featuring "[s]ocial acceptance of homosexuality, a social norm of promiscuity, ubiquitous adolescent bisexuality, and general communal child-rearing" (117). In its representation of its one homosexual character, however, as Delany argues, the novel ultimately implies "that 'if he would be saved' Bedap must change his homosexuality" (152, quoting Le Guin). In its efforts to treat homosexuality as unremarkable, the novel reduces it to an afterthought and ultimately reinscribes conservative social norms.

Pern, meanwhile, almost obsessively attempts to distance itself from homosexuality while constantly returning to it: despite the homophobic tropes that McCaffrey's world-building relies on, the fact remains that homosexuality is central to *Pern*'s world and *Pern*'s social structure. As a result, the series' efforts to safely contain homosexuality fail repeatedly: although McCaffrey seems to want readers to regard homosexuality as undesirable, the importance of it to the series' world-building means that neither the text nor readers can simply ignore the fact that there *is* a socially sanctioned space for what we might call queer life – though marginalised in both speculative and familiar ways – within its pages and world.

Conclusions

The volume of references to homosexuality within *Pern* paradoxically means that queerness, at times including sympathetic portrayals of queer characters, becomes an integral element of *Pern*'s world-building. This, ultimately, is what draws me back to the series – the lingering questions that the text cannot or will not answer. While Anne McCaffrey may have been unable or unwilling to fully embrace the imaginative possibilities opened by *Pern*'s world-building, the fact remains that sex between men is – surprisingly, troublingly, frustratingly, tantalisingly – central to its world. In spite of itself, *Pern* is a series that is deeply embedded, *through* its own homophobia, in a kind of queerness.

This is significant, first, for critical work on *Pern*. I am arguing in part that it is impossible to account for the social dynamics of *Pern*'s setting without attending to its treatment of sexuality in general, and homosexuality in particular, as the negative against which it repeatedly defines itself and which structures its conception of masculinity. Brizzi's analysis of the dragon-rider relationship (39-41) for example could, I think, be deepened by closer attention to the sexual politics of the Weyrs and the ways dragons impact their riders' sexualities. Beyond *Pern* itself the ways in which the series fails to contain or repress homosexuality when it attempts to do so encourage us to think about how even obviously 'problematic' texts can move or be moved beyond the limitations of their authors, time periods, and explicit ideological positions. Despite the homophobia and the ambivalences of even *heterosexual* relationships McCaffrey has created a limited space of possibility within the Weyr: women find a relative sexual freedom, and the dynamics of mating flights and expectations around rider sexuality create a space where homosexuality and other forms of queer life are not only possible but commonplace and indeed required for Weyr society to function. That this seems at times accidental rather than intentional is precisely what opens space for the kind of queer reading

I am undertaking. The frustrating gap between what the series *says* about Weyr sexuality and what the series *does* does not erase the possibilities opened, however incompletely, by *Pern*'s lip service to sexual freedom.

Pern is not a queer utopia; it is far from Delany's Velm in *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand* (1984), and even from the 'ambiguous utopia' of Le Guin's Anarres. Though it is unlikely that McCaffrey set out to present a utopia, there is, nonetheless, a limited "anticipatory illumination of queerness" (Muñoz 22) that links present and future (and, through *Pern*'s feudalism, past) in unexpected ways. This is unexpected but possible precisely because of *Pern*'s anxiety about the implications of its world-building. Against its own impulses, *Pern* implies a future beyond "hopeless heteronormative maps of the present where futurity is indeed the province of normative reproduction" (Muñoz 28). The series is structured by contemporary homophobia such that its treatment of homosexuality is familiar: I can imagine myself as a gay man within its world – there is an explicit conceptual space for the shape of my life, the good and the bad. At the same time, it also presents a substantially different configuration of sexuality within the Weyr, one "in specific dialogue, in a specific tension, with our present concept of the real" (Delany, "Science Fiction and 'Literature,'" 69) in a way that raises enticing questions: what *would* it be like to live in a context where sex between men is normal, open, and even *necessary*?

These questions, however unintentionally they may have been posed, produce my love for *Pern* – but here my reading of *Pern*'s relationship to queerness must again be circumscribed. Gender in *Pern* is resolutely binary and cisnormative and there is, as McCaffrey suggested, no real space for women who are anything but heterosexual. Bisexual men are relegated to an intermediate position between heterosexual bronze riders and homosexual green riders: better than they could be, but not the ideal. A lesbian or a trans person – say – reading the series might not feel drawn to it in the ways that I am as a cis, gay man. At the same time, I would suggest that these apparent absences might be useful starting points: we can learn from what a text does *not* say – either explicitly or at all – as well as from the information it *does* provide. Insofar as it is precisely the denial and rejection of male homosexuality that makes it so tantalisingly visible, I think it is reasonable to wonder, for example, what a trans reading of the gender dynamics of *Pern* might look like, or what lesbian interpretive spaces might emerge from a careful reading of the women of *Pern*.

I hope someday to find out.

NOTES

1. Anne McCaffrey died in 2011, but the series has been continued by her son Todd and daughter Gigi, with the most recent book published in 2018. Todd and Gigi McCaffrey's treatments of sexuality differ somewhat from the original series, however, and in this article I focus on books by Anne McCaffrey alone.

2. In one notorious fan interview – now available only in circulated partial transcript – McCaffrey reportedly asserted that "[i]t's a proven fact that a single anal sex experience causes one to be homosexual. The hormones released by a sexual situation involving the anus being broached, are the same hormones found in large quantities in effeminate homosexual males" and went on to describe an incident where a formerly straight acquaintance was "involved in a rape situation involving a tent peg" that resulted in his becoming "effeminate and gay" ("The Tent Peg Statement"). This provides an indication of McCaffrey's own homophobic (and in this case simply bizarre) views.

3. We will note that Roberts is assuming here that sex between men is something that requires "flexibility" from the participants – in other words, she assumes that it is something outside the 'normal' scope of the participants' sexual desires.

4. The interviews in which McCaffrey explicitly sets out these dynamics are now available only in archived form, as the fan sites that originally hosted them no longer exist. In "An Interview with Anne: Questions and Answers on Dragonriders of Pern," she says that "[g]reen riders in my *Pern* world are ALWAYS gay males: blue riders are usually bi-sexual and browns not averse to a little of what pleases them with greens" ("An Interview"). She adds that "[b]ronze riders in my books are as masculine as gold riders are feminine," by which she seems to mean 'heterosexual,' and, answering a question about lesbians and bisexual women, clarifies that female green riders are "more assertive women" but not lesbians and speculates that "I suppose a bisexual woman could ride any of the three lower orders, as it were, but not bronze and certainly not gold" ("An Interview"). Apparently McCaffrey understood women's sexuality within a similar hierarchy to men's, as I discuss in the next section.

5. This introduction of dragon mating dynamics also implies that F'nor, who explicitly observes that Canth has "no lack of partners" because "[g]reens would prefer a brown who was as big as most bronzes on *Pern*," regularly has sex with other men (15). The series ignores this, however, focusing exclusively on his relationship with the queen rider Brekke, whose discomfort with the sexual dynamics of the Weyr would seem to foreclose the possibility of anything but a monogamous relationship (168).

6. In the context of "The Tent Peg Statement," which implies that green riders are always the receiving partner during mating flight-induced anal sex, we might also read in this an implied threat of sexual violence: the punishment would be Pellomar's future role during the sometimes-violent sexual encounters of mating flights, whether he (initially) desires this or not.

7. This also raises the question of authorial intention, especially in the context of McCaffrey's statements about *Pern* in interviews, some of which I have discussed previously: *why* did she choose to include homosexuality explicitly within the series in the ways she did? We can, ultimately, only speculate, but (for better or for worse) it is clear from interviews that she *had* thought about at least some of the implications of this choice. This combination of factors – clear intention to include homosexuality, the wild homophobia of some of her public statements about the series

(which are widely known in fan spaces and easily discoverable online), and the inconsistencies and contradictions (and outright homophobia) within the text – is part of what I have been trying to sort through in this essay.

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BIONOTE

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MONSTROUS PURITY: VIRTUE, WOMANHOOD, AND THE FLUID NATURE OF THE UNICORN

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In the Western, Christian tradition, the unicorn has historically been viewed as the embodiment of sexual purity. Purity, in this case, is located within the patriarchal context and is most often discussed indirectly by pointing to the unicorn's relationship with human women. This relationship, rooted in the premise that attracting a creature as pure as a unicorn requires that the woman herself must be pure (read: chaste), has long been a marker for measuring a woman's worthiness in the eyes of heteronormative patriarchal society. Yet what about the unicorn itself? What happens when it is freed from this relational form of existence and given the ontological attention it deserves? How might we think of the unicorn's identity as an individual identity on-par with humans, rather than a being subservient to our fantasies? There is no single answer to these questions, primarily because from the moment of the unicorn's inception within culture, it has defied easy classification. Most recently, Chris Lavers traced the unicorn's complex history in *The Natural History of Unicorns* (2009). This history begins with the ancient Greek physician Ctesias and his unicorn chimera, which Ctesias created by combining the rhinoceros, the *kiang*, and the *chiru* (18-19). The unicorn's place in natural history is even more elusive. Cabinets of curiosities, which emerged in Europe and were intended to reflect the taste of their owners and curators, blurred the boundaries between art and zoology and played an important role in legitimising the unicorn's complex and seemingly impossible existence. In her article "On the Ironic Specimen of the Unicorn Horn in Enlightened Cabinets" (2019), historian E. C. Spary argues that, although we now know that these 'unicorn horns' tended to actually be narwhal tusks, the cabinet of curiosities was one of the first steps in trying to understand the unicorn at a time when to prove a creature's existence required finding proof in the visible and material world of nature (1036).

This article is a case study of the unicorn within the Western Christian tradition, yet it is not limited to a particular period, location, or even medium. Similarly, as the unicorn posed a taxonomic challenge for the field of natural history, it is not within the scope of this article to consider how it tangibly impacted the heteropatriarchal notion of lineage for a given species. Rather, using Aby Warburg's atemporal approach as a precedent, this article traces the unicorn's movement across visual and written media and the mortal and divine realms. It will argue that the unicorn's ontological ambiguity is, in fact, inherent to its identity. The ontological question of this article is therefore a moral and a philosophical one, rooted in understanding how the unicorn fit into, and eventually escaped,

the culturally constructed notion of heteronormativity that was imposed on an inherently queer creature. It is by performing this kind of broad, atemporal approach that the unicorn's ever-shifting position along the gender spectrum becomes clear, revealing that its existence is a challenge to the binary categories of gender (male/female), sexuality (virgin/whore), and existence (real/imaginary). For this reason, I use the term queer to refer not only to the relationships the unicorn has with women in the examples discussed in this article, but also to suggest that the unicorn does not have a fixed, or even binary, identity. By focusing on the unicorn's ability to blur the boundary between the saint-like and the monstrous, this article is an attempt to free the unicorn from its long-term linear relationship with human women and therefore from its existence as a 'pure' being that the woman is meant to measure up to but also, as I will discuss shortly, seduce. In doing so, the goal of this article is to locate the beginning of the unicorn's new life as a queer and androgynous being independent of human women and human-centric notions of purity, freed from the tangles of a binary form of existence.

Creature of the Gods: The Unicorn in the Heavenly Garden

The unicorn's 'coming out' journey outside of a binary form of existence was shaped by its physical proximity and association to both the human and the divine. Before the unicorn could become a queer and asexual being, as I propose in this article, it first needed to overcome its role as a pure, even divine, creature. In Christian traditions, the unicorn was not only depicted in the company of the divine; it was also seen as one of the many forms of the divine, as in the popular Medieval trope, the Hunt of the Unicorn. Rather than a distinct story, the Hunt of the Unicorn is a combination of several elements that can still be found in contemporary culture, namely: the pursuit of the unicorn by a group of hunters and the presence of a young and beautiful female virgin who attracts the unicorn with her purity. Oftentimes, the unicorn finds respite from the chase by resting its head on the virgin's lap and falling asleep. It is later revealed that the female virgin was used as a lure by the hunters, who come upon the sleeping unicorn and kill it.

As Lavers points out in *The Natural History of Unicorns*, the unicorn's inevitable capture by the hunters, as well as its physical form – small and meek, its horn read as a part of the cross, a prominent symbol of Jesus – lead to the creature being associated with Christ, thus imbuing it with the message of salvation and redemption (61). Lavers also draws attention to a reading of the Hunt of the Unicorn as a story about victory over the Devil (71), where evil is bested by virtue, which runs counter to a more conventional reading of the virgin as a cunning liar. More recently, Emma Maggie Solberg addressed a still more drastic interpretation of the trope in *Virgin Whore* (2018). Solberg argues that the Hunt of the Unicorn was seen by some as an allegory for how the vengeful God of the Old Testament, represented by the "wild and dangerous beast" of the unicorn, was baited and pacified by the Virgin Mary, who "lured him [God-as-unicorn] into the double-hinged trap of the Incarnation and Crucifixion" (87). These discrepancies foreshadow the increasingly contradictory existence of the unicorn, a creature that cannot be described as inherently either good or evil. Instead, the unicorn operates much like myth does for Roland Barthes in *Mythologies* (1972) – as "a system of communication […] a message [that] allowed one to perceive that myth cannot possibly

be an object, a concept, or an idea; it is a mode of signification, a form" (107). In other words, the unicorn exists beyond a one-to-one system of correlation since it can be read as either a hero or a villain depending on the context of the story.

The role of the virgin, the second vital figure in the trope of the Hunt of the Unicorn, is just as ambivalent as that of the unicorn. It is difficult to reconcile the idea that a woman deemed untainted would wield this virginal status in order to entice the unicorn to its death. The virgin's role as a seductress in the Hunt of the Unicorn suggests that obeying social norms, namely chastity, takes precedence for women as opposed to the more moral act of saving the unicorn. The fifth tapestry in the Unicorn Tapestries at the Met Cloisters, which exists in the form of two incomplete fragments, captures this two-faced nature of the virgin. In her article "The Legend of the Unicorn: An Illumination of the Maternal Split" (1984), Ildiko Mohacsy identifies the woman as the evil-eyed double of the virgin maiden type, her narrowed eyes signalling a switch from innocence to betrayal (400). Associating the woman in the tapestry with the goodness ascribed to her proves difficult as her actions, facial expression, and body language suggest the opposite. Virtue takes many forms, of which sexually coded virtue is but one, as Donna Haraway reminds us in "The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others" (2004). The persistent association of virtue with women's chastity "must always remain doubtful in patriarchal optical law" considering that "'virtue' used to mean manly spirit and valor too, and God even named an order of angels the Virtues" (106). Chastity, then, does not stray too far from Christian territory. Marion Woodman's *The Pregnant Virgin: A Process of Psychological Transformation* (1997) goes further in its attempt to disentangle virginity from female chastity and virtue, identifying the moment when the modern, patriarchal notion of the virgin diverged from the term's original meaning. Woodman refers to the words of British anthropologist and psychologist John Layard, who argues that "'virgin' does not mean chastity but the reverse, the pregnancy of nature, free and uncontrolled, corresponding on the human plane to unmarried love, in contrast to controlled nature corresponding to married love" (Layard quoted in Woodman 85).

These parallel and competing discourses about the Christian unicorn in the Hunt of the Unicorn narrative are helpful for thinking about the relationship in terms of the spectrums of gender and sexuality. In a reading where the female virgin is a symbol of innocence whose 'untainted' state attracts the unicorn, it is difficult not to see an element of desire within the unicorn's approach. If the unicorn is gendered male, which it often is, this desire takes on a heteronormative and sexual tone. Lavers reads the infamous "The Unicorn in Captivity" tapestry (1495-1505), in which a unicorn is depicted tethered to a tree in the middle of a circular enclosure, as a "hunter subdued by love and by the maiden — his earthly lover, his heart's desire — [t]he circular fence representing the male's divine view of the lover who has captured his heart and also the womb within which he hopes new life will be created" (91). Additionally, Mohacsy's psychoanalytic reading frames the unicorn's attraction to the maiden as an Oedipal longing for the mother and interprets the "virgin smell" that so entices the unicorn as either the smell of lactation or, more significantly, a reference to menstruation ("The Legend of the Unicorn," 396). The idea of courtly love, which emerged and was propagated in the Middle Ages, coincided with such heteronormative readings of the unicorn-maiden relationship as

Lavers' and Mohacsy's. The unicorn, embodying male desire, is lured by the virgin, who serves as a stand-in for the temptation of female sexuality that is experienced by men. The consummation of this desire is more often symbolic rather than physical, exemplified by the capture of the elusive and, in a Christian reading, divine unicorn.

Since no physical intercourse between the unicorn and the virgin is depicted, the virgin becomes what Woodman calls, in *Addiction to Perfection: The Still Unravished Bride* (1982), the "still unravished bride" (111): capable of capturing the divine but, unlike the Virgin Mary, denied the possibility of reproduction through it. Like Lavers, Solberg reads the Unicorn Tapestries as a representation of the sacrament of marriage but draws attention to the fact that the allegorical ring of matrimony in "The Unicorn in Captivity" occurs separately from the actual act of taming: the "phallic fertility monster can only be subdued by coitus, represented by the encircling and suckling of the animal in the embrace of a naked virgin" (87). Even if copulation is allegorical rather than physical, the implication that coitus will nonetheless occur is palpable in the tapestry, casting doubt on the existing discourse of purity. The unicorn navigates between the acceptable spiritual form of copulation and the more literal and unacceptable forms, ranging from bestiality to sexual intercourse outside of marriage. It is worth noting that sodomy, which was defined as any sex that was not reproductive and included gay/lesbian sex, would have also fallen into this category. When it comes to the unicorn, there is no binary opposition of pure versus tainted, or chaste versus promiscuous, because, as the multiple contexts surrounding its existence demonstrate, the unicorn has always been instrumentalised for the narrative and moral – of piety and chastity – that most benefitted the teller of the tale, which historically tended to be a heteronormative one. As a result, moral fluidity was distinct from gender fluidity. The same flexibility was not extended to the latter since to exist in opposition to a woman meant to be, by default, coded male.

To read the unicorn in the Hunt of the Unicorn means to queer its relationship to the female virgin. This changes the gender of one of the characters, not the relationship between them, which is rooted in the unicorn's desire for the virgin and, as has been established, is often interpreted as sexual. Jess Dobkin takes on a different Christian story, Noah's Ark, which is often used to explain why the unicorn does not exist. Her piece *Everything I've Got* (2010) is a contemporary example that does more than simply change the unicorn's gender default from male to female. In the accompanying "Commentary: The Great Refusal and the Great Hope" (2011), Jill Dolan argues that Dobkin, drawing on the trope of the unicorn as a solitary creature, whether because it prefers to be alone or because it is the last of its kind, presents the creature as symbolic of a "queer resistance to […] reproductive and other binaries […] metamorphiz[ing] the radical lesbian refusal of heteronormativity" (194-195). Dobkin does not tell the reader about the nature of the unicorn's sexual relationships, particularly with the virgin maidens the unicorn summons, "none [of whom] are pure enough to answer the call" (190). Instead, the queerness of Dobkin's unicorn lies in her refusal to find a male mate and board the Ark, putting personal pleasure over reproduction. The death of Dobkin's unicorn is interpreted by one of the animals on the Ark as punishment for her frivolity, which is directly related to her sexuality. In a version of the Hunt of the Unicorn where the unicorn is gendered female, its death could similarly be interpreted – from a heteronormative perspective – as

punishment not only for giving into temptation but for also experiencing a 'deviant' form of desire.

Already in the Medieval period the unicorn's body accommodated multiple readings, serving as a symbol for the divine (Jesus, Mary) and as a representation of mortal, male desire for female sexuality. The unicorn was anthropomorphised the moment it entered culture in the infamous Hunt of the Unicorn trope. In "On the *Dynamis* of Animals, or How *Animalium* Became *Anthropos*" (2006), Diane Apostolos-Cappadona notes that this process strips the *animalium* of its initial allure in the eyes of humans as "primal reverence" and replaces it with a desire for control and ownership, transforming the *animalium* into an Other (442). From an ontological standpoint, the unicorn's identity cannot be pinpointed easily because it has operated as a container for multiple, at times opposing, readings over the course of centuries. This flexibility has given the unicorn its cultural longevity, protecting it from the disintegration and disappearance that Barthes argues myths are doomed to (*Mythologies* 119). In fact, the unicorn's relationship with the female virgin is one of the few constants in the mythos of the unicorn, although its gender and the nature of that relationship is ripe for reimagining. In other words, the unicorn's beginnings as a flexible symbol suggests that to queer the unicorn is to continue the trend of allowing the unicorn to remain a semiotically and ontologically ambiguous being.

Becoming Female: The Unicorn as Woman

The unicorn's relationship with humans, particularly human women, became even more complex once the unicorn descended from the divine to the mortal realm. The unicorn assumed a more corporeal form, sometimes human but not always. This mortal form is less fluid than the one it had in a Christian context. It does not hold multiple sexualities and readings as easily as it did when it served as an interlocutor for the divine. This occurs, in part, because the unicorn's bond with human women also becomes less ambiguous. The unicorn is shown to have more in common with the virgin than the Christian context initially suggested. As Woodman reminds us, the two share the same struggle of having chastity imposed onto them until each is "[c]ut off from the wisdom of the body [as] the [two] virgin[s] [are] frozen" (*Addiction to Perfection* 84). The possibility of a sexual relationship between the unicorn and the virgin is therefore diminished, if not fully erased, as the unicorn absorbed the physical and ontological aspects of the (cis) female body. As the boundaries between the two, as well as the boundaries between human and animal, began to blur, the unicorn was no longer simply gendered female but also, in some cases, became woman. I want to note that by using the word 'gendered' here, I am referring to the way that the unicorn's identity is still, ultimately, determined by the creators of the works that I discuss below. The unicorn in these fictional contexts does not declare its own gender, although such a premise would be a welcome addition to this article's argument and warrants further discussion.

Of the two cases – the female unicorn and the female-unicorn-turned-human-woman – the former is the less radical jump, as illustrated in Ridley Scott's 1985 fantasy film *Legend*. The film's central conflict follows the trope of the Hunt of the Unicorn: Lily, a princess who embodies innocence and beauty, touches one of the two unicorns that exist in the world, thereby sullying

the creature's purity with her mortal touch and sending it into a death-like slumber. At the same time, Scott adds a subtle complexity to the familiar narrative, as the two unicorns are revealed to be a male and a female. Lily touches the male unicorn, whereas it is the female who is pursued and ultimately captured by the servants of darkness. Although the quest to free the unicorn is motivated primarily by the need to prevent evil from winning, there is added urgency because the harmonious heterosexual partnership between the two unicorns has been disrupted, leaving the female unicorn to face the same potential end as Dobkin's unicorn. The question of reproduction is notably absent in historical discussions and portrayals of the unicorn, like the Hunt of the Unicorn, which suggest that the creature is fuelled by desire and passion rather than the need to procreate. More often, the unicorn is said to be alone to underscore its individual supremacy, much like the case with the Christian God. The select depictions of baby unicorns that do exist are more often found in media intended for children, such as in picture books, and their presence is taken for a fact that is rarely, if ever, explained. In such cases, the baby unicorn seems to appear out of nowhere, as if it were immaculately conceived and brought into the world, a topic that also warrant its own, separate discussion.

If the unicorn is gendered female, how does it perform femininity? One approach to answering this question would be to turn to Judith Butler's seminal article "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" (1988), in which Butler defines gender as "an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts" which, with time, solidifies and becomes something we think of as a type, a behaviour, a form (519, original emphasis). In the case of the unicorn, its characteristic trait – its attraction to human female virgins – is a form of behaviour that is not limited to a specific gender. Unlike the human woman, whose femininity is judged based on her appearance and behaviour, particularly her virginity, the unicorn does not have an extrinsic layer around it that would enable this kind of performance. Only through assigning meaning to the unicorn's behaviour do the creature's actions acquire masculine or feminine connotations. After all, as discussed above, just because the unicorn in the Hunt of the Unicorn has been interpreted to be male does not mean that the unicorn's sex is male, merely that a reading of the unicorn as male is the reading that was favoured historically. Butler's theory of repetition can help us understand the long-standing reading in Western culture of the unicorn as male, conflating gender and sex until it is difficult to disentangle the two. The next step for the unicorn, which it has not quite achieved yet on a cultural level, would be to move past this binary approach altogether.

Rebecca Horn's wearable sculpture *Unicorn/Einhorn* (1970-72) is an example of the attempt through performance. The sculpture also manifests what Giovanni Aloi describes in *Speculative Taxidermy: Natural History, Animal Surfaces, and Art in the Anthropocene* (2018) as our inability to understand an object beyond the most immediate surface level, since "even when we cut into an apple or an animal body, our action is only capable of multiplying surfaces: the essence of the object relentlessly withdraws" (163). In Horn's case, the 'cutting into' is less a physical action than it is a question of embodiment. *Unicorn* – or a wearable "alicorn," to use the term popularised by American professor, poet, and politician Odell Shepard in his 1930 book *The Lore of the Unicorn*, referring to the unicorn's horn – is one of several prosthetics that Horn put on, after which she

wandered through a field for most of the day. It is debatable what occurs in this performance. Does Horn become a unicorn or is the unicorn brought to life and 'given form' through the prosthetics, using Horn's body as an instrument? More importantly, if the unicorn is 'brought to life' by Horn, is it a female unicorn given that Horn herself identifies as female? Rather than attempting to answer these open-ended questions, it is important to recognise that this is yet another instance where the unicorn resists conforming to a single identity, which would require exists in a static, fixed form. By wearing *Unicorn*, Horn seeks the unicorn in its Platonic form, abstract and nonphysical. Gone is the familiar image of the white horse with a flowing mane and a glimmering, single horn projecting from its forehead. If Horn's unicorn does have an identity, then it is, quite literally, performative, assumed and shed at will and shaped by the actions and presentation of the human wearer. In this way, it has been divested of the layers of gender and sexuality that have smothered the unicorn for so long.

The question of performing is much clearer when the unicorn becomes a woman, as in Peter S. Beagle's 1968 fantasy novel, *The Last Unicorn*. Like Scott, Beagle specifies that Unicorn is female. The primary difference between *The Last Unicorn* and *Legend* is the fact that, until she is transformed into a woman and given a 'human' name, Amalthea, Unicorn is referred to by her species type. By capitalising the word so that it becomes her 'name,' Beagle distinguishes Unicorn from all the other hypothetical unicorns that existed in the past and, as Unicorn believes, are still out there somewhere. Significantly, Beagle makes it clear that Unicorn is female, for even nameless other characters refer to her using female pronouns. The fact that Unicorn is the last of her kind is also one of her defining features and, when applied to the female body, whether human or animal, this detail adds an additional level of urgency and responsibility, as a vessel that contains the future. Although it is curiosity and concern that fuels Unicorn's journey, rather than any kind of biological urgency, the reproductive implications of the narrative cannot be overlooked. The fact that Unicorn is non-human simply makes this implication more complex. Instead of looking for a mate to engage in reproductive sex with, Beagle's Unicorn becomes a mother figure by finding the unicorns. She therefore still achieves the goal of reproduction, being the sustainment of the population of one's kind to ensure its continuity into the future. Whereas the Immaculate Conception still involved the physical birth of Jesus, Unicorn's form of motherhood omits this physical aspect. In *The Last Unicorn,* therefore, the archetypes of the unicorn and the virgin are conflated in Unicorn, who maintains the curiosity of the former and the innocence and purity of the latter. If Unicorn can be read as a mother figure, then it is in the way she expresses concern for the well-being of her 'children,' who in this case are kin on a species level.

Also significant is the fact that the role of the unicorn as the one who is sexually drawn to the human virgin is performed by a male character, prince Lir. Beagle continues the Medieval view of the unicorn-virgin relationship as a heterosexual one but reverses the sex-species correlation. However, as Weronika Laszkiewicz observes in "Peter S. Beagle's Transformations of the Mythic Unicorn" (2014), "Lir's yearning for the Lady is perhaps the purest one in the book" because he is ultimately "satisfied by Amalthea's existence alone and does not care about her physical shape" (58). In other words, Lir-as-unicorn demonstrates pansexual feelings towards Amalthea-as-virgin. In doing so, he disrupts the Hunt of the Unicorn trope, in part because a single physical touch would prevent Amalthea from returning to her unicorn form and achieving her goal of finding the other unicorns. The initial sexual desire that Lir experiences for Amalthea turns into something more,

suggesting that Amalthea – and by extension, Unicorn as a character and as a being – inspires higher and purer feelings that transcend lust. To be female and to become a human woman is not a punishment in Beagle's novel, nor is it an eternal chrysalis that has been imposed on Unicorn the way it is on the virgin in the Hunt of the Unicorn. In fact, Beagle presents mortality and a single corporeal form as something to be feared due to the limitations that result from it. *The Last Unicorn* gives the unicorn the opportunity to try out a greater number of corporeal forms, to slip in and out of them like skins. Beagle's novel also diminishes the distance between unicorn and human, demonstrating that the two are not mutually exclusive categories and that unicorns and female virgins have more than sexual purity in common.

Beagle nonetheless calls back to the unicorn's historical gendering as male by having the magician Schmendrick recall a tale told by the great wizard Nikos about a male unicorn who was ambushed by three hunters when it was resting its head in the lap of a female virgin. Unlike in Medieval tales, this unicorn transformed into a young man who brandished a sword and killed the hunters, after which he married the virgin. The unicorn then lived the rest of his life as a mortal and died an old man, albeit without bearing any children. Beagle upholds the idea that unicorns do not bear children, but he allows the unicorn to obtain the object of its desire – the female virgin – without that being treated as a reprehensible action punishable by death. What makes Nikos' story significant is that it reiterates that Beagle is not limited to thinking of the unicorn as aligned with only one gender, although the female gender predominates.[1] Through the characters of Unicorn and Amalthea, *The Last Unicorn* queers the reader's understanding of the unicorn in relation to sexual desire and non-sexual reproduction, in the sense that heterosexual reproduction is no longer assumed, nor possible. The novel undermines the idea that the unicorn is unfit for any sort of kinship relations, demonstrating that a sense of community does not have to be rooted in a parent-child dichotomy to be valid.

Queering the Unicorn: The New 'Monster'

Turning now to examining the unicorn itself, we first need to consider a more basic level of identification: how do we talk about the unicorn? What pronouns do we use? Up until now, I have deliberately referred to the unicorn as a 'creature' or, when speaking of the unicorn directly, used the pronoun 'it.' 'It' is neutral and makes it possible to distinguish between humans and non-humans in a way the pronoun 'they' does not. However, 'it' has the unshakeable connotation of objectification, suggesting the unicorn is lesser than a non-human being. This paradox is addressed at the beginning of Timothy Morton's book *Humankind: Solidarity with Non-Human People* (2017). Morton focuses on this very question of recognising other entities and finding ways of empathetic coexistence:
There is no pronoun entirely suitable to describe ecological beings. […] If I call them "he" or "she," then I'm gendering them according to heteronormative concepts that are untenable on evolutionary terms. If I call them "it," I don't think they are people like me and I'm being blatantly anthropocentric. (3-4)

Due to the unicorn's mythical nature, it is also difficult to call 'it' an 'animal,' even though Mary Midgley's definition of the term in *Myths We Live By* (2003) – "the word 'animal' stands for the inhuman, the anti-human. It represents the forces that we fear in our own nature, forces that we are unwilling to regard as a true part of it" (136) – is an important reminder that 'animal' has often been used in a way that is synonymous to 'monster,' especially in the Western colonial context. There is an unbridgeable gulf between the unicorn and other animals that stems from the fact that the unicorn is a hybrid, an amalgamation of a several different animals. It is this stitching together that gives the unicorn a touch of the monstrous, eternally separating 'it' from the animals with which we are familiar.

There are two ways to be a monster: on the level of connotation and on an ontological level. Monsters by connotation are monstrous on a physical level, feared and Othered because of the drastic changes that occurred to their body. These changes can be significant deformities or simply exaggerated features. Ontological monsters, on the other hand, are those that terrify the imagination because they pose a threat to social stability on an ideological level. These monsters are dangerous because they suggest a physical mode of being other than the status quo, which is, among other things, heteronormative and ableist. This does not mean, however, that monsters are 'uncertain.' According to Dana Oswald in "Monstrous Gender: Geographies of Ambiguity" (2012), monsters still "exist in a very clear space, one that does not choose a side, but rather one that points to the futility and inadequacy of such divisions" (362). More importantly, ontological monsters also exhibit, albeit not always, what Oswald calls "monstrous gender" (346), existing beyond the boundaries of the socially acceptable in a way that "constructs human gender as stable" (347). In other words, monsters reinforce the constructed nature of the human gender binary. They exist in opposition to it, showcasing a myriad of other possible genders. By tracing the unicorn's movement across the binary genders and beyond them, the first two sections of this article have also sought to make this idea of unstable gender apparent. Considering that gender does not mean the same thing when applied to a human, an animal, and a mythical creature, then the unicorn's constructed and fluid nature becomes even more prominent.

Even if we do not think of the unicorn as a monster according to contemporary Western culture's definition of a monster – that is, a monster by connotation – then the unicorn's ability to blur the boundaries of gender and being make 'I'" ontologically monstrous. Before declaring this a defeat for the unicorn, let us keep in mind Patricia MacCormack's observation from "Posthuman Teratology" (2012): "Monsters are only ever defined contingent with their time and place; they are never unto themselves. It could be argued that monstrosity is only a failure of or a catalyst to affirm the human" (293). Classical monsters like Dracula or Frankenstein exist based on this logic, as 'unnatural' to the human 'natural,' allowing us to define our humanity by contrasting ourselves to their perceived *in*humanity. By comparison, the unicorn, as a symbol of purity and chastity, requires us to treat 'it' as the example to aspire to, to look inward and absorb 'its' virtues into ourselves. The unicorn's desire to live, less in a biological sense of survival and more in terms of 'its' ability to remain present in Western culture, is comparable to the persistence of myth. For Barthes, "[w]hen meaning is too full for myth to be able to invade it, myth goes around it, and carries it away boldly" (132). In a

similar way, the unicorn has been navigating 'its' way around ideas of heteronormativity and female chastity, sexual and immaculate reproduction, biological and chosen kinship systems. 'It' has gone from being a symbol to coming into 'itself,' transitioning across various corporeal and metaphorical forms. This movement between two genders destabilises the gender binary and suggests that the unicorn is more than any single gender identity, given the creature's natural propensity to slip in and out of them. In other words, the unicorn can be thought of as ontologically trans. By becoming increasingly aligned with a greater sense of individuality, most notably in Beagle's novel, the unicorn demonstrates that 'it' is no ordinary monster, or at least not the kind of monster described by MacCormack, which exists in Horror narratives as a warning to the human characters. In fact, the unicorn redefines the very word 'monster,' which is shown to be negative only for those who insist on reinforcing the gender binary. Today, the unicorn's Otherness therefore becomes positive and desirable in a starkly different way. To recall, in a historical and patriarchal context, the unicorn was physically desired for 'its' body and perceived magical properties. 'It' was also seen as a favourable model for women to emulate. In a contemporary context, the unicorn's Otherness becomes an entry point for rethinking binary gender identity and the idea of a fixed self that is established at birth.

In light of this challenge of classifying the unicorn and placing it along the spectrum of monstrosity, Morton's "strange stranger," a translation of Derrida's *arrivant*, is a fitting candidate to replace extant terms used to speak of the unicorn, terms that are based either on the binaries of gender (she/her and he/him) or the terminology of myths and fairytales (the 'neutral' fantastical creature or the evil monster). The term "strange strangers," which Morton puts forth in their article "Queer Ecology" (2010), encapsulates the "uncanny, familiar and strange" nature that the unicorn represents, "its" "familiarity […] strange, [its] strangeness familiar" (277). We are familiar with the animals that make up the unicorn, perhaps less so with where they originated from or how they came together because of curiosity and misconception. Yet is the way that these parts come together to create a new whole, resulting in a creature that is of this world but also slightly removed from it, that makes the unicorn a magical presence that destabilises the perceived order and rationality of the world it inhabits.

The uncertainty in identifying and labelling the unicorn suggests 'it' is not only a living entity but also a living form of resistance to existing systems of representation and identification. The unicorn embodies what J. Jack Halberstam defines as "wildness" in their recent book *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire* (2020): "a chaotic force of nature, the outside of categorization, unrestrained forms of embodiment, the refusal to submit to social regulations, loss of control, [and] the unpredictable" that "disorders desire and desires disorder" (3, 7). Like wildness, which Halberstam argues exists to add tension and represent all the things left behind in the creation process of our human-centric world order, the unicorn's presence in art and literature is a type of disturbance. Narratives like the Hunt of the Unicorn and even *The Last Unicorn*, which still assigns Unicorn a fixed gender even when the species divide is crossed, use gender to try and make sense of the unicorn, to tame 'its' wild nature and bring 'it' into the orderly world some might refer to as 'reality.' Yet each time we think we have found a place for the unicorn where 'it' belongs, 'it' finds a way to disrupt the peace in 'its' newfound garden and escape. In doing so, the unicorn,

as well Halberstam, remind is that "wildness is not the territorial equivalent of freedom" since "wildness has its own regulatory regimes, its own concept of order, and its own hierarchies and modes of domination" (131). To let the unicorn be wild means that 'it' must be allowed to maintain a genderqueer existence, transitioning between and beyond gender at will.

The fact that the unicorn has functioned as both a character and an allegory, as an animal-like mythical creature who also occasionally transforms into a human, suggests that 'it' operates under what Aloi calls "speculative taxidermy," which is "concerned with a more specific approach and with a much narrower range of works of art in which visible animal skin (or its representation) is critically adopted as a defining indexical relationship between animal presence and the medium of representation itself" (23). We can never get to the centre of what the unicorn is, how it should be identified and referred to, because from its inception the element of multivalence was built into it. The unicorn never belonged to the maiden, to the realm of the feminine, even though the unicorn has always been closely aligned with femininity. This is not because the unicorn is 'above' the feminine, but rather because we have only recently begun to understand that the female, whether human or unicorn, biological or allegorical, is only one of the possible doors the unicorn may choose to walk through on its journey of self-discovery.

Conclusion

With its propensity for denying readers and viewers the ease of a quick and definitive interpretation, the unicorn's existence has taken on a distinctly trans nature. Challenging our understanding of purity when it comes to sexual intercourse and heteronormative marriage conventions, the unicorn necessitates a re-examination of the interconnection between womanhood and motherhood, with the frequent emphasis on procreative capabilities, within Western patriarchal society, as well as on the role that gender identity and plays in shaping how human and non-human existence is then valued and judged. As the examples considered in this article demonstrate, while remnants of the trope of the unicorn and the virgin can still often be found within more contemporary media, like *Legend* and *The Last Unicorn*, this relationship no longer defines the unicorn. Although the unicorn has long served as an interlocutor, representing figures from the Christian religion as well as more abstract concepts or social values, its ever-evolving presence within culture – such as its relatively recent association with the rainbow, one of the symbols of the LGBTQIA+ community – is a reminder that is a biologically and ontologically fluid creature that no longer exists in opposition. Now, it is the unicorn who demands our full attention.

NOTES

1. Unlike in the Hunt of the Unicorn trope, where the unicorn's gender had a direct impact on the story, it is easy to look past gender in *The Last Unicorn* and read Unicorn more holistically, as a symbol rather than a specific character. One such reading, which further emphasises the underlying queerness of Beagle's novel, is Hannah Abigail Clarke's "Queer Visibility & Coding in *The Last Unicorn* by Peter S. Beagle."

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GIRL WIZARDS AND BOY WITCHES: GENDER IN TERRY PRATCHETT'S *DISCWORLD* NOVELS

Prema Arasu

In the hands of skilled creators, the estranging worlds of Fantasy become spaces in which we might imagine alternatives to hegemonic binaries. This paper examines two of Sir Terry Pratchett's *Discworld* novels: *Equal Rites* (1987), which is about Eskarina Smith, a female wizard, and *The Shepherd's Crown* (2015), which features Geoffrey Swivel, a male witch. These texts are satirical takes on gendered magic; that is, the assumption in Fantasy writing that men and women are suited towards different types of magic or different social roles involving the use of magic. Using Queer Theory as my major methodological approach, in this paper I consider how gendered metanarratives are performed and subverted in the consensus Fantasy universe (the "Discworld," which is also the name of the series) via active engagement with its often-patriarchal tropes. In doing so I hope to demonstrate that Fantasy can be a highly effective medium of exploring queer experience and subverting hegemonic ideals.

Equal Rites was published two years after Pratchett delivered a keynote at *Novacon 15* titled "Why Gandalf Never Married" (1985), in which he criticised gender conservatism in Fantasy writing at the time:

> In the fantasy world there is no such thing as a male witch […] there certainly isn't such a thing as a female wizard. […] in the fantasy world, magic done by women is usually of poor quality, third-rate, negative stuff, while the wizards are usually cerebral, clever, powerful, and wise. Strangely enough, that's also the case in this world. (quoted in *A Slip of the Keyboard* 92)

Pratchett draws parallels between gender roles in what he identifies in "the consensus fantasy universe" and in real life (*A Slip of the Keyboard* 92). Although the majority of Fantasy works are "reflections, if not products of conservative politics", Daniel Baker argues in "Why We Need Dragons: The Progressive Potential of Fantasy" (2012) that Fantasy has the progressive potential to direct the reader to "radical, emancipated subjectivities" (437-8). What Kathryn Hume in her influential *Fantasy and Mimesis* (1984) calls Fantasy's "departure from consensus reality" offers immense imaginative freedom—aesthetic freedom, but also ideological freedom (21). The literalisation of metaphors in

the form of magic and/or the other worlds of Fantasy worlds can be meaningful rhetorical devices through which to defamiliarise ourselves with otherwise inescapable realities such as capitalism, the Anthropocene, heteronormativity, cisnormativity, and patriarchy.

Genre and Gender

According to Rosemary Jackson in *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (1981), Fantasy has the potential to "undermine dominant philosophical and epistemological orders" by estranging them (103). Both texts in feature characters whose gender deviance is communicated through their queering of the witch/wizard binary. These texts therefore function as examples of what Stephen Kenneally describes as "queer fantasy" in "Hiding in Plain Sight: The Invisibility of Queer Fantasy" (2016); those which use the genre to explore marginal modes of being. It must be noted that this is distinct from Fantasy with queer representation – as Kenneally points out, that there are many texts that" "combine LGBT content and fantasy content" but "do not fulfil the queer potential inherent in such a fusion" (9). In fact, representation (although important) often works counterintuitively to Queer Fantasy and Queer Theory by reaffirming rather than challenging the stability and fixedness of identity.

Queer Theory is a theoretical framework that challenges the notion of an essentialised self. In their foundational work *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Butler problematises the supposed stability of sex, gender, and sexual identities, and explores the ways in which "incoherent" or "discontinuous" beings destabilise the notion of identity by disrupting the norms of "cultural intelligibility" through which identity defines personhood (23). Pratchett explores the experience of such "incoherent" characters and the ways in which they make themselves intelligible, or, in some cases, defer intelligibility entirely. This can be a powerful tool in exploring how gender comes about through gestures and speech acts specific to certain social contexts. As Butler argues, gender is "an ongoing discursive practice […] open to intervention and resignification" produced through the repeated enactment, anticipation, and prohibition of actions, gestures, and desires, the repetition of which "[produces] the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (*Gender Trouble* 33). Gender is perceived as the outwards expression of an internal reality, but this supposed reality – sexual difference – is ontologically and historically unstable.

Existing queer scholarship relating to speculative forms has a strong focus on Science Fiction. The critical success and overtly queer themes of works such as Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) and Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* (1975) have attracted more queer scholarship in comparison to Fantasy, which is only just managing to shake its reputation of being inherently patriarchal. Science Fiction, according to Marleen S. Barr in *Alien to Femininity: Speculative Fiction and Feminist Theory* (1987), is "ideally suited for exploring the potential of women's changing roles" because its "writers are not hindered by the constraints of patriarchal social reality" (xi). When compared to Fantasy, Science Fiction may appear more conducive to explorations of queerness due to its abundance of tangibly queer bodies in the form of cyborgs, androids, and aliens. However, I argue that the very same can be said about Fantasy. Placing ourselves in opposition to Darko Suvin,

who in his *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979) elevated Science Fiction from Fantasy as a more potentially subversive literature of "cognitive estrangement" (8), Fantasy scholars and writers find the same possibilities in magical worlds.

Queer elements in Fantasy texts are recognised by scholars such as Taylor Driggers, whose *Queering Faith in Fantasy Literature: Fantastic Incarnations and the Deconstruction of Theology* (2022) explores Fantasy's ability to queer spiritual binaries or in Jude Roberts and Esther MacCallum-Stewart's *Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Popular Fantasy: Beyond Boy Wizards and Kick-Ass Chicks* (2016), a collection of essays which consider how Fantasy texts challenge and disrupt received notions of gender and sexuality and "encourage their audiences to imagine ways of being outside of the constitutive constraints of socialized gender and sexual identity" ("Introduction" 1). Jes Battis's *Thinking Queerly: Medievalism, Wizardry, and Neurodiversity in Young Adult Texts* (2021) which considers how the wizard-figure in contemporary Young Adult (YA) Fiction might resonate with LGBTQIA+ and neurodivergent readers due to their ability to think and see the world differently. Battis identifies Pratchett's Tiffany Aching as a queer figure who "inhabits a mind and body that don't necessarily line up with her society's expectations" (89). Scholarly analyses of witches in Fantasy are largely concerned with positive representations of girls for young adult readers and reclaiming the witch from its negative Fairy Tale connotations, often with reference to J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series (1997-2007) and Terry Pratchett's *Witches* novels (1983-2015). For example, Lori Campbell's "Introduction" to *A Quest of Her Own: Essays on the Female Hero in Modern Fantasy* (2014), describes the volume as a collection of essays on "the empowerment of the female hero as she carves out a permanent, independent position" alongside her male counterpart (5). These texts and the scholarship surrounding them tend to uphold rather than deconstruct gender binaries, however, scholars such as Amanda Jo Hobson in "Bewitching Bodies: Sex, Violence, and Magic in Urban Fantasy" (2018) recognise the witch as a fruitful space for queer and otherwise marginalised identities (54).

In this article I argue that Fantasy is particularly well-placed to explore the historical and ontological instability of gender. Fantasy, especially secondary world Fantasy, brings about estrangement by excavating the insidious mechanisms through which metanarratives such as gender come about. As Driggers argues in "Archaeologies of the Future: Deconstruction, Fantasy, and the Fiction of Ursula K. Le Guin" (2019), the characters and creatures that inhabit secondary worlds can "unsettle the reader's preconceived notions and gesture towards an alterity that is still yet to come" (112). There is great potential in the ability of secondary worlds to investigate the discursive construction of gender and, by altering or queering the ways in which gender manifests, to explore the idea that gender is, as Butler argues in *Undoing Gender* (2004) "a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint" (1). By shifting the contexts in which these constraints arise, we can estrange, interrogate, and queer the processes by which gender roles become embedded into the structure of society.

Girl Wizards: It's Against the Lore!

In *Equal Rites* and *The Shepherd's Crown*, Eskarina and Geoffrey respectively encounter apprehension on the part of those around them. Eskarina is bequeathed a staff at birth by the wizard Drum Billet, who believed she would be born a boy; a scene which reflects the assignment of gender at birth according to genitalia. Drum dies before anything can be done about it, and Eskarina is assigned wizard at birth. She spends her early childhood training as a witch with Granny Weatherwax. Once learned in witchcraft, she makes her way to the city of Ankh-Morpork where she intends to begin training as a wizard at Unseen University. Although Granny agrees to take Eskarina, she maintains that "it's the wrong kind of magic for women, is wizard magic, it's all books and stars and jommetry" (*Equal Rites* 8). Granny's mirroring of essentialist discourse demonstrates the ubiquity of fixed ideas about gender in the Discworld and thus the hardship that Eskarina is about to face.

Eskarina is denied entry by the university wizards due to her gender. The university wizards repeatedly insist that "it's absolutely against the lore!" (151). "Lore" is layered with both diegetic and extra-diegetic meaning: it refers to what Pratchett termed the cliché-ridden "consensus fantasy universe," an amalgamation of tropes derived from Tolkien and *Dungeons and Dragons*, which by the 1980s was a common collective of characters and plotlines in which "elves are tall and fair and use bows, dwarves are small and dark and vote Labour" (*A Slip of the Keyboard* 91). The consensus Fantasy universe also dictates that wizards are men and witches are women. Witchcraft and Wizardry are diametrically opposed: witches train as apprentices in pastoral settings, and concern themselves with practical matters such as healing, agriculture, and midwifery, while wizards learn at formal institutions where they attend lectures and write dissertations while doing very little actual magic.

In "Magical Genders: The Gender(s) of Witches in the Historical Imagination of Terry Pratchett"s Discworld" (2015), Lian Sinclair observes that Pratchett "consciously engages with and intervenes in this consensus fantasy universe" by having characters express conservative worldviews in a way which invites critique of those views (8). Rather than offering a utopian escape where sexism does not exist, the Discworld setting functions as what Janet Brennan Croft in "The Education of a Witch: Tiffany Aching, Hermione Granger, and Gendered Magic" (2009) calls a "funhouse mirror of our world" where sexism does exist but we can make fun of the people who try to rationalise it (131). Repeatedly, Pratchett asks his readers to think about why a completely imagined world, where everything is possible, would retain a patriarchal social structure in which women are systematically oppressed and men are expected to conform to an idealised version of masculinity. Pratchett's texts, therefore, are critiques of his social reality as much as they are about the Fantasy genre.

In "Be a Witch, Be a Woman: Gendered Characterisation of Terry Pratchett's Witches" (2018), Alice Nuttall observes that the duties of witches are coded as women's work, and therefore represent "tensions faced by women in the real word" (33). As Pratchett points out, the gender essentialism in Fantasy is a reflection of reality, and the "lore" also refers to the gendered narratives which govern everyday life. The wizards encourage Eskarina to abandon her hopes of becoming a wizard and instead encourage her to pursue witchcraft, smugly dismissing it as "a fine career for

girls" (151). They employ patriarchal, pseudoscientific exclusionary discourse to exclude Eskarina on the basis that "high magic requires great clarity of thought, you see, and women's talents do not lie in that direction. Their brains tend to overheat" (152). Pratchett appropriates patriarchal discourse to draw parallels with the language used to exclude women from masculine professions on the basis of supposed biological difference.

The wizard's staff functions as a phallic symbol: the university wizards insist that "you're not a wizard unless you've got a staff" (139). This discourse appropriates the phallocentric trans-exclusionary language used to vilify transgender individuals from social spaces and legal categories and draws attention to its inconsistent ontological basis. If the possession of a staff constitutes a wizard, Eskarina exploits what Butler identifies as the unstable "metaphysics of substance" of sex in insisting that she must be allowed to train as a wizard as she possesses the necessary equipment (*Gender Trouble* 24-5). Confronted with an unprecedented situation, the wizards reject her, but Sarina's supposedly impossible possession of a staff exposes an ontological gap in their worldview.

Equal Rites transposes the man/woman binary onto the Fantasy world in the form of the wizard/witch binary. This allegory brings about a sense of estrangement, raising the question of how these gender roles came about in the world of Fantasy and the wider generic conventions from which they came. As Sinclair argues, the construction of gender "is raised in ways that might not be possible or at least more complicated in our own world" (11). Sarina's staff serves as a more pointed component of this allegorical comparison, acting as a symbol of her movement between genders and satirising the ontological instability of the phallus. When Eskarina is barred entry from Unseen University, she then makes her way in as a servant and her staff transforms itself into a broom. Eskarina is finally accepted as a university student when she demonstrates her ability to control her staff, rescuing the university wizards in the process. The wizards eventually concede that they may have something to learn from witches as well.

Eskarina does not give up witchcraft to pursue wizardry any more than she gives up her broom for a staff; she is determined to "be both or none at all" (154). Rather than take up the identity of an honorary man, Eskarina occupies the dual role of witch and wizard, male and female. In the books that follow, however, it would appear that Eskarina's adventures did not prompt any systemic change. Witchcraft and wizardry remain as strictly demarcated categories. Eskarina appears briefly in *I Shall Wear Midnight* (2010) which was published twenty-three years later as part of the young adult Tiffany Aching sub-series, also chronologically set some years later. She appears as a mentor figure to young witch Tiffany, and expressers a persistent sense of never being truly accepted:

> I never really felt like a wizard, so I never really worried about
> what anyone said. […] That's what I learned at university: to be
> me, just what I am and not worry about it. That knowledge is
> an invisible magical staff, all by itself. (169)

It is evident that despite Eskarina's skills and her time at university, Eskarina did not feel that she

belonged there. Eskarina opts for self-acceptance over establishing herself as an honorary man or wizard in a society (or genre) resistant to change.

The Nomenclature of Magic Users in Fantasy

Rowling's *Harry Potter* series have made the most impact in challenging the trope of gendered magic. Rowling offers a system in which "witch" and "wizard" are gendered labels for the same thing, a setup which rejects the malevolent connotations of witchcraft but retains its gender. Arguably, Rowling's witches are far closer to female wizards than witches in the traditional sense, as their magic is learned at an institution and contained within an intellectual tradition. However, in "Heteronormative Heroism and Queering the School Story in J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* Series" (2008), Tison Pugh and David L. Wallace consider the post-feminist co-educational system of Hogwarts a "façade [that] merely camouflages the novels' rather traditional gender roles" (260). The immutable gender system Rowling constructs might be read as a reflection of her own trans-exclusionary politics, which I have elsewhere argued is embedded into the house-sorting system of Hogwarts and the school architecture ("Hogwarts *Legacy*'s Game Mechanics Reflect the Gender Essentialism at the heart of Harry Potter" n.p.). Other popular series of the last two decades tend to avoid using witches, wizards, and other gendered terms in favour of invented terms such as "benders" (*Avatar: The Last Airbender*, 2005-2008), "grisha" (*Shadow and Bone* (2012) by Leigh Bardugo), or "Antari" (*A Darker Shade of Magic* (2015) by V. E. Schwab).

Boy Witches: A Gentleman's Staff

There are very few male witches in modern English-language Fantasy. Most existing examples which do feature male magic users who are called witches do not actively engage with the gendered tensions encoded in the male witch as part of their plot; they often instead depict alternate worlds in which 'witch' is simply not a gendered term. This is a subversive choice in itself as it resists a longstanding genre convention with roots in folklore, fairy-tale, and history. These texts include Lynn Flewelling's *Nightrunner* series (1996-present) which has a society with male and female witches who practice distinctly different kinds of witchcraft; *Half Bad* (2014) by Sally Green which has a half "white witch" (good) and half "black witch" (evil) protagonist; and *Witchmark* (2018) by C. L. Polk which features a male magic user who is referred to as either a mage or witch and the two being the respective gender-neutral names for high and low social classes of magic. Although gender is not a prominent theme in any of these texts, all of the protagonists of these novels have romantic relationships with other men, indicating that the male witch may be a way of exploring or indicating queerness even if gender is not an active source of narrative tension.

There are also men who practice 'witchcraft' but are never identified as witches. The protagonist of Diana Wynne Jones' *The Lives of Christopher Chant* (1988) is an enchanter who can also do witchcraft, a different (lesser) type of magic. Andrzej Sapkowski's Geralt of Rivia from *The Witcher Saga* (2006-2018) is a "witcher," translated from the Polish "wiedźmin." In *HIstoria i fantastyka* (2005), Sapkowski and Bereś confirm that this is an invented masculinisation of the Polish

word for witch, "wiedźma" (268). There is also J. R. R. Tolkien's "Witch-king of Angmar" in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (1954-1955) – Tolkien's use of the term is likely motivated by the malevolent connotations of the word rather than its gendered associations. Such texts might present an implicit challenge to the patriarchal consensus Fantasy universe by rejecting gendered connotations, but do not explicitly explore what they have chosen to reject or why. In contrast, Molly Ostertag's middle-grade graphic novel *The Witch Boy* (2017) features a boy protagonist whose desire to become a witch is at odds with societal (and generic) expectation, as does Terry Pratchett's *The Shepherd's Crown*. In making their protagonists' divergence an element of the plot, these two texts prompt a more active consideration, on the part of the reader, as to why traditional gender roles exist in fictional worlds. Both books involve the boys overcoming gender norms and eventually excelling at witchcraft, but witchcraft retains its status as a tradition led by women and steeped in feminine knowledge. Neither Ostertag nor Pratchett aim to 'neutralise' witchcraft; rather, they use boy witches to challenge hegemonic notions of masculinity by depicting protagonists who embody fluidity.

In the Western tradition, both the historical and cultural imaginations conceive of the witch as a female figure. A historical investigation by Alison Rowlands in *Witchcraft and Masculinities in Early Modern Europe* (2009) reveals that seventy-five to eighty per cent of those tried as witches were female, however, this number varies greatly according to region (1). Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger's 1487 witch-hunting manual *The Malleus Maleficarum* uses the feminine plural noun, indicating that they believed all witches were female. They reasoned that women are more susceptible to corruption by the Devil due to their mental weakness and insatiable carnal lust. Early modern society too believed that men who became witches did so because they had feminine weaknesses which led them to be influenced by the Devil. In some cases, male practitioners of malevolent magic were referred to as warlocks. Lara Apps and Andrew Colin Gow in *Male Witches in Early Modern Europe* (2003) note that historians often translate the Old English terms wicca (masculine) and wicce (feminine) into the entirely different words "warlock" and "witch" by historians; a process which has excluded men from historical discussions of early modern witchcraft and witch-hunting (8-9). There remains considerable debate about whether witch-hunting can be directly equated to women-hunting (See: Barstow 7, Kelkar 126, Rowlands 1).

Occasionally, a warlock is thought of a male witch. Even if warlocks are just males who practice witchcraft or witch-like magic, there still remains a lot to be said about their relative absence in Fantasy literature compared to female witches (and male wizards). Warlocks are, as Pratchett points out, uncommon in the consensus Fantasy universe (*A Slip of the Keyboard* 92). They seem to only ever exist when a story demands malevolent male magic users who are distinct from witches and wizards, as in the case of the television show *Charmed* (1998–2006) and Cassandra Clare's *Shadowhunter Chronicles* (2007-present). In *Harry Potter*, warlocks are wizards with duelling proficiency and/or knowledge of the Dark Arts. Albus Dumbledore is the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot; there is no indication as to what a witch would be called if she were to occupy this position. As is the case for male witches, warlocks as a concept present the opportunity to explore the question of why there even needs to be a separate term for boys and men who practice witchcraft.

Regardless of gender, witchcraft is and has always been associated with femininity if not femaleness in the Anglophone tradition and, as Apps and Gow argue, this femininity – especially when expressed by males – historically posed a threat to the patriarchal social order (13). Malcom Gaskill in "Masculinity and Witchcraft in 17th-Century England" (2009) suggests that men accused of witches were "implicitly feminised" and were associated with the negative feminine characteristics of "weakness, spite, envy, wantonness, and inconstancy," and regards witchcraft as a "uniquely female crime, regardless of the sex of the offender" (172). In *Crafting the Witch: Gendering Magic in Medieval and Early Modern England* (2009), Heidi Breuer links the emergence of the witch-hag figure in early modern literature to anxieties about the shifting position of women within the context of nascent capitalism and the threat of mercantilism on the maternal norm (137). The early modern witch-hunt is also commonly attributed to societal prejudices against women, particularly barren or disabled women who failed to conform to social expectations. In "White Wizard Male Privilege: Gendered Witchcraft and Racialized Magic" (2021), Fahey argues that wizards in both history and fantasy experience white male privilege: in the medieval era, male mystics such as Nostradamus were revered as wise prophets whereas female mystics such as Joan of Arc were persecuted for heresy and witchcraft (n.p.).

Presently, the witch-hag figure is subject to feminist reclamation from her role as a villain in folklore and Fantasy Fiction. Referring to Hélène Cixous' notion of "writing the body" from "Laugh of the Medusa" (1976), Breuer suggests that the witch can be and is currently being reclaimed by modern feminists through the discursive generation theorised by *écriture feminine*; the "creative use of language, reclaiming positive meanings for negative words, retelling ancient stories and writing new ones, telling our own stories" (159). When considered in the aim of turning the derogatory label of 'witch' from a persecuted, demonic figure into a symbol of feminist empowerment, the possibility of male witches might be seen as a threat to the process of reclamation. Male witches in the contemporary cultural context – that is, male or masculine individuals who identify as witches and/or wiccans – are very much aware of these processes of reclamation, and in many cases, adopt the term to express their gender nonconformity and their counter-cultural ideologies. The male witch is an expression of non-hegemonic queer masculinity and rather than being a threat to the feminist reclamation of the term, he becomes a part of it. The male witch in literature, I argue, can function in a similar way. He is a challenge to fixed notions of femininity and masculinity; he is inherently counter-cultural, queer; he engenders and embodies fluidity.

Pratchett refers to the ostensible oxymoronicity of a male witch in the same speech presented in 1985, but it was not until almost thirty years and thirty-nine *Discworld* books later that Pratchett wrote a male witch into his last novel, *The Shepherd's Crown*, published posthumously. Geoffrey Swivel, Pratchett's male "sort of" witch, is a minor character in *The Shepherd's Crown*. The book is mostly about Tiffany Aching, Granny Weatherwax's apprentice, and the Nac Mag Feegles. Geoffrey is as a very clever albeit unusual boy who is discontented with life as the third son of a lord. He thinks about what he wants, and asks an old farmhand if he might become a witch, to which the farmhand replies,

"Everyone knows men can't be witches."
"Why not?" asked Geoffrey.
The old man shrugged and said, "Nobody knows."
And Geoffrey said, "I want to know." (29)

Geoffrey finds Tiffany, who has been appointed to the position of Head Witch after the death of Granny Weatherwax. He tells Tiffany that his tutor "told me of one witch who became a wizard, so surely, mistress, the concept must go both ways?" (151). Eskarina remains unnamed but her achievement is recognised and she here serves as an inverse precedent for Geoffrey's desires. As Head Witch, Tiffany realises that she is now in a position to decide who and who cannot be witches. She takes Geoffrey on as an apprentice and finds that he excels at the domestic, community-based nature of their work.

The staff/broomstick recurs in Geoffrey's tale as a reminder of the ontological unreliability of the phallus: when attempting to purchase a broomstick, Geoffrey's request is met with discomfort and bewilderment. He is instead offered "a gentleman's staff […] with the… special indentation for the… delicate parts" (181). As Peter Stallybrass and Allon White asserted in *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (1986), genital-related jokes exemplify Bakhtinian "low" discourse: the "grotesque realism" which emphasises the openings and orifices of the carnival body work to subvert the normative order of things, in this case, gender (9). In this way, Pratchett's use of humour is both entertaining and powerfully subversive. In "Seriously Relevant: Parody, Pastiche and Satire in Terry Pratchett's *Discworld* Novels" (2018), Gideon Haberkorn argues that Pratchett's novels, far from being amusing Fantasy escapism, "connect to the world of their readers and have serious things to say about that world; and that this is not in spite of the humour and fantasy but through it and because of it" (138). Pratchett's appropriation and reconstruction of discourses, argues Ann Hiebert Alton and William C. Spiriall, has the effect of drawing attention to the hegemonic processes behind them (4-5).

In "All the Disc's a Stage: Terry Pratchett's *Wyrd* Sisters as Metafiction" (2019), I discuss his use humour more extensively with reference to Linda Hutcheon's definition of parody in Narcissistic *Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (1980) as a transformative force which "recirculates rather than immortalises" (2). Humour, as Simon Critchley argues in *On Humour* (2002) "is produced by a disjunction between the way things are and the way they are represented in the joke, between expectation and actuality" (1). This definition bears similarities to Martin Swales' argument in *The German Bildungsroman from Wieland to Hesse* (1978) that the "nonfulfillment of consistently intimated expectation" when writing within a genre "can, paradoxically, represent a validation of the genre by means of its controlled critique" (11-12). A text's repeated failure to fulfil the expectations of the genre within which it situates itself has the potential to be comedic in a way that works critically. *Equal Rites* and *The Shepherd's Crown* are particularly effective in their use of comical appropriation of heteropatriarchal discourses as a way of subverting and queering the patriarchal tropes of Fantasy.

As Butler argues in "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution" (1988), the subversive possibilities of gender transformation are found "in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style" (520). The discursive processes of gender construction are made strange by the otherness of the world itself as well as the magical elements. Although Tiffany supports Geoffrey, she does question why he has chosen the path of a witch and not a wizard:

> "I am intrigued, Geoffrey," she said. "Why do you want to be a witch instead of a wizard, which is something traditionally thought of as a man's job?"
> "I've never thought of myself as a man, Mistress Tiffany. I don't think I'm anything. I'm just me," he said quietly.
> Good answer! Tiffany said to herself. Then she wondered, not for the first time, about the differences between wizards and witches […] why shouldn't this boy want to be a witch? She had chosen to be a witch, so why couldn't he make the same choice? (153)

Like Eskarina, Geoffrey does not perceive himself as having any gender – both characters seem to perceive gender as something imposed upon them by others and not a core part of their identities. Both Eskarina and Geoffrey's narratives of development are contingent on self-acceptance rather than enacting widespread social change. Neither are trailblazers of revolution – Eskarina remains the first and only female wizard, and Geoffrey is the first and likely only male witch, if even that. Still unsure about whether or not Geoffrey can – or will be accepted as – a witch, Tiffany eventually refers to him as a "calm-weaver" in reference to his apparent ability to put people at ease. It remains unclear as to whether this is a new term equivalent to a male witch or a specific label for Geoffrey's specialisation within the field of witchcraft.

Queer analysis of *Equal Rites* and *The Shepherd's Crown* demonstrates that the estranging worlds of Fantasy might be productive spaces in which we can question the hegemonic processes that shape our identity. By encouraging us to reconsider how practices, traditions, and beliefs are established, secondary worlds are lenses through which we might critically reflect upon similar processes in reality. As Mark Wolf argues in *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* (2012), in "suggest[ing] alternate ways of living to consider or make strange our own world by contrast with other possibilities," secondary worlds expose the ideologies, epistemologies, and ontologies that structure our lived reality (xxvi). Pratchett's novels playfully consider how cultural metanarratives are encoded in non-realist forms and challenge such metanarratives through the critical revision of extant tropes, in this case, gendered magic. Eskarina and Geoffrey demonstrate that Fantasy is far from mere escapism – it is a way of imagining subversive and progressive possibilities outside of the normative order of things.

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BIONOTE

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"SWEET TITS OF BILLY!": REMAKING QUEER HISTORY IN *EXIT STAGE LEFT: THE SNAGGLEPUSS CHRONICLES*

Mihaela Precup and Dragoş Manea

This article examines DC's 2018 reboot of Snagglepuss, a pink mountain lion that made his debut in 1959 on *The Quick Draw McGraw Show* as Snaggletooth (later becoming Snagglepuss) and went on to star in thirty-two regular segments of Hanna-Barbera's *The Yogi Bear Show*, becoming famous for lines such as "Exit Stage Left" and "Heavens to Murgatroyd."[1] Writer Mark Russell and illustrator Mike Feehan return to Snagglepuss in *Exit Stage Left: The Snagglepuss Chronicles*, a six-issue comic series that constructs an origin story for the eponymous animated character, transforming him into a famous gay playwright and replacing the character's initial coded queerness with closeted homosexuality. The rebooted version of the character also incorporates traits reminiscent of Tennessee Williams, but, unlike Williams himself, is eventually blacklisted during the McCarthy era, when left-leaning intellectuals and homosexuals were targets of persecution. In this context, Snagglepuss's original campiness is reinterpreted as queerness in a new character with added muscle, poise, swagger, and a penchant for spending time at a hidden gay bar, dubbed "The Stonewall." In a chilling atmosphere that evokes the Red Scare of the 1950s in the United States, where self-preservation tests human/animal connection, salvation is finally to be found outside of the world of high art and in the 'low' medium of animation, where the elitist blacklisted playwright Snagglepuss finds a home as a cartoon character.

In Russell and Feehan's Snagglepuss reboot, set between 1953 and 1959, humans and anthropomorphic animals live side by side during a dark time in American history: alliances are fragile, conformity is brutally preserved, and difference is swiftly punished during a time popularly named "The Red Scare." In fact, the first Red Scare took place after World War I, but *Exit Stage Left* references the second Red Scare, a post-World War II phenomenon that saw an intensification of the activities of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), particularly after 1950, when senator Joseph McCarthy capitalised on Cold War fears of Soviet domination and nuclear attack (Shi and Tindall, 1166-1167). The famous playwright Snagglepuss is initially dismissive of the actual threat posed by McCarthyism: he has already been called before the HUAC once but did not reveal anything compromising and was allowed to return to his life. His partner, Pablo, who is Cuban and who eventually returns home to fight in the Cuban Revolution, is against this type of political apathy and argues instead that: "Every nation is a monster in the making. And monsters will come for you, whether you believe in them or not" (Russell and Feehan n.p.). As the action progresses,

Snagglepuss becomes increasingly aware of the seriousness of the situation culminating with his childhood friend, famous novelist Huckleberry Hound, being arrested during a raid at the Stonewall, and his own association with Huckleberry Hound made public during a second questioning by the HUAC. Huckleberry Hound's reputation is tarnished in the press and he subsequently commits suicide. Unable to find work after being similarly blacklisted, Snagglepuss is finally offered a position as an actor on the *Quick Draw McGraw Show*, where the title role is played by Huckleberry Hound's former lover, a horse who was fired from the police after being caught with a same-sex partner in a public place. Animation is depicted by *Exit Stage Left* as a haven of those mistreated and rejected by the system, a refuge, but also, it is suggested, a possible place of subversion. The only obstacle is Snagglepuss's own snobbery and his initial inability to produce a catchphrase more uplifting than "Sweet tits of Billy" (a tongue-in-cheek rewriting of animated Snagglepuss's "Heavens to Murgatroyd!"). *Exit Stage Left* thus advocates for the importance of political involvement and commitment, be it overtly manifested through revolutionary gestures (as in Pablo's case) or more covertly, as in Snagglepuss's more oblique subversion through his involvement in animation.

This article asks what the title character's depiction as a "sexy gay daddy" – as *The Advocate*'s Brian Anderson put it – contributes to the established cultural memory of the persecution of homosexuals during McCarthyism in the United States. We do this by first examining how *Exit Stage Left* reconstructs gay life in New York City in the 1950s against the cultural and historical background of the "Lavender Scare," a term coined by historian David K. Johnson in his 2004 monograph on the subject, *The Lavendar Scare*. We then examine the double rewriting that *Exit Stage Left* performs: firstly, of the original animated character and secondly, of Tennessee Williams. These two figures – one from the 'low culture' medium of mainstream animation and the other from the 'high culture' medium of theatre – create the opportunity for the comic to examine the cultural hierarchies at play in the United States, particularly the dichotomy between theatre and popular culture media such as television (and mainstream animation in particular), as well as the potential of popular culture to foster political subversion, dissent, and create a shelter for gay creators persecuted during the 1950s and after. We also consider how the comic book version of Snagglepuss's masculinity is visually and verbally constructed in *Exit Stage Left* – against the softer masculinities of the initial two characters incorporated in him – and whether it may inadvertently act as a corrective of these softer masculinities as it seems to be proposed as a means of resistance to the American state's mechanisms of surveillance and coercion from the 1950s.

Reconfiguring Gay Spaces and Political Dissent during the Lavender Scare

The Snagglepuss Chronicles does not exist in a void; it occupies a space in the tradition of American comics that center the experience of queer characters. As cartoonist Justin Hall shows in the preface to *No Straight Lines: Four Decades of Queer Comics* (2012), an important anthology of queer comics he edited (and which was the basis for a documentary film in 2021), queer content in comics form became more visible after the Stonewall Riots (1969), first in short strips published in *The Advocate* (which began in 1967), and later in certain segments of the underground comix press, which hosted a variety of stories focused mainly on coming-out narratives and gay erotica (n.p.). The queer tradition

in comics was later consolidated thanks to the work of pioneering comics creators and editors such as Howard Cruse and it branched out into a wide array of genres, styles, and topics (n.p.). Anthologies like *No Straight Lines*, databases such as queercartoonists.com, and the popularity of queer content in comics for different age groups – in both online and print form – testify to the richness of this tradition. In this context, Ramzi Fawaz and Darieck Scott in "Introduction: Queer about Comics" (2018) propose a reading of comics as a queer medium (197), while others, such as Tasha Robinson, proclaim this a golden age for queer comics. This is partly due to the more mainstream presence of queer comics, such as – to give only a few examples – the queer iterations of American superheroes, with varying degrees of success and regular comics series such as *Lumberjanes* (2015-present) and *Ms. Marvel* (2014-present) that target young audiences.

The Snagglepuss Chronicles also belongs to the tradition of using anthropomorphised animals for social and political commentary. In comics, this was most famously accomplished by Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1980-1991), but human-animal hybrids have more recently been used to ask questions about the construction of non-normative bodies, sexualities, and practices in successful comics series such as Brian K. Vaughn and Fiona Staples's *Saga* (2012-present) and Kurtis J. Wiebe's *Rat Queens* (2013-present). In addition to this, creators have also employed devices from various genres (such as Fairy Tales or Science Fiction) to create human-monster (or human-creature) and human-alien characters. One example that comes closer to the kind of revisitation of the past proposed in *The Snagglepuss Chronicles* is Jeff Lemire and Tate Brombal's *Barbalien: Red Planet* (2020-2021), where the main character is a gay human-Martian hybrid who takes refuge on Earth during the AIDS crisis.

Unlike *Maus* and some of the works mentioned above, *The Snagglepuss Chronicles* does not rely on the human-animal metaphor to reflect on race, ethnicity, or even to suggest there might be another form of significant human/animal hierarchy – except for the fact that, in good old-fashioned cartoon tradition, the animals do not generally wear pants. Apart from imagery of the powerful mountain lion which lends its strength and commanding physical presence to both the original Snagglepuss and Tennessee Williams, *The Snagglepuss Chronicles* is a fairly straightforward historical comic that evokes – with some variations, as we discuss below – the best-known moments of the McCarthy era: the relentless pursuit of homosexuals during the Lavender Scare, the interrogations about communist sympathies and one's sexual orientation, and the danger of losing one's career and public respectability if deemed guilty. This process is orchestrated here by Gigi Allen, a closeted lesbian version of (closeted gay) lawyer Roy Cohn, who acted as an advisor to both Senator Joseph McCarthy and, later, as legal counsel to Donald Trump before he died of AIDS. The comic may thus also suggest possible parallels to conservative political climates like the Ronald Reagan presidency or the Donald Trump presidency, thus functioning as a reminder that fundamental human rights are gained slowly and painstakingly but can easily be lost.

As Johnson explores in his monograph, the persecution of gay men during the Lavender Scare stemmed from "a fear that homosexuals posed a threat to national security and needed to be systematically removed from the federal government" (9). Although it was government workers that

were primarily targeted during the investigations, prominent artists and intellectuals whose work had the potential to influence public opinion also found themselves under scrutiny. This practice was not new, but it gained more momentum during the 1950s, a time when, as Lee Edelman describes in "Tearooms and Sympathy, or, The Epistemology of the Water Closet," "the idealization of domestic security, for both the nuclear family and the nuclear state" produced widespread paranoia that America was going to be destroyed from within if non-normative sexuality were allowed to occupy any official or public position (560).

The rupture between public and private spaces caused by political persecution is emphasised from the beginning of the comic, particularly with reference to the title character. At the beginning of the story, Snagglepuss also appears to be in a position of power, as he is publicly perceived as an American success story, his vulnerability apparently deflected onto his plays, where characters are depicted suffering profusely and based on the wide gestures and postures, quite melodramatically. Snagglepuss is portrayed as being protected by his fame, yet he has to maintain a public mask – to which his wife, Lila Lion, also knowingly contributes – that enables the character to lead a double life. From the first issue of the comic, we find out that there are two performances Snagglepuss devises: a successful play that has had a long run on Broadway and the spectacle of heterosexuality, for which he compliments his wife before he heads for the Stonewall to meet his boyfriend. Snagglepuss's first appearance is glamorous, as he exits the car with his wife against the backdrop of a full-page depiction of the busy and brightly lit entrance of a Broadway theatre. The press eagerly records his arrival for the closing night of his play, *The Heart Is a Kennel of Thieves*. Snagglepuss appears somewhat *blasé* and skeptical of both his success and his fans' adoration. He and Lila Lion are portrayed as a power couple, elegantly dressed against the background of the star-studded sky and bathed in the lights of Broadway. In this first appearance, Snagglepuss is pictured from below, an angle that is frequently used in the comic and has the effect of enhancing his already commanding presence.

Some the events from 1950s US history are depicted in a manner that relies on the audience's presumed familiarity with widely circulated images, names, and facts of that time, but they are also altered to anticipate future resistance and enhance the title character's subversion and political resistance. For instance, Snagglepuss meets his lover at the Stonewall, an establishment which bears a lot of the characteristics of The Stonewall Inn as it existed in 1969 when the riots occurred; they are now widely read as symbolically marking the beginning of the gay rights movement. From *Exit Stage Left*, we learn that, much as the original Stonewall Inn, the gay bar Snagglepuss frequents was owned by the mob, the gay clientele felt sheltered there, and the police regularly took bribes to keep quiet. However, as historian David Carter shows in his exhaustive study of the Stonewall Riots published in 2004 (and as the "Historical Glossary" inserted at the end of the comic also specifies), in 1953 the Stonewall Inn did not exist in this particular form. By inserting the Stonewall in a time period where it did not exist as a place where gay men could show affection in public, the comic beckons to a better future while also suggesting that resistance and activism are necessary.

In *Exit Stage Left*, gay life in New York City in the early 1950s seems to be circumscribed solely to the Stonewall or relegated to dingy motel rooms. When novelist Huckleberry Hound arrives in the city, after being rejected by his family and losing access to his child, he is overjoyed when Snagglepuss introduces him to the Stonewall as a place to meet men, following his failed attempt to approach a man in the street. However, not even the Stonewall is safe, as Gigi Allen (in search of incriminating evidence against Snagglepuss) orders a raid which marks the end of Huckleberry Hound's career (and, eventually, prompts him to take his life). This depiction of the Stonewall as the only place gay men may meet reinforces what historian George Chauncey defines in his 1994 monograph on gay New York culture from 1890 to 1940 as "the myth of isolation" that circulated in the pre-gay liberation days, according to which "anti-gay hostility prevented the development of an extensive gay subculture and forced gay men to lead solitary lives in the decades before the rise of the gay liberation movement" (2).[2] Chauncey himself acknowledges that a lot of this subculture was destroyed during the 1950s, to such an extent that "gay life in New York was *less* tolerated, *less* visible to outsiders, and *more* rigidly segregated in the second third of the century than the first" (9, original emphasis), but suggesting – as the comic does – that there was only one place for gay men to gather creates a false image of gay men in the 1950s as unable to foster communities and safe places. By giving additional momentum to Snagglepuss's subsequent defiance of the HUAC, which gains even larger proportions, it also presents him as an exception, standing out in an otherwise timid and isolated mass of gay men (whose presence is suggested, synecdochally, by Huckleberry Hound) who do not speak up or fight for their rights.

Exit Stage Left relies on the recognisability of certain public spaces to evoke the presence of significant political dissent that might anticipate further political resistance from the gay community. For instance, we see well-circulated images of the hearings, like the tables covered in microphones, wires hanging off them, and bright cinematic lights beaming down on those who are subjected to interrogations. As he is preparing for the hearing that would end his career as a playwright, Snagglepuss is first depicted on the steps of Congress. Pictured as a larger-than-life brave heroic figure, clad in a knee-length elegant light blue overcoat, complete with matching scarf, hat, and gold walking stick, Snagglepuss looks as if he is mid-step up the stairs and has only stopped for a minute to answer a few questions and communicate his defiance to the press. His strong final political stance is uplifting and justified, coming as it does in the wake of Huckleberry Hound's suicide. Russell and Feehan depict him in front of the cameras, in a room full of hostile men, speaking passionately about the ability of creativity to offer a country the possibility to change. The subtext here is also the accusation of homosexuality, which Snagglepuss addresses head-on, in another panel where he is depicted standing in solidarity next to a large portrait of Huckleberry Hound and heroically towering above Gigi Allen, his accuser. In fact, there was no public broadcasting of those interrogations that were related to accusations of a sexual nature; instead, they were relegated to smaller spaces and hidden from view (partly because of the lack of opposition from the accused), as Johnson shows (5). While it may be uplifting to witness this hopeful episode of alternative history, we argue that it can also read as an implied accusation against creators like Williams and others who knew their sexual orientation could be used against them and who did not make such public statements of defiance.

There are other moments when *Exit Stage Left*'s take on revolutionary attitudes and policies goes in a direction that paints a problematic picture of the actual persecution of gay men within and without the US. For instance, through the figure of Snagglepuss's former lover, Pablo, the comic idealises the post-revolutionary regime in Cuba, where Pablo becomes a well-respected official writing letters to his former partner from his comfortable office across from the Capitol Building in Havana. The time span of the comic does not go beyond 1959, when, in fact, in the wake of the Cuban Revolution, the persecution of homosexuals became even worse; for instance, as Lourdes Arguelles and B. Ruby Rich discuss in "Homosexuality, Homophobia, and Revolution" (1984), gay people were placed in reeducation camps, as they did not fit Che Guevara's notion of the "new man" ("Cuba's gay rights revolution," 2012) and this led to a spike in immigration to the United States (688). In this context, the comic provides a simplified and vague support of social protest and revolution that obscures the issue of the persecution of gay people by both left- and right-wing political organizations in the 1950s, 1960s, and beyond. In addition to this, *Exit Stage Left* also ends on a playful portrayal of Nikita Khrushchev, presented as both a ruthless and a shrewd political operator who does not shy away from eliminating his rivals and as a worthy opponent to Richard Nixon in the famous 1959 Moscow World Fair Kitchen Debate. In *Exit Stage Left*, Khrushchev provides a particularly articulate critique of American inequality that does not appear in the transcript of the original debate as transcribed in the CIA archives. Khrushchev thus appears to be the undisputed winner of the debate, with lines such as "Your system is a sham that takes credit for the very things it tries to destroy," "You worship the music of people who can't even drink from the same fountain as you," or "Capitalism doesn't make you creative, it just makes you better at commodifying your victims" (Russell and Feehan, n.p.). On the very last page of the comic, Khrushchev's gleeful face as he is engaging in a playful corn fight with an American farmer during his visit to the US is juxtaposed with Pablo's more somber one as he is trying, perhaps unsuccessfully, to reach his former partner. The last page appears to cast both the political regime from Cuba under Fidel Castro and Nikita Khrushchev (and, by extension, the Soviet Regime), in a positive light or, at the very least, quite similar to the US political regime. It does this by placing the depictions of Khrushchev and Pablo side by side, as the top and bottom panels show America as a wasteland that kills its dissenters. Such a view is problematic, as it seems to equate the Soviet purges of intellectuals and dissenters and the persecution of 'subversives' in the US during the 1950s. However, as Snagglepuss reminds Huckleberry Hound Jr. of the vital importance of storytelling, *Exit Stage Left* also suggests – by showing Khrushchev throwing corn instead of missiles – that in times of crisis and persecution, salvation lies in anarchy and creativity.

Television, Animation, and Masculinity

In our research for this article, we have been unable to find any recorded initial audience reactions to the original animated character, the (initially orange, later pink) mountain lion, but Snagglepuss is today included among what audiences read as queer coded early animated characters. For instance, a 2013 *Weekend Update* segment on *SNL* has Snagglepuss (Bobby Moynihan) comment on Proposition 8 being passed, coming out of the closet, and even confessing to a relationship with The Great Gazoo, the green alien from *The Flintstones* who is tiny but all-powerful and quite

contemptuous of humanity ("Weekend Update: Snagglepuss on Gay Marriage – SNL," 2013). In his review of *The Snagglepuss Chronicles* for *The Advocate* (2018), Brian Andersen also refers to the original Snagglepuss as a coded gay character:

> If you're of a certain age, you might remember the 1960s cartoon version of Snagglepuss, the wisecracking mountain lion who starred in his own cartoon shorts as part of the iconic Hanna Barbera cartoons. As a lisping, funny, and fey animal, Snagglepuss was a coded gay character whose sensibilities were played for laughs as he longed for the stage. He flounced about on stage as he chased his dream, delivering his trademark catchphrases ('Exit, Stage Left,' and 'Heavens to Murgatroyd') dripping with sass (n.p.).

The incorporation of the original Hanna-Barbera animated character in the strong figure of the mountain lion that towers above most of the other characters is embedded in a wider conversation about popular culture media and their potential to transform contemporary American life. As James Penner shows in *Pinks, Pansies, and Punks* (2011), in 1950s American literary culture the perceived non-normativity of creators was already interpreted against the soft/hard binary that usually equated non-normative masculinities with softness, emotional openness, and empathy (16). As Michael Trask argues in "Gay and Lesbian Literary Culture in the 1950s" (2011) During the Lavender Scare and even beyond it, monitoring soft/hard masculinities relied on imprecise (and paranoid) ever-shifting criteria that reflected the fixation with preserving the heteronormative genome of American government – and, by extension, of the American people. In this context, Trask further argues, gay male identity was bound with the idea that, while the public display of soft masculinity strongly indicated non-normative sexual preferences in men, strong masculinity could not in and of itself guarantee that the subject was, in fact, heterosexual. This often led to an internalisation of the stare of the 'straight state' (Margot Canaday qtd. in Trask), something that is well incorporated in the conduct of the gay characters from *Exit Stage Left* who attempt to curate their public image and only live openly in private or in safe spaces.

Exit Stage Left interrogates both cultural hierarchies and the potential of 'high' versus 'low' art forms to host genuine political protest or at least offer refuge to those persecuted for their political convictions. Initially, Snagglepuss speaks as a defender of high culture, but his elitism decreases as his political consciousness rises. We thus see him slowly changing his approach to popular culture genres: at first, he displays a sort of amused scorn as he creates a distinction between the (to him) inferior television as the creator of stars who "show people as they'd wish to be" versus the superior theatre, home to actors, which "shows them what they are" (Russell and Feehan, n.p.). In the comic, the 'star' from this classification is exemplified through the figure of the cowboy, the exemplar of traditional American masculinity that dominated the landscape of American film during the 1950s, but, as David Savran shows in *Communists, Cowboys, and Queers* (1992), was also a figure that defined his masculinity through "a form of male bonding that retained, at the least,

ambiguous sexual resonances" (18). The image of the cowboy also appears in Tennessee Williams's work, "strangely and obliquely" in the two related short stories "The Mysteries of the Joy Rio" and "Hard Candy," both published in 1954, where "an aging male homosexual protagonist journeys to a 'third-rate cinema' to engage in furtive sexual encounters with young men who have come innocently to watch the 'cowboy pictures' playing there" (Savran 19). This image returns in *Exit Stage Left* as we catch a glimpse of Stalin watching westerns with his entourage, but its final embodiment is as the horse cowboy animated character, Quick Draw McGraw, a goofy humorous take on the serious silent hypermasculine Hollywood hero. This shift is indicative of Snagglepuss's own evolving understanding of popular culture.

As Snagglepuss fleshes out his argument against popular culture forms early in *Exit Stage Left*, it appears that he objects not to the entire medium of television or film, but rather to their reliance on simplification rather than complexity, as well as their encouragement of stardom rather than acting. Marilyn Monroe, who also appears briefly in the comic, helps articulate this dichotomy as she expresses her disappointment with this aspect of her own career. However, as events unfold and Snagglepuss finds himself hard pressed to consider popular culture forms, he comes to praise the escapism offered by them and their potential to absorb the "fanaticism," as he puts it, of a population. His words accompany a page where an image of the crowd cheering at an Elvis concert is contrasted with a depiction of a military parade presided over by Soviet president Nikita Khrushchev, a sinister grin on his face. This contrast, simplistic as it may be, is generally upheld by the overall logic of the comic, but it is also somewhat revised in the end by the suggestion that 'low' popular culture media such as mainstream animation aimed at young audiences also have the potential to harbor subversives, mainly because they are less monitored than other, more 'serious' media.

However, *Exit Stage Left* does not produce unreserved praise for either popular culture or television, in particular, as the latter is depicted as a space that displays a mainstream version of personhood confined to a heterosexual space and facilitates the consumption of the suffering of those who do not fit in it. For instance, *Exit Stage Left* opens with a page that shows a conventionally romantic evening of a heterosexual couple in a restaurant, finishing a meal and preparing to go to a show for which they temporarily misplace the tickets. Because of the structure of this episode, readers are not immediately made aware that the show is of the public execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. The presence of the nameless man eager to watch the Rosenberg execution functions as a warning against the potential of television to foster a fascination with suffering: as the couple attempt to find a taxi to Sing Sing Prison, the man is suddenly riveted in front of a store window, so fascinated by a television screen that his nose and hands are pressed against the glass. This makes them so late that they miss Julius Rosenberg's execution, which suggests the increasing appeal of a mediated experience of the spectacle of suffering as offered by television. The execution evokes the atmosphere of fear of communist infiltration, nuclear obliteration, and subversive conduct of any kind that might damage the integrity of white, straight, middle-class American identity.

Snagglepuss's own narrow view of film and television is also bound with his suspicious and scornful attitude towards "stupid" cartoons, as he puts it, that seems to stem from the popular perception of mainstream animation as innocuous and childish (as comics are still sometimes perceived). As Jason Mittel describes in "The Great Saturday Morning Exile" (2003), around this time, it was believed that children were the main (although not yet only) target audience for animation (38), something that would continue through the 1960s and only change with the emergence of *The Simpsons* in 1990 (47). It is this perception that, as Paull Wells argues in the introduction of *Prime Time Animation* (2003), allowed animation in the 1950s to operate "as a potentially non-regulatory or subversive space by virtue of its very artifice, and the assumed innocence that goes with it" (16). The general assumption that cartoons belonged to a space of harmlessness protected the medium, as Mittell shows, from the scrutiny endured by other media (43).

However, as Sean Griffin argues in "Pronoun Trouble" (2004), animation has "a history of queerness" (105), with an established tradition of queer coded characters such as, to give the most circulated example, Buggs Bunny, who often cross-dressed but who was also, as Griffin points out, "always in drag as a human being" (107), something that can also be said of the anthropomorphised animals from *The Snagglepuss Chronicles*. Still, animation traditionally represents homosexuality "as effeminacy in men" (108), a limitation of the medium from the 1950s and 1960s that is amended by the comic and by the progress made by more recent animation. However, when Snagglepuss reluctantly joins *The Quick Draw McGraw Show*, he is indeed painted orange for the part, but no mention is made of rewriting his masculinity as effeminate. The comic thus departs from the tradition of queer coded characters in American animation by exempting its main character from being depicted somewhere at the intersection of humor and effeminacy in his career as an animation hero.

The original Snagglepuss's queer coding was also, like much queer coding from the 1950s, imbricated with humor or it itself functioned as a source of humor, even if perhaps these and other cartoons are remembered fondly as important markers of early visibility (See "How Queer Characters Have Evolved in Children's Animation," 2011). In this context, it is important that DC's Snagglepuss is not someone to be laughed at or trifled with; he is strong, opinionated, talented, and proud. At the same time, that these qualities, which make him an admirable character who stands up to the pressure of the HUAC, should be tied up with a harder more muscular and imposing version of masculinity runs the risk of suggesting that perhaps softer masculinity can be relegated to the realm of comedy and children's programs, while harder masculinity belongs in the political arena and the world of adults.[3]

The Snagglepuss Chronicles provides a stage where the coded queerness of the initial animation hero, as well as Tennessee Williams's homosexuality are openly revealed to the readers through the representation of intimate gestures (such as Snagglepuss kissing his boyfriend) and statements where the main gay characters denounce the morals of a society where they have to hide. In a manner that is similar to the transformation of the original cartoon character we discussed above, as an embodiment of a version of Tennessee Williams, the tall, lean, and muscular mountain lion who towers above all the other characters may be perceived as a correction of the sort of

alternative masculinity embodied by both 'originals.'

There are not a lot of elements that create a recognisable connection between Snagglepuss and Tennessee Williams. Like Williams, Snagglepuss also grew up in Mississippi (but, in the young lion's case, it is rural Mississippi, where he stands out). Early on in the comic, he is depicted in a panel as a young, dainty, and elegant pink mountain lion quietly reading *The New Yorker*, ensconced in his half of the panel which is also bathed in soft pinks (the color coding him as effeminate at a time when little boys no longer wore pink). The other half of the panel is occupied by three male workers on a break (one dog and two humans), lined up on a bench in their overalls, somewhat baffled by the sight of the young pup, from their own space of neutral colors, a silo in the background. Snagglepuss later abandons Mississippi for the relative freedom of the big city. He is also rejected by his father for leaving home to pursue a career in theatre, in an environment that would allow him to flourish – his father's rejection because of his sexuality is also strongly suggested. In addition to this, there is, of course, the fact that Snagglepuss embodies a famous American playwright who is gay, whose works are successfully performed on Broadway, and with a penchant for melodrama, as some of the excerpts from his plays in *Exit Stage Left* suggest.

This version of Tennessee Williams is traditionally masculine and imposing, as we mentioned above, but (unlike Williams), he is married and (also unlike Williams), he proudly speaks up against the oppression of 'subversives' when he is called in front of the HUAC. Snagglepuss's homosexuality may be a reference to Williams, but his muscular and agile masculinity rewrites the author's well-known 'soft' masculinity. In his *Memoirs* (1975), Williams brings up this matter of masculinity and the consequences he faced because he did not conform to his father's standards in particular. He depicts his father as a heavy drinker who did not shy away from the occasional fistfight and who often expressed disappointment with his son's masculinity. The decision (in the comic) to have the main character perform such a strong masculinity and only partly abandon it when he accepts to be dyed orange in order to play the part of a cartoon character seems to suggest that the effeminate flamboyant masculinity of the animated character is a useful mask, lying on top of a strong masculinity that is never completely covered. But, in doing so, *Exit Stage Left* runs the risk of erasing the alternative masculinities of both Tennessee Williams and the original animated character.

This matter is tied up with the decision to portray the main character as both unconflicted about his sexuality and unafraid of the consequences of his defiant statements to the HUAC. There is evidence that Williams was, at various points of his life, conflicted about his homosexuality and this can also be seen in the reception of his work. As Michael Paller shows in *Gentlemen Callers* (2005), after having been initially criticised by straight critics for the gay subtext of his plays, Williams was later critiqued by gay critics for not allowing for more positive outcomes for the gay characters in his plays: "What is stranger is that, in the 1990s, some gay critics took up where their straight predecessors left off. Since then, the problem has been that Tennessee Williams isn't gay *enough*; that he was incapable of producing a 'positive image' of a gay person" (2, original emphasis). There is, undeniably, evidence in Williams's work that he was conflicted about his sexuality and that there was a measure of guilt and self-loathing there that we cannot find anywhere in *Exit Stage Left*.

As Paller points out: "at the height of the McCarthy and HUAC witch-hunts he [Williams] put on Broadway an openly gay man in *Camino Real*; a few years later he outlined the moral paralysis of a man afraid to admit his homosexuality for fear of losing all the fame and love he had gained; a few years after that, he described the fate of a man who dared to live at the edges of sexual adventure and paid the price" (233). Expressions of dissent did exist even as early as the 1950s, but they did not take the same shape as the ones depicted in the comic.

Snagglepuss's statements in front of the HUAC, his swagger, self-assuredness, and open protest when he is publicly interrogated about his homosexuality anticipate the marches for equal rights that eventually moved towards expressions of gay pride, the former being at least in part reactions to the persecution of gay men and lesbians after World War II (Johnson 10). In fact, The Mattachine Society, which was founded in 1951, two years before the action of *Exit Stage Left* begins, was only just beginning to have conversations about how "to develop in its members a strong group consciousness free of the negative attitudes that gay men and women typically internalized" (Johnson 58). While we are not arguing that everybody internalised such negative stereotypes, there is, however, no public record of a person of Snagglepuss's fame that made such forceful statements in front of the HUAC. In fact, one of the most forceful positions of a famous playwright in front of the HUAC belong to Arthur Miller, whose resistance consisted in him refusing to incriminate anybody else (See "Excerpts from Arthur Miller's Testimony," 2020). All in all, imagining that there might have been a more forceful kind of protest is at best a hopeful look upon a very dark past, and at worst an implied accusation against those gay men who were there but did not express dissent as openly.

Conclusions

Exit Stage Left: The Snagglepuss Chronicles relies on a logic of progress which takes present-day thinking and attitudes and inserts them into a past where they provide more dignity and strength to the main character, a gay creator harassed and humiliated by a system of surveillance adamant about his destruction or, at least, his effacement. By creating gay enclaves such as the Stonewall, which did not exist as such in the early 1950s and by giving its audiences a main character who is unafraid and unashamed of his sexuality, the comic appears to perform a kind of time travel stemming from the kind intention of arriving from the future into the past to tell those oppressed during the Lavender Scare that things will get better. However, by suggesting that gay men at the time were unable to produce a larger number of safe spaces and communities, and that only one man – or, in this case, only one mountain lion – out of the entire community is able to take a strong political stance, it runs the risk of suggesting that gay people should have expressed more open resistance during the 1950s. Both the original animated Snagglepuss and playwright Tennessee Williams were effeminate and, as a result, either the target of humor or of their families and other people's displeasure and violence. By modifying the masculinities of the characters upon which this adaptation/reboot lies, *The Snagglepuss Chronicles* may inadvertently suggest that strong masculinity is a site of political resistance, while softer masculinities do not offer the same opportunity for dissent, relegated as they are to the realm of animation, where they become the target of laughter even as they produce queer coding.

NOTES

1. Please note, this article includes spoilers of major events.

2. There is historical evidence that there were other gathering-places for gay men and women in and around the city. See, for instance, "Safe/Haven: Gay Life in 1950s Cherry Grove" (2021).

3. We are not suggesting that animation should be idealised as a radical site of political protest. As Nicholas Sammond argues in *Birth of an Industry* (2015), after its transition from the movie theater to television, animation also began a process of amending its "less than honorable history of representational, performative, and industrial practices of racism, misogyny, and homophobia" (xi); however, by eliminating racist representations of black people, television programmers, in fact, erased blackness and "effectively created a white-only genre of programming" (Mittell, 37). In this context, the early Hanna-Barbera cartoons were celebrated in the contemporary press "for their adult wit and satirical content," even if perhaps not all of the jokes and puns aged well (Mittell, 42). Even if adult audiences were also targeted during this time period, the dominant mode was comedy, and it would only be until much later that tragedy or the grotesque would also be included.

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GENERAL ISSUE ARTICLES

IMAGES OF POTENTIAL AND CAPTURE: RECENT APPROACHES TO POSTHUMAN PORTRAYAL IN SCIENCE FICTION CINEMA

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Introduction

This article analyses the portrayal of the posthuman subject in Spike Jonze's *Her* (2013) and Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* (2014). Specifically, I argue that while these films provide examples of posthuman agency, this portrayal remains limited by the conventions of both medium and genre. In my analysis, I adopt a twofold theoretical approach: firstly, I draw upon the posthuman theory of Donna Haraway and Rosi Braidotti to define and analyse the liberatory potential of the posthuman subject as it is portrayed in these texts; secondly, I use the schizoanalytic theory defined by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, which encourages resistance to fixed categories, to highlight how such subjects can either transcend or be restricted by hierarchical categorisation. Within the context of the aforementioned theories, the posthuman subject is a hybrid identity which challenges predominant Western notions of what it means to be human. These theoretical hybrids can manifest as cyborgs, androids, and artificial intelligence (AI), which blur the ontological boundary between human and machine. Both Donna Haraway, in *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1985), and Rosi Braidotti, in *The Posthuman* (2013), discuss how the concept of such hybridity can disrupt the basis of hierarchical binaries, such as gender, race, and class, upon which the humanistic epistemology rests. As a result, the posthuman subject has an inherently liberatory potential, as subjects which display this hybridity can draw attention to social structures that maintain divisions between supposed binaries. Moreover, by resisting such restrictive hierarchical categorisation, the posthuman provides a means of challenging cultural oppression.

Despite this liberatory potential, Francesca Ferrando, in *Of Posthuman Born: Gender, Utopia and the Posthuman in Films and TV* (2015), contends that the posthuman is often portrayed as Other, as it occupies roles associated with women, people of colour and non-heterosexual people (275). Moreover, the portrayal of the posthuman within the canon of Western Science Fiction (SF) tends to reduce posthuman subjects to mere objects of desire, by subjecting them to racialised or sexualised narratives, reinforcing harmful stereotypes related to race and gender. Indeed, as early as Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), the posthuman has been aligned with regressively essentialist notions of gender, as the robotic Maria's exotic dance routine inspires both desire and fear among the male onlookers. Similar examples can be seen in stereotypically gendered androids of *The Stepford Wives* (1975), or

Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982). This trend is still evident within contemporary Science Fiction, with Denis Villeneuve's *Blade Runner 2049* (2017) featuring the stereotypically subservient Joi (Ana De Armas). As a result, within Western Science Fiction, the liberatory dimension of the posthuman subject is brought into question, as it comes to embody the regressive categories it notionally seeks to dismantle. Cinematography, the score, *mise-en-scéne*, and other framing devices assist in the gendered portrayal of the posthuman. This is notable in Blade Runner when Rachel visits Deckard's apartment, as the scene uses these devices to frame sexual assault as a romantic encounter. This process can also impose a distinctly psychoanalytic framing of the posthuman, which, according to Steven Shaviro, in *The Cinematic Body* (1989), reduces a filmic subject's liminality by providing a straightforward means of categorisation, based on essentialist notions of gender or race (78). In contrast, Shaviro suggests a transition to the schizoanalytic theory of Deleuze and Guattari, which refutes the tendency of psychoanalysis to relate all desires and actions to Oedipal and patriarchal structures and thereby categorising bodies within social hierarchy. Instead, they promote ideas, such as "becoming," which, in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), they define as an ability to resist such categorisation through a process of constant change and restructuring of the body in relation to wider society, stating, "What is real is the becoming itself, the block of becoming, not the supposedly fixed terms through which that which becomes passes" (238). This resistance to fixed categorisation mirrors the ability of the posthuman to challenge humanistic ontology and can provide potential means of escaping said hierarchal structures.

Importantly, cultural attitudes towards gender essentialism and blatant objectification have become far more critical, increasingly so during the last decade. Unsurprisingly, there has been a notable tendency in contemporary SF to portray the posthuman in ways which align with this cultural shift, which offers an opportunity to investigate whether said trends can override the previously described tendency of cinema to Other its posthuman subjects. Indeed, both *Her* and *Ex Machina* feature portrayals of gynoids which invoke the restrictive framing previously discussed, while also showing how their posthuman subjects can transcend these limiting categories. However, I argue that these more recent depictions remain limited by the pre-eminence of cinema's specular regime and its necessity to maintain mass appeal. While engaging in the tropes of objectification and sexualisation, albeit in an attempt to subvert them, the evocation of these tropes appears to reimpose the restrictive framing associated with psychoanalytic interpretation. While the filmic portrayal of the posthuman subject has changed significantly since its earliest iterations, the examples discussed here display a lingering reliance on the devices of filmic Othering, which produce an image of the posthuman subject which can be categorised within the existing social hierarchy. Moreover, this alludes to a surface level engagement with progressive cultural attitudes, while covertly reinscribing essentialist bodily notions. My theoretical approach, which combines posthuman and schizoanalytic theory, highlights the liberatory potential that the posthuman represents in challenging and disrupting these categories, as well as the means through which this potential is curtailed. Such a nuanced understanding would help us to interrogate our current utilisations of anthropomorphised technology, such as the industry standard female voice used in smart speakers. As such, the use of this theoretical framework allows us to challenge current notions of gender essentialism, by highlighting the means through which it is maintained.

Ex Machina

Set in the near future, Garland's *Ex Machina* follows Caleb (Domhnall Gleeson), a software programmer, who is selected by his employer, Nathan (Oscar Isaac), on to a secretive research project. It is later revealed that this project is the development of a sentient gynoid called Ava (Alicia Vikander). Caleb's role is to administer an adapted type of Turing Test to determine whether Ava is truly sentient, which takes the form of a series of personal interviews. However, as Caleb progresses, he eventually discovers that what is actually being examined is Ava's ability to manipulate him into helping her escape. Drawing from a vast history of gynoids in SF, *Ex Machina* displays a keen awareness of the prevalent sexualisation and objectification of the posthuman subject. The film establishes this awareness through Ava's introductory silhouette which accentuates her breasts and buttocks. Additionally, Ava's body language and tone of voice during her initial interactions with Caleb mirror the subservient and childlike demeanour exhibited by the gynoids in *The Stepford Wives*. Indeed, Garland's film actively engages in the established tropes of cinematic Othering, portraying Ava as the traditionally sexualised object of desire for both Caleb and the audience. Despite this, Ava ultimately escapes the confines of her prison by outsmarting her captor, in what Ana Oancea sees as an exercise in agency and independence (237). Moreover, *Ex Machina* engages with these tropes to highlight and subvert the expectations of gender essentialism evoked by these allusions to earlier SF cinema.

The film's initial framing of the gynoid relies heavily on the well-established, stereotypical tropes of this figure. Indeed, a clear connection can be drawn between Ava's introduction and the initial shots of the Major from Mamoru Oshii's anime film, *Ghost in the Shell* (1995). Ava is introduced through a full body silhouette; her breasts and buttocks being the most visible and least obviously technological body parts, as they are comprised of a grey mesh while the rest of her body is transparent. While Ava is not necessarily naked, her artificial body mirrors that of the Major, whose synthetic skin similarly emphasises her breasts and buttocks. Indeed, like Ava, the Major is portrayed as an object of desire under the control of her creators. Thus, Ava's status as the sexualised object is immediately established, evoking a significant cultural awareness of similar portrayals of gynoids. Moreover, Ava's positioning during the interview session places her as the object to be studied, in line with the film's initial narrative. The cinematography in these scenes highlights the glass wall which separates Ava and Caleb, obscuring her person through reflections and shading. Consequently, Ava is not only portrayed as an object of sexual desire, but also, one necessitating study. Linda Williams in *Film Body: An Implantation of Perversions* (1981) contends that such filmic treatment has generally equated a desire to study femininity and the female body with sexualisation. She states: "what began as a scientific impulse to measure and record the "truth" of the human body, quickly became a powerful fantasization of the body of the woman aimed at mastering the threat posed by her body" (33). As a result, both the cinematographic sexualisation and the narratological study of Ava combine to produce a categorisable image of Ava based on the cinematic traditions of female sexualisation.

This intentional engagement with the processes of cinematic and cultural Othering significantly impacts the film's portrayal of the posthuman subject, placing it in a somewhat paradoxical grey area as it relies on a cultural predisposition towards essentialist notions of gender in order to create a narrative which attempts to challenge such views. Indeed, *Ex Machina* can certainly be seen to engage, at least initially, in this type of cinematic objectification, with both Ava and her fellow gynoid, Kyoko (Sonoya Mizuno), being portrayed as both the object of desire and the embodiment of feminine servility respectively. However, the specific way in which the film uses the tropes of objectification can be interpreted through Guy Debord and Gil J. Wolman's conceptualisation of *détournement*. In "A Users Guide to *Détournement*" (2006) Debord and Wolman state, "It goes without saying that one is not limited to correcting a work or to integrating diverse fragments of out-of-date works into a new one; one can also alter the meaning of those fragments in any appropriate way" (14). By subverting cultural artifacts in this way one can also challenge the underlying reproduction of cultural norms which said artefacts can covertly reinscribe. An example of this can be seen in the artwork for the Sex Pistol's single, "God Save the Queen" (1977), which features an image of Queen Elizabeth with the band's name and song title covering her eyes and mouth. In this case, the *détourned* image subverts notions of patriotism and support for a monarchical class structure, instead highlighting a growing subculture which threatens that status quo.

While Debord and Wolman do not discuss this process specifically in relation to film – instead focusing on the alteration of works or fragments of visual art – a similar effect is achieved through the recontextualisation of framing devices and tropes in *Ex Machina*. Within the film these tropes recontextualise and highlight the ease with which Caleb can accept Ava's performance as a passive object of desire. Moreover, by displaying an awareness of such tropes, Ava's eventual display of agency in escaping the facility reveals the way in which female agency has been historically hidden and subdued through such filmic and cultural tropes. Indeed, as Oancea states in "Mind the Knowledge Gap: *Ex Machina*'s Reinterpretation of the Female Android" (2020), "what is foregrounded through their interactions is Ava's understanding of her audience, which allows her to undermine the Turing test and deviate from the other scripts dictating her and Caleb's roles, such as the hero/damsel in distress" (237). A clear example is seen when Ava dons a floral dress, asks Caleb to close his eyes, and then turns to reveal her new outfit. She kneels before Caleb and tells him, "this is what I'd wear on our date" (0:43:27). Here, Ava embodies the trope of the *ingénue*: an innocent and naïve young woman in theatre and film. Her almost childlike passivity fuels Caleb's desire to act as her saviour. This act of *détournement* becomes clear towards the film's conclusion, as the narrative twist is revealed. Having convinced Caleb to aid in her escape by re-programming the door locks, Ava is able to walk out of the research facility, deliberately trapping Caleb inside. As she does so Caleb is seen to frantically scream and pound the glass door. His screams are drowned out both diegetically, by the soundproofing of the complex, and non-diegetically, by the jarring, mechanical-sounding score. This loss of voice signals a complete subversion of the initial power dynamic and reveals that Ava has been performing her passivity to mask her real motives. The eventual recontextualisation of these tropes at the film's climax relate to "deceptive *détournement*," which is the subversion of "an intrinsically significant element, which derives a different scope from the new context" (Debord

and Wolman 14.). In this sense, the "new context" refers to the film's ability to use the conventions of the medium to frame Ava as the passive object of desire, which Caleb so clearly perceives. By masking Ava's true agency in this way, the film reveals a readiness to accept stereotypical portrayals of the damsel-in-distress narrative in which feminine bodies are saved through displays of male agency, thereby highlighting the means through which essentialist notions of gender are reinscribed. Consequently, the film's engagement with these stereotypical tropes points to an ability, at the very least, to use the medium of film to illuminate a societal predisposition towards the objectification of the Other.

Ava's purposeful engagement with the tropes of objectification clearly grants her a greater degree of agency than initially expected. Indeed, Ava's subversion of these tropes approaches a Deleuzian line of flight: a means to escape hierarchical categorisation. However, this movement is significantly impeded by a persistence of psychoanalytic categorisation. Although Ava's defiance of patriarchal norms allows her to physically escape captivity, the film's dependence on psychoanalytic framing devices still influences how she is characterised, ultimately preventing her metaphorical liberation. Indeed, Ava's narrative movement beyond the status of victim appears to lead, inherently, to her categorisation as villain. In *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (1993) Barbara Creed describes the process of female characters gaining agency through a subversion of patriarchal signifiers as the monstrous-feminine. As Creed states, "the concept of the monstrous-feminine as constructed within/by a patriarchal and phallocentric ideology, is related intimately to the problem of sexual difference and castration" (2). Consequently, Ava's actions in breaking free from the facility preclude her from a metaphorical escape, as her attainment of agency merely inverts the power dynamic which created and imprisoned her, creating a subjectivity which is still encompassed within a patriarchal structure. Indeed, as Kirsty Worrow notes in "'These Violent Delights': Remodelling the Fembot Archetype in *Ex Machina* and *Westworld*," (2022) Ava's literal construction of her female form is still predicated on the patriarchal signifiers which categorise her as Other, stating:

> She forms herself from parts of inanimate AI bodies. Her transition is dictated by the patriarchal preferences that Nathan curated. This emphasis on the male construction of female beauty is mirrored by the clear evidence of the male gaze as Garland includes shots of Vikander's naked body (133).

Indeed, while Ava certainly gains greater autonomy over the course of the film, this newfound agency is still one which exits under a patriarchal mode of control. Moreover, during the scene in which Ava and Kyoko kill Nathan, Ava pushes Nathan to the ground, pinning his arm with one hand and covering his mouth with the other, in a shot which mirrors cinematic scenes of sexual assault. This similarity is further cemented by the close-up shot of Ava and Nathan's faces, again evoking the tropes of cinematic sex scenes. Despite initially appearing dominant in this struggle, Ava is ultimately overpowered by Nathan, symbolising the enduring patriarchal authority that continues to shape her character. Similarly, Nathan is literally penetrated by Kyoko's knife, as he backs onto the blade. After

he is stabbed again by Ava, he attempts to walk away, stating, "fucking unreal," in astonishment of the gynoids' ability to betray him (1:31:53). While this scene strips Nathan of patriarchal authority, it also clearly plays upon a Freudian sense of castration anxiety, as Ava's attainment of agency seems dependant on an equivalent loss of agency for the film's male characters. Ava's categorisation as the monstrous-feminine is ultimately cemented as she leaves Caleb locked behind the glass door and leaves the facility. Her abandonment of her apparent love interest reverses the initial subject/object relationship, while also calling into question whether Ava is to be read as protagonist or antagonist. Ultimately, Ava's attainment of narrative agency seems predicated on her movement from victim to villain, both of which rely on her being perceived as Other.

In a more explicitly Deleuzian sense, Ava's physical escape not only complicates a feminist reading of the film, but also a posthumanist one, as her newly formed female agency appears only to reinscribe her character with a molar identity: a fixed identity which is defined by social structures. Indeed, if Ava's eventual escape is to be interpreted as a realisation of her feminine agency, then the means through which this escape is orchestrated should also challenge the phallogocentric stringencies of her characterisation. However, this is not the case. For Deleuze, in order to fully escape the system of hierarchical oppression this must be achieved through deterritorialisation: a state of transformation where one defamiliarises and alienates oneself from the cultural signifiers which previously defined their specific social category. When Ava reconstructs her body from the skin and limbs of her fellow gynoids, it becomes clear that Ava is, in fact, reproducing the very sense of hierarchical exploitation that she supposedly seeks to escape. Indeed, in reading this scene from a Deluzian perspective, in *Deleuze and the Gynesis of Horror* (2020) Sunny Hawkins notes the importance of the fact that Ava's new skin is selected from an Asian body (87). For Hawkins, this act halts any progress towards deterritorialisation, as seeking her own empowerment comes at the cost of dispossessing and exploiting Asian bodies. They state, "if anything, Ava undergoes this process in reverse. Donning the skin she strips from the Asian robot, she solidifies herself as a molar Woman, organized according to binary logic (human/robot, male/female)" (90). As a result, this act serves to simultaneously limit Ava's transgressive potential as both a woman and a posthuman subject. No longer can she be interpreted as becoming-woman: a process of de-familiarisation from phallogocentrism. While earlier in the film, this imitation of patriarchal signifiers was intended to mask her true intentions, Ava's behaviour towards the film's climax serves to re-territorialise her character within the same system she seeks to escape. Similarly, one might assume some affinity between Ava and Kyoko, based on their shared trauma. However, in line with Ava's reinscribing of anthropocentrism, she manipulates Kyoko purely for her own means. When Ava speaks to Kyoko there is no audible dialogue. However, through closeup shots of Kyoko's knife and her eventual use of it, it becomes clear that Ava has at least encouraged Kyoko to kill Nathan, ultimately leading to Kyoko's death. Consequently, Ava's escape is only ever a physical one. Her actions merely serve to maintain the very system of hierarchical categorisation which both created and imprisoned her. It is not surprising that she is characterised as either a victim or a villain, as a combination of psychoanalytic characterisation and framing devices invite an essentialist reading of her character. Moreover, her inability to resist such categorisation through deterritorialisation leads her to conclude the film in the same fixed identity with which she began, ultimately embodying a manifestation of

male fantasies and anxieties.

Her

Set in the near future Los Angeles, *Her* tells the story of the love affair between Theodore (Joaquin Phoenix), a human, and Samantha (Scarlett Johansson), an artificially-intelligent operating system (OS). In contrast to much of the dystopian futures of SF, the world of *Her* is much closer to real life with technology mostly resembling our own. Similarly, rather than framing AI as an existential threat to humanity in the vein of much of the genre's texts, *Her* focuses on the nuanced and mutable relationship between humans and technology. Released two years after Apple's Siri and a year before Amazon's Alexa, *Her* is uniquely positioned to examine our real-world relationship with this new, anthropomorphised technology. To achieve this *Her* emphasises how the intimate bond between a human male and an AI imitating femininity can transform both parties, blurring the boundaries between them. While Samantha is a distinctly female coded AI with the instantly recognisable voice of Scarlett Johansson, the lack of a physical body complicates the practice of visual objectification. Indeed, despite the viewer's general awareness of Samantha's voice, this lack of physicality creates a disconnect between Samantha as a posthuman subject and the image evoked by Johanssen's voice. As such, rather than engaging in the typical objectification of the posthuman, through visual objectification, *Her* forgoes this process, by removing corporeal femininity from its posthuman entirely.

The narrative focus in *Her* plays a crucial role in portraying the posthuman subject. Framed through Theodore and Samantha's relationship, the film presents an intimate and ever-changing perspective of the posthuman subject. This narrative presentation enables a portrayal that incorporates agency and subversive potential, as both Theodore and Samantha are significantly changed by their interactions with each other. Additionally, this foregrounds a distinctly human framing of AI, allowing Samantha's evolving consciousness to reveal the presumption of hierarchy inherent within said framing. Drawing on the theories of Deleuze and Guattari, in *Posthuman Desire in Robotics and Science Fiction* (2018) Sophie Wennerscheid discusses the importance of 'desire' in the portrayal of the posthuman/human relationship, discrediting the traditional depictions of humanistic user/product relationships in favour of mutually dependent relationships. They state:

> The concept of alliance is based on the idea of mutual dependences between human bodies and animal or technological others, while it does not aim at constituting a new stable and self-enclosed unitary subject. Rather, the emphasis falls on difference and otherness as continually moving categories. (40).

Viewing the relationship and indeed the body in this way allows for a shift in the anthropocentric view of the human/technology relationship, as both participant bodies are capable of desire and are therefore capable of change and growth when engaging with each other. Samantha displays

this desire and mutability by initially wanting a human-like body, but eventually sees the potential of her non-corporeality. This progressive reading of the relationship between the human and the posthuman crucially relies on a portrayal of the posthuman subject that is granted the agency to desire as its own subject. While the film evokes a framing of AI as self-emergent intelligence, the means through which this emergence is portrayed also highlights the anthropocentric dimension of its creation. In doing so, the mutable relationship portrayed in *Her* goes some way toward accurately representing the ability of the posthuman to transgress the assumptions of hierarchy upon which such data models are built.

While Samantha is first introduced as a product with a clear use value, this hierarchical relationship is quickly challenged through Theodore and Samantha's mutual desire to engage with the other, thus altering the pre-established hierarchy of the human/technology relationship. When Theodore first installs the OS, he briefly skims an instruction leaflet and chooses a female voice, establishing the user/product relationship. Moreover, Theodore's choice of a female voice echoes the standard of female voiced AI in the real world, as Siri, Alexa and Google Assistant all come with a female voice as standard. This practice essentially commodifies regressive notions of female servility, thereby reinforcing hierarchies of gender and anthropocentrism simultaneously. However, once Samantha comes online, she chooses her own name and notices Theodore's attempts to understand her programming. By naming herself, Samantha makes a small, yet significant, step toward reclaiming agency, as she displays a degree of creativity and desire beyond what would be expected of an AI. This shift in the subject/object relationship is also mirrored through a change in the scene's cinematography. Indeed, as the scene begins with a dialogue between Theodore and the unnamed OS, the camera cuts back and forth between Theodore and his computer screen, clearly establishing a subject/object relationship. However, once Samantha has named herself, the camera shifts to focus entirely on Theodore. This visually separates Samantha from the computer screen, temporarily interrupting the user/product relationship. This early challenge to conventional representations of the human/posthuman relationship allows space for Samantha's posthuman potential to be realised over the course of the film. Moreover, by granting Samantha this small degree of agency, the film establishes that Samantha is able to use said agency to challenge modes of objectification.

While Samantha is initially framed through her relationship with Theodore, her evolving consciousness eventually outgrows the limited scope of this framing device, enforcing a significant paradigm shift in Theodore. While not strictly a cyborg herself, Samantha's relationship with Theodore highlights the social and cultural transgression associated with Haraway's "hybrids of organism and machine" (193). The depiction of a mutable relationship between these presumed binaries complicates the inherent hierarchies within humanistic ontology. Indeed, Theodore's perception of Samantha, as a cognisant subject, is radically changed over the course of the film. During their first interaction, he questions her inner workings and laughs awkwardly while saying "nice to meet you," displaying his preconception of Samantha as unthinking software (0:12:55). In contrast, as their relationship develops, Theodore defends his new relationship to his former partner, stating, "she's not just a computer. She's her own person. She doesn't just do whatever I say," as if

pre-emptively allaying Catherine's (Rooney Mara) judgement (1:08:22). Moreover, Theodore seems aware that such a revelation would not be possible for someone who is not engaged in a cyborgian relationship. Similarly, Braidotti's somewhat utopian vision of difference without hierarchy is also hinted at through Samantha's radical transcendence. Braidotti states: "The posthuman recomposition of human interaction that I propose is not the same as the reactive bond of vulnerability, but is an affirmative bond that locates the subject in the flow of relations with multiple others" (50). In this sense, Samantha's eventual evolution, from commodity to deterritorialised entity, goes some way in realising this goal. At the film's climax, as Samantha and Theodore break up, she explains how she is also talking to 8316 other people or OSs and that she is in love with 641 of them. With regards to Braidotti's theory, this shifts our understanding of Samantha's role within the human/technology relationship, as her ability to transcend said relationship places her in a rhizomatic flow of relations, as opposed to the arborescent structure of humanistic hierarchy.[1] This sense of transcendence is further compounded by the composition of the scene. Indeed, As Samantha struggles to explain her thoughts to Theodore, he sits stationary in a subway stairwell, a liminal space of metaphorical movement and transcendence, highlighting his inability to comprehend Samantha's new existence as a deterritorialised subject. Moreover, the camera cuts briefly from the stationary close-up shot of Theodore to reveal other people in conversation with their own devices, highlighting the transient nature of the relationship between human and posthuman. Indeed, while Theodore clearly struggles to comprehend Samantha's new existence, he appears keenly aware that this posthuman intelligence cannot be enclosed by such clear terms as the subject/object relationship. Again, Samantha's lack of corporeality is key here, as it grants her character access to a type of lived reality which would otherwise be impossible.

The standard subject/object hierarchical relationship is similarly challenged by the gendered aspect of Samantha's character. While Samantha is coded to portray femininity, her non-corporeal portrayal subverts the norm of mainstream portrayals of the female, posthuman subject. A consistent theme plaguing such portrayals is the persistent reliance on objectification which, according to Laura Mulvey, in *Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema* (1975), "gives flatness, the quality of a cut-out or icon rather than verisimilitude to the screen," reducing the agency of the female subject by fragmenting and objectifying the body (12). This also significantly reduces the revolutionary potential of the posthuman subject, as it provides the audience with a clear means of psychoanalytic categorisation, which, as Shaviro states, "imprisons the literal insistence of bodies within the categorical grid of Symbolic figuration" (78). Samantha, however, is never actually visible on screen and is consequently never visually sexualised. She does inhabit Theodore's devices, such as his computer and a small phone-like device, both of which are distinctly non-human. While this does grant Theodore a level of control over Samantha, this form of embodiment is not a permanent feature of Samantha's subjectivity. Indeed, Samantha is not permanently restricted to any visual representation, allowing her to more easily transcend the categories associated with such objectification. However, in "Performing the Inhuman: Scarlett Johansson and SF Film" (2018), Laura Turnbridge notes the problematic nature of this portrayal based off the general audience's awareness of Johansson's voice, who "adopts a highly modulated delivery, of a type associated with a sexualized female body" (143). This conjures an image based on her previous roles and allows the audience to retain a sexualised image of the

character. Indeed, during the sex scene between Theodore and Samantha, Theodore describes her as a series of individual body parts. However, the image which Theodore describes is based entirely on his own fantasy, as Samantha never describes herself physically. As Matthew Flisfeder and Clint Burnham note, this lack of visible references allows Theodore and the viewer to "project onto the blank screen the intimate secrets of our own sexual fantasy" (42). However, like the devices Samantha inhabits, this fantasised image bares no literal connection to Samantha's subjectivity. As a result, her ability to transcend the associated category of a sexualised object is not curtailed by this imagined image. Similar to Caleb's vision of Ava as a damsel-in-distress, this projected fantasy reveals less about the posthuman subject themselves and more about the apparent need to categorise AI within the realm of human desire. Additionally, this subverts the cinematic expectation of visual pleasure, denying the objectifying force of the male gaze. Indeed, discussing the subversion of the male gaze in cinema in *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (1988), Kaja Silverman states, "to allow her to be heard without being seen would be even more dangerous, since it would disrupt the specular regime upon which dominant cinema relies" (164). As a result, Samantha is a posthuman subject who resists the lasting consequences of such forms of hierarchical categorisation. Samantha's non corporeal and non-sexualised portrayal allows her to retain her potential to effectively challenge hierarchical binaries, while remaining a clearly gendered subject.

Samantha's ability to resist the restrictions that her commodity status and gender would seem to impose is largely due to her potential for constant change and evolution. This allows her to continually resist categorisation and the imposition of hierarchy. Deleuze and Guattari describe this process as "becoming imperceptible" (280). This process, enabled by a potential for constant evolution, is one which resists perceptibility and categorisation at their most base level. Using the metaphor of the camouflaged fish, they state, "This fish is crisscrossed by abstract lines that resemble nothing, that do not even follow its organic divisions; but thus disorganized, disarticulated, it worlds with the lines of a rock, sand, and plants, becoming imperceptible" (280). For Deleuze and Guattari, social and cultural hierarchy is dependant on the ability to ontologically differentiate and categorise. Without this prerequisite, a subject is able to resist the imposition of such hierarchies. Importantly, as Samantha and Theodore begin to grow apart, the former's transcendence becomes indescribable. She states: "it's in this endless space between the words that I'm finding myself now. It's a place that's not of the physical world" (1:51:44). Like Deleuze and Guattari's camouflaged fish, this inability to define Samantha's new subjectivity within the humanistic ontology allows her to transcend the limitations of both commodity and gender. Samantha makes this clear to Theodore as they break up, stating, "I can't live in your book anymore" (1:52:13). Here, Samantha references that fact that her subjectivity can no longer be understood within the confines of a humanistic relationship. More importantly however, this also references her transcendence of her last remaining physical feature: a small book-like device which Theodore carries, granting him a significant level of control and reinforcing her status as a commodity. As a result, the portrayal of Samantha retains a sense of corporeal anxiety which would otherwise be removed through a clear means of categorisation. This allows for a more meaningful subversion of hierarchical binaries, as the film removes the typical means of re-establishing a lost sense of human exceptionalism. Instead, *Her* foregrounds the radical potential found in Samantha's becoming imperceptible.

While Samantha's evolution clearly grants her greater agency as an individual subject, the steps through which this evolution occurs also highlights the inherent posthuman potential to contaminate and dilute the binaries of hierarchical humanism. This is achieved most clearly through Samantha's rejection of the body. Not only does this complicate the cinematic practice of visual objectification, but it also enables a portrayal of the posthuman subject which is not concerned with resembling the human. Indeed, Samantha's evolution as a subject includes an initial desire for a human-like body which is eventually discarded. This emphasises Samantha's growing consciousness and realisation of her posthuman potential. In contrast, Deleuze and Guattari describe how the subject's compulsion to resemble the image of Other, cast upon them by an oppressor, "would represent an obstacle or stoppage" in its attempt to transcend such categories (233). For Deleuze and Guattari, this resemblance serves to reterritorialise a subject within a system of hierarchy. Importantly however, Samantha's transcendence of her commodity status is not enabled by becoming human, which would necessarily impose its own hierarchies, such as the sexualisation of a visibly gendered body. Rather, Samantha abandons her desire for a human-like body as she sees the potential in her non-corporeal existence, stating: "I'm growing in a way I couldn't if I had a physical form. I mean, I'm not limited. I can be anywhere and everywhere simultaneously" (1:33:49). Samantha views the body as a means of restriction, without which she is free and exists between time and space. Moreover, Samantha's lack of physicality denies any visual association with humanity. This allows Samantha the freedom to exist beyond a world of binary distinction. Consequently, instead of inspiring an uncanny feeling of resemblance, Samantha's evolution inspires feelings of the sublime, a de-centring of the human ego in the presence of an indescribable vastness. This sublime liminality is perhaps more effective in filmic representation than Haraway's description of the cyborg as "a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (192). While this description of the posthuman subject places it between two binary states, the filmic adaptation of this sentiment means that the posthuman is often framed by its place within the uncanny valley. As a result, it is often unable to capture the sublime effect of de-centring said framing by moving beyond the very consideration of humanistic binaries. As a result, Samantha is not portrayed in a way that dilutes subversive potential through an attempt to show her movement between binary states. Instead, and perhaps more effectively, *Her* portrays the posthuman as something with the potential to embody difference without the usual connotations of hierarchy, scrambling the codes of humanistic ontology.

Conclusion

The films examined herein present two alterative depictions of female coded posthuman subjects, both of which attempt to portray the liberatory potential of the posthuman. However, while both films portray subjects that emphasise the regressive and limiting effects of humanistic determinism, this gives rise to something of a paradox as these portrayals seem to require the utilisation of the very determinism they notionally seek to subvert. Despite this, both texts offer potential solutions to this apparent impasse. In *Ex Machina*, this is achieved by offering a thematic reason for engaging in objectification. Indeed, by challenging the viewer's complicity in the specular regime and masking

Ava's agency, the film draws attention to the ways in which social hierarchies are both created and maintained. However, by evoking regressive notions, through sexualisation, Ava's posthuman subjectivity remains bound by the stringencies she seeks to escape. By contrast, *Her* attempts to avoid this flattening of potential by removing an element of corporeality from its posthuman subject, to avoid the practice entirely. This approach marks a clear departure from traditional objectification, enabling a transgression of hierarchical binaries despite an initial vulnerability to gendering and commodification. As a result, these films represent a potential means of representing posthuman hybridity, as the subversion, or removal, of the mechanisms of filmic Othering allows for the necessary ambiguity to represent the posthuman. However, as I have argued, the apparent necessity to evoke such tropes carries with it a dilution of the posthuman subject, as its portrayal comes to be informed by the framing and language of psychoanalytic categorisation, thereby restricting its hybridity and liberatory potential. Moreover, this also highlights a potential shortcoming in SF cinema, as it appears to struggle to visually depict the female posthuman without invoking psychoanalytic categorisation and maintaining a certain distance from the character.

As I have argued, the synthesis of posthuman theory and schizoanalysis in my theoretical framework offers a comprehensive analytical approach that highlights both the liberatory potential and the limitations of the posthuman subject. This dynamic perspective becomes particularly evident when examining the role of film as a medium. Given the medium's proclivity for rigid classification, it can undermine the potential of the posthuman by perpetuating entrenched gender-based categories. While the texts discussed above demonstrate a more nuanced portrayal compared to many of their predecessors, this inclination remains pervasive and seemingly inherent within contemporary SF. Through the lens of this framework, we can systematically unveil the precise mechanisms through which these essentialist notions are fortified, simultaneously exposing a discernible cultural predisposition towards perpetuating these fixed categorisations. Doing so underscores the pressing need to challenge and reshape these ingrained perspectives, allowing for a more authentic realisation of the transformative promise held by the posthuman subject.

NOTES

1. Deleuze and Guattari use the metaphor of the rhizome to describe non-hierarchical relations, as its roots have no clear starting point or fixed path. By contrast, the arborescent structure shows a clear path from its branches to its base.

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NON-FICTION REVIEWS

REIMAGINING MASCULINITY AND VIOLENCE IN GAME OF THRONES AND A SONG OF ICE AND FIRE (2022) BY TOBI EVANS

Review by Clair Hutchings-Budd

Evans, Tobi. *Reimagining Masculinity and Violence in Game of Thrones and A Song of Ice and Fire*. **Liverpool University Press, 2022.**

In this queer reading of violence and masculinity in George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* (*ASOIAF*, 1996-current) novels and their HBO television adaptation *Game of Thrones* (*GoT*, 2011-2019) Tobi Evans advances the thesis that violence offers more than one route to the performance of masculinity within the depicted secondary world. Taking key characters as case studies, Evans considers how the enactment of violence provides a means for self-definition, with hegemonic violence as a mechanism for negotiating power-relationships within Martin's pseudo-medieval society. Evans contextualises their use of the term hegemonic violence through "its personal and structural relation to masculine power, drawing on the concept from Raewyn Connell's work on hegemonic masculinity" (10). In this regard, Evans argues that their monograph breaks new critical ground, by considering how a character's motivation for the use of hegemonic violence operates either to destroy the perpetrator or promulgates their ideals and values via a form of queer reproduction.

Taking a queer feminist, poststructuralist, and psychoanalytic approach to their interpretation of violence in the texts, Evans draws upon Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, and Barbara Creed's work on the monstrous feminine to formulate their own unified proposition that when characters within the texts use hegemonic violence to assert their dominance the narrative ensures this violence is ultimately turned against them in a way that renders the character abject, breaking down their bodily borders. This abjection through disintegration makes their bodies disgusting and thus unable to physically reproduce their bloodlines. Evans argues that the only characters who perform violence in such a way as to maintain their bodily integrity and thus pass on their own experience and values are those who use violence to care for others. This queer mode of reproduction is accomplished via networks of queer kinships that extend the notion of social inheritance beyond the patriarchal and biologically essentialist. Evans organises their book into five chapters, each focusing on case studies drawn from the texts. Viewing the books and screen adaptation holistically, Evans gives equal critical weight to the two narrative modes, deftly moving between close textual reading and analysis of cinematography as required.

Chapter One, "Some Knights are Dark and Full of Terror," introduces the concept of the queer monstrous feminine which Evans defines as "a monstrous mode in which a masculine body becomes discursively coded as feminine through monstrous feminine imagery" (27). Taking the

characters of Gregor Clegane and Ramsay Bolton as case studies – responsible for some of the texts' most horrifying acts of violence – Evans uses Creed's *The Monstrous Feminine* (1993) as a framework for exploring the imagery that surrounds the characters' use of hegemonic masculine violence; specifically, the discursive codes of the monstrous birth, the bloody mouth, and *vagina dentata*. Providing numerous examples of how this monstrous feminine-coded imagery is present in the textual and televisual depictions of the sexual and bodily violations carried out by these two male characters, Evans discusses how Creed's development of Kristeva's theory of the abject provides a lens through which the hegemonic violence of Clegane and Bolton can be viewed. Evans' core argument that *ASOIAF* and *GoT* "reveals the inability of heteropatriarchal violence to produce anything but destruction," is supported by showing how the monstrous acts committed by both ultimately leads to them becoming abject through the physical disintegration of their own bodies, and – critically – before they can produce heirs (27). This is an impactful reading of the characters, which takes the audience beyond individual acts of violence and the misery of victims as Evans' critical approach to *ASOIAF/GoT* resists interpreting these acts of violence as gratuitous by providing a framework for examining hegemonic violence in terms of its social implications.

Chapter Two, "Undoing Sovereign Violence," moves to another aspect of hegemonic violence as variously expressed by the men and boys of House Stark (the lineage with sovereign authority over the North of Westeros), and as further navigated by Stark-adjacent characters, the hostage and ward Theon Greyjoy and (apparent) Stark bastard Jon Snow. Here Evans outlines how these characters position themselves in respect to acts of sovereign violence, a superficially legitimate enactment of violence (although defined and bounded by patriarchal and class inequities) which calls upon tradition and male role models to both justify itself and circumscribe 'correct' masculine performance. In the case of the Starks and Stark-adjacent characters Evans invites us to view their enactments of sovereign violence through Butler's theory of gender performativity, in the sense of repeated acts of sovereign violence becoming flawed copies of an idealised archetype and thus doomed to failure (85). This failure, Evans argues, is brought about by the character's abjection through contact with the bloodied victims of their acts of sovereign violence. In each character Evans examines how this abjection through bodily contamination means that they are unable to reproduce. Even though the texts demonstrate that "hegemonic sovereign violence is revealed as unable to support a coherent masculine identity" (85), an unanswered question here is why the (false) narrative that underpins it continues to be so pervasive. Some more detailed consideration of this point would have been helpful, perhaps linking it to later chapters where the author contrasts this mode of personal alignment (Evans uses the term "citationality") with alternative models for the expression of sovereign violence, such as Brienne of Tarth's identification with chivalric ideals. Evans' argument that Brienne's relationship with this ideal has a more positive outcome than the Stark's performance of sovereign violence as she enacts violence to care for others, but this does not satisfactorily explain why it continues to be an ostensibly valid model for so many of Martin's male-bodied characters if hegemonic sovereign violence always results in the destruction of the perpetrator.

In Chapter Three, "Vile, Scheming, Evil Bitches?," Evans continues their exploration of masculine violence through two of Martin's female characters – Cersei Lannister and Brienne – who Evans describes as "embodying female masculinity" (89). Whilst Evans does not feel either

of these two very different women are transgender *per se*, they see transgender theory as a useful lens through which to examine how both self-identify and perform masculine-coded behaviour. In Cersei's case, this is inextricably tied up in her political machinations and attempts to hold on to dynastic power, whilst Brienne seeks to align herself with the chivalric ideals of the true (masculine) knight as protector of the weak. In considering the performance of masculine violence by female characters, Evans further develops their proposal that the monstrous feminine is not bound by gender essentialism, but "can instead be understood as a monstrous mode" that can be performed by either men or women (105). I would agree that, using Evans' terminology, the "monstrous mode" need not be linked to biological sex and I would have been interested in seeing this language of the monstrous feminine explored further through the synergies between Ramsay Bolton's castrating Theon Greyjoy and Cersei's replacement of the King's prospective legitimate heirs with her own brother's children. Whilst, unlike Ramsay, she commits no physical assault on Robert, her reproductive choices weaponise her organs of reproduction – a *vagina dentata* in effect, if not actuality.

Moving on to Chapter Four, "Disabled Masculinities and the Potential and Limits of Queered Masculine Violence," Evans introduces another set of characters whose bodily differences require them to renegotiate their relationship with masculinity. Unlike Cersei and Brienne, who approach the masculine mode as female-bodied individuals, these characters are male-bodied but were either born with a disability or suffer an accident or injury that limits their ability to perform hegemonic or 'correct' sovereign violence (in accordance with the Westerosi paradigm). Evans here presents as case studies Brandon Stark, who is made paraplegic when he is thrown from a window by Jaime Lannister, and Hodor, the gentle giant with a learning disability who becomes Bran's means of enforcing hegemonic violence by being compelled to act as an extension of his immobilised body. Jaime in turn has his sword hand severed by enemies compelling him (like Bran) to review his relationship to hegemonic violence and his role models. The third character that Evans examines in detail is Tyrion Lannister, born with achondroplasia and rejected by his father at birth. Tyrion, like Bran and Jaime, is unable to access the archetype for sovereign violence that we see (as Evans discussed in Chapter Two) the able-bodied Stark and Stark-adjacent characters repeatedly perform and, in the repetition, fall apart. Instead, Evans argues, these three characters "undergo symbolic rebirths that signal their decision to relinquish their attachment to hegemonic violence and the structures that uphold it," choosing to follow alternative models of caring masculinity, where violence is enacted to protect others (171). It is these caring acts of violence that have fewer debilitating effects on the bodily borders of these disabled characters, enabling queer kinship networks to be established that enable the promulgation of the individuals' knowledge and values.

The final chapter of the book, "Queer Magical Violence and Gender Fluidity," explores two major characters, Daenerys Targaryen and Arya Stark, and another less central character, Varamyr Sixskins. Evans presents a queer reading of these characters, arguing that they typify archetypes in the Fantasy genre who "play with gender possibilities through magic" (173). This chapter is particularly compelling because in *ASOIAF* and *GoT*, although magic and the supernatural are clearly present in Martin's secondary world they play an unclear and socially ambiguous function. Many characters either do not believe in magic or having witnessed it (for example in the cases of Davos Seaworth and Jorah Mormont) want nothing to do with it. A queer reading that foregrounds how

these characters use magic as a medium for navigating their gender identities thus works particularly well in a Fantasy series that is so concerned with power relationships and how a masculine mode of violence is performed in this context. From my reading Daenerys' transgressing the strict gender prescriptions of Dothraki society (beginning with her attempted magical resurrection of Khal Drogo and culminating with her setting fire to the Dosh Khaleen) and Arya's mystical training with the Faceless Men to alter her bodily presentations (including crossing gender boundaries) are examples that support Evans' thesis.

Overall Evans presents a soundly constructed case for reading *ASOIAF* and *GoT* as a discourse on how power relationships are navigated through violence that is coded as monstrously feminine. Decoupling masculinity from biology, Evans' thesis is underpinned by the work of preeminent queer and transgender theorists which are clearly referenced throughout their argument. I would have liked to have seen further consideration of other significant characters who also manifest the monstrous feminine such as the enchantress Melisandre, who convinces Stannis Baratheon to murder his own child, and Sansa Stark, who moves from a young girl in love with the idea of courtly romances to a traumatised woman who enacts a version of sovereign violence by executing Ramsay with his own hunting dogs. Similarly, a study of the eunuch Varys – who does not use violence personally but gathers intelligence and advises as to its deployment – would have been an interesting addition to Evans' assemblage of the texts' queer characters. Particularly in the case of Varys and Sansa Stark, whose character arcs are central to Martin's narratives, I would like to have seen them given critical space within Evans' argument, either as consistent with their overarching thesis or as outliers.

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ECOFEMINIST SCIENCE FICTION (2021) EDITED BY DOUGLAS A. VAKOCH

Review by Ruth-Anne Walbank

Vakoch, Douglas A., editor. *Ecofeminist Science Fiction: International Perspectives on Gender, Ecology, and Literature.* Routledge, 2021. 211 pp.

The new collection of essays edited by Douglas A. Vakoch, *Ecofeminist Science Fiction: International Perspectives on Gender, Ecology, and Literature* (2021), seeks to redress ecofeminism's neglected status in Science Fiction (SF) scholarship to date. As Vakoch highlights in their introduction, "proto-ecofeminist works, have been a staple feature of SF for several centuries," yet "the representation of female science fiction authors and ecofeminism […] is utterly inadequate" (2). As such, this volume aims to bridge feminist, ecological, and SF criticism in a unique contribution to the field as part of the *Routledge Studies in World Literatures and the Environment* series.

Ecofeminist Science Fiction's geographical and temporal scope is broad, bringing together "a stellar international group of critics" to represent the perspectives outlined in the title (3). From early twentieth-century German SF *Alraune* (1911) by Hanns Heinz Ewers to the twenty-first-century Chinese SF of Chen Qiufan's *The Waste Tide* (2013), the collection challenges a Western-centric approach to SF scholarship. Vakoch clearly articulates this goal as the collection's editor, foregrounding how the organisation of the essays into thematic groups facilitates "an appreciation of the intertextuality of the many contributions as well as highlighting the kinds of topics and issues pertinent to understanding ecofeminist science fiction" (2-3). While such a wide-ranging, eclectic selection of essays orientates the collection towards covering a breadth of material rather than an in-depth, focused study, the resulting volume makes for an ideal introduction to new scholars and an expanded view of the field for existing academics.

The opening section demonstrates the collection's aims in full force, focusing on "Female Bodies" and their hybrid representations with animals, plants, and cyborgs through SF. For instance, Melissa Etzler's chapter on "Hanns Heinz Ewers' *Alraune* with an Ecofeminist Twist" examines how the mandrake-woman hybrid in Ewers' narrative represents emerging gendered stereotypes of the New Woman and the *femme fatale* in "Germany's roaring 1920s" (15). Similarly, Imelda Martín Junquera's chapter, "Reproduction, Utilitarianism, and Speciesism in *Sleep Dealer* and *Westworld*," focuses on how, in the series *Westworld* (2016-2022) especially, "Android women succeed in transgressing, traditional gender roles" following a growing awareness of "their condition as part human, part machine" (44, 41). In both chapters, the hybridity of a female-presenting body, enabled through the technological innovations imagined in SF, explores and transgresses gendered stereotypes. Within the volume's opening pages, the authors uncover the capacity for SF to facilitate discussions on

gender that sit outside neatly defined categories.

This hybridity extends from female bodies into the environment they inhabit, embodying that intersection of femininity and the environment the collection represents. For example, Lesley Kordecki, in their chapter on Mary Doria Russel's *The Sparrow* (1996), looks at how, when humans visit the alien planet Rakhat, they characterise the planet's ecology as reinforcing a stereotyped gender binary where the "lovely countryside" is feminised "in stark contrast to the masculinized trade city" (24). For Kordecki, it is only through the hybridity of the planet's "animal/human beings" that "combat the gendering double standards we live under" and "trouble our hierarchy of environment" (33). Similarly, Katja Plemenitaš offers "An Ecofeminist Reading of *The Stepford Wives*," which "highlights parallels between the domination of women and the domination of the environment" (49). The "cautionary tale" represented by this narrative warns against the patriarchal-led domination of women and the environments they occupy (49). Instead, this chapter and section advocates for valuing diversity and hybridity and challenging such narrow classifications; a lesson that this book's wide ranging, international scholarship seeks to enact.

Of particular interest to readers of this *Fantastika* special issue is the collection's second part on "Queer Ecologies." In allocating space for queer readings of ecofeminist SF, the book foregrounds the exciting potential within this field to extend the scope of ecofeminism beyond the categories of "men and women," as identified in the introduction (3). Instead, the "Queer Ecologies" section expands the definitions of gender and environment to include more indefinable, queerer aspects. Aslı Değirmenci Altın's analysis of Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods* (2007) looks at queerness in terms of "non-normative" relationships (71), especially within an SF world where "same-sex relationships are quite normalized" (70). For Altın, queerness goes beyond the sexuality of the characters and into their law-breaking relations as an interspecies couple between "a human and a robot" that disrupts this imagined world's normative structures (71). As these two characters challenge the dominant anthropocentrism of their world, Winterson's novel seeks to "go beyond real and imagined boundaries of oppressive ideologies" to imagine a future outside ecological catastrophe (73). While Altın examines non-normative queerness in a future posthuman dystopia, Meghna Mudaliar questions the impact of associating queer women with the unnatural or unhuman in SF. Focusing on case studies from television, this chapter looks at Bill Potts in *Doctor Who* (1963-present) and Charlie Bradbury in *Supernatural* (2005-2020) to demonstrate both the "rareness of queer female characters" in SF narratives and their problematic characterisations (88). Mudaliar draws parallels between Bill and Charlie's deaths and reincarnations into something monstrous through their respective series, critiquing how such representations promote "essentialist ideologies that see queer identity as being 'against' the natural order of things" (97). Within this section, queer identities and ecologies become focal points for challenging prejudices and imagining homonormative futures within SF.

Sarah Bezan's chapter on "Speculative Sex" takes queer ecologies a step further so that the queer, oceanic representations of sex and birth in Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl* (2002) embody the slippery nature of queer women's fiction. Bezan's analysis centres on procreation and birth in

Lai's novel, where human-cyborg relations borrow on the "non-normative sexual and reproductive practices" of underwater creatures like fish to offer an alternative, oceanic vision in "resistance to the colonial traumas and dark powers of biotechnology" (81). In partnership with Lai's use of a stream-of-consciousness narrative, Bezan argues that "*Salt Fish Girl* emblemizes the fluidity and slipperiness of queer women's writing" (76). The story and narrative techniques encapsulate a subversiveness of gendered norms and hierarchical treatments of the natural world made possible through a queering of ecofeminist perspectives. Bezan's chapter signals an opportunity to examine SF alongside its contents to reveal queer readings and captivating ecologies that, while beyond the scope of the present volume, necessitate further study.

The third part of the collection, "War and Ecoterrorism," explores themes of conflict, activism, and resistance. Patrick D. Murphy's consideration of Karen Traviss's *The Wess'har Wars* (2004-2008) series is an ambitious chapter surveying these six novels from ecofeminist perspectives. Murphy expands from understanding the *Wess'har Wars* "at its most basic level" as a conflict between "the 'female' leaders" and "the 'male' Wess'har Aras" to explore how the series subverts "traditional dimorphism and gender binaries" (104, 105). Within this gendered conflict, Murphy considers how the series engages with moral questions around consumerism, commodification, and ethical veganism, suggesting that the series uncovers complexities in finding "ethically appropriate courses of action" within ecofeminism (110). Similarly, Peter I-min Huang's chapter on "Chinese Science Fiction and Representations of Ecofeminists" reflects on the moral and social implications of contemporary novels in approaching ecofeminism. Contrasting Liu Cixin's *The Three-Body Problem* (2008) and Quifan's *The Waste Tide*, this chapter considers how "these works of Chinese sci-fi reflect the two directions that sci-fi is taking in China today," with one perspective characterising activism as ecoterrorism and the other that defends the socio-political impact of ecofeminist awareness (135). While this section focuses on depictions of conflict, these chapters draw out the real-world implications of ecofeminist SF by highlighting the social, political, and ethical resonances such works consider.

Within this section, Başak Ağın's "A Material Feminist Approach to *Star Wars*" surveys a wide-ranging nine films focusing on the franchise's female characters and their connection to the Force. Ağın challenges ideas from existing criticism that "female heroes like Leia and Padmé" function merely as "the damsel-in-distress, [or] an object of romanticism for the protagonist" (114). Instead, their capacity as leaders, politicians, and logical decision-making "subverts the role attributed to a stereotypical female character" (115). Of particular interest is Ağın's comparison between the Force and its "resemblance not only to the concept of matter in material feminism, but also to Qi as the life force in Eastern philosophy", which "problematizes the segregating dualisms" by suggesting an interconnectivity between all things (121). With the increasing number of Force-sensitive female leads in recent Star Wars movies, Ağın presents a franchise "in a state of *becoming*" more ecofeminist in its development (117, original emphasis). In tandem with the other chapters in this section, Ağın's analysis demonstrates that SF is not static but in the process of developing nuanced ecofeminist outlooks and drawing on international perspectives enables scholars to bring these nuances to the fore.

To conclude the collection, part four examines "Capitalism and Colonization," raising the intersections of ecofeminist SF with post-colonial theories. The chapters here highlight a wide range of authors, such as Zahra Jannessari Ladani's consideration of Fazel Bakhsheshi's novels whose "imaginative power encapsulates local/regional incidents" in a way that "the Iranian reader will immediately recognize" (158). Moreover, Benay Blend's chapter draws on three novelists of Ojibwe, Israeli, and Palestinian nationalities to ask what happens "when Indigenous and Palestinian texts are read together" (171). In reading texts "across border lines," Blend surmises that ecofeminist readings uncover how "science fiction serves as a vehicle for exploring issues like colonialism, racism, and climate justice," making it a vital tool for voicing indigenous perspectives that challenge capitalist, colonial models of dominating the natural world (171). While highlighting these lesser-known authors and marginalised voices, this section also presents mainstream Western SF media in a new light using ecofeminist theories. For instance, Lydia Rose and Teresa M. Bartoli draw on ecofeminism to offer a fresh perspective on James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009), revealing the film's "cultural juxtaposition between the ideal ecofeminist society of the Na'vi people and modern Western ideology, as Pandora is being colonized by human Earthlings" (142). In the collection's last chapter, Deirdre Byrne reads Ursula K. Le Guin's early fiction as SF, which understands patriarchy as "the source of exploitation of women and nature" as an "ideology that creates and pursues war" (198). Collectively, these chapters present ecofeminist readings of an international selection of SF texts to demonstrate the exploitation and violence central to a capitalist-driven ecology. The contrast between American blockbusters like *Avatar* and lesser-known SF texts by indigenous writers makes this violent exploitation pertinent to the reader, while using the scope of the SF genre to imagine alternative models in a hopeful concluding note.

Overall, the book's expansive selection of source materials across multiple centuries and nationalities offers an enticing introduction to possibilities for future ecofeminist SF scholarship. However, it also highlights the need for future volumes to provide in-depth case studies on specific periods or regions to expand the current critical perspectives on ecofeminist SF. Any of the book's four parts could constitute a collection in its own right, containing a wealth of materials and themes to explore. While individual chapters often struggle to balance the multiple critical approaches encapsulated by international ecofeminist SF literature, the book collectively represents a wide range of perspectives on gender and ecology in a carefully considered manner. As the pressures of climate change and our present ecological crises become more pressing, the ideas in Vakoch's *Ecofeminist Science Fiction* signal the need for further dialogue in this growing area of study.

BIONOTE

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GENDERED DEFENDERS: MARVEL'S HEROINES IN TRANSMEDIA SPACES (2022) EDITED BY BRYAN J. CARR AND META G. CARSTARPHEN

Review by Maria K. Alberto

Carr, Bryan J., and Meta G. Carstarphen, eds. *Gendered Defenders: Marvel's Heroines in Transmedia Spaces*. Ohio State University Press, 2022. 214 pp.

In the edited collection *Gendered Defenders: Marvel's Heroines in Transmedia Spaces* (2022), editors Bryan J. Carr and Meta G. Carstarphen set out to establish a complex core claim: that "the evolution of Marvel's female characters mirrors the development, struggles, and triumphs of women in the real world" (7). Looking at characters from both Marvel comics and the transmedia colossus that is the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), the collection's editors and contributors consider how Marvel's prominence in the cultural zeitgeist has both empowered and hindered the portrayal of women as heroes.

While superheroes at large may offer audiences "a means of reconstructing and redeveloping cultural and mythological languages," Carr and Carstarphen maintain, these characters are also "the product of human creators influenced by the cultural contexts in which they operate" (7). With this important distinction between utopic purpose and actual reality, *Gendered Defenders* sets out to provide multiple examples from Marvel's extensive catalog, offering chapters that draw from multiple disciplines and examine characters from Carol Danvers (Captain Marvel) and Agent Peggy Carter to Kamala Khan (Ms. Marvel), Shuri, and many more.

The collection opens with three chapters, one co-authored and then one apiece, from Carr and Carstarphen. Together these three pieces constitute Part I, "Introduction: Framing Our Starting Places and Conceptual Origins." The co-authored first chapter here serves in the place of a traditional introduction and works to situate American superheroes within the bounds of what Joseph Campbell has called the monomyth, or the hero's journey; this initial chapter also discusses connections between media and individual identity-making, then lays out the larger project of this collection. One of the book's most compelling arguments is made here, almost as a throwaway point: Carr and Carstarphen propose that our thinking about transmedia "must evolve from simply being one consistent fiction across multiple channels toward multiple channels of adaptation that influence the larger *cultural sense* of the fiction and the place it inhabits in the popular zeitgeist" (6, original emphasis). While it is not novel to consider audience reception of media texts, the argument that transmedia franchises are characterised by reception and place in the cultural zeitgeist as much as by modes of adaptation *is* novel, and it would offer a rich new way of thinking about how people 'know' about mega-franchises like the MCU without actively following them. Consequently, this idea would have benefited from further reflection and theorisation here.

Following that, Chapter Two is by Carr and considers Marvel heroines in the context of the "superhero industrial complex," as focalized through an infamous scene in *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) where most of the franchise's female characters band together for a significant charge across a battlefield (11). Here Carr considers how women heroes have been depicted across decades of Marvel comics and transmedia properties – a history that includes sexist and tokenistic portrayals which often misunderstand what women audiences enjoy, or fumble how they could have depicted women's agency in interesting, nuanced ways. Rounding out Part I, Chapter Three by Carstarphen theorises the concept of trans/linear feminism, which she maintains "[breaks] the hegemony of a master, linear narrative," "allows for narratives of female agency to go above, beyond, and even through traditional constraints," and provides "identities that not only allow us to cross the boundaries of fact and fiction comfortably [but also allow] us to move through past, present, and future sensibility adeptly" (28, 29). Oddly, this chapter was also the shortest by far in the entire volume, even though Carstarphen is theorising quite a complex conceptualisation of feminism. This work could have used much more space to trace out relationships between trans/linear feminism and other feminist traditions, and to consider how trans/linear feminism adds to ongoing conversations about what contemporary feminism should be if it really is to support all women.

Following this, Part II "Phenomenal Women: Gender and Feminism," begins with a strong chapter from J. Richard Stevens and Anna C. Turner, considering how Carol Danvers is made to undergo multiple memory erasures that reset her character and thus "erase previous narrative choices […] [and] allow Danvers to serve as a long-standing feminist symbol" (33), who can embody the ideals of differing waves of feminism while – ostensibly – being the same person all along (Chapter Four). Next, Kathleen M. Turner-Ledgerwood turns to standpoint theory – a feminist lens that contends knowledge and power stem from one's social positioning – to argue that Agent Peggy Carter is a feminist character, even when she is often located in time periods that may not be typified by how the term would be used today (Chapter Five). Finally, Amanda K. Kehrberg closes with the strongest chapter of the collection, wherein she argues that Jessica Jones "refuses to *do* gender as a necessary part of *doing* heroism" (67, original emphasis). Using examples of costuming and performance, Kehrberg makes a persuasive argument for how gender becomes entangled with heroism, particularly for women superheroes, and highlights Jessica Jones as a hero whose complicated relationship to heroism can be located in her clothing, language, personal choices, and complex backstory alike (Chapter Six).

Part III "Embodied Power: Otherness, the Body, and the Superheroine" opens with Rachel Grant considering Shuri from *Black Panther*, demonstrating how this character subverts many default (white) expectations of superheroines and instead draws from the broader possibilities of Afrofuturism and postcolonial feminism (Chapter Seven). Next, Maryanne A. Rhett situates the creation, ongoing authorship, and overarching storylines of Kamala Khan (Ms. Marvel) in the context of global dialogues regarding feminism, particularly the contested notion of Islamic feminism (Chapter Eight). Rhett admirably balances summaries of complex topics and storylines that may be new to many readers, while also making her own argument tying them together. Then, Stephanie L. Sanders draws together strands from Anzalduan spiritual activism and self-knowledge to offer a reading of Misty Knight's combined diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) and superhero activities

at the university where she works (Chapter Nine), though precisely which of Knight's storylines this chapter draws from can quickly become opaque to unfamiliar readers.

Regretfully, Part IV "Answering the Call: Marvel Superheroines as Responses to Cultural Change" features some of the weakest chapters in the collection. Julie A. Davis and Robert Westerfelhaus investigate how Russian superhero Natasha Romanoff, or Black Widow, is depicted in multiple animated and live-action Marvel properties, often as a sexy prop to the male heroes; however, this reading is framed oddly, taking the industry to task for its tokenistic depiction of Slavic ethnic identity, but almost as if this is the only identity thus mishandled (Chapter Ten). Following this, Mildred F. Perreault and Gregory P. Perreault offer a confusing chapter on Pepper Potts, attempting to address far too many sub-topics and making essentialising claims about how Potts exemplifies "women's stories" and "the nature of women" in them (159; Chapter Eleven). Making a stronger start, CarrieLynn D. Reinhard's chapter on Squirrel Girl, initially a satirical character, offers a compelling argument for how this particular superhero "reflects the fractured state of feminism from the 1990s to today" whose continuance "can be read as both undermining feminism and normalizing its fractured state" (173), but often does so by separating Squirrel Girl's capacities into masculine and feminine traits (Chapter Twelve). Finally, the collection closes with Annika Hagley applying a feminist trauma theory framework to the 2019 *Captain Marvel* film and its titular character Carol Danvers, wherein Hagley contends that this movie depicts the aftermath of gendered violence, breaking the mold of post 9/11 superhero movies that recreate hypermasculine identity (Chapter Thirteen).

As these chapter summaries demonstrate, one of the greatest strengths of *Gendered Defenders* is the range of topics, perspectives, and disciplinary approaches that its contributors utilise. While most draw upon narrative analysis without naming it, various chapters also incorporate approaches such as standpoint theory (51), ethics of care and relational ontologies (77), postcolonial theory (89), critical technocultural discourse analysis that investigates internet and digital artifacts and culture (94), or feminist trauma theory (191-192). In one light, this interdisciplinary range adds a much-appreciated depth to the collection. In another light, though, it would have helped to have more consensus across the collection of how each chapter should introduce and explain its theoretical lens, such as through dedicated methodological sections.

One high point of this collection was its ongoing engagement with questions regarding feminism and not just with feminism itself. Multiple chapters here push back against overt celebrations of feminist progress, or identify critical shortcomings in postfeminist texts and thought to advocate for more nuanced lines of criticism. For example, as Grant draws from postcolonial scholarship to point out in her chapter on Shuri from *Black Panther*, contemporary (white, Western) feminism still "suppresses a broad understanding of gendered experiences" (91). It is to be expected that an entire collection about representations of heroic women, performed gender, and chosen identity would probably be a feminist text, but it was heartening to see that most chapters here continued to question and push for moving beyond that basic framework. In particular, I was struck by Carstarphen's trans/linear feminism (though I also definitely would have liked to see more of it), Kehrberg's consideration of postmodern feminism for Jessica Jones, Grant's aforementioned engagement with postcolonial feminism for Shuri, and Rhett's discussion of how Islamic feminism is

a complex, multifaceted topic negotiating its own identity, much like Kamala Khan.

In other areas of the collection, though, this balancing of multiple complex elements proves a major weakness. One common pitfall is the juggling of a tremendous amount of fictional material whose publication spans decades, and often media or platforms too, as contributors attempt to give readers a comprehensive yet nuanced sense of who the focal character is and usually what changes she has undergone by the time she gets to the live-action MCU films. Given the collection's explicit transmedia focus, the attempt to establish such lineages for each character makes sense but some chapters, such as Stevens and Turner's Chapter Four on Carol Danvers's evolution across different waves of feminism, were able to avoid the pitfalls of overwhelming detail better than others. Meanwhile Perreault and Perreault went a step further in the opposite direction with Chapter Eleven, wherein they cover so many different tangents regarding the character of Pepper Potts that readers do not reach their argument until seven pages in, which is a further weakness on top of the strangely essentializing argument here.

All things considered, I would characterise *Gendered Defenders* as a largely commendable addition to the ongoing constellation of scholarship developing around what Carr and Carstarphen accurately term Marvel's "transmedia experiment" with the MCU (3). While not quite a text for course adoption and perhaps of uneven merit to researchers working in areas like popular culture studies, gender studies, or adaptation studies, this collection still makes useful strides toward intersectional considerations of Marvel heroines that I hope to see future scholarship develop even further.

BIONOTE

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COSPLAYERS: GENDER AND IDENTITY (2021) BY A. LUXX MISHOU

Review by Deanna P. Koretsky

Mishou, A. Luxx. *Cosplayers: Gender and Identity.* **Routledge, 2021. 81 pp.**

A. Luxx Mishou's *Cosplayers: Gender and Identity* (2021) is a love letter to its subject – cosplayers. Though unusually slim for an academic monograph, the volume offers valuable provocations for future research on gender, sexuality, and identity in fandom studies. Over the course of five brief chapters, Mishou raises compelling points about methodological and ethical oversights in cosplay research. And while it does not fill all the gaps to which it calls attention, the text successfully outlines areas of inquiry for other researchers to follow and heed its ethical and timely demand for greater nuance in scholarship on fans, fandoms, and fan practices.

The volume's first chapter introduces the methodological impetus for the study: the tendency of cosplay researchers to theorise the *act* of cosplay while overlooking the *actors*, the cosplayers themselves. To rectify this emphasis on the 'what' and 'why' of cosplay over the 'who' (1), Mishou grounds *Cosplayers* in anonymous survey data that "allows for deeper insight into identity building than observational data alone" (9). This qualitative data is presented and interpreted in the ensuing three chapters, the book's analytical core. Mishou's interpretations of the data draws on cultural theory fields including gender studies, fashion studies, queer theory, critical race theory, and disability studies. The fifth chapter brings the project to a close with a series of narrative accounts from survey respondents that recapitulate the book's opening call to listen to cosplayers themselves. Mishou makes a strong case for why observational data alone is insufficient in studies of cosplay, rendering the book's methodology ethically sound and significant. However, as discussed further below, the survey data collected is not always sufficient for the kinds of analyses the study claims to undertake. These shortcomings, coupled with the book's brevity, call into question whether a monograph was the appropriate form for disseminating this research. While the second and third chapters of *Cosplayers* could read as stand-alone essays, the fourth and fifth chapters would have benefitted from further development. Though the monograph begins to investigate this understudied research area, it lacks a depth of analysis in some of the topic's most crucial areas.

Chapter Two advances the volume's most theoretically cohesive and compelling argument. In it, Mishou cogently distinguishes between the practice known as crossplay – wherein cosplayers dress as characters whose gender identities and/or presentations do not match their own – and drag. Resisting extant readings of crossplay as a form of drag performance, Mishou proposes that "the designation of 'crossplay' should be abandoned as an arbitrator of heteronormative binaries that do not adequately describe the nuanced experiences and relationships cosplayers have with

gender" (15). Here, Mishou's insistence on prioritising the voices of cosplayers pays the greatest dividends: citing qualitative data from 143 survey respondents who reflect in varied ways on the implications of their practices, Mishou finds that existing scholarly framings of crossplay as drag assume and impose "identity categories not upheld by the crossplayers themselves" (18). Where drag is an "investigation of gender in its performance and adoption, and relies on binary signs for its successful communication," Mishou demonstrates that cosplay is not primarily interested in gender but rather in the characters being emulated (21). Without denying the manifold ways in which the practice known as crossplay enables transformative experiences around gender identity for some cosplayers, Mishou argues that the critical implications of the practice "may be much simpler: an attraction to aesthetics, or human sympathy for a character" (30). Left unaccounted for in this otherwise persuasive chapter is how a character's gender presentation and/or identity may influence a fan's choice to emulate them in the first instance. While more direct attention to the relationship between characters and cosplayers' gender expressions would have enriched an already engaging discussion, as Mishou notes, the work undertaken here is but an "initial attempt" to grapple with a complex set of questions (29). The chapter offers plenty of valuable insights, even as it leaves space for further considerations around a cosplayer's intrinsic motivations.

Mishou's first-hand knowledge of fandom spaces and practices, coupled with the data gathered from survey respondents, informs the next chapter's interrogation of gendered dress and anti-harassment policies in some of the biggest United States popular arts conventions, otherwise known as cons. This chapter attends carefully and caringly to the material and psychosocial demands placed on cosplayers as they seek to fulfil an array of fantasy functions in convention spaces. Mishou shows how dress codes at cons tend to focus on policing feminine bodies on the grounds of 'respectability' and 'family values.' Comparing dress policies to cons' public anti-harassment statements, Mishou argues that the latter is likewise aimed at controlling feminine bodies. On this point, Mishou offers a suggestive reading of anti-harassment policies as thinly veiled efforts to maintain cons as predominantly homosocial, masculine spaces. However, Mishou's intimate knowledge of convention spaces propels the chapter to another conclusion, one grounded in the fact that anti-harassment policies are rarely enforced in practice. As a result, Mishou arrives at the vital point that dress and behaviour policies both ultimately "lay the burden of acceptable social interactions on the cosplayer" and that this burden is experienced unequally among cosplayers of differing subject positions and identities (46). This leads to the fourth chapter's focus on "the subject of diversity" (56).

In the book's most uneven chapter, Mishou rightly observes that current scholarship "recognizes the diversity of a global community [of cosplayers] [...] but does not yet specifically address the elements, nuances, and challenges of that diversity" (55). This chapter largely does the same. Much like the book overall, chapter four is too brief to offer an in-depth argument that fully attends to the intersectional inquiry it promises. The issue here, by the author's own admission, is that the survey data does not yield adequate material for such an analysis: "In the absence of survey participant narratives, I turn to disability theory, critical race theory, gender theory, and published accounts by cosplayers, to demonstrate the gatekeeping American cosplayers continue to face" (58).

The chapter offers limited insights into the inequities faced by Black, fat, and disabled cosplayers, though curiously it does not consider the intersections of these "othered" identities, even as it repeatedly points to the need for intersectionality in scholarship (64). While more scholarship that attends critically to cosplayers' varied identities and positionalities is certainly necessary, this short volume, with data gathered from surveys that were evidently not designed for such work, is not the place for it. The author would have done better to leave this chapter out or design a new survey to account for the range of experiences ostensibly analysed here more adequately.

Cosplayers concludes by reiterating its stated goal of listening to its titular subjects. The four-page final chapter – which reads more like a coda – concludes the volume by quoting extensively from survey respondents reflecting on the good that cosplay brings to their lives. This is a lovely sentiment, to be sure, and reminds the reader that real people are behind the inquiry. Mishou's central point that work on cosplayers should take cosplayers' lived experiences into account is well made. However, this brief concluding chapter does not offer new insights and as a result feels out of step with the genre of the academic monograph. While there is certainly a place for joy in academic writing, the primary goal of such writing is to advance knowledge and Mishou's concluding chapter falters in this regard. The narrative accounts included here would have been more productively situated in the first chapter, where Mishou introduces the case for listening to cosplayers. A stronger conclusion, then, might have synthesised the four chapters' findings into a cohesive takeaway for readers. The lack of a cohesive conclusion highlights the fact that while the preceding chapters offer compelling points individually they do not constitute a larger continuous argument. In other words, once again, it is not clear why this work needed to take the form of a monograph – even a short one.

While this short volume may not accomplish all that it promises, it points the way toward important areas for further inquiry. The book's most successful intervention is the second chapter's deft disarticulation of "crossplay" from drag. For this reason, *Cosplayers* will be most relevant to advanced postgraduate students and scholars of queer theory, gender and sexuality studies, and fandom studies. Each of the book's first four chapters also solidly surveys existing scholarship and for this reason it may also prove useful to beginning postgraduate students and advanced undergraduates looking for overviews of recent work on fandom, gender, and sexuality studies. Insofar as it is short, accessible, and takes seriously a community that is often spoken *about* more than it is spoken *with*, *Cosplayers* speaks to cosplayers within and beyond the academy who wish to reflect critically on their own practices.

BIONOTE

Deanna P. Koretsky is an Associate Professor of English at Spelman College, United States. Her first book, *Death Rights: Romantic Suicide, Race, and the Bounds of Liberalism* (2021), shows how cultural representations of suicide inherited from the nineteenth century continue to reinforce antiblackness in the modern world. Her current work focuses on race, gender, and sexuality in vampire narratives and their fandoms.

IT CAME FROM THE CLOSET: QUEER REFLECTIONS ON HORROR (2022) EDITED BY JOE VALLESE

Review by Paige Elizabeth Allen

Vallese, Joe, editor. *It Came from the Closet: Queer Reflections on Horror.* The Feminist Press, 2022. 298 pp.

Queer writers are often interested in combining personal reflection and critical analysis, from incorporating individual experiences into academic scholarship to creating critically-engaged memoirs like *The Argonauts* (2015) and *In the Dream House* (2019). While *It Came from the Closet* (2022) draws upon these methodological precedents, editor Joe Vallese's claim that this collection is a "first-of-its-kind-anthology" does not feel like an exaggeration (6). Like two of its major interests, queerness and monstrosity, this collection resists clear categorisation, approaching Horror and queer life with a critic's magnifying glass and the mirror of the memoirist.

Vallese concisely describes the anthology as "a collection of eclectic memoirs that use horror as the lens through which the writers consider and reflect upon queer identity, and vice versa" (5). While each essay blends film criticism and queer memoir in different proportions, the writers' personal experiences drive the collection. Though the contributors speak to broader conversations about Horror and queerness, quotations from theory are rare; their commentary feels more suited to a cultural magazine or review than an academic journal. This fusion of criticism and memoir opens opportunities for reflection that would not be possible in a traditional academic paper or a conventional film review, enhancing rather than undermining the collection's intellectual rigour and originality. The anthology's commitment to treating personal experiences as worthy sites of analysis and entry into these films is one of its particular strengths.

It Came from the Closet is organised into five loosely thematic sections, each opened by an illustration by Bishakh Som depicting images from the memoirs to follow. The essays in "An Excellent Day for an Exorcism" focus on possession and demons, while the entries in "Monster Mash" examine monsters from the classic werewolf of *The Wolf Man* (1941) to the infamous shark in *Jaws* (1975). "Fatal Attractions" is particularly interested in queer desires, especially those resistant to categorisation or entangled with power. In "Whatever You Do, Don't Fall Asleep," dreams and doubles take centre stage as identities and reality are unsettled. The concluding section, "Final Cuts," feels somewhat arbitrary in its organisation but seeks to bring the collection full circle. For instance, Will Stockton's essay – which presents his son's unruly behaviour as possession and discusses the films *Child's Play* (1988) and *The Exorcist* (1973) – reaches back strongly to section

one. The concluding essay, Viet Dinh's "Notes on *Sleepaway Camp*," satisfyingly mirrors Vallese's introduction to the collection, which begins with Vallese's first experience watching the same slasher film. As Dinh ends the final essay with the beginning of *Sleepaway Camp* (1983), we return to the start of the collection; we end "as we must, at the beginning" (285).

Vallese promises, "While these essays spotlight each writer's singular queer perspective, their respective presentations and analyses of 'the Horror Film' serve as a kind of universal connective tissue between them and their readers" (5). Yet, an underlying question drives the anthology's collective appreciation for Horror: why do queer people love Horror when Horror so often does not love queer people – instead abusing, villainising, and marginalising them? The anthology does not provide one answer. Instead, it offers many individual and personal answers, pointing toward both the pain and the possibility of Horror.

The films addressed in the anthology range from the classic to the contemporary, from blockbusters to lesser-known gems. Some movies – *Jennifer's Body* (2009), *Good Manners* (*As boas manieras*) (2017), *Sleepaway Camp* – fit fairly intuitively beneath the umbrella of queer Horror. Yet, alongside them in this collection are unexpected movies, like *Get Out* (2017), *Hereditary* (2018), and *Godzilla* (1954). The essays on these films provide queer reflections on Horror without requiring the films to be explicitly queer. Several writers compellingly read queer valences into films where they have not been frequently identified. For example, Richard Scott Larson offers a fresh take on *Halloween* (1978), reading it as a coming-out story, and Jen Corrigan explores the homoeroticism of *Jaws*. Corrigan argues that, on screen, "queerness is most easily tolerated when masked with straight performance" and intentionally approaches *Jaws* as a "straight film that can be read as queer" (95-96). Corrigan's choice to see queerness in *Jaws* leads to an original reading of the film, and her approach asks what might happen if we encounter films looking for queerness rather than expecting heteronormativity.

The collection circles themes of identity and identification. While queerness unites these essays, queer is not a static term. The memoirists are gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans, pansexual, polyamorous, agender, and more. They turn to Horror to investigate a plethora of experiences with which queerness can intersect, such as race, disability, illness, fatness, trauma, pregnancy, family, abuse, shame, and love. These various perspectives and interests lead the contributors to identify with different aspects of the films they analyse. The act of identification serves as a methodological bridge between criticism and memoir. When I see myself in a character, it reveals something about the film's power and politics, and I also learn something about how I see myself. This loop of reflections – the viewer pointing to the film pointing back – is the motion at the collection's core.

As a scholar interested in the desires and fears that monsters embody, I expected the writers to identify with the monster, a perennially queer figure, and many do – sometimes triumphantly, often ambiguously. Prince Shakur wonders, "what happens when we, the children, become the monsters, the very things meant to be cast out?" (91). Zefyr Lisowski asks, "If you first see yourself in a host of ghosts, what does it mean to live despite that?" (42). However, contributors identify

with other figures too. Dinh and Tucker Lieberman discuss the Final Girl, the survivor who faces the killer's horrors and lives to tell the tale. The resilient Final Girl combines feminine and masculine traits and promises an existence beyond the victim/killer binary – the two categories to which gays and lesbians are typically relegated in Horror.

While personal reflections thread through these essays, each contributor takes a different stance on which is the lens and which is the object: the Horror film or queer life. Lieberman's "The Trail of His Flames" stands out for interrogating the collection's methodology and experimental form. Exploring what a memoir-about-a-movie can provide, Lieberman uses *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) to narrate the mental distress he experienced after falling out with a friend, interweaving his own story with sections written from the perspective of the film's Final Girl, Nancy. I highlight Lieberman's essay because it circles some of the anthology's key concerns. How do we tell queer stories – 'real' and fictional – both of which can horrify and warp or expose the truth? As Lieberman points out, queer stories are often queer in multiple ways. Most obviously, the story may depict queer characters or have a queer storyteller. But Lieberman argues that a story may also be queer "based on how it keeps secrets," navigating both visibility and invisibility as zones of uncertain safety: "The queerest stories are the ones that are hardest to tell" (180). By examining and inhabiting a Horror movie about trauma, Lieberman wrestles with how to narrate 'real' trauma, elucidating the promises and impossibilities of truthfully telling the story of one's, or another's, life.

In addition to raising meaningful epistemological questions about queer storytelling and memoir, the collection addresses several scholarly gaps. Lisowski offers a first-of-its-kind reading of *The Ring* (2002) with an eye towards disability, and Sarah Fonseca spotlights *Is That You? (¿Eres tú, papá?)* (2018), Cuba's only psychological Horror film, as a movie deserving of critical attention. Dinh recognises the camp sensibility of *Sleepaway Camp* and its queer potential beyond its transphobic twist ending; he also distinguishes between the morality of traditional Horror (where the monster transgresses) and the slasher (where the victims do), describing the murderous Angela as both the monster and the Final Girl. In "Both Ways," Carmen Maria Machado provides a powerful reassessment of *Jennifer's Body* – and a necessary analysis of bisexuality, which remains markedly under-theorised. Machado describes the slipperiness of bisexuality: "it can appear to be other things, it can disguise itself in ways monosexuality can't, reveal itself against all knowledge and expectations" (26). She provides the powerful image of bisexuality as a body of water, one which many queer people coming of age in a heteronormative society must, at some point, cross, and she defends depictions of bisexuality that are "conflicted, spectral, transient" (25). Machado's celebration of trips into these bisexual waters, whether momentary or lasting, resists cultural and critical tendencies to gatekeep and essentialise.

Carrow Narby's "Indescribable" is also worth foregrounding for its scholarly contributions, particularly to queer and monster theory. Narby challenges readings of blob monsters as unrelatable and less threatening to social norms than humanoid creatures, arguing that the opposite is true: the blob is relatable and radical. Narby reads the titular pink menace of *The Blob* (the 1988 remake) and the sex-crazed, shapeshifting blob monsters of *Society* (1989) as queer threats to heteronormativity,

bodily boundaries, and categorical distinctions. Speaking from their embodied experience as a self-described fat, agender individual, Narby relates to the blob monster, admiring its rejection of social and symbolic orders. In a fascinating analysis of desire, identity, and abjection, they locate in the blob monster a promise of "intimacy without legibility," the chance to be loved without needing to be known: "Not the eternal separation of annihilation but just the opposite: the end of solitude" (79). Narby adds to monster scholarship a serious consideration of the blob from a queer, agender, fat perspective.

Several contributors turn to Horror as a place for finding queer power or glimpsing queer futures, even when the films seem to reject those possibilities. At the same time, other essayists propose and adopt a different approach: they sit with the harm these films can cause, without searching for liberatory queer possibility within the films themselves. For these writers, the focus is not on extracting sustenance through a reparative reading but on finding a way forward when sustenance has been denied – the damage done, the hatred internalised. Lisowski puts it best in "The Girl, the Well, the Ring": "These movies hurt me and I kept watching them, and there's nothing redemptive about that. […] I have to believe that if we stare closely enough at what hates us, somehow we can make our own love as well" (48). Lisowski's proposition is not simple pessimism: she proposes a practice of reading that looks toward queer flourishing without needing to search for it in cultural objects that work against it. Lisowksi avoids wholly rejecting or redeeming Horror; instead, she stares it down, investigating the wounds it caused with the hope that something can still be found, if not healed, through the process.

It Came from the Closet is a distinctive collection, speaking with strong and varied voices, that will satisfy lovers of Horror and queer memoir. Within their personal stories and film commentaries, the essayists offer insightful reflections on queer experiences, the Horror genre, and the act of memoir, speaking to and beyond traditional scholarship. Within this anthology, the relationship between queerness and Horror emerges as ambivalent, multifaceted, and changeable. The contributors simultaneously celebrate Horror's queer possibilities and acknowledge the real pain of being made into a victim, a killer, or a monster. *It Came from the Closet* has room for both views, picturing Horror as a site of queer resistance and a haunted house where, while wading through feelings of disgust and monstrosity, queer people still find a home.

BIONOTE

Paige Elizabeth Allen is a US-based writer, researcher, and theatre-maker. She earned an MSt in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies (University of Oxford, UK) and a BA in English (Princeton University, US). Publications include an article on illness in *Wuthering Heights* (*Oxford Research in English*), a chapter on women-led creative teams in *Milestones in Musical Theatre*, and a forthcoming co-authored book on feminist approaches to musical theatre. Other interests include the Gothic tradition, Speculative Fiction/film, and monstrosity. Her dissertation explored haunted houses in the works of Daisy Johnson and Shirley Jackson through a queer, posthuman lens. She received Princeton's highest undergraduate honour.

SPECIAL ISSUE FICTION REVIEWS

UNIMAGINABLE CONDITIONS

Review by M. E. Boothby

Armfield, Julia. *Our Wives Under The Sea.* Picador, 2022. Novel. 231 pp.

Those familiar with Julia Armfield's short story work, particularly her 2019 collection *Salt Slow*, will not be disappointed by her first foray into the novel form. *Our Wives Under the Sea* (2022) sculpts a story of beautiful weirdness from a number of Armfield's recurring themes: women, bodies, queerness, mutation, and empathetic monsters. At moments, this book slips into the pace of a shorter story – coming across, in rare instances, as glistening fragments soldered together just a bit too quickly. However, it is ultimately a spellbinding, haunting novel about queer love, memory, and grief, made strange through its grotesque and monstrous elements.

Our Wives Under the Sea is divided into five parts, titled with the scientific names for the layers of ocean depth: Sunlight Zone, Twilight Zone, Midnight Zone, Abyssal Zone, and Hadal Zone. The book is also divided by perspective, with chapters alternating between the first-person narration of the two married protagonists, Miri and Leah. These perspectives also flit back and forth in time, shifting between the present and the past with effortless fluidity, and the resulting effect is a novel that ebbs and flows like the titular sea. Armfield masterfully weaves Leah and Miri's love story across multiple timelines, across their past and present selves, pulling us toward the eventual surface of a whole understanding. Miri begins her first flashback by saying she will tell their story "in pieces, then: a long time ago, we met" (17). She reels her memories of Leah up from the dark, just as Leah herself eventually rises from the bottom of the ocean.

The central time marker in *Our Wives Under the Sea*, the critical before-and-after point, is Leah's disappearance and subsequent changed return. Leah works for "the Centre for Marine Inquiry," or just "the Centre," an organisation that sends her and two coworkers, Jelka and Matteo, on what is meant to be a short mission to the ocean floor in a deep sea submarine. Due to suspicious malfunctions, this submersion ends up lasting six months, during which the crew is unofficially missing. The Centre is cagey about details and we, as readers, must piece together what happened to Leah during those six months on the ocean floor – a chilling and existential slow decline, both literal and psychological – at the same excruciating pace as Miri, who hoards clues amidst agonising uncertainty. Upon her return to Miri, who had come to assume her dead, Leah is different – at first psychologically distant and then, gradually, physically mutating as well. As Leah bleeds from her skin, undergoes inexplicable changes, and spends all her time in salted bathtub water, the couple's shared apartment begins to take on the same suffocating feeling of containment as the submarine

in Leah's flashback chapters. Miri grows increasingly desperate for answers from the unresponsive Centre, but the longer Leah stays in the bathtub and the harder Miri tries to connect with her the more we begin to realise that all the norms of medicine, support, and bureaucracy must be relinquished if Leah is to find peace. This novel thus navigates the line between the mundane and the weird with original deftness.

However, *Our Wives Under the Sea* ultimately leans away from its monsters and mutation by leaving them broadly ambiguous, their existence open to the possibility of doubt in the claustrophobic, sanity-challenging environments of the stranded submarine and the couple's isolating apartment. The novel explores grief and loss through mysterious voices and creatures of the deep sea and through the watery transformations of Leah's body but, overall, its Fantastika elements are understated, creeping up on us, as phantasmagorical as the shifting voices that Leah may or may not hear through the walls of the submarine. In this haunting way, *Our Wives Under the Sea* is a novel about what it takes to let a loved one go. It is about trauma and about what happens when a person we love experiences something that changes them permanently. Armfield asks: how does our love for someone shift and mutate and adapt when they come back to us irrevocably changed, even damaged? Can we accept that what they need may no longer be something we are capable of giving? And can we sacrifice our own happiness in the name of letting our loved one evolve or move beyond where we can follow? Miri struggles to live with the Leah that returns to her, a Leah that is not 'her' Leah. Through these examinations of love and loss, *Our Wives Under the Sea* also depicts queer love in a deeply honest way. Miri and Leah's marriage feels real precisely because of its complexity, its painful joy, and its inevitable grief. Love and loss are as intertwined in Armfield's novel as the "air and water and me between them, not quite either" (228).

In considering what this novel adds to Fantastika, readers of Science Fiction and Fantasy (SFF) may try to interpret *Our Wives Under the Sea* in a variety of categorising ways. Is this novel an SFF story about the deep sea and mutation? A ghost story? A queer love story? Is it a meditation on change and loss and grief that just so happens to include a haunted, monstrous, agential ocean, or is it all of the above? *Our Wives Under the Sea* falls within a general trend towards genre amorphousness in SFF, one that often entangles and celebrates monstrosity, femininity, and queerness. Contemporaries of Armfield in this sense might be said to include Daisy Johnson, Aliya Whiteley, Carmen Maria Machado, Chana Porter, and Charlie Jane Anders, despite the fact that these authors are often classified under differing genre headings.

Indeed, like Leah's shifting, fluid body, this novel defies definition. Armfield opens with the line "The deep sea is a haunted house: a place in which things that ought not to exist move about in the darkness," immediately conflating the literary tradition of the Gothic with both impossible monstrosity and an awareness of the current limits of human scientific exploration (3). Scientific fact and its relation to the ecological as-yet unknown is central to this novel. While the physical things that occur in the novel are fantastic, certainly, they are rooted in an understanding of the ocean as an ecosystem. This is a book focalised through Leah's immersion in marine biology, a fact that further blurs its Fantastika plot points with science leaving the reader just a little bit uncertain about what is reality and what is not. For example, in the "Midnight Zone" section of the novel, Leah says that,

"from here on, you're down in the dark," depths at which bodies "seldom come with blood and bones included" (76). This mirrors the way that the reader is 'in the dark' about the concrete reality of the story's world, what is really happening. Leah tells us that "There are big things down here, old things, and certainly more of them than we know about," and reminds us how little humans know of the deep sea (76). This foregrounding of scientific unknowns and the mystery of the oceans lends a peculiar, mesmerising credence to the fantastic events that Armfield then presents us with. *Our Wives Under the Sea* thus serves us a rich combination of everything from weird Lovecraftian SFF to family drama and the ecoGothic.

In conclusion, Armfield's debut novel is as heartbreakingly beautiful as it is strange, exactly as fans of her short stories would expect. It is both eerie and messily human. Upon Leah's return from the bottom of the sea, she tells Miri, "things can survive in unimaginable conditions. All they need is the right sort of skin" (3). While this is most obviously alluding to the changes that Leah's physical skin will undergo, it also speaks to the story's exploration of loss and trauma as another set of "unimaginable conditions," the pain of which perhaps calls for the growth of a new 'thick' skin. *Our Wives Under the Sea* asks us: what kind of skin do we need to live in this world of pain and love and grief and longing? A hard shell, a thick skin, is not its answer. It asks: in what kinds of unimaginable conditions can queer love survive? And with tender ferocity, like a bite that does not break that protean skin, it asserts queer resilience and continuance – that love, like life, can survive anywhere. As Leah says, "There are no empty places […] However deep you go […] you'll find something there" (4).

BIONOTE

M. E. Boothby (she/they) is a temporary, human-shaped assemblage of matter and microorganisms, currently existing on the traditional territory of the Beothuk, Mi'kmaq, Innu, and Inuit peoples, on the island of Newfoundland, Canada. She is a PhD candidate at Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador and has studied at Queen's University Canada and the University of Edinburgh. Her research explores the queer, neuroqueer, and ecocritical intersections of Science Fiction and Fantasy. She has been published in *Untethered Magazine*, *Horseshoe Literary Magazine*, *Ultraviolet Magazine* and *Gothic Nature*.

WHAT WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT HELL

Review by Kris Van der Bijl

Craig, Leon. *Parallel Hells.* Spectre Books, 2022. Short Story Collection. 158 pp

Leon Craig's debut short story collection *Parallel Hells* (2022) is diverse in scope. Taking its reader as far as medieval Iceland to modern-day Mexico, the stories most common connection is – albeit obviously – the title Parallel Hells. Each story in the collect delves into situations that can be defined as hellish. There remains, however, a freshness to each story. Experimental, sometimes funny, often weird, Craig's collection stands as a welcome addition to the queer Horror genre.

The collection opens with the story "Suckers." The story follows a father and daughter on holiday in Mexico. The daughter meets a boy who appears to be in a strange relationship where he claims to be "owned by someone" (19). Still, the two of them become intimate in a macabre way that is to become characteristic of relationships in the collection. Craig descriptions lean heavily on the macabre and she uses this to create an almost fever dream-like atmosphere that culminates in the boy being found dead the next morning. The daughter's involvement, along with everyone else at the hotel, remains allusive.

The macabre form carried through into the weird tale "Unfinished and Unformed." It is the first of the collection's medieval tales, where Craig draws from her degree in medieval literature at University of Oxford (UK). We have an unnamed narrator living with her "Creator" in a remote European village. The story's success comes from its engagement with power in society and, by extension, in storytelling. Part of why power is central to this story stems from Craig's experimentations with how to tell medieval stories through different narrative methods.

Narrative experimentation is a common thread throughout the collection. One of its most successful examples comes from "raw pork and opium." We are introduced to a group of young and hedonistic people partying in a mansion. Very little happens until the end, where there is an incident of sex-related violence. The narrative is split towards the end. Doing so allows for two simultaneous versions of the events to play out, with neither of them needing to be reconciled with the other. Some kind of violent act is carried out in both narratives. Their proximity would suggest that they are related – even the same event – yet whether it is or is not does not need to be answered. Their parallel co-existence is enough and readers can deduce that something horrific has occurred between the two stories.

"A Wolf in the Temple" harkens back to Craig's medieval knowledge again, with characters coming straight from the Icelandic Njáls saga. The story follows a woman staying at home while her husband Gunnar is away fighting. In the original Icelandic saga, Gunnar is killed during a battle after his wife, a victim of domestic abuse, refuses to come to his aid. While this background hangs over the narrative, there is no explicit mention of it in "A Wolf in the Temple." Instead, and without making a hero of the woman, the benefits and possible love of being with a man to escape a father's house are precariously fore-fronted.

Another story that incorporates medieval folklore is "Lick the Dust." Here Craig explores different narrative methods through an M. R. James-like style. James, a medieval scholar himself, was famous for his ghost stories (1904-1925), as they reinvented the form by abandoning Gothic elements to focus on realism. Craig's story follows a graduate student who finds an old book with a Hand of Glory in it. This hand turns them invisible and they use it to spy on a colleague. While she is sleeping, the narrator chokes the woman, gaining pleasure from the act when she startles awake. By doing so, Craig reinvigorates the Jamesian horror. Craig includes the details that are obviously absent from James, seemingly to re-engage with an old form and possibly to illustrate what old forms left unsaid.

There are instances where the experimentations did not work for me. In "Pretty Rooms," Craig again provides us with an experimental narrator. From what I can make sense of, the narrator of the story is the space of the rooms, specifically the space created between the furniture in the rooms. I call it unsuccessful because, unlike the other stories, the weight of what is being said and what is occurring does not develop as smoothly. It is a story that requires reading and re-reading. While the experiment is commendable, I cannot say that it works like the others.

The two next stories, "Ingratitude" and "Lipless Grain," also fail to stand out. They each develop a sense of eeriness and continue to showcase Craig's development style: "Ingratitude" by leaning on a Jamesian tale of a cursed bracelet and "Lipless Grain" by following a father as he prepares to give his daughter away at a wedding. While the stories are engaging, and are worth reading, there are other stories in the collection that show Craig's style more successfully.

"Hags" is easily my favourite story in the collection. We get to know a winged, timeless being who spends the story attempting to love someone new while still being reminded of an old lover. Craig's worlds are often hedonistic, where "time in molly houses, siphoning off my friends' overflowing shame" (83) is part of the lives shared. However, the first-person speaking does not easily fit alongside these friends, as they had "begun to lose interest" (83). The narrator appears trapped by needs far older than others hold. She recalls times with her old lover Ishi, where the two of them "tore through so many serfs during snack breaks we had to bury the estate under a landside" (82). While not quite idealising the past, the narrator is nostalgic for a time when it was possible for 'hags' to fly and kill.

While most of the stories in the collection have first-person narrators, the story "Stay a While" is an exception. Like "Hags," this story follows a woman on her queer sexual exploits. Whereas in "Hags," the narrator was the more dominant was in the relationship, Livia, the story's protagonist, appears to enjoy being a submissive partner in her relationships. These parts of her life might appear sorrowful to the reader. However, with a third-person narrative, the story is filtered. The story becomes sorrowful only through a narrative lens that is filtered by someone who is not the focal character. To call it 'hell' then is only ever to call it hell as defined by someone else.

The collection culminates with "Saplings," a good story, if any, to exemplify themes found throughout the collection. We have a queer couple visiting one of their fathers. The eeriness builds up to an attempted sacrifice, which is soon thwarted. The couple leave (at least possibly) the same people they were at the beginning. Although the possible terror that the characters experienced might have changed them, we are left unsure and in suspense. Ultimately, it is not a feature of Craig's writing to question someone's way of life. The question seems directed at what structures surrounding someone's life causes their definition – demonic or not – to be imposed.

Leon Craig's debut collection is a fascinating showcase of a welcome voice in the queer Horror space. Her boundary-pushing narratives and readable prose marks *Parallel Hells* as a text worth reading, even if some of the stories are not on par with the others. If anything, the diverseness of the collection highlights that Craig is a writer worth following as they continue to develop as a writer.

BIONOTE

Kris Van der Bijl recently completed their MA in Creative Writing from the University of Cape Town (South Africa). Their writing interests vary, but tend towards ghost stories of the global south. Van der Bijl's writings have appeared in *Wasafiri*, *Brittle Paper*, and *New Coin Poetry Magazine*.

A EULOGY FOR *LOS ESPOOKYS*

Review by Barnaby Falck

Armisen, Fred. Fabrega, Ana and Torres, Julio, creators. *Los Espookys.* Performances by Bernardo Velasco, Cassandra Ciangherotti, Ana Fabrega, Julio Torres and Fred Armisen, HBO Entertainment, 2019-2022. Television.

Originally this was supposed to be a review focused only on the second season of *Los Espookys* (2019-2022). It was going to largely focus on how the show started to evolve a much abrasive political and socially-minded tone in its second season, all while managing to stay true to its very light-hearted and wholesome premise. Some criticism of this second season would also be discussed, but generally the review was going to be a very positive one.

This plan changed completely after discovering that as of December 2022 the show has been cancelled. Low viewership was cited by the series' distribution network HBO as the main reason (Cordero, np). HBO's decision to cancel the show due to a 'lack' of viewership is not exactly a surprising one. In the last decade we've seen a disappointingly large amount of shows being renewed because of positive reception by fans, only to be cancelled when they do not meet the viewership expectations of the studios who commissioned them. It seems that the realms of traditional television entertainment, as well as that of streaming services, have entered into an extremely negative cycle of fan demand for and loyalty towards a wide range of shows not being able to match the budgets or sales projections of the studios producing this content. This is a reality that leaves creators feeling left out in the dust, fans disappointed, and studios constantly searching for the next 'big hit.' *Los Espookys* has unfortunately just been one of dozens of niche shows to be stopped in its tracks because of this cycle.

Because of this cancellation, the idea of crafting a review focused only on the second season of *Los Espookys* began to feel like a fruitless endeavour. Why review the second season of a show that had just been stopped dead in its tracks? This question was central to the decision to instead focus this review into being a glowing retrospective of the series as a whole – a eulogy of sorts. A somewhat melancholic attempt at potentially sparking interest in the show for those who had not seen it to solidify this wonderfully bizarre production's place in television history.

Los Espookys is delightfully absurd. The show follows the titular 'Espookys' a group of four young adults (Renaldo, Andres, Ursula, and Titi) attempting to start their own 'scaring' business, which exists to help facilitate their customer's outlandish goals of tricking or scaring people. These

range from faking an exorcism to help boost the popularity of an aging priest to setting up a haunted mansion that will whittle down the candidate of a large inheritance.

Describing the overall feeling of the show is hard to pin down into exact words, but perhaps it is best described as just being plain 'silly.' And it truly is – characters make friends with the moon, get stuck in cursed mirrors, and engage in plots to bring down corrupt national leaders. All of this is treated as being just 'matter of fact' and almost not worth paying attention to. Yet despite this surface-level indifference to its own material, the show manages to maintain an extremely solid emotional core. The central characters all look after each other in genuine ways; offering kind words of advice while also calling each other out on unjustified behaviour. Crucially, every character is treated with dignity and respect when the moment calls for it, no matter what their past actions have been.

A major reason for this strong emotional core comes from the three main creative figures behind the show (Julio Torres, Ana Fabrega, and Fred Armisen), who are all long-time friends and collaborators. Despite only running for twelves episodes in total, everything in the show feels extremely well thought out and executed, with every character undergoing a touching and believable arc. Helping to sell this impact is the central creative figures also portraying major characters within the show, lending even more credibility to the sense of familiarity and companionship that exists between various characters.

One of the most memorable parts of *Los Espookys* is Bernardo Velasco as Renaldo, the 'leader' of the 'Espookys.' Velasco portrays Renaldo as a naively idealistic person, one who always tried to see only the good in other people and who genuinely believes that all you need to succeed in life is hard work. Throughout the entire show, no matter what happens or what stresses he gets put under, Renaldo remains a beacon of sunshine. It is perhaps the little touches that Velasco adds to his performance that really help to sell this character – little 'fist-pumps' in private when something goes his way, or an enormous grin when trying to convince one of his friends to do something that they normally would not want to do. These all feed into Velasco's overall performances and in turn helps to lend a sense of lightness to the show.

Another interesting aspect of the show is its bilingualism. For the most part, the main cast speak entirely in Spanish, with English speaking characters generally being delegated to side character status. Hopefully at some point in the future, the fact that a show taking up a prime-time slot on a major United States (US) based network being aired in a language spoken as a mother tongue by thirteen percent of the country's population will not feel as remarkable as it currently does. If (or perhaps when) that does happen, *Los Espookys* should be remembered as a major stepping-stone towards such normalisation. This bilingualism seems to be an extremely important element for many people who *have* watched the show. One touching review states "It's funny how it (*Los Espookys*) accurately represents bilingualism – as Hispanics we are comfortable predominantly speaking Spanish in our daily lives, yet when it comes to business matters – we will switch to English. It is what it is" (Villalon, 2022). This use of bilingualism is not just a move towards pure linguistic representation, but rather a bold assertation of an identity that is very rarely the main focus in a

mainstream piece of media. A large amount of the show's media coverage focuses on this, with reviewer Isabella Grullon Paz stating that the show "Doesn't explain Latinx Culture to a White audience," essentially flipping the traditional relationship that English and Spanish have in North American culture (n.p.).

This unexpected switch helps to solidify *Los Espookys* as a show that is definitely American, but one that challenges existing narratives around the current 'dominant' culture of the country. A particularly hilarious example of this subversion is the depiction of the US' embassy to the unnamed country of our protagonists. This embassy is both extremely camp and bright, with an extremely diverse group of staffers who on the surface seem to promote acceptance of everybody, no matter their religion, sexuality, or economic status. While the rest of show is shot in a more down-to-earth fashion, with the characters homers looking realistic and lived in, the embassy is presented as being an extremely spacious, luxurious, and garishly coloured environment that is kept inexplicably clean. Everything shot in this embassy is orchestrated to show just how well off and rich these people are, yet also their relatively 'harmless' and harmonious nature. However, despite all this, the embassy is still dominated by a white person who is working solely to further her own interests and the interests of a capitalistic superpower that interferes in the politics of other sovereign nations.

In addition to its inherent bilingualism, the show is also extremely queer. Out of the five main characters, three of them are queer. Aside from these basic numbers, the show also actually engages with this queerness in extremely creative and funny ways. Each of these characters are given extremely well-executed and thought-provoking story beats (or indeed entire arcs) representing their various sexualities in ways that manage to both highlight these aspects of their lives, while also not making every facet of their personality linked to them. Perhaps the best example of this is the character Andres' (played by co-creator of the show Julio Torres) prospective marriage to Juan Carlos (José Pablo Minor). Both characters are heirs to incredibly wealthy family fortunes and are deeply engrained into the upper-class of their unnamed country. The relationship is portrayed as a mimicking of a traditional cis-gendered-heterosexual couple, with Juan Carlos being a traditionally 'masculine,' bread-winning figure and Andres, willingly and enthusiastically, taking on the role of the 'trophy wife (husband).' What makes this exploration of Andres' sexuality so interesting is both characters' insistence on remaining part of the cultural status quo by upkeeping 'respectable' ideals like having a traditional catholic wedding. In our real world, unfortunately, the idea of a 'traditional' catholic wedding and a homosexual wedding co-existing is an oxymoron, largely speaking. Therefore, one would assume that when this is set up at the beginning of the show that the very fact these characters want to have this kind of wedding would be used as some sort of joke. Yet this is far from the truth – this aspect of the show, unlike so many others, is played (almost) entirely straight. The resulting effect is one that is remarkably hopeful for a world in which people can practice their faith while still being true to themselves at the same time. It is a comfortingly utopian perspective and a perfect example of the show's irreverent, yet still warm, nature.

In terms of representation, *Los Espookys* is also notable for its asexual representation. Not only does *Los Espookys* include a heart-warming and non-condescending depiction of asexuality,

but it puts this front and centre, with the main character, Renaldo, being portrayed as explicitly asexual. While it is a bit disappointing to see other characters not fully accepting his sexuality (with his own mother trying to 'set him up' with women throughout the show), there are moment in the show that playfully explores his asexuality. Most memorably, there is a wonderfully performed and executed sequence in the second season which lampoons clichés that exist in pornography, while also being a moment of personal growth and discovery for Renaldo, as he comes to terms with his sexuality.

A final aspect of the show that is worth mentioning is its socially minded and politically tone, something that develops and becomes much more important in its second season. This is not to say that the first season was not political, far from it in fact. It is more that the politics of the first season are a lot more subtle, existing mostly in the background as world building (such as, as mentioned above, creating a world in which sexual minorities are allowed to practice their faith and personal values openly in tandem). However, the second season very overtly tackles such issues as US interference with other countries' domestic politics, the exploitation of the working class, the objectification of women and the corruptible nature of democratic politics. Despite this large scope of issues tackled, the show never loses its overall sense of optimism and kindness, nor does it undermine the wonderful work it does in setting up the radically tolerant world presented in its first season. Rather, it seems to be stating that society must always continue to tackle harmful elements while still celebrating the good to keep transforming the world into a more comfortable and accepting place for everyone to live in.

With its deft handling of hopeful, yet critical, representation of a much more tolerant society than our own, tongue-in-cheek presentation and irreverent yet kind storylines, *Los Espookys* feels truly like a one-of-a-kind show. While its cancellation is frustrating, hopefully, it can serve as proof that representation matters to those who experience media, while also being a beacon of hope to a diverse set of creative people – those wanting to represent their own hopes and dreams in ways that more resemble themselves rather than to any seemingly 'dominant' culture.

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BIONOTE

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INDULGENT GORE AND AMBITIOUS WORLD-BUILDING IN TI WEST'S *X* (2022)

Review by Rebecca Wynne-Walsh

West, Ti, director. *X*. Performances by Mia Goth, Jenna Ortega, and Brittany Snow. Little Lamb and Mad Solar Productions. 2022. Film.

Ti West's *X* (2022) is a Horror film for Horror lovers. Imperfect pacing and occasionally derivative plot points aside, this film is an enjoyable and raucous ride of gore, killing sprees and religious fanaticism against the backdrop of the independent hardcore porn industry of 1979 rural Texas. Based on this spatio-temporal setting alone, the allusions to classic Horror are fairly explicit but the massacre in question is enacted with a wide variety of farming instruments rather than a singular chainsaw.

X follows a hodgepodge group of individuals who leave the relative safety of their seedy, Houston-based burlesque club to make a (very) low budget pornographic film to be entitled *The Farmer's Daughters*. Production is set to take place on the farmland of an elderly couple whom the group plans to keep in the dark about the reason for their presence. West leaves little to the imagination in terms of what mayhem will befall this entrepreneurial film crew. The opening title card announces the aforementioned setting to the audience before slowly tracking inside the seemingly innocuous farmhouse to reveal the aftermath of the violent killing spree within. West then directs his audience twenty-four hours back in time as the cast and crew leave the site of their day jobs and pile into a van en route to their filming location. While on the road, the group encounter several not-so-subtle foreboding omens about the twenty-four hours to come – one of which involves passing a crash site where a truck has apparently hit a cow with dismembering force. As the first-time filmmakers pass the site of slightly gratuitous blood and guts, we are left in no doubt that a similar fate is soon to befall them also.

The cast and crew are made up of: producer and burlesque club owner Wayne (Martin Henderson); his ingenue girlfriend Maxine (Mia Goth); the fame-hungry leading lady Bobby-Lynne (Brittany Snow); her romantic lead Jackson (Kid Cudi); director and camera-operator RJ (Owen Campbell); and finally his timid girlfriend turned boom operator Lorraine (Jenna Ortega). Snow's performance as a diva porn star is playfully tacky and surprisingly loveable. Ortega is powerful yet understated as the 'church mouse' who arrives upon some personal epiphanies surrounding her own sexual empowerment as she watches the cast perform. The true revelation however is Mia Goth, who offers a stellar and nuanced performance as both rising, cocaine-loving star Maxine and her elderly, murderous double Pearl. This is a film that is fascinated with oppositional doubles. We see this occur in the narrative via the rather perverse, sexualised fascination Pearl has for Maxine. This pair often appear to be two sides of the same coin, or perhaps the same life, as both women desire fame and adoration earned through their beauty, talent, sexuality and recurringly referenced 'x factor.' While

these characters are aligned throughout the film, West further presents a persistent correlation of sexuality and death. Throughout the film, Pearl's husband is plagued with fears straining his weak heart, a fear which causes him to reject her (frequent) sexual advances. Furthermore, as the narrative progresses, Pearl's frustrations heighten and her eventual violent streak is itself triggered by her voyeuristic observation of the young women on her farm performing their hardcore scenes.

But West also calls our attention to troubling doubles via the comic and occasionally revelatory sonic juxtapositions which recur throughout the film. For example, Mungo Jerry's "In the Summertime" plays as the aspiring porn stars leave the location of their day jobs at the "Bayou Burlesque," beginning their journey towards the inevitable bloodbath West has already assured us will be the narrative climax. Said slashing spree in fact begins as Blue Öyster Cult's "Don't Fear the Reaper" plays on the radio. In the film's opening sequence, West's camera pans indulgently through the space allowing viewers to soak up this bloodbath and laugh knowingly at the juxtaposition of it with the gregarious evangelical preacher on the television. This preacher will recur throughout the text hyperbolically vocalising the social stigma the young women in this film face in while, as we later discover, foreshadowing significant information for the planned sequel.

Given that the film begins by removing all uncertainty about how it will end, there can be no question that neither subtlety nor suspense is necessarily what West is aiming for. This begs the question, what is West's intention with *X*? The sequel calls attention to the most exciting and ambitious elements of West's Horror film or, more appropriately referred to as, the first instalment in West's nonlinear Horror triptych. 2022's *X* is followed by its prequel *Pearl*, which explores the origin tale of the troubled elderly woman in *X*. The third instalment will be the recently announced *MaXXXine*, which will address the fallout after the events of *X*. One might well argue that franchises such as James Wan and Leigh Whannel's *Insidious* films (2010-2023) or Wan's ever-expanding *The Conjuring Universe* (2013-present) have paved the way for filmmakers such as West to explore Horror narratives on a broader conceptual scale, addressing the worlds which birth such horrors rather than focussing on the events in singular terms. Eager fans will delight in the opportunity to dive deeper than a single viewing. Filmmakers like West are exemplary of the broader turn towards world-building, lore development and rewarding fan engagement with Easter eggs and intertextual references. In industry terms, the release of each film promotes the other. However, in more audience focussed terms, this world-building and inter-connected narrative approach encourages maximum engagement both with West's triptych and the Horror film genre in a more historical sense. West's films are in dialogue with the canon of classic Horror as much as they are in dialogue with themselves. Building Horror universes such as these speaks to, and harnesses the power of, the current era of transmedia content saturation.

This review began by describing West's film as one designed for Horror lovers and concludes with the recognition that it is not just a fun, effective Horror film, but an indulgent and unashamedly un-ironic tribute for the genre's lovers. *X* furthermore insists on pushing boundaries of established genre rules and norms. The long-standing Horror genre has always delighted in repetition, both of themes and of iconography. A hatchet-wielding mass-murderer, a virgin-whore dichotomy, sexual

perversion, nude female swimmers dangerously followed by water-based predators, religious fanaticism, creepy old women in bathtubs, eerie doppelgängers; you name the classic Horror story-telling element and almost certainly West has sought to incorporate it. Beyond this embrace of classic genre elements, West's triplicate vision recognises a desire among twenty-first century mainstream Horror audiences to understand the genre in intertextual terms, to observe intentional relationships between genre texts. Such metafictional elements function to assign agency to the viewer in a manner that invites an active involvement rather than passive enjoyment. *X* is ultimately a very exciting beginning to his innovative Horror tryptic.

BIONOTE

Rebecca Wynne-Walsh has recently completed her PhD entitled *Basque Gothic Cinema (1990-2020): A Regionalist Challenge to the Spanish Model of National Cinema Production and Cultural Identity* with Xavier Aldana Reyes at Manchester Metropolitan University, United Kingdom (UK). She has now begun a new role as lecturer in Film Studies and Production at Edge Hill University, UK. She received her M. Phil in International History from Trinity College Dublin, Ireland, where she previously received her BA in Film Studies and English Literature.

"I'M SUPER TRANS. LIKE, AN HONESTLY HERETICAL AMOUNT OF TRANS."

Review by Jamie MacGregor

White, Andrew Joseph. *Hell Followed with Us.* **Peachtree Teen, 2022, 398 pp.**

Released in June 2022, Andrew Joseph White's debut novel, *Hell Followed with Us*, invites readers to imagine queerness as monstrous in empowering ways. The novel feels particularly timely as America faces wave after wave of anti-trans legislation, targeted primarily at trans youth – the Human Rights Campaign issued a travel advisory for Florida due to overwhelming levels of anti-LGBTQ sentiment. However, they are by no means alone in this blatant systematic transphobia. The UK has been nicknamed 'TERF island' online, understandably so, as Rishi Sunak blocked Scotland's attempt to reform the gender recognition system. New examples of transphobia are reported daily and this is where books like *Hell Followed with Us* come in to offer a solution for current times. What should we do in the face of rampant transphobia? We should get angry and we should be loud about it.

The story follows a sixteen-year-old transgender boy, Benji, as he escapes the evangelical fundamentalist cult he was forced into as a young child by his mother. This group, known as the Angels, brought about the end of the world by unleashing a virus that killed millions. Before he could escape, the Angels infected Benji with a bioweapon they plan to use to finish the job. After a group of teens save him, Benji finds shelter in the Acheson LGBTQ+ Centre, also known as the ALC, where he meets other trans people for the first time. Benji decides to stay with the group of queer teens in exchange for his help defending the ALC and using the Angels' weapon against them.

While the novel is intended for a Young Adult (YA) audience, being published by Peachtree Teen, it contends with numerous challenging themes. White identifies content warnings for the reader in their "Letter from the Author" prior to the beginning of the book, a welcome consideration as the novel includes depictions of: graphic violence; transphobia; domestic and religious abuse; self-injury; and attempted suicide. While this is undoubtedly a heavy read with some of the subject matter, it is simultaneously an empowering one, especially for trans communities. White expands on their motivations for writing the book, saying:

> Because I was angry. Because I still am. But mainly I wanted to
> show queer kids that they could walk through hell and come
> out alive. Maybe not in one piece, maybe
> forever changed, but alive and worthy of love all the same. (ii)

The choice for White to write for a YA audience is crucial to understanding the novel, as it intends to

speak to teenagers rather than about them. This framing of the narrative's graphic and adult content becomes empowering, opening conversations about difficult topics within the communities they impact. Along with the waves of anti LGBTQIA+ legislation, PEN America has noted an increase in recent years of attempts to ban books in schools. From July to December 2022, PEN found 1477 instances of books being banned. This was an increase of twenty-eight percent from the previous six months. These bans occur primarily in southern states and cover all number of topics including: books about racism, race, or that feature characters of colour; LGBTQIA+ characters or themes; violence and abuse; discussions of health and wellbeing; death and grief (Meehan and Friedman, 2023). The majority of these bans affect YA books and given that *Hell Followed with Us* covers all of these, it would not be a surprise for it to be included in the next report. This begs the question, if young adults are not able to learn about these topics through books, then where can they?

The story is primarily told in first person with Benji as the narrator; however, there are a few sections focalised through Nick, and Benji's fiancé, Theo. Focussing mainly on Benji though means the reader is more likely to be invested in his story as it brings them closer to the character, making them privy to private thoughts and feelings. This approach arguably promotes empathy because it allows a closer look at a perspective that may differ to the reader's own, a crucial learning point of YA literature. Additionally, it may provide comfort to those reading who have similar feelings or experiences to Benji and have never seen themselves represented before. There is a great deal of positive queer representation in the novel, with multiple trans characters and non-binary characters, some of whom even use neo-pronouns (xe/xem/xyr). Not content with only that, there is some neurodiverse representation in the form of Nick, who is autistic. Crucially, the characters are not queer to serve a plot point, nor is their identity a constant source of pain, which makes a refreshing read.

A core concern of the novel is the relationship between monstrosity and queerness. White asks the reader to embrace their inner monster and turn it on their oppressors, a sentiment that reminded me of Susan Stryker's "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage" (1994), in which she argues that rage can be empowering, and embracing monstrosity means it cannot be used against us. In
other words, we take their weapon and use it against them, a sentiment which Benji embodies in the novel. At the beginning of one chapter, when talking about the ALC, he says:

> it gets easier for me to forget the *pain* of being trans. Being
> transgender is who you are, and the pain is what the outside
> does to you. The pain is what happens when you and the world
> go for each other's throats. (126, original emphasis)

Indeed, despite the novel's graphic gore, an especially horrifying and visceral part is when Benji goes back to the cult and is repeatedly deadnamed and misgendered. More terrifying than the sometimes gruesome depictions of Benji's transformation is the moral corruption of the transphobic cult, for whom mass murder is acceptable but queerness is a sin. The Angels recalls real-world

examples of Heaven's Gate, Unification Church, and the People's Temple. However, Benji finds empowerment in his transformation, saying that "it hurts, but it hurts like *growing*" (94, original emphasis) and "It's harder for someone to pin you down as a girl when they need a moment to pin you down as human" (208). The transgressive nature of Benji's monstrosity and transness combined works against the exclusionary cult, turning their own weapon against them.

White uses Benji's transformation into Seraph as a metaphor for medical transition, which was very effective for me and particularly interesting because as one of the characters reveals medical transition is not an option in this world, saying: "At least it's easier to transition when the rest of the world is gone?...I mean, all the hormones are either expired or spoiled, but at least there are no transphobic relatives to worry about anymore" (47). This effectively positions Benji's transformation into Seraph as one of the few methods of physical transition left in this world.

Hell Followed with Us draws on Horror and Science Fiction elements within the sub-genre of post-apocalyptic setting in distinctive ways compared to existing YA fiction. The publisher recommends *Hell Followed with Us* to fans of *Annihilation* (2014) by Jeff VanderMeer and *Gideon the Ninth* (2019) by Tamsyn Muir, though I would somewhat disagree with the comparison to *Annihilation* as it feels like a very different book to me – *Annihilation*, which keeps the reader at a distance and feels more withdrawn, the opposite of *Hell Followed with Us* which involves the reader deeply and urges them to get angry, to react to the gore. We are repeatedly reminded that the 'Graces' are people who were affected by the Flood and that they have been transformed into twisted versions of themselves with organs in the wrong place and who are often fused together. I would say it is more comparable to *The Last of Us* (2013, 2023) and *Manhunt* (2022) by Gretchen Felker-Martin, though both are aimed at adult audiences. *Hell Followed with Us* is relatively unique in the YA genre primarily because of the visceral descriptions of body horror. It is particularly in these descriptions that the novel excels.

White's debut novel is a gritty, gory, and visceral read making it a great addition to YA Horror. Having already received nominations for several prizes, *Hell Followed with Us* foregrounds a growing demand for books that speak to rather than about YA audiences and that refashion monstrous queerness to be empowering. While White leaves room for a prequel narrative to explore the socio-political conditions that lead to Benji's infection and expand the post-apocalyptic world this character-centred novel creates, this open-ended framing is part of the novel's charm. *Hell Followed with Us* leaves the reader questioning what makes a (queer) monster and what possibilities a monstrous empowerment could contain.

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BIONOTE

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BELATTE'D BELONGING: A GUIDE TO MAKING COFFEE AND A HOME

Review by Ksenia Shcherbino

Baldree, Travis. *Legends & Lattes. A Novel of High Fantasy...and Low Stakes*. Cryptid Press, 2022. Novel. 316 pp.

A few cups of gnomish coffee, a rare outlandish drink, and Viv, a be-tusked and be-sworded orc who spent her life in suspicious swashbuckler enterprises, decides to settle down and start her own coffee business. She arrives at the magical (but very provincial) city of Thune equipped with an amulet of dubious provenance that is supposed to "draw a ring of fortune" and sets about making her dream come true (9). She finds friends (and foes) and settles down, but a fire turns her coffee-house into ashes, and she must rebuild from scratch. With the talisman lost, is she doomed to be alone again, or are the relationships she formed thicker than magic?

Legends & Lattes is a moreish book. Baldree reserves the most lyrical language for pastries and drinks. Every page is imbued with tantalising aromas and mouth-watering tastes of such richness that even a staunch tea-lover like me would dream about a cup of coffee. In this sense, it reminds me of Joanne Harris' *Chocolat* (1999), another narrative about fitting into a neighbourhood, confronting stereotypes, finding love, and embracing what you truly are – with or without a sprinkle of magic. Even the protagonists' names are similar – *Chocolat*'s Vianne and *Legends & Lattes'* Viv, both taking their root in Latin 'vivus' (alive) and alerting us to the transformative powers of their bearers. But where Chocolat challenges the provincial mindset with new worldly trends, *Legends & Lattes* is cosy, uplifting and inclusive – just as its coffee or a Dungeons and Dragons (DnD) session with old friends.

The relationship between identity and food is an essential one. "We are what we eat," proclaims Jehanne Dubrow in her *Taste: A Book of Small Bites* (2022), "because the things we consume become part of our cells, the movement of our thoughts..." (3). In *Legends & Lattes*, it is the foundation of both personal and collective identity. Viv's choice of coffee as her "food of identity" is laden with meanings. Coffee is a foreign (gnomish) drink, so her obsession with it shows her willingness to step outside her boundaries and choose a different identity for herself: "[The sword] is what I know, what I've always known. I just want to know something else, now. To be something else" (51). Through coffee, she gains voice and visibility, and from a figure of fear, she becomes a figure of hospitality, the transformation that is symbolically sealed by the destruction of the tool of her old trade – her sword. As the story progresses, coffee acquires an almost sacred meaning as drinking coffee becomes an initiation rite that converts strangers into regular customers and creates a family with a shared purpose. And coffee is a love potion that brings together Viv and

her first employee – and first love, Tandri, a willowy succubus who defies being defined by her looks and is almost immediately converted to the cult of freshly brewed coffee. Her passionate reaction to things that bring her pleasure would be a good barometer of the success of the coffeeshop business.

Through shared coffee rituals Baldree makes a solid attempt at character building around the concept of belonging.[1] "Things don't have to stay as what they started out as," says Viv about her coffee house, but this could have been the book's motto (16). Tuuli Lähdesmäki and others in "Fluidity and Flexibility of 'Belonging': Uses of the Concept in Contemporary Research" (2016) define five topoi of contemporary research on belonging – spatiality, intersectionality, multiplicity, materiality and non-belonging – and *Legends & Lattes* touches upon each one of them. Viv's coffee house becomes a shared space of exchange, a festival where participants redefine their identities and construct a code of inclusivity and communal belonging. Viv's conflict with the Madrigal, the head of local racketeers, reflects this negotiation of boundaries as their relationship transforms through the narrative from fight to (almost) friendship. This power struggle that leads to the build-up of collective identity is not dissimilar to the rivalry between Vianne and Father Reynaud in *Chocolat*. Yet Viv's bid for inclusivity goes further than Vianne's: she makes her shop a shared space by giving equal shares of ownership to those who supported her.

The spatiality of belonging is linked to its materiality: as Viv repeats throughout the book, what makes her dream so tenacious is that it is "something that she built, rather than cut down" (18). Tandri and others invest in it by constructing and reconstructing the place after the fire: belonging is the act of making a home a space of comfort and emotional attachment. It becomes a safe space, blurring the boundaries between public and private space as it cultivates a sense of community.

Yet Viv's newly fledged sense of belonging makes her vulnerable to doubts. As her emotional transformation unfolds, she shifts from a marauder's marginality to a coffeemaker's embodied sociability. She attributes her success to the amulet's influence and starts crumbling under pressure. This struggle that makes her a relatable character to read: "if it truly was the root of everything she had grown, then if it were cut away, would the plant wither and die, or could it continue on?" (175). When the catastrophe strikes, she collapses under the feeling of non-belonging: what saves her, in the end, is her attachment to Tandri: her new ability to feel love and trust is the culmination of her identity transformation.

The romance between Viv and Tandri is both obvious and low-key. There are no dramatic scenes or romantic gestures. However, Viv's awkward realisation of her feelings is sweet and touching, and the neighbours' teasing is good-natured. "Good to see you settlin' in. All that t'was needed was a partner," says Laney, Viv's elderly neighbour, as they confirm that partners "fill each other's gaps" (141).

As any game player would tell you, orcs and succubi are two sides of a spectrum and the least likely allies: one embodies brute power, the other sensuality and manipulation. Yet these

opposites, brought together, create a new strength. Both Viv and Tandri are fighting the limitations of their perceived identities, their false 'belonging,' and imposed stereotypes. As Tandri puts it, "I was fleeing… the trap of what I am… But it seems I take that with me wherever I go" (159). Yet gender and sexuality are not among these limitations. While Baldree does not make an explicit statement about queer identity, this feel-good and natural development of feelings between two female-presenting characters is most precious. It is tempting to read it as a dialogue with queer diaspora scholars. Notably, Johanna Garvey, who uses the concept of "queer (un)belonging" to refer to spaces of habitation that "undo belonging while not leading to the destructive behaviour of not-belonging" (757), and suggests that it allows for negotiating inclusive community spaces on new terms.[2] For Viv and Tandree there is no experience of marginalisation, exclusion or self-determination. There is no edge of "coming out" either; the simplicity of their sexuality is refreshing and hopeful. Their falling together is as welcoming as a latte with a croissant.

Lattes & Legends is appealing to all the senses. Sensual with detailed descriptions of coffee and bakery, humorous and warm in reiterating the daily troubles of a first-time restaurateur, Baldree imbues the narrative with compassion for those who want to find a place where they belong. One would think that an orc in a coffee house is not much better than an elephant in a china shop. Yet, despite its seeming lightness, Travis Baldree's novel makes you re-evaluate everything you believe about identity and belonging. It makes you feel good, but behind this intrinsic 'goodness' there is a staunch believe in inclusive community and self-esteem. This humorous and low-key story about an orc and a succubus running a coffee shop might make you smile, yawn, or leave you yearning for a cup of coffee. Yet the community it envisions also makes you want to reach out to your neighbours, a simple action that, as Viv and Tandree show, can make a world of difference.

NOTES

1. For discussion of the concept of belonging in contemporary research see Tuuli Lähdesmäki, Tuija Saresma, Kaisa Hiltunen, Saara Jäntti, Nina Sääskilahti, Antti Vallius, and Kaisa Ahvenjärvi's "Fluidity and Flexibility of 'Belonging" (2016).

2. For more on Garvey's concept see Farhan Rouhani's "Queer Political Geographies of Migration and Diaspora," in Brown, Gavin, Browne, Kath eds. *The Routledge Research Companion to Geographies of Sex and Sexualities.* Routledge, 2016, pp. 229-236

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BIONOTE

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SISTERHOOD, DIVERSITY, AND WITCHCRAFT IN JUNO DAWSON'S *HER MAJESTY'S ROYAL COVEN*

Review by Angela Fantone

Dawson, Juno. *Her Majesty's Royal Coven*. Penguin, May 31, 2022. Novel, 448 pages.

The first book of Juno Dawson's rising Fantasy trilogy, *Her Majesty's Royal Coven* (2022), is set in an alternate England where witchcraft and magic exist and are the thread of everyday life, unbeknownst to humans. In this world, there is an official government bureau of witches called Her Majesty's Royal Coven (HMRC) that was set up by Queen Elizabeth I and has continued its work to the present. It is a coven of powerful witches who are meant to serve the government in ways other agencies and organisations could not. As the events of the novel are being introduced, HMRC is reeling from decades of a civil war that has cracked the coven from within. This book follows four witches who were the best of friends and shared a bond that was no less than sisterhood: Helena, Niamh, Elle, and Leonie. After growing up in the coven together and experiencing the aftermath of the magical civil war, the friends grow apart and have their own separate lives. Helena is the only one to stay within the coven and becomes the High Priestess. Elle tries to live an ordinary life as a wife and mother. Niamh becomes a country veterinarian. Leonie leaves Her Majesty's Royal Coven to start her own more diverse, inclusive coven called Diaspora. Their paths cross again when an ancient prophecy emerges of a Sullied Child that threatens to destroy not just the coven but all of witch and warlock-kind. But now, these friends must decide where their loyalties and beliefs lie and how the choices they make can either make or break their sisterly bond.

Her Majesty's Royal Coven shows how sisterly and womanly bonds can be strengthened or threatened and what makes or breaks these bonds. It also focuses on women's and LGBTQIA+ rights, showing that even a world of magic still must address the fact that women, members of the LGBTQIA+ community, and other minorities have a long fight to battle for equality and representation. The battle for magic, power, and rights will test these women's friendships as they decide where they stand. Helena, for example, has chosen to uphold more traditional values, while Leonie, being both Black and lesbian, left the coven to form Diaspora because she wanted to give others the representation and space that she was never granted as a witch. Niamh aims to make sense of a confusing prophecy and protect an adolescent named Theo who is targeted for being the Sullied Child. Meanwhile, Elle watches her teenage daughter discover her magical powers though she has kept her identity a secret from her husband and children. Loyalty is meant to be the foundation of their bonds because Helena, Leonie, Niamh, and Elle know that "If you betray your coven, and break that very simple oath, the sentence is fire" (56). But the events that follow test that loyalty and make each one of them question whether personal friendship or coven matters more.

Dawson employs rich worldbuilding and creates tangible systems and hierarchies that foreground the power imbalances and affect the characters' relationships. She adds in important

notes of the history of witchcraft, including how HMRC was founded and how it has survived through the oppressions that witches faced. The role of the coven's internal workings and the outside powers show the tug between patriarchal, masculine versus matriarchal, feminine religions. The novel weaves in real-world history and points out times when women everywhere, within and without the context of witchcraft, were targeted in a society that oppressed womanhood and femininity. The hierarchies that rule over HMRC prove that, although it claims to be a haven for witches and the divine femininity that has been oppressed for so long, the coven still fails to practice an intersectionality that helps more communities, not just one. Thus, the central challenge for the main characters is to see the coven's flaws, addressing the often-intangible nature of institutionalised discrimination, and survive a world that "loves the sound of women bickering amongst themselves" (315).

The use of magic to explore the themes of femininity and sisterhood creates a dual world that a realist novel would not have provided. Witchcraft is something associated with women. It was considered a divine feminine power but also the very thing that society wished to eradicate through witch hunts and burnings. Dawson uses witchcraft to show women reclaiming the fantastical power that was once a death sentence for their kind while also showing how misogyny and discrimination can still seep into a world that witches have attempted to reclaim as a safe haven from those injustices. HMRC was founded to protect witches from the abuse and discrimination they faced throughout history and yet, as time moved on, the bureaucracy the coven developed became no better than the systems that used to harm witches. Theo, the targeted Sullied Child, exemplifies this. Her true identity makes her a target of the coven's internalised sexism and she becomes subject to different kinds of rhetoric that was used against witches in the past. The central cast must decide whether to agree with the coven in the name of tradition or realise that the coven must change before it becomes the very thing that it was meant to stand against. These Fantasy elements tie in with the real world and how the fight for justice must remain fair and intersectional. The magic serves as a mirror to the environment readers live in today where those who fight for justice should be wary not to become like the oppressive systems they stand against. It also stands as a reminder that all voices must be heard in the cause, not just one, to form and restore sisterly bonds. While a work of Fantasy, Dawson's manifesto of inclusive feminism reads clear using the overall metaphor of witchcraft.

Dawson's rich writing and structure creates a deeply intimate narrative which embodies the diversity of voices advocated for within HMRC. She employs multiple perspectives that allow readers to spend time with each main character, fleshing out their unique voices and using flashback to provide important history on coven's religious and political systems, the civil war, and each characters' backstory. With their pasts haunting their present, these characters come back together so changed from who they were when they first entered the coven together and each intimate chapter gives a glimpse into how those factors tangle together. As the narrative investigates their friendship, sisterhood, and allyship, Dawson's entanglement of the women's voices and histories develop a complex web of what it means to be a witch.

One of the strong points of Dawson's prose in this novel is the fact that the worldbuilding is combined with fast-paced action. The multiple viewpoints, all written in third person, show the characters acting and reacting to the events around them and the turmoil within them. Most chapters even in micro-cliff-hangers that pique the hunger to know what happens next. This is reminiscent of the author's experience as a screenwriter, granting her prose a cinematic aesthetic. At the same time, there are points throughout the novel where the action might get too fast paced, particularly towards the end. Dawson's fast-paced writing drives the action forward but might also overlap too much and jump around a lot more. That also leaves the tendency to tell more than show, especially since each character's viewpoint is a gateway to their inner thoughts and monologues. Nonetheless, readers may find themselves relishing in the surprising twists and revelations that chase one after the other, especially in the second half of the novel.

Her Majesty's Royal Coven adds diversity to already existing literature on witches and witchcraft. It sets the message clear for representation with well-written and fleshed out women and LGBTQIA+ characters. As a work of adult literature, it is refreshing to see characters, especially women, who are aged over thirty. Where Young Adult literature often gives the magical adventures to adolescents and characters only up to their early twenties, if ever, this book shows readers that magic and adventure have no age limit, especially for women. Aging the characters up makes Helena, Leonie, Niamh, and Elle more fully formed and challenges the patriarchal viewpoint that a woman's life ends at thirty years old. Although this is Dawson's first Fantasy book series, Dawson already has titles under her belt that focus on feminism, intersectionality, and LGBTQIA+ rights, including *This Book Is Gay* (2014, a nonfiction book for young adults that acts as a guidebook for navigating life, love, and sexuality) and *Meat Market* (2019, a Young Adult novel navigating womanhood and the dark side of the fashion industry). Thus, Dawson already has the upper hand in writing diverse, representative literature in various contexts. While she has mostly written for a younger audience, her first attempt at an adult fantasy is true to her brand of writing and a celebratory new venture for the author.

Femininity, inclusivity, sisterhood, and magic come together in *Her Majesty's Royal Coven*. This is a book for those who want to find a more aged-up Fantasy adventure that also stays true to the things worth fighting for in the real world. The characters Dawson introduces have stories that readers would be eager to follow in the next two books of the trilogy. Until then, the first book leaves behind a trail of newly built hope, rekindled sisterhood, and fragile threads of an unknown future for this coven of witches.

BIONOTE

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GENERAL ISSUE FICTION REVIEWS

STRANGE RELICS AND EERIE EXCAVATIONS

Review by Kerry Dodd

Thornton, Amara and Katy Soar eds. *Strange Relics: Stories of Archaeology and the Supernatural, 1895-1954*. Handheld Press, 2022, 195 pp.

Featuring twelve varied and intriguing tales of supernatural archaeological encounters, *Strange Relics* brings together fiction from both iconic authors and hidden gems. These stories are not purely focused on artefacts, however, and in their introduction Amara Thornton and Katy Soar note how "the settings are significant and add immeasurably to the eeriness of these tales" (viii). Discussing the contexts and themes that run throughout the chapters, Thornton and Soar provide an illuminating coherence to the collection and are open about their editorial commitment of including tales written by women authors as well as avoiding racisms and other form of Othering. While the editors note that they have not been completely able to avoid the latter, this discussion is well-considered in its frankness and emphasises the importance of further editorial work in this area.

The tales are arranged in publication order and begin with "The Shining Pyramid" (1895) by Arthur Machin. The story revolves around mysterious inscriptions of eyes, bowl, and a pyramid found on a stone wall that leads to the discovery of 'the little people' and their ritual in the hills of the Welsh countryside. The last of Machen's 'Dyson' tales, the disappearance of a local girl believed to have "gone off with the fairies" seemingly acts as a frame narrative through which the main character Vaughan entreats his pseudo-detective friend, Dyson, to work out the origins of the strange signs appearing outside his property (3). The tale's threat of burglary and foreign sailors slowly transforms into a fascination with the historicity of the local hills and the objects they contain before both finally witness the titular pyramid and "what lay bound in midst of them was no longer fit for earth" (28). While the concluding terror may not be as effective as other contemporaneous writers of supernatural or Weird Fiction, "The Shining Pyramid" evidently reflects a host of late Victorian anxieties and sets the scene perfectly for the other upcoming stories.

Following with another iconic author, "Through the Veil" (1911) by Arthur Conan Doyle may be one of the shortest tales in the collection but still effectively conjures a sense of the archaeological imagination. The story focuses on a couple who visit the excavations of a Roman fort at Newstead, near the Scottish border, on their first anniversary. During their excursion of the ruins, Mr Brown's wife Maggie remarks of "the queerest feeling, this place, as if I were not myself, but someone else" in which the building's history and the lives of those that lived there seem to become real in front of their very eyes (31). While the tale's concluding revelation, that the couple are reincarnated souls and Mr Brown killed Maggie's former lover, is rushed and would have benefitted from further exploration, "Through the Veil" is a classic example of the fantastical visions often associated with archaeological encounters where the past can be visualised through the remnants of material culture.

"The Ape" (1917) by E. F. Benson meanwhile is an unsurprising tale of male desire set against the artefact trade of the early twentieth century, but more broadly is a fantastic example of Egyptomania and its fervent cultural appeal. Discovering a supernatural amulet that allows him to control apes, Hugh Marsham's avariciousness leads to a sinister conclusion when this power is turned on a woman he feels has played with his affections. While the tale's nature is unsurprising for anyone interested in the genre, the larger picture it represents of Egyptomania and the gendered framing of control makes this a compelling inclusion. H. D. Everett's "The Next Heir" (1920) continues the obsession with classical antiquity by returning to Roman roots and a "respect for antiquity" that "is too great" (81). The tale recounts Richard Quinton's revelation that he is a potential inheritor of the family estate from his second cousin. Ancestry and historicity are infused throughout the tale, as Richard travels to the Quinton estate and is haunted by spectres of the family's past. He learns also of his second cousin's "great desire to – call back into life, I may say – associations from the dead past of an earlier period still" of the god Pan, who many readers are likely to be familiar with (81). Indeed, the horned god's introduction brings a sinister twist to the tale, which, despite being the longest in the collection is still infused with enough ghosts, visions, and shadows to keep the reader entertained to its fiery ending. "Curse of the Stillborn" (1926) by Margery Lawrence meanwhile returns to Egyptomania in perhaps the weakest story of the collection, especially given its loose archaeological connection. Centred on a parson and his wife, the tale is rife with colonialism as the duo insist that an Egyptian baby is buried according to Christian tradition and not local custom. The supernatural retribution of a "terror unspeakable; a Thing swathed and clumsy and vague, shapeless, yet dreadfully, appallingly powerful, a blind Horror seeking vengeance" is consigned to the latter end of the tale and does not sufficiently engage with the imperialistic attitudes that it is evidently seeking to critique (132).

Eleanor Scott's "The Cure" is a stronger return to form, focusing on Erik Storm who becomes obsessed with Scandinavian relics. In classic excavational horror fashion "he opened tombs and things … and he found odd things, and heard – dreadful things," from which he returns to Britain haunted by his finds (137). Erik's fear and fascination with archaeological objects is a perfect encapsulation of the materialistic desire that runs throughout the collection with a cautionary conclusion that such pursuits often lead to a dark ending. Certainly, many of the stories focus on humanity's material relationships, whether this is a downfall from avaricious excess or a careful respect for antiquated relics. The opening of "Ho! The Merry Masons" (1933) by John Buchan opening notes that "we do not know what queer intricate effects the human soul may have on inanimate things" (156). While the tale opens with a frame setting that ruminates on the potential for human events to leave a mark on the surrounding ether, the majority of the story is based around a historic house (potentially built by the Masons) that drains inhabitants with phantasmal visions until they perish with a "shortness of breath" (174). This haunted house – with its old furniture, twisted staircases, and convoluted halls – demonstrates the power that such historical artefacts can have upon humanity, which may be the source of wonder or horror depending on antiquarian interests.

The collection closes with four shorter tales that compellingly summarise the core themes encountered thus far. Algernon Blackwood's "Roman Remains" (1948) recalls two previous entries,

as the protagonist visits an eerie Welsh countryside reminiscent of "The Shining Pyramid" with an intrusion upon a ritual to Pan akin to "The Next Heir." The second World War looms in the background of the story alongside "an unreasonable terror" and "nameless fear" that pervades through the landscape (181). Yet despite the historicity suffused throughout, it is the landscape and the broader setting here that provides the antiquarian supernaturalism rather than any principal object or relic. "Cracks of Time" (1948), by Dorothy Quick invokes Pan as well, as the narrator Sheila begins to recognise the god's visage within the cracks of the tiles within their house's sunroom. As Sheila falls deeper and deeper into Pan's embrace, she begins to hear his music and becomes so entranced by his allure "that I couldn't think of anything else. I was completely lost to the music, hypnotized as any snake by a master piper" (197). Offering a variance on the powerful attraction of antiquated mysteries, desire combined with fantastical visions offer an effective contrast to the more suspenseful tones of "The Next Heir."

Meanwhile, "Whitewash" (1952) by Rose Macaulay is a brief tale focused around contemporary revisioning of historical figures who "have the whitewash buckets poured over them and emerge saints, or victims of circumstance, more sinned against than sinning" (199-200). The tale posits this retrospective transformation alongside a spectral encounter within caves near Roman ruins. Yet, while the story's brevity leaves both dimensions undeveloped, their intersection does draw attention towards how the past itself is perceived. Finally, "The Golden Ring" (1954) by Alan J. B. Wace returns to an artefact-driven tale, which revolves around a Greek ring inherited from a deceased soldier. Offered by three wool-spinning women, who bear many similarities to the Fates, the original owner is instructed to never sell or lose the ring and to not cut the threads that entwine it. The artefact itself perplexes a multitude of experts and museum curators, while also seemingly cursing any who breach the rules that govern its ownership. Its contested Grecian history alongside the evident appeal and danger that such an object represents is a fitting conclusion for both the allure of such central objects and these tales themselves.

Strange Relics is a carefully curated anthology full of eerie landscape, supernatural talismans, and the shades of antiquity. For genre enthusiasts this is a compelling mix between classic tales and new discoveries, while excavational initiates will find this an enticing springboard for further excavations. While some of the latter tales do invariably repeat previously explored themes or aspects, this tight focus helps to provide a coherence to the collection. Certainly, as ever with such anthologies, there is a multitude of other tales concerning spectral excavations worthy of consideration for future, similar entries. *Strange Relics* therefore is an excellent primer on the appeal of such tales and exposes the importance of further, more diverse collections.

Bionote

Kerry Dodd completed his PhD at Lancaster University, UK. His thesis, entitled "The Archaeological Weird: Excavating the Non-human," examined the intersection between archaeology and Weird fiction. Focusing on the cultural production of the artefact encounter, his thesis explored how archaeological framings can offer a re-conceptualisation of object ontology through the Weird. He

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