

# FEMINIST SPACES

CREATE. SHARE. EXPLORE.



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*Feminist Spaces* is an online, interdisciplinary academic journal that invites undergraduate and graduate students as well as faculty and independent scholars from institutions worldwide to submit formal essays as well as multimodal and artistic pieces per our biannual Call for Works. Established in March 2014, this journal is sponsored by members from the University of West Florida's Women's Studies Collective, a student-run organization invested in the vitality of Women's Studies at UWF and the larger academic community.

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## Letter from the Editors

Greetings, Readers,

As we progress into our second volume of *Feminist Spaces*, we cannot help but be increasingly grateful for the support and the opportunities that working for this publication has provided us. As the success of our journal continues to grow, we are appreciative of our readership, of the exceptional and thought-provoking work we receive from our contributors, but most importantly, we are indebted to the members of our board whose remarkable dedication is truly invaluable to us.

It is with this support that we are able to continue fostering these inclusive spaces for students and emerging scholars to share their thoughts and connect with others who are committed to the vitality of women's and gender studies.

In our previous issue of *Feminist Spaces*, we presented an array of critical and creative works that invited our readers to consider the relationship between women and technology and how this discourse is meaningful in both academia and the political movement geared toward gender equity. For our third issue of *Feminist Spaces*, we wanted to continue the discourse of inclusivity by focusing specifically on issues surrounding LGBTQ+ and feminist intersectionality. In this issue, we are delighted to present creative and academic works from emerging scholars that take up issues central to queer theory including, but certainly not limited to, gender fluidity, asexuality, trans inclusivity, and the gender binary.

As always, we now invite you to turn the page and discover what lies within and beyond these continually growing feminist spaces.

Our kindest regards,

Brittany Hammock, Editor-in-Chief  
Erica Miller, Managing Editor



## Contributor Biographies

**Abhimanyu Acharya** studies English Literature at St. Xavier's College, Ahmedabad. He is interested in literature and can read in five languages. As a creative writer, he prefers to write stories and plays in his native Gujarati but has written academic work in English and Hindi as well. He has also translated works by Italo Calvino and Anton Chekhov and adapted a play by Harold Pinter.

**Laurel Billings** is a joint PhD student in English and Women's Studies at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. She holds a BA in English from NYU and an MFA in creative writing from the University of Alabama. Her research interests include 20th century American literature, women's life writing, queer futurities and affect.

**Darian Cantón** studies Theatre at the University of West Florida and enjoys creative writing and acting.

**Jean Matarrita Chavarría** is from San José, Costa Rica and has a BA in Physical Education and Sports with an emphasis in Education from the Universidad Autónoma de Centroamérica. As a Trans poet and activist member of the Costa Rican group Poesía Irreverente [Irreverent Poetry], Jean has been presenting poetry in different places throughout Costa Rica (at State Universities such as the University of Costa Rica and the National University of Costa Rica; at literary and lesbitransfeminist events such as the 2<sup>nd</sup> Latin American LesBiTransInterFeminista Encounter Venir al Sur in 2015 and 2016; and at the Costa Rica International Book Fair in 2015). Jean states that "For me, it is very nice that this work exposes these borders so that other people learn in a poetic manner something about my reality—my trans life."

**Maria Cruse** is completing her undergraduate work at Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, WA. She is involved on her campus and works in the Diversity and Women's Centers and Residential Life and also volunteers with Campus Ministry. She is passionate about social justice, music, and the community. She plans to pursue a career in social justice work.

**Lake Elrod** is an independent researcher who holds a BA in Anthropology from New College of Florida as well as an MA in Gender, Media and Culture from Goldsmiths, University of London. Lake's current



research interests include affect studies, phenomenology, and the social power of language at the intersections of gender and culture.

**Chase Gregory** is a graduate student in the literature program at Duke University where she studies gender and sexuality, graphic literature, and critical theory. Her current project focuses on issues of style in contemporary works of queer theory as well as on early queer theory's literary objects.

**Krista Grensavitch** is currently a PhD student in the History Department at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and holds an MA in Women's and Gender Studies also from UWM. Krista currently works as a Research Assistant for the Encyclopedia of Milwaukee project and has also served as a Graduate Teaching Assistant for both the History and Women's and Gender Studies departments. Her dissertation will discuss the ways in which Object Lessons can be a feminist intervention into the higher ed classroom, the History classroom and otherwise, and her research interests include feminist and queer theory, material culture theory, and pedagogy.

**Sur Landfried** (alias) graduated from the University of Marburg in Germany with a BA in educational science. Sur's primary focus is gender studies and queer theory and ze started to transfer this focus to hir minor in fine art. Sur is currently a student in the Master's program of educational science at Philipps-University Marburg. Sur recently presented at the conference, "Between Joy and Concern," an experimental workshop on experiences and strategies in power and discrimination critical practices" at Philipps-University Marburg in September 2015.

**Amélie Ollivier** is a first-year graduate student in Women Gender and Sexuality Studies at Oregon State University. She moved to the United States from France where she taught English at the Secondary Level for 8 years. Her research interests involve representations of diversity in the media and questions surrounding diversity in the classroom with a focus on LGBTQ issues.

**Daniel Putney** is an English and journalism student at the University of Nevada, Reno. He enjoys writing about queer-related concerns and social justice issues. His poetry has been published in various media.



## **Twisted Matrix: Sara Ahmed's Orientation Phenomenology and the Queerness of Trans**

Lake Elrod

I first laid my hands on the text that would reorient me toward queer feminism, Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* (2006), while taking an academic detour through the phenomenologies of Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty. With an interpretation of the concept of orientation that positions this long history of male-dominated phenomenology in conversation with queer theories about the performativity of gender and sexuality, *Queer Phenomenology* bridged my academic interests with my own developing negotiations of queer identity. The intersection formed through my encounter with the text seemed to open up a horizon of possibility. Ever since I was introduced to tropes of ritual "passage" during the course of my undergraduate work in anthropology, I have been fascinated by the relationship between the social organization of space and embodied movement. It struck me that van Gennep's often-cited three stages of ritual passage moving from a preliminal separation from the social world, progressing to a liminal threshold as the suspension of status, and finally becoming re-incorporated into a community as a changed, postliminal subject<sup>1</sup>--could be applied to the narrativization of not only formally inscribed rites and rituals, but as generic tropes for embodied progressions through a social world that is always in process, always unfolding for the subjects it produces. While the language of "passage" and "threshold" lend a certain clarity as theoretical appropriations from the world of everyday objects and experiences, I was also intrigued by the proposition that these tropes could provide recognition of the ritualistic and culturally structured dimensions of that same sphere of habitual, unthematized practices. It was with this interest, prior to sustained exposure to feminist theory that I began to consider how aspects of the personal form a dialectic with the political. Ahmed's novel interpretation of both phenomenology and queer theory provided a paradigm with which to examine the socially structured dimension of perceptions and practices often conceived as pre-social, non-discursive, and politically neutral within much classical phenomenological theory, while placing the proximities of bodies and the perceptions that animate their interrelation at the center of queer politics.

I begin with this autobiographical account of my theoretical orientation in order to foreground the role of objects, in this case, *Queer Phenomenology*, in structuring the directionality of experience embedded



in the concept of orientation. This text guided me along the passage through many transitions: the transition from a primary academic focus in the anthropology of religion to the phenomenology of gender; the passage between continents to pursue feminist studies under the text's author; even a transition of gender identification from masculine to non-binary. While these embodied and thematic passages are all clearly linked as the development of my interests and investments over time, it is this last sense of transition—transition between genders—that I will take up in relation to Ahmed's work on orientation. With reference to trans (especially transsexual) narratives, I will consider how the corporeality of transition results in differences of orientation. More precisely, I will consider how the process of becoming oriented revolves around interdependent relations among bodies, objects of attention, and trajectories that become uniquely apparent as process in the language of gender/sex transition.

When gender is indeterminable or ambiguous, we might say that a body is absent of familiar “orienting devices” that point the way toward normative expectations of interaction governed by gender.<sup>2</sup> Ahmed describes orientation devices as “ways of extending bodies into space that create new folds, or new contours of what we could call livable or inhabitable space.”<sup>3</sup> Disorientations occur when this extension of bodies into space fails to make the strange familiar.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, “it is by understanding how we become oriented in moments of disorientation that we might learn what it means to be oriented.”<sup>5</sup> To think about this mediation of the strange and the familiar through a body’s extension in space, consider an introductory description of shared disorientation from Jay Prosser’s *Second Skins: the Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (1998):

I did not feel I could present as a man in a department in which I had been known as a butch woman for five years and that I was anyway leaving that semester. At the same time I was so relieved to be moving away from femaleness that nothing could persuade me to anchor myself back to it, even provisionally. The obvious alternative—to have come out as a transsexual—I thought would have rooted rather than alleviated my students’ confusion and discomfort. For, in common perception, to name oneself transsexual is to own precisely to being gender displaced, to being a subject in transition, moving beyond or in between sexual difference. So I left them uncomfortably (all of us horribly uncomfortable) leaving me to my ambivalence; and as the class progressed, this not attributing me with a gender, in my experience, became more and more glaring—and kind of deafening unspoken.



In this gendered nonzone, I felt too embodied (only body) yet also disembodied: for what on earth did I embody?<sup>6</sup>

For Prosser, to identify as transsexual in the classroom would only exacerbate an already palpable intercorporeal failure of orientation. Prosser describes coming out as trans as an ambivalent experience<sup>7</sup> that enables political representation while simultaneously provoking anxiety about the "very feasibility of identity."<sup>8</sup> To undergo transition is to be "gender displaced," or to introduce a division between contemporary, unfinished modes of embodiment and those that exist in projections of a future self.<sup>9</sup>

The discourse of transition describes an incomplete or partially gendered body-in- process. The self becomes an object on the horizon of future experience paradoxically potentialized by the body's failure to conform to that ideal in the present. Within a popular culture that recognizes sexual assignment as the essential referent of gender identity -- and sex/gender as the "most fundamental of identity assignments" -- the subject of transition becomes visible through moments of intercorporeal disorientation that may render social spaces "horribly uncomfortable").<sup>10</sup> Prosser feels paradoxically reduced to body through the scrutiny of his student's cisgendered gaze and disembodied in his failure to collapse the horizon of present and future corporealities. By embodying a range of possible bodies in the diachronic process of transition, the trans subject only becomes recognizable as such when identity is destabilized in the form of an (often unspoken) question about "real" or "true" gender. In other words, trans visibility begins with an unequal burden of self-representation that takes on an ontological dimension over time; for a subject to be recognized as trans involves the mystification of public identity. Under the constant pressure to disclose and clarify gender identity, transition itself can become a "barely livable zone."<sup>11</sup>

In other words, trans bodies are often caught in a liminal status "between" genders in which passage through social space involves "passing" or failing to pass within binary notions of gender. Transitional experiences can help us understand how passing "functions as technology, which relates movement with identity formation: to pass through a space requires passing as a certain kind of subject, one whose distance is unmarked and unremarkable".<sup>12</sup> Whereas moments of successful passage require an unmarked distance, or a distance that is made unremarkable by a lack of signs of difference, trans subjects who fail to pass by embodying signs of difference become destabilized as objects of perception that confound



normative modes of cultural intelligibility. Prosser's narrative of failed passage illustrates how the disorientation of others can feedback as the disorientation of the trans body under scrutiny.

To understand the notion of orientation, it is necessary to consider phenomenology's "radical" and foundational claim about the basic relation between a perceiving body and its object of perception: the relation of intentionality.<sup>13</sup> Phenomenological intentionality holds that all attention is directed toward an object; the presence of objects in the realm of perceptual experience—objects that we can see, feel, and do things with—is in one sense a material effect of the "towardness" of this relation.<sup>14</sup> Following Merleau-Ponty, Ahmed describes perception as already a matter of orientation, or as "a way of facing something."<sup>15</sup> "I can perceive an object only insofar as my orientation allows me to see it (it must be near enough to me, which in turn means that I must be near enough to it), and in seeing it, in this way or in that, it becomes an 'it,' which means I have already taken an orientation toward it."<sup>16</sup> We might say that objects come to matter when matter is "before" us: we apprehend and interact with the materiality of a world that precedes and exceeds our own consciousness in the moments when our bodies are turned toward objects of perception.

Objects of perception are not simply mental representations, nor do they describe an unmediated world of objective materiality. A phenomenology of orientation centered around the towardness of objects of perception helps collapse the epistemological dichotomy between solipsistic subjectivism and the objectivist, androcentric "view from nowhere" described by feminist philosophers such as Donna Haraway.<sup>17</sup> To take the phenomenological claim of intentionality seriously means understanding knowledge claims as points of view (literally, views from particular points) situated within partial perspectives.<sup>18</sup> Orientations take on an epistemological function as the situated positionality of a body in space. "The body provides us with a perspective: the body is 'here' as a point from which we begin, and from which the world unfolds, as being both more and less over there."<sup>19</sup> We can only make claims about that which has been made present to our awareness, objects and bodies of knowledge, as an effect of not only where we have been, but how objects "create a ground upon which we can gather."<sup>20</sup> The things we do and say are grounded in different assemblages of objects that gather as different orientations toward the world. It follows that the privilege of certain perspectives indexes not an objective and disembodied stance, but the value of certain objects in social flows of distribution and circulation.



One mode of the objectification of trans bodies is through attention to sex, and genitals in particular, as the essential referent of authentic gender identity. Judith Butler's concept of the "heterosexual matrix" clarifies the socially constituted alignment among sexual assignment, gender identity, and heterosexual desire that positions genitals as objects that circulate with both interpretive and ontological power.<sup>21</sup> Butler describes the heterosexual matrix as "a grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized" and as "a hegemonic discursive/hegemonic model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality."<sup>22</sup> It is interesting to note here that while the hegemonic discursive practices through which the heterosexual matrix is an interpretive technology narrativizes a linear projection of the body in question through time -- progressing from the medical assignment of sex at birth, to the performance of a stable gender role, to the naturalized sexual desire for an "opposite" gender -- Butler seems to describe a grid that eschews any linear progression of the body's materialization: it is heterosexuality that retroactively defines gender as the naturalization of an opposition. Similarly, sexual assignment, a process that often involves a medical professional's orientation toward genitals as objects of perception, is produced as an effect of the pre-existing norms of binary gender. As Sarah Salih comments in "On Judith Butler and Gender Performativity" (2007), the performative statement "It's a girl" is not a statement of fact but an interpellation that initiates the process of 'girling,' a process based on perceived and *imposed* differences between men and women, differences that are far from 'natural'.<sup>23</sup> Far from being the biological origin of gender, sex comes to define a body only when it is interpreted within the pre-existing and interlocking binaries of a heterosexual matrix that seeks to reproduce gender in acts of recognition. Thus, "the very concept of sex-as-matter, sex-as-instrument-of-cultural signification...is a discursive formation that acts as a naturalized foundation for the nature/culture distinction and the strategies of domination that that distinction supports."<sup>24</sup> The value of genitals in the teleology of transition is not their status as the essence of gender, but the flows of circulation whereby cisgender associations between medically assigned sex and gender authenticate the consistency of bodily identity through performative acts of recognition.



The nature/culture distinction instituted through conceptions of sex-as-matter can be especially important for transsexual subjects whose passage from male to female involves the process of bodily and genital reconstruction. Pre-operative transsexual orientations toward genitals assigned male or female at birth as orienting objects in the social intelligibility of gender illustrate the affective valence of objects of intention. The orienting objects that “give us our anchoring points”<sup>25</sup> and help us “come to feel at home”<sup>26</sup> involve relations of emotional attachment and detachment that simultaneously regulate proximities among bodies and objects. The extension of bodies in space is coextensive with the capacity to be affected by objects of intention. We might say that the genitals that do not “match” gender self-identification within frames of the heterosexual matrix act as disorienting devices that affect the directionality of experience in the process of sexual transition. Since the heterosexual matrix defines sex/gender in binary oppositions (of male/masculine and female/feminine), the space of the social already organizes the point toward which the transsexual subject tends as the projection of a corporeality that conforms to the normative alignment of the sexed body and its gendered iterations.

Jay Prosser argues that the theory of gender performativity described in *Gender Trouble*, and queer theory more generally, has instrumentalized the transgender figure in such a way as to create a hierarchy between queer boundary transgressors and transsexual subjects oriented around the processes of corporeal reconstruction.<sup>27</sup> “As Butler exemplifies, queer theory has written of transitions as discursive but it has not explored the bodiliness of gendered crossings. The concomitant of this elision of embodiment is that the transgendered subject has typically had center stage over the transsexual...queer theory’s approbation has been directed towards the subject of who crosses the lines of gender, not those of sex....the transsexual reveal’s queer theory’s own limits: what lies beyond or beneath its favored terrain of gender performativity.”<sup>28</sup>

Prosser suggests that the “matter” of the body in transsexual narratives may be incommensurable with the cultural construction of identity.<sup>29</sup> Does Butler’s critique of the concept of “sex-as-matter”<sup>30</sup> constitute the limit of a gender theory based on the notion of performativity?

The life and death of Venus Xtravaganza depicted in Jennie Livingston’s film *Paris is Burning* (1990) serves as one narrative instrumentalized by Butler to question whether the “hegemonic constraint” embodied by a transsexual desire to “become a real woman, to find man and have a house



in the suburbs...culminates in a reworking of the normative framework of heterosexuality.<sup>31</sup> Xtravaganza was a male-to-female pre-operative transsexual active in the underground ball culture of New York in the 1980s.<sup>32</sup> Her narrative helps delineate the heterogeneity of the film's "spectrum of bodies and desires, homosexual and heterosexual, in-drag, transsexual, and genetic male, with the subjects frequently articulating the distinction between these categories."<sup>33</sup> Although the film's audience meets Xtravaganza in the context of a subcultural queer community oriented around parodic performances of gender denaturalization, the narrative of the trajectory of her own trans desire to "pass" beyond transition—to become a "complete woman" through sexual reassignment surgery<sup>34</sup>—indexes a different orientation toward both body and world through the value assigned to the sexed body. The contrast between the apparent subversion of parodic drag and the more urgent desire to become a "complete woman" is brought into sharper relief as the film reveals that Venus has been murdered while engaged in sex work.<sup>35</sup> Prosser identifies this as "the moment that most cuts through any sense of the performativity, the fictionality of identities..."<sup>36</sup> By situating Xtravaganza's desire for conformity within the parameters instituted by the heterosexual matrix, Butler insinuates a division between queer performances of transgender identity that reveal the "fictional and precarious" categories of gender, sex, and sexuality<sup>37</sup> and what Prosser refers to as "gendered realness."<sup>38</sup> "Transgender narratives as much as transsexual ones continue to attest to the valences of cultural belonging that the categories man and woman still carry in our world....That is, transsexual and transgendered narratives alike produce not the revelation of the fictionality of gendered categories but the sobering realization of their ongoing foundational power; and why hand over gendered realness when it holds so much sway?"<sup>39</sup>

Butler and Prosser seem to agree that the gender binary represents a hegemony that structures the trajectories of the social. From different angles, "gendered realness" acts as both a performance of the social compulsion to constrain oneself within the categories that iterate authentic identity and a mode of leveraging the "sway"<sup>40</sup> of those same performatives. But the foundational power of gendered categories and the forms of "realness" they compel in order for subjects to pass indexes more than just queer theory's axes of subversion and conformity. As Venus Xtravaganza's narrative illustrates, passing as a "complete women" can be a matter of life and death. Violence can result when a body that does not conform to expectations about sex/gender alignment becomes objectified before a heterosexist gaze. Prosser reminds us that sex work is commonly



the sole means by which economically disadvantaged male-to-females like Xtravaganza can afford to change sex.<sup>41</sup> In instances such as these, transgressions of the constraints of the heterosexual matrix have a direct relationship with unequal distributions of precarity: queer subjects may afford to express parodic transgressions of gender boundaries and contest the centrality of sexual assignment as an effect of a privileged distance from physical danger. The value Butler places on a transgressive queer perspective relies on circulations of valued objects -- the resources to effect material privilege and wellbeing -- that must first gather to constitute the space for parody and subversive play.

Xtravaganza's narrative attests to the reality that "there are transsexuals who seek very pointedly to be nonperformative, to be constative, quite simply, to *be*."<sup>42</sup> On this basis, "transgender subjectivity is not inevitably queer."<sup>43</sup> However, I disagree that the hierarchy constituted through Butler's privileging of an anti-essentialist queer perspective results from a reading that "demotes gender from narrative to performative."<sup>44</sup> Prosser dichotomizes the performative and the narrative, aligning the former with discourse<sup>45</sup> and the latter with materiality: "what gets dropped from transgender in its queer deployment to signify subversive gender performativity is the value of the matter that often most concerns the transsexual: the *narrative* of becoming a biological man or a biological woman (as opposed to the performative effect of becoming one)—in brief and simple the materiality of the sexed body."<sup>46</sup> The teleological operation of a transition that aims toward a newly sexed body as the "end of a narrative becoming"<sup>47</sup> is precisely the performative effect of a becoming that is simultaneously embodied and discursive. The prepersonal discourses that structure the unfolding of the sexed body find articulation through processes of narration. If sexual assignment is a function of gendered discourse and what "matters" emerges as an effect of what comes into view through the directionality of orientation, then the analytical distinction between embodiment and discourse collapses in the sexed body as an object of intention. From the initiation of gendering processes in the delivery room to Xtravaganza's devastating failure to pass in a hotel room, discourse is always embodied in scenes of address and intercorporeal proximity. Through discursive and affective repetitions, bodies and matter emerge as an "effect of boundary, fixity, and surface."<sup>48</sup> Because they are mutually constituted in the context of intercorporeal proximities, a queer phenomenology need not theorize matter nor discourse as opposed nor originary modes of experience. In her essay "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage" (1994), transsexual scholar and activist



Susan Stryker describes this “field governed by the unstable but indissoluble relationship between language and materiality” as a “regime of signification/materialization.”<sup>49</sup> Transsexual narratives do not demonstrate the limits of a queer theory centered around gender performativity: they demonstrate the performance of gender through its discursively entangled orientation toward the sexed body as the ultimate sign of gendered intelligibility.

Prosser’s introductory narrative of intercorporeal disorientation, and the scene of Xtravaganza’s murder to a more vital extent, both illustrate how proximities are registered and social spaces are constituted through a dialectic between bodily expressions and bodily “impressions.”<sup>50</sup> Ahmed exhorts us to remember the shared “press” in the etymologies of “impression” and “pressure.”<sup>51</sup> Bodies are moved by proximal objects as impressions that are simultaneously points of social pressure. “The ‘here’ of the body does not simply refer to the body, but to ‘where’ the body dwells. The ‘here’ of the body is thus what takes the body outside itself, as it is affected and shaped by its surroundings.... Bodies may become oriented in this responsiveness to the world, given this capacity to be affected. In turn, given the history of such responses, which accumulate as impressions on the skin, bodies do not dwell in spaces that are exterior but rather are shaped by their dwellings and take shape by dwelling.”<sup>52</sup> Here we see how Ahmed is influenced by Butler’s theory of the materialization of bodies as the “effect of boundary, fixity, and surface”<sup>53</sup> while attending to a spatial dimension of performativity that is no less discursive. The phenomenological mode of transition as an orientation (or intersection of orientations) toward the sexed body literalizes this materialization as a process of reconstruction. Moved by the promise of reorientation, transitional bodies take the shape of a passage through gendered dwellings where the matter of passing or failing to pass can render those dwellings unlivable.

One queer potential in *Queer Phenomenology* follows the concept of the “line” or trajectory created as an effect of the directionality of orientation. Since orientation devices turn us toward the direction of the familiar,<sup>54</sup> the trajectory embedded in orientations tends toward a field of familiar and valued objects. The circulation of valued objects that gather to create a zone of familiarity also suggests a phenomenological theory of normativity. “We follow the line that is followed by others: the repetition of the act of following makes the line disappear from view as the point from which ‘we’ emerge.”<sup>55</sup> The normative becomes that which disappears from view as an effect of the passage through a terrain of familiar objects.



The performativity of space is articulated through the repetition of familiar passages through which passing renders the familiar “unmarked and unremarkable.”<sup>56</sup> “Lines are both created by being followed and are followed by being created. The lines that direct us, as lines of thought as well as motion, are in this way performative: they depend on the repetition of norms and conventions, of routes and paths taken, but they are also created as an effect of this repetition.”<sup>57</sup> Thus, the binary and oppositional alignments of the heterosexual matrix could be conceived as repetitious movements between orienting impressions, pressure points, or value-encoded objects along normatively preconstituted trajectories.

Three interrelated notions of the “lifeline”<sup>58</sup> clarify the processes of bodily materialization as a trajectory through time as well as space. The lifeline can be described as variously (1) “a route through the contours of the world, which gives our world its own contours;” (2) “the external trace of an interior world, as signs of who we are on the flesh that folds and unfolds before others;” and (3) “what gives us the capacity to get out of an impossible world or an unlivable life.”<sup>59</sup> The concept of the lifeline does tremendous work through these three definitions by collapsing the epistemology of situated perspectives, the ontology of the body as an object for others, and the politics of anti-violence struggle. The process of transition manifests the lifeline in all three senses: it is once the narrative unfolding of the body’s processual materialization in gendered space, the objectification of the transitional body through attention to sex and other signs of alignment, and the “gift”<sup>60</sup> that can make life liveable for liminal bodies that do not “extend the shape of this world.”<sup>61</sup>

If we conceive of the heterosexual matrix as socially constituted parallel trajectories or lifelines extending the shape of a heterosexist and cisgendered world, then Ahmed’s formulation of a performativity of embodied space may help us bridge the “conceptual splitting between transsexual and queer” constituted in Butler’s anti- foundationalist queer theory.<sup>62</sup> Importantly, the lines of the heterosexual matrix divide the social world into objects and divergent trajectories both within and beyond our reach. “Such exclusions -- the constitution of a field of unreachable objects -- are the indirect consequences of following lines that are before us: we do not have to consciously exclude those things that are not ‘on line.’ The direction we take excludes things for us, before we even get there.”<sup>63</sup> As gender/sex transitions open up new, more liveable worlds, trans bodies transverse the exclusions performed through the parallel lifelines of the heterosexual matrix. A central claim in *Queer Phenomenology* that opens up the possibility of queer subversion is the



notion that the trajectories and objects that we inherit become possessions through the embodied social pressure to reproduce not only life, but a certain kind of life.<sup>64</sup> The reproduction of the “gift” of inheritance entails traditional modes of domesticity and family life structured around the form of the heterosexual couple.<sup>65</sup> The failure to reproduce the family/familiar through heterosexual reproduction is one deviation that aligns both queer and trans subjects in “oblique”<sup>66</sup> relations to normative space. While I will leave open the question of the transgression or normative reinscription of trans heterosexuality suggested by Butler (a question that carries its own normative violence, as Venus Xtravaganza’s life narrative reminds us), I would suggest that the transverse trajectories whereby trans bodies become oriented toward a field of unreachable objects (the normative family, the sexually reconstructed body, the promise of safe passage) can be described as queer in at least the etymological sense: they “twist”<sup>67</sup> the parallel lines of the heterosexual matrix. Through the unique orientations formed by these unexpected intersections, transitional bodies contest the pressure to inherit a social landscape organized by the undeviating alignment of binary sex/gender antinomies.

The processual unfolding of transition illustrates how the materialization of bodies occurs during scenes of intercorporeal proximity. Through the simultaneously embodied and discursive organization of these scenes, passing or failing to pass as a normative subject rests on the value of the sexed body as an index of gendered intelligibility. The liminality of the body in transition is structured by a heterosexual matrix that constitutes social space and time through binary alignments of sex, gender, and sexuality. Sara Ahmed’s phenomenological account of orientation as the mutually constitutive arrangement of objects and lifelines helps us to think through the potential of transitional bodies to generate queer deviations from preconstituted trajectories of social reproduction. Sex/gender transitions demonstrate that the matter of corporeal difference is always a matter of orientations embedded in social norms that simultaneously establish the performative context of perspective and delimit the circulation of bodies and objects.

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<sup>1</sup> Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (London: Routledge, 1960).

<sup>2</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Objects, Orientations, Others* (Durham and London: Duke, 2006),

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>6</sup> Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>12</sup> Sara Ahmed, "Affective Economies," *Social Text* 22 (2004), 112.

<sup>13</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 27.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.



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- <sup>16</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>17</sup> Sonia Kruks, "Merleau-Ponty and the Problem of Difference in Feminism," in *Feminist Interpretations of Maurice Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Gail Weiss et al. (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 24-48.
- <sup>18</sup> Donna Haraway, "Partial Perspectives," *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, 183-203.
- <sup>19</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 9.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid., 1.
- <sup>21</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 208.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>23</sup> Sara Salih, "Judith Butler and Performativity" in *Sexualities and Communication in Everyday Life*, eds. Karen Lovaas et al. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2007), 61.
- <sup>24</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 51.
- <sup>25</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 1.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid., 7.
- <sup>27</sup> Prosser, *Second Skins*, 21-60.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid., 6.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid., 7.
- <sup>30</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 51.
- <sup>31</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 133.
- <sup>32</sup> Prosser, *Second Skins*, 45-46.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid., 45.
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid., 47.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid., 46.
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid., 36.
- <sup>37</sup> Prosser, "Judith Butler," 258.
- <sup>38</sup> Prosser, *Second Skins*, 11.
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid., 11.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid., 48.
- <sup>42</sup> Prosser, "Judith Butler," 264.
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>44</sup> Ibid., 263.
- <sup>45</sup> Prosser, *Second Skins*, 6.
- <sup>46</sup> Prosser, "Judith Butler," 264.
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid., 263.
- <sup>48</sup> Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 9.
- <sup>49</sup> Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 9.
- <sup>50</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 2-3.
- <sup>51</sup> Ibid., 17.
- <sup>52</sup> Ibid., 9.
- <sup>53</sup> Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 9.
- <sup>54</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 11.
- <sup>55</sup> Ibid., 15.
- <sup>56</sup> Ahmed, "Affective Economies," 122.
- <sup>57</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 16.
- <sup>58</sup> Ibid., 17-18.
- <sup>59</sup> Ibid., 17-18.
- <sup>60</sup> Ibid., 18.



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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>62</sup> Prosser, "Judith Butler," 261.

<sup>63</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 15.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 161.



## **“That Infinite Sphere” Paradox, Paralepsis, and Politics in *Les guérillères***

Chase Gregory

*“As they stand there with an open book the chosen passages are re-uttered from the other side by a voice that becomes distant and repeats itself. Lucie Maure cries to the double echo the phrase of Phenaraete, I say that that which is is. I say that that which is not also is. When she repeats the phrase several times the double, then triple, voice endlessly superimposes that which is and that which is not. The shadows brooding over the lake shift and begin to shiver because of the vibrations of the voice.”*

-- Monique Wittig, *Les Guérillères*

I begin this project *in medias res*, with a question that may seem somewhat auxiliary, but that nonetheless proved fundamental to my primary question: how do we define “shape?” More specifically, I feel that before I begin to answer my question, “What is the shape of *Les guérillères?*,” I need to know the difference between “shape” and “form,” a distinction made in class while discussing this question, and one that I still haven’t quite pinned down. A quick online search yielded both definitions. Shape, I learned, is “the external form or appearance characteristic of something”; form, on the other hand, is something’s “visible shape or configuration.” And so upon first trying to solve this problem, I met a tautological impasse: shape is “an external form,” while form, on the other hand, is “the visible shape.” Having made, I thought, no significant progress in distinguishing the two terms, and stuck on this first step, I felt prevented from moving forward.

The question hasn’t gone away, but having come across this strange conflation of terms, and in the spirit of one of the most frequently-quoted lines of Monique Wittig’s book: “Make an effort to remember. Or, failing that, invent,”<sup>1</sup> I will put the problem of “form versus shape” aside for a moment, and attack the text from another angle. As a war text, *Les guérillères* seems to me able to withstand a militant strategy of reading, one that, like its titular guerilla fighters, erupts in a variety of spaces and wields a variety of munitions. I will attack from another starting point, then: this time mathematically mapping, so to speak, the terrain of *Les guérillères*. Only in beginning again, I think, am I to get my bearings both temporally and spatially with regard to the shape (or is it the form?) of Wittig’s project.



There is, after all, another way to think of “form,” apart from “shape;” that is, form as it regards the style and genre of a text. In this sense, the form – that is, the genre – of a novel depends heavily on the *temporal logic of its narrative*, as well as the *temporal structure of the text*. Those might seem confusingly similar, so just to be clear: by “temporal logic of its narrative,” I mean the temporality of the story itself – what we can call vaguely “the plot” of *Les guérillères*; and by “temporal structure of the text,” I mean how Wittig chooses to lay out her novel, i.e., how the book reveals the plot to us.

Wittig herself classifies her novel as “an epic poem... a collage... you can't assign a genre to it outside of the epic movement given by the rhythm, the action, and the characters.”<sup>2</sup> Whether we classify *Les guérillères* as an epic, or as science fiction, or as a “utopian novel,” or as something else, all of these genre choices have different relations to time, and therefore different relations to the central question I want to ask of *Les guérillères*, namely, what is its relation to “the future.” This relationship to the future highlights what is at stake in theoretical readings of *Les guérillères*, as well as returns to a question that echoes throughout Wittig's theoretical and literary work: how do we understand the future with regard to revolution, to politics, and to the relation between words or grammar and what we might call “material,” “real-world” action and activism?

For the purposes of my second attack strategy, I'm going to assume *Les guérillères* has three parts. Dividing a plot or a text into three parts might be a little suspect, seeing as any delineation of threes seems bound to be haunted by a Hegelian chronology, but I justify my decision based on a number of factors, primarily that *Les guérillères* is literally delineated into three parts by three bold **Os**, which interrupt the text once at the beginning, and twice in the middle, suggesting that the novel is, if not narratively, at least structurally a triptych. Breaking the book into three parts also allows me to theorize the complicated and often ambiguous narrative structure of the novel, as will become clear, I hope, in a moment.

So we have three parts, each marked by these circles, which I will try to summarize briefly here. For now, I will call the three sections of the book “Part One,” “Part Two,” and “Part Three,” and I will number them based on their appearances in the novel – these names, that is, reflect what I have called the temporal structure of the text. Thus “Part One” is the beginning part of the text, after the first circle, “Part Two” starts with the



second circle, and “Part Three” is the last third of the text, and comes after the third circle.

*Les guérillères* begins with a poem in capital letters. If we are to believe Wittig that the book’s genre is closest that of an epic, we would expect it to begin with an invocation to a muse, or perhaps a *praepositio*, stating the epic’s theme. Instead, we open with a gap: the first words of the text, “GOLDEN SPACES LACUNAE,” rather than ground us, instead seem to call into being a non-place, a space, a hole. What does it mean to call a “space” golden? The list of disparate images that follows, a *parataxis* of short, intense phrases, reads like montage or collage: “THE WEAPONS PILED IN THE SUN... THE DEAD WOMEN THE DEAD WOMEN” etc. inundate us, like a *guerrilla* attack, but also like a carnival, full of colors (green, violent, gold...). Is this a different kind of invocation? If so, to what muse does it speak? In any case, this strange parataxic prelude ends with a scene of “triumph,” and the phrase “ALL ACTION IS OVERTHROW.”<sup>3</sup> We thus begin with an overthrow and a gap, before the first circle marks the beginning of what we are calling “Part One.”

A brief aside here: the exact end/beginning of each section is slightly ambiguous, seeing that in the English version of *Les guérillères* the circle images fall between paragraphs, so that it’s unclear in what section that paragraph belongs, whereas in the French edition, the circles come at the end of the paragraph instead of intersecting it. In addition, the book is further marked by lists of names (a continuing list?) in capital letters, perhaps recalling list of dead soldiers on a war memorial. These names periodically interrupt the text, and echo also, in terms of their formatting, the poem in the beginning of the book. Finally, gaps or lacunae exist between the segments of text in the book – blocks of words that I hesitate to call “paragraphs,” because they seem to exist independent of one another, so that the effect of reading them is less like a continuous narrative than it is like cinematic montage. All of these interruptions and gaps contribute to a text that seems riddled with holes and blank spaces, something to keep in mind when we think about its shape.

The world of Part One is a world “turned... upside down;”<sup>4</sup> a bacchanalia characterized by laughter, flooding, rain, pastoral scenes, lists of fruits, perfumes, incenses, infighting, engineers, and the invocation of multiple named Goddesses. Writes Wittig: “*Elles* tries to make its way across the labyrinth of dead culture of ancient signs, of representations—across stories, facts, history, ancient symbols. *Elles* exalts itself in some of the ‘feminaries’; *elles* is caught in the trap of narcissism or self-admiration.”<sup>5</sup>



It's in Part One, also, that we first hear of the "feminaries"—bound litanies describing sexual difference and exalting the biological markers of female-ness:

They say that they expose their genital so that the sun may be reflected therein as in a mirror. They say that they retain its brilliance. They say that the pubic hair is like a spider's web that captures the rays... They are all illuminated at their centre, starting from the pubes the hooded clitorides the folded double labia.<sup>6</sup>

Slowly, however, *elles* begins "to transcend itself;" the feminaries begin to lose meaning, and a new generation of "young girls" are now "amused" by them. "Terms to designate the vulva" fall into obsolescence and cannot be deciphered.<sup>7</sup> At the end of Part One, right before the second **O** appears on the page, the feminaries, at first so crucial, "have fulfilled their function:" the *elles* burn them in a celebration, it rains, and the colony of former fighters goes to bed in the trees.

In Part Two, we see a shift away from natural metaphors and towards a different way of knowing oneself. The women dance, "giving voice to a song from which no coherent phrase emerges."<sup>8</sup> Whereas laughter is the primary mode of Part One, Part Two is also marked by grief: there is crying, lamentation, drunkenness. There is more pain, more ambiguity, and even a scene of painful ecstasy, which one can choose to read (depending on how one perceives the timeline of the book, as we'll see) either as an epileptic prophecy or an episode of intense, post-war PTSD.

At a given moment she lets herself fall to the ground, she strikes the ground with her arms, she rolls about shrieking. Her mouth seizes the earth and spits it out. Her gums bleed. Words like death blood blood burn death war war war are heard.... Four of the women carry her, singing, Behind my eyelids/the dream has not reached my soul/whether I sleep or wake/there is no rest.<sup>9</sup>

Paralepsis – that rhetorical device in which a subject is brought up by its negation—factors heavily in Part Two: now the women "do not say" what they "said" before. Part Two ends with an escalation of violence, games, and laughter: "Then they begin to laugh ferociously, slapping each other on the shoulders. Some of the women, lips parted, spit blood"<sup>10</sup>.

As we read, the chronological ordering of Part Two becomes more and more ambiguous: are the women predicting, or remembering? Consider the last paragraph of what I am calling Part Two:



The women say that, with the world full of noise, they see themselves as already in possession of the industrial complexes. They are in the factories aerodromes radio stations. They have control of communications. They have taken possession of aeronautical electronic ballistic data-processing factories. They are in the foundries tall furnaces navy yards arsenals refineries distilleries. They have taken possession of pumps presses levers rolling-mills winches pulleys cranes turbines pneumatic drills arcs blow-lamps. They say that they envisage themselves acting with strength and happiness. They say that they hear themselves shout and sing, Let the sun shine / the world is ours.<sup>11</sup>

By the time we reach the third and final **O**, it's unclear (as it was unclear in the PTSD/prophesy episode) whether this vision is of the future or the present: the verb "see" in "the women see already" occupies a strange place in time.

Part Three, in contrast to the first two parts of the novel, is characterized both by an extreme rise in violence and by the introduction of *ils*, the first time we see the masculine pronoun (besides one brief reference to a book written by a dead author in part one). There are battle scenes of all sorts: cavalry, archers, troops armed with rifles, clubs, blades, torches, and futuristic ray guns; women mock men as "vile creatures,"<sup>12</sup> hiss at them, mock their "tails"<sup>13</sup> attack bearded strangers, and launch bombs and grenades. Some of the younger men surrender and join the rebel fighters, who embrace them. The war crescendos; it is going well, women march in the thousands.

The text ends with another poem, again in capital letters, that echoes the poem in the beginning both in its format and its parataxis. Here, again, there are gaps ("MARGINS SPACES INTERVALS"), but also a more violent call to action: "AGAINST TEXTS / AGAINST MEANING / WHICH IS TO WRITE VIOLENCE / OUTSIDE THE TEXT."<sup>14</sup> Then, after this last poem, a coda of sorts: a song at the end of a war: "And when it had finished and we remained there in a kind of embarrassed silence, a woman at the end of the hall cried, Comrades, let us remember the women who died for liberty. And then we intoned the Funeral March, a slow, melancholy and yet triumphant air."<sup>15</sup>

At the outset, we might be tempted to read the book so that the narrative structure and the textual structure are both linear and in order; that is, as the book proceeds from Part One, to Part Two, to Part Three, so does the plot proceed from beginning, to middle, to end. A careful reader gets the



sense, though, that it's not that simple. Not only does the brief textual gloss I've just offered seem to refute or at least complicate a simple linear reading, but also various comments by Monique Wittig herself seem to indicate that something else is going on here, and more complicated structures of time are at play.

Suspicious though I am of arguments based on authorial intent, it might be useful to look at Wittig's own comments about the structure of *Les guérillères*, of which she made a few, at different times in her career. In "The Mark of Gender," an essay published in 1985, Wittig describes the book as a "total war," where "the third part of the book" is in fact the "chronological beginning of the narrative," and, as would follow, "the textual beginning [is] in fact the end of the narrative."<sup>16</sup> So, it follows that the temporal logic of *Les guérillères* is Part Three, Part Two, Part One; or, Part Two, Part Three, Part One; depending on what Wittig means by "the end"—here "the end of the narrative" could mean "the last third of the narrative within a linear temporal logic" (i.e., Part 3), or "the last two-thirds of the narrative within a linear temporal logic" (Parts 2 and 3). Either way, two things remain consistent: Part One, the beginning of the narrative plot, is at the textual end of the book, which means that either way (3, 2, 1 or 2, 3, 1) this book starts *in medias res*. This should remind us again of the Homeric epic, in which the text begins in the middle of the narrative action.

Other things, it should be clear now, point us in the direction of *Les guérillères*-as-epic. The book contains various *enumeratio* or epic catalogues: long genealogies, lists of places, objects, ancestors, and names. It's repeated "they say... they do not say" recall *The Odyssey*'s recurring verbal tic, "So he spoke," "Thus he spoke," or variations thereof. *Les guérillères* is universal and vast in scale, calls upon the divine, and describes a war. It even has an epic hero, though a less conventional one: for Wittig, the hero is "*elles*," both the pronoun and the group.<sup>17</sup>

But before we get too happy with ourselves, and declare the problem of genre solved – our answer is that *Les guérillères* is a simple linear epic, beginning in the middle of the action and ending with the end of a violent war – it's worth considering another commentary by Wittig, a piece titled "Some Remarks on *Les guérillères*," published in 1994, nearly ten years after "The Mark of Gender." Here Wittig complicates her initial explanation *Les guérillères*'s temporal structure.



Wittig still insists that “[the] section of *Les guérillères* written first... becomes the last part of the text, the textual end of the book,”<sup>18</sup> a statement that would seem to support either the (3, 2, 1) or the (2,3,1) interpretation. Even more helpful is her assertion, directly following this description, that the book “is written back to front” and “must therefore be read back to front”<sup>19</sup>; this clearly suggests a textual temporal structure that is the inverse of the narrative temporal structure of the novel: (3, 2, 1). Again, we still have a narrative heading towards a future, even if that future is placed textually at the beginning of the novel. We are still, for now, in the realm of modernism, where the revolutionary act is merely a stylistic reversal of *textual* temporal logic rather than an attack on the *narrative* temporal logic that relies a “future” at all.

In the wake of Wittig’s 1994 essay, though, things get more complicated. In this second essay, Wittig also insists on the formal structure of a *circle*, a structure referenced by the three **O**s visually marking the text, as well as by the various invocations of the theme of the circle by the characters *elles* themselves (the ring, the vulva, the sun, the O, the zero, etc.). “The circle appears three times in *Les guérillères* and indicates how the book develops chronologically and formally,” writes Wittig. “And its meaning changes each time. The first circle corresponds to the emergence out to the labyrinth, out of the old culture; the second gives the manner of functioning of the text; the third is that of the action, of overthrow, of the epic poem.”<sup>20</sup>

By introducing the *circle* as *Les guérillères*’ “modus operandi,” Wittig turns a line into a shape, as the book “turns on itself to rejoin the beginning of the text.” Thus what was originally thought to be a reverse linear structure – 3,2,1 – now folds in on itself a looping myriad of narrative options. Many moments in the text support this reading of *Les guérillères* as a circle. The constant thematic allusions to circles and cycles, the zero, the sun, etc. already discussed are supplemented by a description, in Part Two, of the strategic movement of *elles* themselves: “Their peregrinations are cyclical and circular. Whatever the itinerary, whatever point of departure they choose, they end up in the same place”<sup>21</sup>. Anywhere is now the beginning! If we were to imagine tracing our finger around the circumference of a circle that had been designated into three parts, we might come up with any of these temporalities: starting at Part 1 and going in one direction, {1,2,3}; starting at Part 2, {2, 3, 1}; starting at Part 3, {3, 1, 2}; or, going the other direction, {1, 3, 2}; {2, 1, 3}; or {3, 2, 1}, respectively.



Here, let's think of the direction we move (counterclockwise or clockwise) as the narrative temporal structure of *Les guérillères*, and the numerical combinations ( $\{1,2,3\}$ ,  $\{3,2,1\}$ , etc.) as the textual temporal structure of *Les guérillères*. As you can see, though, within this circular model we are still bound in some ways to a linear temporality, insomuch as we have to choose between going clockwise or going counterclockwise; i.e., between reading the novel front to back, or back to front. "Clockwise" and "counterclockwise" here are particularly apt terms, as we need only to think of the hands of a clock, moving forward or moving back, to understand that this model still exists in a space where moving "forward" or "backward" in time is still conceivable: that is, there is still a "past, present, and future" in this model, although a more complicated one; we can still only ever move "forward" or "back," we still either *progress* or *regress*.

Again, we seem to have reached our answer: *Les guérillères* is a circle. Except that here, again, sentences later in her 1994 commentary, Wittig transcends her own formal description again, adding quite literally another dimension to the shape of the novel when she describes the structure of the book as, in the words of Blaise Pascal: "It's virtually that infinite sphere whose center is everywhere, circumference nowhere."<sup>22</sup> In the text itself, the aforementioned "cyclical and circular" peregrinations of the women don't exactly fit the description of a flat circle, and instead seem much more complicated: "they follow the path from the interior to the exterior they must traverse the widest of the circles before finding the cross-passage that leads them to the center. At the same time it is without limit, the juxtaposition of the increasingly widening circles configures every possible revolution."<sup>23</sup> We move from a circle to an "infinite sphere," that is, from two to three dimensions.

We are again troubled by the middle, by the lacunae at the middle of an **O**. Wittig describes this second part of the book as "going back and forth between a future and a past" at once readying the reader for the war to come and describing "the modification of the naive conceptions of the *guérillères* such as they were just after the war, that is to say in the first part... this immediate part is not the center of the book since 'it is everywhere.'<sup>24</sup> To try to unravel this dizzying description, it's worth returning to the Part Two of *Les guérillères*, since this is the part giving us the most trouble, and since it is, after all, where Wittig locates "the manner of functioning in the text."<sup>25</sup>



As has been already noted, Part Two is marked, as a text, by recurring paralepsis, especially in reference to the feminaries, which factor prominently also in Part One from page 58:

They say that they did not garner and develop the symbols that were necessary to them at an earlier period to demonstrate their strength. For example they do not compare the vulvas to the sun moon stars. They do not say that the vulvas are like black suns in the shining night.<sup>26</sup>

And, again, a few pages later:

They do not say that Vulvas with their elliptical shape are to be compared to suns, planets, innumerable galaxies. They do not say that gyrators movements are lie vulvas. They do not say that the vulva is the primal form which as such describes the world in all its extend, in all its movement. They do not in their discourses create conventional figures derived from these symbols.<sup>27</sup>

Wittig, in her 1994 analysis of her work, links these various paralepses with the structure of the text. “The paralepses also function to put the reader on guard against a linear reading of the text,” she writes. And later: “As well as certain fragments of the text... The war is already made in this second part. However it has yet to come in the text. For in a text of fiction one can be, as here, at once in the present, the future, and the past”<sup>28</sup>. The negations function as more gaps, more lacunae. Thinking through these negating paralepses, then, I want to offer a twist on the novel’s thematic circle, to bring it into the third dimension: what if *Les guérillères* is a Möbius strip?

The Möbius strip, discovered in 1858 by German mathematician August Möbius, is sometimes defined as a surface with only one side. To make a Möbius strip, simply take two-dimensional surface and connect its two opposing edges together, twisting one of the edges. Writes Clifford Pickover in *The Möbius Strip: Dr. August Möbius's Marvelous Band*: “It has become a metaphor for change, strangeness, looping, and rejuvenation. In fact, today the Möbius band is the ubiquitous symbol for recycling, where it represents the process of transforming waste materials into useful resources.”<sup>29</sup> The famous strip, in addition to being a mathematical paradox – a so-called “hole within a hole”<sup>30</sup> – is also a “non-orientable surface;” that is, if a two-dimensional figure travels around/along the Möbius strip from start to finish in one direction, it will return as its own mirror image. Put more simply: it is impossible to travel either simply “clockwise” or “counterclockwise” on a Möbius strip without somehow changing one’s orientation.



In part because of these intriguing properties, the Möbius strip has been nearly exhausted as a metaphor, not only famously in Lacanian analysis – a tricky subject, no doubt, when talking about the work of a prominent materialist feminist – but also, relatedly, in my own field of queer theory, notably by Diana Fuss,<sup>31</sup> Lee Edelman,<sup>32</sup> but by others as well. Psychoanalytic theorist Jacques Lacan has used the strip as a topological metaphor for understanding how psychoanalysis collapses multiple binaries even as it enforces them – unconscious/conscious, for example, or signifier/signified<sup>33</sup> – and also as a way to think through what he calls “traversing the fantasy.”<sup>34</sup> Because the only thing that distinguishes the two sides of a Möbius strip is the time it takes to run one’s finger around its surface, it serves as a helpful model for the structure of the (Lacanian) unconscious: that is, as a language.

Edelman, in an essay for an early gay and lesbian theory compendium edited by Diane Fuss in 1991, describes the strip as both a helpful metaphor for metalepsis (the rhetorical substitution of cause for effect), and as a shape distinguished by “the impossibility of distinguishing its front from its back, a condition that has... [not only] an immediate sexual resonance; [but also] a crisis of certainty, a destabilizing of the foundational logic on which knowledge as such depends.”<sup>35</sup> In both models of the Möbius strip, time remains the thing that both is troubled by and constitutes the strip’s shape, which means that the strip, if we’re going to take it seriously as a model for a narrative, is not only a spatial model, but a temporal one as well—a reason, as I hope is clear from the start of this talk, that makes it a particularly appealing model for *Les Guérillères*.

Before we go any further: I remain wary of recuperating Wittig, as some have done, as either a “proto-queer theorist” or, as others have claimed, as an inventor of certain “queer” theories outright (for examples, see the 2007 special issue of *GLQ* devoted to Wittig), not only because in our contemporary moment the entire definition of the academic/activist buzzword “queer” is highly up for debate, but also because projects of recuperation seem to me always in danger of disregarding complicated histories in favor of simplified progress narratives. It’s tempting, with the vocabularies we have in the present moment, to group Wittig’s theories under one theoretical banner, be it “queer theory” or “materialist feminism” or “French post-structuralism,” or something else. Nonetheless, I feel obliged to note the channels by which I first became familiar with Wittig: two classes, one in undergrad and one in my first year of graduate school, with “queer” in the title.



I note this not only in the spirit of academic honesty – I want you to know where I’m coming from – but also because I do find in Wittig’s writing, and particularly in *Les Guérillères*, a strange way of thinking about time and narrative that I am tempted to call “queer.” Furthermore, the “twist” of the Möbius strip recalls, to me, the etymology of “queer” – from the Middle High German root \*terkw- “to turn, twist, wind”<sup>36</sup> – with the added bonus of spatializing, quite effectively I think, what I see as a resistance to a “straight,” future-oriented readings that linear, or even circular, temporality might imply. Although I use the Möbius strip metaphor slightly differently than either Lacan or Edelman, I think it’s important to discuss ways in which the strip has been used by previous queer and psychoanalytic theorists, especially given the ambiguous and often contested relationship of Wittig’s work to queer theory, and her noted opposition, as a member of *Questions féministes*, to Lacanian/Freudian *Psych et Po* school of French feminist thought in the late 1970s.<sup>37</sup>

It’s worth noting, too, that Wittig herself references the Möbius strip in *The Straight Mind*, in her 1989 essay “On The Social Contract.” Here, the strip functions as a limited metaphor for the construction of homosexuality:

If I try to look at the dotted line that delineates the bulk of the social contract, it moves, it shifts, and sometimes it produces something visible, and sometimes it disappears altogether. It looks like a Möbius strip... But this Möbius strip is fake, because only one aspect of the optical effect appears distinctly and massively, and that is heterosexuality. Homosexuality appears like a ghost only dimly and sometimes not at all.<sup>38</sup>

Thus, the heterosexual social contract becomes recognizable only as it “goes without saying.”<sup>39</sup> So we can use the Möbius strip, or rather, what Wittig terms the “fake” Möbius strip, to understand the hegemony of heterosexuality. But we can also think about it in terms of gender, and the fixed gender binaries Wittig is interested in undoing, particularly in *Les guérillères*.

In fact the Möbius strip proves to be a useful way of thinking about how grammar functions in *Les guérillères*, especially given how Wittig describes it herself, as a kind of universalizing agent that collapses or makes unreadable differences in gender. By universalizing the (hitherto) feminine form of “they” – that is, the plural pronoun “elles” that reoccurs throughout the text – Wittig “set[s] up *elles* in the text as the absolute



subject of the world.” This *elles* (regrettably translated as “the women” in the English version, and thus in the English arguably not quite escaping the mark of gender) is meant both as a full-scale “assault” on the masculine universal subject *ils*, and, as the “conqueror” of the world of masculine subject, its new universal. As Wittig puts it: “The goal of this approach is not to feminize the world, but to make the categories of sex obsolete in language.”<sup>40</sup>

It’s also worth mentioning that, in his exhaustive study on the Möbius strip in mathematics, games, literature, art, and technology, Pickover notes that one of the works of literature with a Möbius-shaped-plot is Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*: “In some ways, *In Search of Lost Time* resembles a chunk of spacetime that contains past, present, and future. In this chunk, the reader and Proust may explore the story like they would a hyperspace palace, wandering in time and space through rooms anchored in different epochs.”<sup>41</sup> Wittig cites Proust as an example of a “war machine” similar to her own project in *Les Guérillères*, in her essay “The Trojan Horse”: “By the end of *Remembrance of Things Past*, it’s done. Proust has succeeded in turning the ‘real’ world into a homosexual-only world.”<sup>42</sup> And later, in “The Mark of Gender:” “This understanding both global and particular, both universal and unique, brought from a perspective given in homosexuality, is the object of some extraordinary pages by Proust.”<sup>43</sup>

Like Wittig’s grammatical move, the Möbius strip also turns two sides into one. Mimicking the trick of the Möbius strip, Wittig makes *elles* a universal rather than a specific pronoun only through the narrative structure of time; in much the same way that by moving our finger along the Möbius strip, through time, we come to understand a two-sided structure as a one-sided structure, so do we, through a progressive linear structure of narrative, come to know *elles* not as one side of a masculine/feminine gender delineation, but as the universal itself. This logic of universalization *over time* is present in “The Mark of Gender,” when Wittig describes the necessity for “two-thirds of the text ...to be totally inhabited, haunted, by *elles*... Only then could *il(s)*, *they*, appear, reduced and truncated out of language” (emphasis mine). Wittig insists on the necessity for the story to “eliminate, in the first two parts, any ‘he’ any ‘they-he.’”<sup>44</sup> Such statements would lead us to believe, if we take Wittig at her word, that the text propels itself towards a future of universal *elles*, in a linear time structure in which *elles* gains dominance and universality over the specific *ils* only through its repeated, militant insistence in the first two-thirds of the text.



However, as we have previously established, time in *Les guérillères* is not so simple. Let's return briefly to the sentence from "The Mark of Gender" quoted earlier: "two-thirds of the text had to be totally inhabited, haunted, by *elles*... Only then could *il(s)*, *they*, appear, reduced and truncated out of language." <sup>45</sup> Upon closely re-reading this sentence, we see a more confusing temporality at work. Although the "only then" of "Only then could *ils* appear" suggests a progressive, linear, causal buildup, the verb "haunted," in the phrase "totally inhabited, haunted, by *elles*" complicates our conception of time quite a bit, as for something to "haunt" a text, or anything for that matter, it must already have existed. Thus for a "haunting" *elles* to fully "inhabit" two-thirds of the text, in order that the form of *elles* might transcend *ils* in the future, means that this transcendence is based not solely on a utopic future, nor on a utopian "return" to an Amazonian past, but on an endlessly recurring, haunted, twisted and slightly shifting relational *elles* whose meaning changes not because of a temporal progression within the *narrative*, but because of its spatio-temporal *position* within the *text*. *The future is here presented as a paradox without beginning or end, where two sides actually become one and the same.*

A turn to a more three-dimensional topology seems particularly apt, given *Les guérillères*'s attention both to landscape and to material – mud, water, ruins, blood, flesh, food, terrain, buildings, etc. The move from two to three dimensions is also a move from the Cartesian plane, with its binaries of *x* and *y*, to a geography that has not only length and breadth, but depth as well. Considering Wittig's attention to material means paying attention to material's *three-dimensionality*, its existence in both time (history) and space (matter). It is here, at the intersection of time and the material, that politics and the future become a matter of concern.

Much has been made of *Les guérillères*'s status as a "utopian" text – some critics (Chisolm, Nelson-McDermott, etc.) describe it as a work of Amazonian futurism, a radical lesbian science fiction about a revolution fought and won. Science fiction has long been associated with the "open future" of utopia, but such a reading of the of *Les guérillères* as utopic science fiction fails to allow for a more complicated temporality, one which posits an (anti)politics of paradoxical return, rather than of a promising tomorrow.

*Les guérillères*'s three-part, seemingly dialectical structure, as well as its status as radical feminist science fiction, at first suggests a utopian vision



of a future synthesis born of a revolutionary women's struggle, and indeed it has been read that way. And yet, as we have seen, the shape of narrative seems to resist linearity or progression, which a simply future-oriented reading would suggest. The circles marking the beginning of each section, as well as Wittig's statement about how the text "should" be read – that is, with the chronological end of the narrative at the locational beginning of the book – makes it hard to find a beginning or an end to the narrative at all, calling to mind the "always already" of deconstruction. *To quote a debate held by the elles* amongst themselves in Part Two:

The progression continues simultaneously with the completion of the cycle. But that is to say too much or too little. The women say that, to complete a cycle, a series of brilliant deeds or extraordinary and baleful events is required. Charlotte Bernard says that they are not concerned. Emmanuela Chartre says that it is no longer done to marvel at that kind of cycle. Marie Serge says that in any case the cycle may relate to myth and may not mention acts that have any semblance of reality. Flaminie Pougens says that for the women to be wholly engaged it is necessary to invent these. Then they laugh and fall backward from force of laughing.<sup>46</sup>

Is *Les guérillères*, then, strictly parody? Do we read Wittig ironically – laughing like the women in her book? There is, after all, a good amount of satire in *Les guérillères*, especially in Wittig's descriptions of the feminaries, an ironic nod to previous, essentializing movements within women's liberation, which Wittig criticizes in *The Straight Mind* and elsewhere. Like the feminaries, Wittig sees these movements as reinforcing the gender dichotomy that leads to women's oppression ("The Mark of Gender," etc). Similarly, the *elles* of *Les guérillères* come to eventually laugh at the thought of liberation coming from a mere reversal of binary oppression: "It deploys a series of terms which are systematically related to opposite terms. Its theses are so crass that the thought of them makes the women start laughing violently... They joke on this subject, they say it is to fall between Scylla and Charybdis, to avoid one religious ideology only to adopt another."<sup>47</sup> Read this way, Wittig's work ceases to become a utopian vision and instead becomes a parody of such revolutionary utopian projects.

This reading, though, is again too simple. In fact, both a dialectical and deconstructive readings of *Les guérillères* are possible, and coexist in tension. Here, genre is key: by insisting on the novel's status as epic rather than as science fiction, Wittig changes its relationship to the future. The subjects of *Les guérillères* are constantly remaking and transcending elles



– themselves – and here is “overthrow” is the overall operation of the text, what Wittig calls its *gesta* or, at another point, its “epic movement,” its “rhythm.”<sup>48</sup> Its screwy, circular, Mobius-strip time and shape allows for holes in meaning and plot that remain unresolved; though the book may hint at resolution at its end, the join or overlap between the first “ACTION OVERTHROW” (page 2) and the last “ALL ACTION IS OVERTHROW” (page 144) brings us back to a circular structure with a slight twist, a repetition-with-difference. We return, in other words, to the “PHOENIX” of the first all-capital poem, even as we mourn “THE DEAD WOMEN” whose names recur throughout, and constantly haunt, the text.

In the spirit of the Mobius strip, I would like to return, now, to the very beginning of this paper, and the question I found myself stuck on: the difference between “shape” and “form.” As I pointed out, I was originally caught in a looping tautology, where “shape” was defined as “an external form,” while “form” was “the visible shape.” Now, revisiting this problem, I see a way to twist what seems like a circular tautology, focusing instead on what I first thought to be synonyms but which now seem quite different: that is, the difference between “external” and “visible.” While the novel’s *form* might be “visible” in many ways – the arrangement of the texts, the white spaces of the gap, the mark of the circle on the page, etc. – its *shape* is “external;” it is, in other words, outside. In the case a Mobius strip (a shape with, in many ways, no discernible “outside” at all) shape becomes, in effect, the “hole within a hole.” This infinite sphere is in fact a gap, a looping figure eight of infinity characterized by its double-lacunae.

The “hole within a hole” of the Mobius strip is a rupture through which the utopian *gesta* is enacted, but never accomplished: not a future, so much as a proliferation of presents, actions that lead nowhere but that do not necessarily remain unchanged, like the two dimensional figure traveling along the non-orientable Mobius strip, whose image shifts as a necessity of making the journey back to the beginning. Comparing her work to the Brechtian project of anti-Aristotelian “epic drama,” Wittig states that *Les guérillères* takes on a “revolutionary dimension” that “has the advantage of presenting to the spectator and open, incomplete form on which s/he can immediately exercise his/her critique, and act.”<sup>49</sup> This emphasis on openings in gaps is key to understanding the time, space, and politics of the novel.

Rather than proclaiming a vision of utopia, *Les guérillères* pushes back against the very idea of a “future” to be eventually arrived at, challenging rhetorics of revolution based on progression towards a common, collective



goal. Such futures, as the negative turn in queer theory would later point out, rest heavily on an implicit or explicit notion of reproductive, generational progress, abjecting the non-reproductive, capital-Q “Queer” impulse in order to fetishize a future and create a politics.<sup>50</sup> At the same time, this is not simply nihilistic repetition à la the death drive, but a cycle in which things are invented, slightly remade, revised – queered, in the etymological sense. Wittig’s text insists on the twist in the cycle. Her narrative of war and revolution doubles back on, contradicts, interrupts, and undoes itself... presenting a myriad of different strategies, Wittig allows the political goals of *Les guérillères* to shift as often as the referent of its ubiquitous pronoun, *elles*, also shifts. Wittig blurs the line between two camps –that of the dialectical revolution and that of the deconstructive revolution – and thus serves to call both into question.

Writes Wittig of the revolutionaries towards the end of Part Two:

They say that they foster disorder in all its forms. Confusion troubles violent debates disarray upsets disturbances incoherencies irregularities divergences complications disagreements discords clashes polemics discussions contentions brawls disputes conflicts routs debacles cataclysms disturbances quarrels agitation turbulence conflagrations chaos anarchy.<sup>51</sup>

*Les guérillères* is not a linear progression towards a future, nor is it a zero-sum game. Rather, it is a rupture, an interruption, an attack on the world and time we know, out of which something else, something alien, might burst.

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<sup>1</sup> Monique Wittig. *Les Guérillères*, trans. David Le Vay, Book, Whole (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007). 89.

<sup>2</sup> Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992). 37.

<sup>3</sup> *Les Guérillères*, 1.

<sup>4</sup> Monique Wittig. "Some Remarks on Les Guérillères," in *On Monique Wittig: Theoretical, Political, and Literary Essays*, ed. Namascar Shaktini (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005).41.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 41.

<sup>6</sup>. *Les Guérillères*, 19.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 41.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 54.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 64.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid, 86.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 97.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 115.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 106.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 142.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 144.

<sup>16</sup> "Some Remarks on Les Guérillères," 19.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 40.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 41.



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- <sup>19</sup> Ibid, 40, emphasis mine.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid, 42.
- <sup>21</sup> *Les Guérillères*, 69.
- <sup>22</sup> "Some Remarks on Les Guérillères," 41; *Les Guérillères*, 69.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid, 69.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid, 42.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid, 21.
- <sup>26</sup> *Les Guérillères*, 58.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid, 61.
- <sup>28</sup> "Some Remarks on *Les Guérillères*" 40.
- <sup>29</sup> Clifford A. Pickover, *The Möbius Strip: Dr. August Möbius's Marvelous Band in Mathematics, Games, Literature, Art, Technology, and Cosmology* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2006). Xviii.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid, 2.
- <sup>31</sup> Diana Fuss, *Inside/out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, Book, Whole (New York: Routledge, 1991). 7.
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- <sup>38</sup> *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*, 41.
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid, 41.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid, 9.
- <sup>41</sup> *The Möbius Strip*, 180.
- <sup>42</sup> *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*, 74.
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid, 88.
- <sup>44</sup> Ibid, 9.
- <sup>45</sup> Ibid, 9.
- <sup>46</sup> *Les Guérillères*, 79.
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid, 80.
- <sup>48</sup> "Some Remarks on *Les Guérillères*," 37.
- <sup>49</sup> Ibid, 37.
- <sup>50</sup> Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Series Q (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).
- <sup>51</sup> *Les Guérillères*, 90.



## DeViatiOns Pre T<sup>1</sup>

Jean Matarrita Chavarria

*"I want to be all the deviations  
in one body only."*  
—Michel Riquelme

- Reality: Ze brushes hir beard against my neck  
Fantasy: Ze brushes hir beard against my nips  
Reality: meticulously bandaged
- Fantasy: my crotch begins to awaken  
Reality: empty crotch – hirs not one
- Ideal: That it be neither hetero-normalized  
nor rationalized  
to give desire free reign  
Reality: There is no permission for “perversions”  
lest the self be “defined”
- Reality: I walk through San José after midnight  
hands in my pockets  
my body “rather masculine”  
I am just one more guy  
An urchin asks me for money  
I respond in the negative with a gesture  
Talk is forbidden!
- I walk through San José raw
- Fantasy: hormonal reassignment  
Reality: hormonal resignation
- To be that guy, supposedly pretty macho but designed by a scalpel. With hairs on the chest, more man than the real ones; Your daddy! Like the automobile advertisement.
- Reality: Sometimes I am only fiction.

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<sup>1</sup> Pre T means Pre Testosterone. This poem was presented with *Poesía Irreverente* at the 16. Costa Rica International Book Fair in San José, September, 19, 2015. I am grateful to Christina Schramm and Gary Pool for translating this poem into English.



## DesViaciOnes Pre T<sup>1</sup>

Jean Matarrita Chavarria

*“Deseo ser todas las desviaciones  
en un solo cuerpo.”*  
—Michel Riquelme

Realidad:	Roza su barba por mi cuello
Fantasía:	Roza su barba por mis pezones
Realidad:	meticulosamente fajados
Fantasía:	mi entrepierna comienza a endurecerse
Realidad:	entrepieña vacía – la suya no
Ideal:	Que no sea heteronormado ni racionalizado dar rienda suelta al deseo
Realidad:	No hay permiso para “perversiones” menos si se está “definido”
Realidad:	Camino por San José pasada la media noche Las manos en las bolsas mi cuerpo “un poco masculino” soy un muchacho más una “ratilla” me pide una moneda con un gesto le digo que no ¡Prohibido hablar!
	Camino por San José en carne viva
Fantasía:	Reasignación hormonal
Realidad:	Resignación hormonal

Ser ese mae, supuestamente bien macho a punta de bisturí. Con pelos en el pecho más hombre que los reales, ¡Tu papi! Como el anuncio de automóviles.

Realidad: A veces soy solo ficción.

<sup>1</sup> Pre T significa Pre Testosterona. Este poema fue presentado con *Poesía Irreverente* en la 16. Feria Internacional Del Libro Costa Rica en San José, el 19 de Septiembre de 2015. Agradezco a Christina Schramm y Gary Pool por traducir el poema al Inglés.



## Queering Melancholy

Laurel Billings

In a comment published in *The New Yorker* two weeks after the 9/11 attacks, Susan Sontag denounced public figures and mainstream news sources for overstepping the boundaries of their authority and telling the American public exactly how to feel in this moment of mass uncertainty.<sup>1</sup> She criticized public responses to 9/11 aimed at “grief management” and “confidence-building.”<sup>2</sup> Sontag argued that instead, our public commentators and national leaders should have been helping us to understand the complex network of social, cultural, and political issues that contributed to the attacks, so that we could determine effective means to avoid similar attacks in the future.<sup>3</sup> I would argue that our public figures and national news media often tell us how to feel about national disasters, such as the early phase of the AIDS epidemic, where they instilled great fear in the general public who were not at high risk for contracting the disease. I will thus expand this critique of public discourse-as-psychotherapy by drawing on aspects of queer theory to question the ways in which national and local disasters reinforce the patriarchal, the heteronormative, and even the homophobic in public discourse. Furthermore, I will demonstrate how normative discourse silences nonconformist voices and banishes queer and “abnormal” bodies to a realm of near absence.

The analysis that follows thus addresses the problem of recognizing and memorializing loss within marginalized groups, focusing particularly on women and sexual minorities in the United States, as well as national “others” abroad. My aim, however, is not solely to call attention to the unequal distribution of melancholy and unresolved grief, the burden of which often falls most heavily on these marginalized groups. Instead, I strive to show that mourning and melancholy are, in themselves, queerer experiences than we might think, and that we must look beyond the binary logic of self and other, or “us” and “them,” to effectively articulate our losses and create a less docile, fearful, and melancholy public culture. I thus maintain that, by creating a public space for queer others to articulate their grief and mourn their losses, we might find, in the aftermath of loss, a melancholy sort of hope. , I argue that we should loosen our grip on the normalizing, therapeutic modes of discourse that provide an easy short-term fix for a shocked or frightened public, and, instead, engage in discussions with queer and incomprehensible others that we sometimes might find uncomfortable and disorienting.



Some feminist and postcolonial scholars draw on Freud's theory of melancholy—as inexpressible grief and inexorable suffering—as a productive means to analyze the effects of prohibited love and grieving, at the levels of the individual, the group, and the nation. For example, in "*Melancholia in the Late Twentieth Century*," David Eng suggests that we stop seeking to understand minorities in terms of physical and cultural "differences" and reframe the enquiry in terms of shared injury and historical loss.<sup>4</sup> He argues that the articulation of a melancholy subjectivity has come to serve as a prerequisite for effective participation in modern identity politics, and it is through the articulation of injury and loss that modern minority groups can to claim reparations and advocacy for their interests.<sup>5</sup> In *Revolt She Said*, Julia Kristeva famously pronounces the entire nation of France depressed.<sup>6</sup> The trend in French national culture, she claims, is to cling to wounded pride and lost imperial grandeur and, thus, to avoid interaction with foreign entities.<sup>7</sup> She argues that it was within the context of a withdrawn and depressed culture that the 1968 student revolts broke out in Paris.<sup>8</sup> They aimed to dismantle the hegemony of repressive bourgeois morality and create a culture where diverse forms of love, sexuality, and self-expression could flower in public life.<sup>9</sup> Pursuing a related theme in "*Melancholy Gender/Refused Identity*," Judith Butler posits that the disavowal and repudiation of homosexual love that spurs the performance of normative gender, perpetuating masculine and feminine gender as sustained mirages rooted in unrecognized love and impossible grief.<sup>10</sup> In Butler's view, then, the most heteronormative segments of our society are, in one sense, the most melancholic.

Because I take the terms mourning and melancholia from the early writings of Freud, it is necessary to distinguish between mourning and melancholia before proceeding further. According to Freud's 1917 essay, "*Mourning and Melancholia*," mourning is a normal or healthy grieving process that occurs when a loved object, place, or idea is lost and eventually comes to an end when the subjects lets the lost object go.<sup>11</sup> Melancholia, however, is a pathological form of grieving, in which the lost object or the nature of the loss is not fully recognized, causing the subject to remain in a state of perpetual grief. Eventually, the emotions originally directed at the love object—and the anger over that object's loss—are redirected toward the ego itself, leaving the subject depleted, uninterested in the outside world, and angry with her/himself, and this state Freud refers to as melancholia.<sup>12</sup> In "*Melancholy Gender/Refused Identification*," Judith Butler explains that disavowed love and unrecognized loss actually



figure prominently in Freud's model of gender development, in which a child "accomplishes" masculinity or femininity through the repudiation of the same-sex parent as a love object and the subsequent incorporation of that rejected love object into the ego and onto the bodily surface.<sup>13</sup> She thus argues that the achievement of gender happens through a process of "melancholic identification," in which the image of same-sex love is preserved in the ego and "haunt[s]" the bodily surface, shaping the appearance and behaviors of the gendered subject and leaving the subject in a melancholy state.<sup>14</sup>

Importantly, however, Kruks points to de Beauvoir's experience of overwhelming guilt. Here, her admission of complicity is evidence of an attempt to "overcome" her privilege through disclosure of the "truth" of that privilege and "working on oneself" in an effort to perfect one's own liberal attitude is inherently flawed.<sup>15</sup> In Kruks' view, the tendency to focus on "self-transformation" through confession of privilege and attempts to become more sympathetic with less privileged others are insufficient to resolve the suffering and loss endured by women of less privileged status (182). That is, white Western feminists simply cannot understand or articulate the grief and loss experienced by less privileged racial and national others and therefore should not attempt to speak for them. Kruks therefore points to de Beauvoir's final solution to the dilemma of her French privilege as a better alternative for guilty, white, Western feminists, who attempt to serve women from different backgrounds and cultures. She explains that de Beauvoir's recognition of the violence and oppression on which her own privilege as a French intellectual depended only became productive when she stopped allowing this problem to overwhelm her and began "deploying" this privilege to expose the atrocities in Algeria and thereby reform the French government.<sup>16</sup> Citing de Beauvoir's decision to have *Le Monde* publish Djamilia Bouacha's account of her brutal rape and torture by French colonial soldiers, Kruks suggests that a productive way for white, Western feminists to use their privilege is to create space for others to speak and be heard.<sup>17</sup> Western feminists today can thus best serve their counterparts in other racial groups and nations by creating a space for these others to be heard, rather than speak for them.

Kruks' analysis of de Beauvoir's solution to blinding privilege brings the discussion full circle back to the question of how to discuss both loss and the incomprehensible other in public discourse today. This use of privilege to create space for the individuals and groups who are oppressed and disenfranchised by American wars and capitalist ventures abroad is a solution that Sontag implicitly suggests in her critique of the post-9/11



media response.<sup>18</sup> However, I will take a different approach and instead analyze the gendered and sexualized nature of media representations of contemporary terrorist others as a means to explicate the entrenched patriarchal and homophobic attitudes these post-attack representations reveal within our own public culture. These specters from a long history of the devaluation of female, queer, and non-white bodies suggest that to bring othered bodies into cultural intelligibility, we must reframe the way we think about gender and sexuality.

Just as white Western feminists like Kruks have learned they cannot overcome the personal histories of privilege that have shaped their very subjectivities and somehow “become less racist,” in their article, “*Monster-Terrorist-Fag*,” Jasbir Puar and Amit Rai argue that Westerners representing the terrorist “other” are equally limited by their cultural and national histories.<sup>19</sup> They point out that, in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, mainstream media and popular discourse resorted to a rhetoric grounded in “heteronormativity, white-supremacy, and patriotism.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, in their efforts to represent the situation, the popular media invoked the centuries-old trope of the monstrous racial and sexualized other.<sup>21</sup> Puar and Rai explain that the posters depicting the anal penetration of Osama Bin Laden by the Empire State Building, which appeared in downtown Manhattan days after the attacks, together with the frequently posited suggestion that we give Bin Laden a sex change and make him live as a woman under his own misogynistic regime, reflect an “aggressively heteronormative nationalism.”<sup>22</sup> They explain that these representations actually limited the ways in which queer and minority communities could respond to the terrorist events, citing reports from community-based organizations that show a spike in violence against queer people of color during the post-9/11 period.<sup>23</sup>

The way “we,” the American public, view and treat these incomprehensible “others,” reflects a sort of blind spot in our own national psyche. Even in a “homonationalistic”<sup>24</sup> society where anti-sodomy laws are overturned, the right to same-sex marriage is protected, and Iran’s mistreatment of homosexual subjects serves as a pretext for invasion, homophobia and violence against queer others persists within our borders.<sup>25</sup> In “Rethinking Homonationalism,” Puar emphasizes the absurdity of national culture where the “celebration of the queer liberal subject as bearer of privacy rights and economic freedom sanctions a regime of racialized surveillance, detention, and deportation.”<sup>26</sup> Such a regime simply repeats the old colonial trope that pits one marginalized group against another—the old mantra that justifies violence against a racialized, non-Western other



under the guise of saving their women, their children, and now their homosexuals—from their straight, adult male compatriots. What haunts the wall between “us” and “them,” in these instances, then, is really the monstrous image of our own Islamophobia, as it swallows and overshadows our heterosexism.

Puar and Rai also highlight the ways in which “terrorism studies,” a discipline that takes the psyche of the foreign terrorist as its privileged domain of study, draws on the discourses of normalization that create the very conditions for the appearance of these racial and sexualized monsters.<sup>27</sup> They criticize this discipline for psychologizing foreign terrorists using Western standards, and for attempting to negate the complex cultural, historical, and political factors that contribute to their violence, in order to explain away the terrorist mindset as the result of negative childhood experiences and bad parenting.<sup>28</sup> The absolutist mentality and the fierce devotion to political ideals and movements in response to actions that have occurred less frequently in the United States than in the histories of many other cultures thus becomes a “personality defect”—a pathology to be understood in terms of faulty family structure or failed heterosexuality, instead of an expression of political frustration.<sup>29</sup> Such constructions of the “terrorist psyche” are thus grossly reductionist, at once trivializing and pathologizing the cultures in which these terrorists live. They also transform the political problem of terrorism into a personal one that can be solved through the quarantining and correcting of poorly adjusted, violent individuals. Puar and Rai thus explain that the public spectacle of the conflated “monster-terrorist-fag” serves as evidence of a normalizing discourse, warning queer and racial others that they need to differentiate themselves from the terrorist—which we do in mainstream culture by proving our good, heteronormative “family values” and patriotic American citizenship.<sup>30</sup> In the face of the monstrous, sexualized terrorist, our attention thus, in fact, turns inward as we strive to prevent wrongdoing in our personal lives and communities instead of seeking the information we need to prevent wrongdoing and unjustified violence at the level of the state.<sup>31</sup> The state, therefore, gets a free pass to engage in unjustified violence abroad, while we are busy scrutinizing ourselves.

We could look at this reappearance of the sexual and racial monster from history as a sort of echo, which brings the discussion back to the notion of hauntings. In *Specters of Marx*, Jacques Derrida suggests that the objects and ideas that we push away or let slip from consciousness—individual or public—do not simply disappear, but instead leave us with a sense of their absence, a vague memory, and a fear of their re-appearance.<sup>32</sup> In this way



“specters” and “apparitions” from the past—the objects and ideas we cannot truly forget and histories we cannot overcome—traverse the borders between presence and absence, visibility and invisibility, the nominal and the ineffable, as a ghost traverses the border between embodiment and disembodiment.<sup>33</sup> Yet, in addition to confounding the binaries by which we determine whether or not a thing “exists,” the specter is also characterized by its fluid nature. It has a tendency to shift between presence and absence at different points in time as exemplified by the ghost of King Hamlet who, obscured by his armor and helmet, appears on the castle wall sporadically and at different points in time.<sup>34</sup>

To be “haunted” in the Derridean sense is thus to live in a world where our relationship to the objects around us does not “develop” through time in linear fashion, but where that relationship, or orientation, instead develops recursively, tending to circle back on itself. Significantly, then, the reemergence of the terrorist-monster-fag figure even in the age of homonationalism speaks to the circular nature of a history where the injustice of normalization cannot be relegated to the past or overcome through “progress.” Likewise, reimagining the Lavender Menace within this recursive model of history, in which events and phenomena never completely disappear, expels the notion that she was a problem that belonged solely to the Feminist Second Wave of the 1950s and 60s.<sup>35</sup> The problem of homophobia persists within feminism and the Sex Wars continue, even as the terms and contexts for these arguments change. For instance, the exclusion of trans-women from the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival can be read as a recurrence of this apparition of border-surveillance and efforts to stabilize the category of “women” through exclusion of certain others.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, we persist in prohibiting gay and bisexual men from donating blood, regardless of individual sexual histories or practices, continuing to see them as a potential threat to the purity of the blood supply, when even the Red Cross states that donations from gay men identified as low-risk are safe, due to the advance and highly accurate testing technologies.<sup>37</sup> This inability to exile the racialized, sexualized, and gendered violences that mark our national history thus compounds the problems of a melancholy hegemonic culture that seeks to secure its borders against the imagined threats of domestic and international “others” who are feminized and raced. How, then, can we break free from these entrenched, multiform, and overdetermined cycles of homophobic thinking that drain the life-blood of our nation and hamper coalition building among marginalized groups even today? Since dominant discourse hasn’t figured it out, perhaps our best move is to provide new



spaces for new voices—and then work through own irrational fears so we can join the conversation.

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## A Token Isn't Worth Anything

Daniel Putney

I fasten a blue elephant button  
onto my chest  
beside the HRC podium,  
and now I am trapped.  
My identity only exists in politics.  
Clumps of dirt  
rupture my taste buds  
like invective-filled torrents,  
gushing blood—  
word blood.  
Politicos savor my DNA  
in fine wine glasses,  
toasting to freedom.  
But queer isn't "to be";  
it's "liberal hippie shit."  
Kindness is a mythical fuel,  
powered by super PACs,  
poured into pseudo-Democrats' mouths.  
I am their flag,  
brandished by hoary men  
who have never been touched  
by another man.  
They support with no foundation.  
Corporate walls crumble,  
exposing zombies within,  
meandering election circuits  
with rainbow-colored blinders.  
So take my flesh and guts.  
Tell me what they taste like.



## De\_gendering

Sur Landfried

*“Gender is like [...] glasses worn from childhood, it’s like a lens through which we’ve always seen and can’t remember how the world”*

My artistic work is about gender, and my theoretical background mainly refers to Judith Butlers’ “Gender Trouble” (2006). My basic assumption for all of my artistic work is that gender and sex are socially constructed. Therefore, there is no order of sex and gender. This means that the hegemonic order of the gender binary is invalid. Accordingly, a body can´t be considered as a gendered body—all bodies are only bodies—nothing more or less.

In everyday life, this theoretical assumption is difficult to transact. In Western Society, heteronormativity is the norm. That means that there are only two genders existing and everyone has to assign her- or himself as either male or female. Above all, it also means that women have to desire men and the other way around – heterosexuality is the given norm in the Western Society.

And even if my theoretical assumption shows the being-constructed of heteronormativity it´s not possible to live outside the norm – because we are living in this society which is crossed by the hegemonic norm of heteronormativity. Nearly everything in this society is gendered – e. g. wearing a dress, painting one´s face, being loud, being silent. This doesn´t result in practices of dressing up or character traits. Even shower gel or shampoo are gendered!

There´s (nearly) no way left how people can look like or how they can stage themselves that is not gendered. As a consequence, it´s not achievable to display people without any gendered connotation.

So, the essential question for my artistic work is: How can I illustrate persons, who transgress the gender binary? My way to portray gender transgressive people is to use gendered connotations and mix them up. Connotations that I use in my artistic work are for example coarse/fine facial features, beards, makeup, larynxes, earrings, long\_short hair and so on.



My goal is to irritate and confuse the heteronormative perception and imaginations of the viewers of my artistic works.

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## **From *Brokeback Mountain* to *Tangerine*, LGBTQ Representations in Mainstream U.S. Cinema: Inclusive, Exclusive, or Counter Narratives?**

Amélie Ollivier

Films are, to a certain extent, a mirror of the societies we live in. Unconsciously or not, we, the audience, are often looking for representations of ourselves with which we can identify while at the same time are given the opportunity, through this medium, to peer into the worlds and lives of people who are very different from us and thus to better understand and sympathize with them. The release of *Brokeback Mountain*<sup>12</sup> in 2005, is often stated as a turning point in the representation of gays in American cinema, and the movie has been described as a pivotal film which “has articulated for a mainstream audience the failure of heterosexual identity to fully reproduce its hegemonic hold on the movie-going public.”<sup>3</sup> At a time when George W. Bush was starting his second term in office and pursued his conservative agenda in the US and abroad, *Brokeback Mountain* was perceived by many as a breath of fresh air that contested dominant homophobic discourses at work in the U.S. and the Western world in general. In the last decade, several other mainstream movies focusing on the lives of gay and lesbian characters, such as *Milk*,<sup>4</sup> *The Kids are All Right*,<sup>5</sup> or more recently *The Imitation Game*,<sup>6</sup> have become box office successes, grossing over a million dollars.<sup>7</sup> LGBTQ-friendly commentators often welcome these movies which reflect “progress, unity and liberation,”<sup>8</sup> as OUT Magazine managing editor R. Kurt Osenlund writes of *Freeheld*,<sup>9</sup> released this fall. Unity and liberation for whom and from what?

This paper examines the commonly accepted assumptions that because they depict gay characters in a more positive light, mainstream LGBTQ movies reveal an increasing acceptance of sexual diversity and inclusivity among both mainstream audience and the film industry and, as such, resist dominant heteronormative discourses. I contend that this belief is belied by the fact that they actually portray a limited array of LGBTQ characters – mostly gay white males – and exclude many people whose sexual identities intersect with other gender, racial, or class identities. This narrowing down of the multiplicity of queer experiences to the essentialist representation of gay white men “reinforces hegemonic power structures rather than dismantl[es] them.”<sup>10</sup>



First, it is necessary to acknowledge that progress has been made in the way LGBTQ characters have been portrayed in U.S cinema overtime and I start this paper with a description of how visibility can be beneficial to the inclusion of people who are still stigmatized in the American society. On the other hand, however, a closer analysis of this trend reveals that the experiences of many gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender people are not represented onscreen since the focus of most of these movies is predominantly on white gay male characters. As such, I argue that these movies can be described as exclusive narratives that reflect and perpetuate systems of oppression based on gender, race, and social class, among other categories. Finally, I expose the normative discourses that underlie these mainstream productions. Indeed, I contend that further inspection of these texts uncovers the homonormative and homonationalist discourses at work in these films that depict characters who fit in or long to fit in a dominant capitalist society that values narrow norms of respectability, gender, and patriotism.

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Undeniably, Hollywood is in need of LGBTQ characters who are depicted with more nuance than in the past, particularly as several studies have revealed that “the media is indeed an important vehicle for attitude change.”<sup>11</sup> As Vito Russo explains in *The Celluloid Closet*, his groundbreaking analysis of movies from the twenties to the late seventies, for decades, references to homosexuality were absent or veiled and lesbians and gay men were rarely depicted in a positive light if at all. When they appeared onscreen as openly gay, most of the characters were cast as violent outsiders whose lives were bound to end tragically and their homosexuality was incorporated as something “alien and sinister”<sup>12</sup> when it was not used to make buffoons out of them. Thirty-five years after Russo’s book was published things have changed, mostly for the better. Yet, even as the number of openly defamatory depictions decreases in mainstream Hollywood, there remain outdated and offensive stereotypes as exemplified by Ridley Scott’s *Exodus: Gods and Kings*<sup>13</sup> in which an “ugly, spiteful caricature harkens back to a time when Hollywood routinely depicted LGBTQ people as abhorrent villains the audience would naturally root against. For anyone who thinks those days are behind us, Hegep and his pronounced lisp prove that isn’t the case.”<sup>14</sup>

It is crucial, then, that Hollywood should offer alternatives to such backward representation of LGBTQ people as “stories that place gays in the mainstream of American life challenge heterosexual hegemony and dispel the myth that gays are people who live only at the fringes of



society.”<sup>15</sup> Depicting two lesbian parents living happily in the leafy suburbs of contemporary Los Angeles with their teenage children in *The Kids are All Right* or two average cowboys who fall in love in the sixties in *Brokeback Mountain*, or again two aging men who have been a couple for 39 years in *Love is Strange*,<sup>16</sup> does enable some audience members to associate with these characters and indeed to dispel the myth that gay people are outsiders who do not belong in mainstream society. One may hope that, as a result, discrimination and violence toward LGBTQ people will disappear.

Similarly, the increasing number of biopics that no longer erase and even partly focus on the sexuality of historical figures such as poet Allen Ginsberg in *Kill Your Darlings*,<sup>17</sup> writer Truman Capote in *Capote*<sup>18</sup> and mathematician Alan Turing in *The Imitation Game* demonstrates that Hollywood has evolved since the seventies, when “heroes who were gay in original source material were made heterosexual for the screen,”<sup>19</sup> as Russo deplored in his book. Not only can such movies provide role models for LGBTQ audiences since they portray individuals who have played important roles in history as artists or scientists, they can also lead to social change: *The Imitation Game*, for example, “has launched a campaign helmed by star Benedict Cumberbatch and out actor Stephen Fry petitioning the U.K. government to pardon the 49,000 others who were convicted decades ago under anti-gay ‘gross indecency’ laws like Turing.”<sup>20</sup>

In these respects, one can consider that the greater visibility and more nuanced depiction of LGBTQ characters onscreen reflect and promote an increasing integration of marginalized sexual minorities in the film industry and the American society at large. As Vito Russo had anticipated, “the decision to make visible the gay lifestyle is irrevocable, and eventually the movies will have to reflect the diversity of gay existence.”<sup>21</sup> Yet, one may wonder whether these films truly reflect the diversity of LGBTQ experiences.

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Indeed, to begin with, the absence of racial and ethnic diversity is striking when one looks at American movies focusing on LGBTQ characters in the last decade, most lead characters are white and gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender characters of color are mostly absent from these mainstream movies. One obvious reason behind such a homogenous representation of LGBTQ characters is the structural discrimination at work in a film



industry dominated by white males who may have little interest in and no awareness of the lives of people from social locations other than their own.<sup>22</sup> Although they represented 37.4% of the American population in 2013, minorities directed only 17.8% of the movies examined by the authors of the Hollywood Diversity Report and wrote only 11.8% of the scripts.<sup>23</sup> As a result, the subjugated voices of those at the intersection of multiple sites of oppression, namely LGBTQ people of color, remain on the margins and find no outlet in a mainstream industry that produces narratives in which the experiences of white (gay) characters can be represented as universal truths whereas the experiences of (LGBTQ) people of color are only perceived as marginal stories outside of the dominant norm.<sup>24</sup> Although the discourse underlying these LGBTQ movies is one of visibility and inclusion of a stigmatized minority, the actual portrayal of this minority in all its diversity is sacrificed in favor of an essentialist approach that focuses on a single goal, the fight against heterosexism, thereby leading to the marginalization of people of color outside of this movement. Yet, as Patrick Johnson and Mae Henderson argue, “lesbian, gays, bisexuals, and transgendered people of color who are committed to the demise of oppression in its various forms, cannot afford to theorize their lives based on “single-variable” politics.”<sup>25</sup> The fight against sexual oppression and for sexual justice cannot ignore other hegemonic discourses that rely on heteronormativity to perpetuate racist and patriarchal attitudes.<sup>26</sup> In other words, if the LGBTQ community is to be inclusive, it must take into account the multiple and diverse socially lived knowledge of its members and fight racism, classism and other forms of discriminations alongside its struggle against heterosexism. As they appear now, LGBT movies seem to aim to secure the integration of white middle-class lesbian and gay people who are deemed able to assimilate into mainstream norms of respectability while leaving everybody else on the margins.

A striking example of this white solipsism is the recent controversy around the release of *Stonewall*,<sup>27</sup> by blockbuster gay white director Roland Emmerich that presents a whitewashed version of the historical riots that are often cited as the starting point of the gay and lesbian civil rights movement in 1969. The movie, although it includes characters from diverse minorities, essentially focuses on a young white gay Midwesterner and pushes into the background the drag queen and black transgender activist Marsha P. Johnson who is credited with being one of the first to resist the police.<sup>28</sup> If real gay heroes were turned into heterosexual characters onscreen in Vito Russo’s time, it seems that today real LGBTQ heroes of color are for their part left in the shadows of anonymity to be replaced by fictional white characters.



Another trend in the last decade, has been the notable focus on gay male characters, while lesbian, bisexual, trans and queer characters have been scantly represented. *The Kids are All Right* and *Pariah*<sup>29</sup> were among the few movies that focused on female characters up to recently. In 2015, however, several movies with lead lesbian and trans characters have been or are about to be released: *Freeheld*,<sup>30</sup> *Carol*,<sup>31</sup> *About Ray*,<sup>32</sup> *Tangerine*<sup>33</sup> and *The Danish Girl*.<sup>34</sup> Although they should be welcome for the greater diversity of experiences they portray in terms of sexuality, gender and class notably, one must note that, apart from *Pariah* and *Tangerine*, these films still focus on white characters. This focus should not come as a surprise, since, for Patricia Hill Collins, “as a specific site of intersectionality, Black lesbian relationships constitute relationships among the ultimate Other. Black lesbians are not White, male, or heterosexual and generally are not affluent. As such they represent the antithesis of Audre Lorde’s “mythical norm” and become the standard by which other groups measure their own so-called normality and self-worth.”<sup>35</sup> If the point is, for many of these movies, to demonstrate that gays and lesbians are docile bodies that will integrate in the dominant way of life, then portraying bodies that have been sexualized throughout history as deviant, as is the case for black bodies,<sup>36</sup> would be counterproductive to their assimilationist endeavour in a racist society. *Pariah*, the work of young lesbian African-American director Dee Rees, is a noteworthy exception as the lead character is a black teenager but, even if it also touches the questions of class and poverty, the film does not totally escape the tempting dominant discourses of respectability as the young heroine’s middle-class background and promising career as a young poet suggests. *The Kids are All Right*, on the other hand, with its focus on how a sperm donor can erupt into the lives of a wealthy white lesbian couple 20 years after the birth of their children, is striking in its absence of problematization of class and race, in particular since reproductive procedures, presented as a given here, are inaccessible to many poor people and people of color who historically have been targeted by politics of sterilization and forced contraception.<sup>37</sup>

From an intersectional perspective, then, most movies depicting LGBTQ characters in the last 10 years have been exclusive in so far as they mostly focus on white middle-class characters, in particular white gay men, who are expected to embody the experiences of LGBTQ people as a whole and leave inconvenient “others” on the margins. These movies exemplify “the limits of a lesbian and gay political agenda based on a civil rights strategy,



where assimilation into, and replication of, dominant institutions are the goal.”<sup>38</sup>

These movies, then, mostly targeted at white middle-class urban audiences, do not question hegemonic discourses on race, gender or class. Far from being counter-narratives, they are in many respects normative as they promote values of respectability and propriety that differentiate between assimilable American citizens and unassimilable outsiders. Vito Russo had foreseen that, “in order to be integrated in the American dream, gays [would] have to become as American as apple pie.”<sup>39</sup> This normative discourse is particularly apparent in *The Kids are All Right* as the lead characters, two lesbian parents, can be said to embody, in many respects, the faultless American family as idealized by dominant national narratives: they are married, white, beautiful and healthy, smart and wealthy and have a normal relationship with their teenage children. As such, they are a perfect example of homonormativity, promoting assimilation into dominant lifestyles involving domestic institutions like marriage and the family.<sup>40</sup> Once again, there is little room for the defiance of social norms here since the point of the movie is to show the audience that gay families are “normal,” thereby confirming Foucault’s analysis that “homosexuality threatens people as a ‘way of life,’ rather than a way of having sex.”<sup>41</sup> But by depicting white gay men and lesbians as being “normal” Americans who have the same values and yearnings as their heterosexual counterparts, these films reinforce the exclusion of those people, LGBTQ or not, who do not want to or cannot abide by the hegemonic narratives of respectability, among whom racial and ethnic minorities who do not always have a share of the American apple pie. For Roderick Ferguson “marriage, as the sign of normativity, extends racial discourses that understand women of color who head single-parent homes as the antitheses of citizenship and normativity.”<sup>42</sup> In this respect, mainstream LGBTQ movies contribute to maintaining the structural discrimination that targets those who do not fit in predetermined and acceptable boxes.

True destabilization of dominant discourses and practices then requires destabilizing categorization and this can only be achieved through the rejection of binary definitions that limit the possibilities of existence to a rigid either/or classification. Yet, most of these movies do not destabilize these dual definitions and can even be said to perpetuate such discourses regarding the concepts of sex, gender and sexuality. Indeed, on the one hand, mainstream LBGTQ films tend to place their male characters in stereotypically male-dominated settings such as the wilderness of the American West (*Brokeback Mountain*), literary circles (*Capote; Kill Your Darlings*), and the worlds of politics (*Milk*) and espionage (*The Imitation*



*Game*) symbolizing both physical power and the power of language. On the opposite, films focusing on lesbian characters are overwhelmingly set in family setting where the lesbian characters are either grand-mothers (*Grandma*,<sup>43</sup> *About Ray*), mothers (*The Kids are All Right*), daughters (*Pariah*) or wives (*Carol*) and the plots mostly confined them to the private sphere of family relationship thus reproducing a heterosexual patriarchal vision of gender roles even as they are striving to question heteronormativity. These heteronormative settings enable lesbian characters to be depicted as “true feminine women” and gay characters as “true masculine men” and do not challenge the binary definitions of sex as male/female; gender as masculine/feminine and sexuality as heterosexual/homosexual. By constructing the identities of the heroes in *Brokeback Mountain* as masculine men of the West and describing homosexuality as their true nature (both seem to be condemned to leading “straight” lives in order to conform to the prevalent norms of the time and place they live in), the film mostly strives to refute the negative stereotypes attributed to homosexuality without questioning the normative discourses that posit that sex and sexuality pre-exist the subject.<sup>44</sup> Even movies that deal with transgender characters, in particular *The Danish Girl* or *About Ray*, do not grasp this opportunity to queer their characters who still inscribe their identities in the cultural notions attached to sex and gender, transitioning from one side to the other rather than freeing themselves from the social constructions attached to these concepts. By reproducing and adhering to these binary systems, these representations actually participate in the perpetuation of heterosexism since “the regulatory norms of “sex” work in a performative fashion [...] to materialise sexual difference in the service of the consolidation of the heterosexual imperative.”<sup>45</sup>

If mainstream LGBTQ movies in the last decade have failed to contest dominant normative ideologies of respectability and rigid categorization of gender identity, they also do not subvert hegemonic narratives of patriotism that consolidate the national myth of America’s grandeur. It is indeed quite striking to note the number of LGBTQ movies that celebrate the lives of outstanding historical figures such as writer Truman Capote, poet Allen Ginsberg, or American civil-rights activist and politician Harvey Milk. The portrayal of these famous gay public figures in films allows the LGBT community to be presented with models of success and heroism and to inscribe them in a bigger national narrative from which they often had been unjustly excluded so far. Yet, they also contribute to reinforcing the patriarchal and racist national narratives that represent American heroes as mostly white males within the US but also abroad, since “film remains



one of our country's biggest cultural exports."<sup>46</sup> Similarly, the association of gay characters with World War Two in *Kill Your Darlings* and *The Imitation Game* reminds the audience that the USA, as a nation, was on the side of good against evil, and enables gayness and patriotic identity to become intertwined even as these films also portray the institutionalized discrimination that targeted gay people at the time. The homonationalist undertone of these movies can also find an echo in *Brokeback Mountain*'s wilderness scenes that celebrate "America the Beautiful." The outstanding landscapes captured onscreen evoke the sense of freedom that the lovers feel as they return to Brokeback Mountain and remind the audience that America is a land of opportunity where everything, in this case forbidden love, is possible. However, this underlying discourse, added to the fact that the two characters are portrayed as men of the mythical West, is reminiscent of the ideology that drove settlers to colonize this land in the first place and demonstrates that again, far from rejecting imperialist myth-building narratives these movies participate in their consolidation.

Finally, these mainstream LGBTQ movies also fail both in their form and content to question neoliberalism as they are themselves the cultural products of such a system. From their shooting to their release, from their choice of actors to the award ceremonies that celebrate them, these films participate in the marketability of white LGBT issues and by doing so incorporate them into a consumer society that is based on the exclusion and exploitation of many. It seems unlikely, then, for these mainstream productions to be able to give a voice to those on the fringe of society since "marginalized cultures [...] are quickly absorbed by capitalism and then robbed of their oppositional power."<sup>47</sup> In order to find true counter-narratives, one must look away from mainstream Hollywood and at independent cinema where subjugated voices can be better heard. However, as Jack Halberstam and Kara Keeling warn us, those on the margins must remain vigilant in order to avoid being swallowed into the center:

If [...] black lesbian and gay filmmakers and other queer filmmakers of color "do not speak from a position of marginalization but more crucially from the resistance to that marginalization", then the regimes of articulation and of visibility through which black lesbian and gay filmmakers speak and make visible various expressions of black and gay existence need to be rigorously interrogated so that the "resistance that (in)forms the coming into representations of black lesbian and gay film and video makers does not settle into a comfortable complicity with



the very forms of domination, oppression, and exploitation that the birth of “black lesbian and gay film” itself critiques.”<sup>48</sup>

Resistance to marginalization and to categorization might be the position from which *Tangerine* was shot, even though Sean Baker, the director of this film, is a white man. In many respects, this Queer film is the only one that has been made available to wider audiences in the last decade. To begin, the movie was shot on the margins of the movie-making business with a cell phone and a limited budget. Furthermore, the lead actresses are two non-professional trans persons of color who helped shape the script based on their own socially lived knowledge, as Sean Baker was careful not to impose a script from the outside.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, although it focuses on two transwomen sex workers of color, the story does not dwell on their gender identities – unlike *The Danish Girl* or *About Ray* – but plays around it, intertwining notions of masculinity and femininity and allowing the audience to forget to care about binary definitions of sex or gender making them true genderqueer characters. *Tangerine* also subverts monolithic tales of romantic love and family. The lead character, Sin-Dee Rella, does not have to worry about her carriage turning back into a pumpkin as there are plenty of cars ready to pick her up for a ride after midnight. Similarly, the opening line of the movie, “Merry Christmas, Bitch,” casts, from the start, a different (Christmas) light on this institutionalized holiday that takes discourses around the family hostage by amalgamating a religious celebration with consumerism and rigid notions of “the family.”<sup>50</sup> *Tangerine* queers Christmas, revealing the vacuity of the Christmas family narrative and the holiday mood that is supposed to accompany it. On the whole, the film offers a glimpse into life as it really is for many, neither an idealized nor a tear jerking version of it, and manages to resist the temptation of categorisation, marginalization and assimilation.

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This paper demonstrated that, although movies depicting lead gay and lesbian characters in the last decade can be credited with doing so in an increasingly positive light and helping convey a progressive message of inclusion to straight audiences, they too often focus on the stories of white gay men. Indeed, the voices of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people of color are mostly excluded from these movies which present an essentialist picture of the LGBTQ community reflecting and perpetuating the institutional and structural discrimination at work in the film industry and society at large. Moreover, these movies tend to reinforce hegemonic



narratives that promote homonormativity and assimilation into mainstream norms and institutions such as marriage or the family. They also fail to question the rigid categorization of sex, gender and sexuality thereby upholding the basis of heteronormativity. Similarly, the homonationalist undertone of some of these movies participates in the construction of dominant narratives of patriotism and imperialism. Finally, because they are part and parcel of the neoliberal economy that transforms cultural products into consumer goods, these movies do not offer counter-narratives that resist and contest this hegemonic ideology. It is probably naïve, then, to expect deep social change to come from mainstream representations and one should probably rely on the voices on the margins of mainstream cinema to oppose and subvert dominant discourses.

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## Queering the Study of Classical Antiquity

Krista Grensavitch

In what follows, I consider two texts that represent some of the most recent scholarship that addresses gender, bodies, sex, and, to a lesser extent, sexuality, in classical antiquity: Brooke Holmes' *Gender Antiquity and its Legacy* and Robin Osborne's *The History Written on the Classical Greek Body*. I contend that, although the Holmes and Osborne do not explicitly identify their investigations, through the influence of queer theory, both texts are examples of queer history.

To illustrate the ways in which these writers take up queer theory in their respective historical narratives, and to build my argument for why these texts can be considered examples of queer history, I rely on Benjamin Alberti's assessment of the application of queer theory within the field of history in their chapter "Queer Prehistory: Bodies, Performativity, and Matter". It is important to note at the outset of my summary of Alberti's chapter the way/s in which Alberti deploys the term "queer," for Alberti does not simply seek to remark upon the ways in which other writers have taken up and applied queer theory in their analyses. For Alberti and others, "queer" is both a positionality and mode of analysis that attempts to achieve the following: to denaturalize the subject and expose its constructedness; to reject heteronormative assumptions; and to create and promote a counter-hegemonic epistemology through strategic intervention. Queer can be used in a verbal sense to indicate an approach to the assessment of historical subject matter. It is possible for a historian "to queer" myriad aspects within the process of creating a historical narrative, including method, analysis, data, and subjects, to name several examples.

Alberti discusses the consequences of incorporating queer in an exploration of prehistory. According to Alberti, adopting a queer analytical stance can have two outcomes between which paradoxical tension exists--it can produce a radical critique or create a new set of norms by which to describe non-normative practices, objects, and individuals. The tension that emerges points to queer's political initiatives. Like feminism, it seeks to take a political stance vis-à-vis hegemonic systems that permeate social structures as well as disciplinary methodologies.<sup>1</sup> Alberti outlines three ways in which queer can be explored in prehistory: in a recuperative effort; in an effort that seeks to shift approach or methodology; and as a framework for analysis. Using



one or more of these indicated methods or approaches, I argue, contributes to the creation of queer history. It is this framework or means of categorization that I will take up in my own assessment of the two texts at hand. I will first provide brief summaries of Holmes' and Osborne's texts, recognizing that both writers address populations of antiquity and incorporate theoretical and analytical frameworks, like feminist and queer theory, that emerged well after antiquity. I pay special attention to how Holmes and Osborne incorporate and problematize these approaches in their respective texts. I will then take up Alberti's tripartite categorization in an assessment of the two texts at hand and illustrate the ways in which the writers of the text do or do not incorporate queer into their methodology, analysis, or conclusions. It is my goal to use Alberti's framework to build my case for how and why Holmes' and Osborne's texts can be considered examples of queer history.

Both Holmes and Osborne investigate social categories in antiquity, though the scope of the studies differs quite significantly; Osborne focuses their study on classical Athenian bodies represented in text, sculpture, and painted pottery, while Holmes considers Greek and Roman textual evidence spanning from Homer to Cicero. However, both writers seek to explore ideas about bodies, gender, and identity categories in antiquity, negotiating the ways in which those ideas changed over the course of time in antiquity and how those ideas shape our contemporary understanding of bodies, sex, gender, and difference. Necessarily, both writers address the limits and constraints language places on their work, recognizing that words used to categorize (like "gender" or "antiquity,") are problematic, but are ultimately useful because of the general level of intelligibility they achieve.

In *The History Written on the Classical Greek Body*, Robin Osborne challenges this traditional dependence on written source material, emphasizing that there has been too much reliance on textual evidence and not enough analytical emphasis placed on what was or was not written on the body. While classifications of bodies exist within texts (e.g., citizen, free, foreigner, god), Osborne seeks to discover to what extent these classifications could actually be observed by the eye. Here, Osborne means both the eye of the classical Athenian and our own contemporary eyes that can view images of bodies on sculpture and painted pottery that have survived from antiquity. Significantly, Osborne suggests how the history we write can be different depending on the source material that is considered. This may seem a self-evident observation, though throughout the text, Osborne illustrates the ways in which significantly different



conclusions or observations can be made simply by considering different bodies of evidence, whether textual or visual. Osborne argues that, to properly understand the classical Athenian body, we must have the context for understanding the body as the classical Athenians did. Osborne states their intent is to illustrate how history changes when that which is invisible – (in this case, certain categories, as written on the body) is taken into account. Osborne's text calls for a revolutionary change in what historians should treat and privilege as source material, suggesting that this proposed methodological and analytical shift is applicable even outside of studies of classical Athens because of historians' tendency to treat non-textual (and even some kinds of textual evidence such as drama or mythology) as merely illustrations to privileged forms of textual evidence.

*Gender: Antiquity and its Legacy*, written by Brooke Holmes, aims, like Osborne's text, to address a perceived gap in scholarship. Given the current cultural salience and presence of gender even in our popular media, Holmes contends that what is missing from scholarship on classical antiquity is “how strategic engagements with classical antiquity have contributed to the conceptualization of gender as a modern and postmodern category of analysis.”<sup>2</sup> Holmes’ text functions as a kind of extended state of the field, exploring and putting into conversation examples of scholarship that address how the ancients’ views of gender have been used for the past forty years in several different disciplines, including classics, philosophy, and gender studies. The goal of the text, Holmes explains, is not to totalize a view on the ancients, but rather to provide a nuanced examination of their views on gender and how those views changed over the course of antiquity. Holmes also examines how scholars of the past forty years have grounded their examinations of gender in sources from antiquity and how this scholarship has progressed in the intervening forty years. Like Osborne, Holmes identifies why this shift matters, suggesting that the complicated intersection and imbrication of gender, sex, sexuality, and difference observed in ancient texts allows for reflection about how these terms are still relevant, maintaining that unfamiliar configurations of these categories from antiquity can serve to challenge current assumptions about gender.

Using Osborne and Holmes’ shift in perspectives of “reading” bodies from antiquity, I look to Alberti’s schema that indicates the ways in which queer can be taken up in the exploration and writing of a historical narrative. I will attempt to illustrate how writers can take a queer approach to analysis, method, and the drawing of conclusions, resulting in the



production of queer history by using examples from Holmes' and Osborne's texts.

As a framework for analysis, a queer approach provides an alternate theoretical grounding from the standpoint of queer theory. Both Osborne and Holmes continue to rely on source material that has been central to the creation of historical narratives of antiquity, though both approach the analysis of their respective source material with the application of queer theory. Though neither writer states that it is their intent to apply the lens of queer theory in their examinations, the simple fact that both writers cite and rely on foundational queer theory texts like Michel Foucault's *An Introduction to the History of Sexuality* and Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* is suggestive of queer analytical goals. In the chapter "The Nature of Gender, the Gender of Nature," Holmes engages in an exploration of why ancient sources matter and presents the work of Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and Judith Butler, all feminist philosophers who provide critical and potentially subversive re-readings of classical Greek texts. Holmes contends that a critique of Plato's *Timaeus* laid the bedrock for Butler's most influential feminist and queer theorizing and is an example of the use of ancient textual source material in the creation of a history of sexual difference. The use or function of an approach like this allows for denaturalization and questioning of assumptions, both political motivations of queer theory. Holmes emphasizes the importance of the application of queer theory, suggesting that we need the past to imagine the future in new ways, posing Butler's reading of *Timaeus* as a prime example of how this can be achieved.<sup>3</sup>

Osborne's application of queer theory more directly adheres to the kind of application of a queer theoretical framework for analysis that Alberti outlines. As Alberti summarizes, queer theory recognizes gender and sex as corporeal practices that rely on performance, stylization of the body, and reiteration to become intelligible.<sup>4</sup> In the chapter "Telling Bodies," Osborne contends that painted pottery and grave stelae represent performances; these observed and preserved performances indicate, frame, and make intelligible behavior through the clothing and actions of the depicted subjects. According to Osborne, "what that performance signals is something we must construct."<sup>5</sup> What queer theory lends to this kind of analysis is that instead of uncovering ancient identities, researchers are able to search for evidence of behavior or practice through performance.



Next, Alberti contends that queer can spur a shift in approach and methodology, extending queer's reach outside considerations of sexual non-normativity. In this conceptualization, queer becomes the object of study, emphasizing practices, *not* identities. For instance, a writer could explore individuals who perform in non-normative ways or could read non-normative objects. For Holmes, this means considering traditionally-privileged objects (here, textual evidence) in non-normative ways while for Osborne, this means engaging in analyses of non-normative objects.

I propose that Holmes' non-normative approach or methodology involves putting textual sources from antiquity in conversation with recent examples of feminist theory and philosophy. For example, in the chapter "The Practice of Gender, the Gender of Practice," Holmes discusses the practice of physiognomy, a technique for reading gender through the performance of oration that emerged in the fourth century BCE.<sup>6</sup> Citing a text of Cicero's that outlines appropriate performance and guidelines for appropriate bodily comportment in order for an individual to be perceived as adequately masculine, Holmes ties the ideas presented in this ancient text to that of Butler, suggesting that both writers indicate that identities are created through acts.

The intent of Osborne's text directly addresses the "tyranny of the text" phenomenon that continues to dictate what is understood and promoted as appropriate or privileged methodology for those who seek to create historical narratives about classical antiquity.<sup>7</sup> Simply the primary intention of the text, to explore and establish history written on the Greek body, as opposed to a history of the Greek body, marks a significant and subversive shift in methodology. In order to achieve their analytical goals, Osborne puts visual evidence at the center of the investigation. Further, Osborne calls into question the relationship between art and text and orders a recontextualization (or is it revisualization?) of the Athenian speaker, emphasizing that we must know the appearance of the speaker in order to frame our understanding of discourse and to create our own discourse based on the evidence at hand. In short, Osborne demands that we must "give them back their bodies."<sup>8</sup>

Finally, Alberti indicates that the incorporation of queer is an especially political move as it seeks redress in reaction to a perceived shortcoming or myopia of a particular discourse. Not only does queer have recuperative aims, but it is also a step toward a new epistemology. Both texts examined here acknowledge the political implications of their conclusions and both



writers call for further research using the kind of analysis and methodology they have taken up in their respective investigations.

In a text that comes off as an extended combination of a literature review and state of the field essay, Holmes traces both changing and consistent politics of sexual difference as they emerge in the forty years of scholarship that address the intersection of antiquity and feminism. Holmes argues that “how ancient Greek texts have shaped our thinking about the gendering of politics is inseparable from the contemporary politics of gender.”<sup>9</sup> Using Holmes’ assessment, the role of historians and history is political, by nature, for investigations that seek to trace changing social conceptions and social factors can shed light on why certain social attitudes exist and provide necessary context for these ideas. Queering the history of antiquity is necessary to uncover and denaturalize social processes that, in part, have been transmitted to contemporary times through a cultural relay that links antiquity to present day.

Near the end of the text, Osborne asks the reader to consider the following: “in what way is our story of Athenian political, social, and religious life going to be different if we work with a body of the visual arts, rather than with the body of texts?” Osborne does not explicitly answer this question for the reader but instead allows the reader to come to their own conclusion, and recognize that visual evidence should receive the same privilege that written sources traditionally have, or perhaps, acknowledge that a hierarchy of source materials is obsolete.<sup>10</sup> Osborne puts forward that what Athenians said, in part, knowable through written sources, is not the same as what Athenians did or were able to do; ultimately, a variety of sources must be considered to develop any kind of coherent understanding of the classical Greek body.

I hope to have built a case that argues that these texts are representative of a queer approach to the creation of a historical narrative. Alberti’s assessment of what makes queer history is just one example of how scholars have typified the integration of a queer approach in the study of antiquity or of history more generally. Additionally, I hope to have shown the extent to which the idea of “the tyranny of the text” is a considerable and persistent issue within disciplines that address antiquity. It could be argued, given more space and time, that while it approaches written evidence in novel ways, Holmes’ text continues this phenomenon. Additionally, both writers here represent contributions to the investigation of ancient sexuality, what Holmes calls some of the most “rigorous, sophisticated, probing research on classical antiquity.”<sup>11</sup> As the proverbial



dust settles, there comes forth the ability to move past categorical binaries that have bound inquiry and analysis that have emerged in the last forty years. The challenge is to resist narrowing, thereby maintaining queer's critical edge.

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<sup>1</sup> While recognize this analogy is entirely reductive, it is also helpful in outlining the political initiatives of the bodies of theory I name here:

feminism:androcentrism::queer:heteronormativity.

<sup>2</sup> Brooke Holmes, *Gender: Antiquity and its Legacy* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012), 2.

<sup>3</sup> Holmes, *Gender: Antiquity and its Legacy*, 75.

<sup>4</sup> The notion that gender is performative is a significant aspect of queer theory proposed by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* that builds from a critique of Foucault's idea of self-fashioning.

<sup>5</sup> Robin Osborne, *The History Written on the Classical Greek Body*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 21.

<sup>6</sup> Holmes, *Gender: Antiquity and its Legacy*, 115.

<sup>7</sup> Admittedly, this issue of the 'tyranny of the text' persists far outside historical narratives of classical antiquity.

<sup>8</sup> Osborne, *The History Written on the Classical Greek Body*, 230.

<sup>9</sup> Holmes, *Gender: Antiquity and its Legacy*, 179.

<sup>10</sup> Osbourne, *The History Written on the Classical Greek Body*, 216-17.

<sup>11</sup> Holmes, *Gender: Antiquity and its Legacy*, 109.



## **Ace of Hearts**

Darian Cantón

For an Ace<sup>1</sup> like me,  
first base is sliding into  
warm pleasantries.

For an Ace like me,  
second is reaching in the air,  
waving from afar.

For an Ace like me,  
third is sprinting through  
conversations until the sun rises.

For an Ace like me,  
home is grasping, clutching,  
but only hugging goodbye.

People say I'd just strike out  
since he doesn't want to go the distance  
for an Ace like me.

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<sup>1</sup> Ace: A shortened form of the word “asexual” which is a sexual orientation that is the lack of sexual attraction or feelings. The phrase “Ace Umbrella” is to represent the wide spectrum of asexual identities and experiences.



## **Always Already: Becoming a Trans Ally**

Maria Cruse

This entry will include an introduction of myself, context of this journey, the complexities of allyship, and why the journey is “becoming.” My name is Maria Cruse, senior, undergraduate student at Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, Washington. I am majoring in Women’s and Gender Studies and minoring in Music. My journey of becoming a trans ally began while taking a class called, “Intro to Transgender Studies.” This space has become a community of learning, growth, and confronting challenges. My peers and I were assigned to program for Transgender Day of Remembrance (November 20<sup>th</sup>). We decided to implement our programming throughout Trans Awareness Week. We provided information on trans history, made a gallery of trans individuals who have passed in the last year, and invited our campus peers to work towards gender justice.

For the trans gallery, my peers and I printed twenty-five photos of trans individuals from around the world. These photos were accompanied by personal narratives to show the humanness of these individuals, without presenting a victim’s only image of these people. My peers and I also provided some paper and pens, so that the PLU community could express their thoughts after walking through the gallery.

After the first day the gallery was up, our class had received some very constructive feedback about it. This feedback was voiced from a transgender student. To note, all of my peers in the course, including myself, identify as cisgender. Some of the feedback that this transgender individual provided was that the gallery was sub-par quality and did not represent stories of transgender individuals well. This student also called to attention other institutional concerns regarding gender-nonconforming needs on campus, such as gender-neutral bathrooms. Once our class received this feedback, we had a debrief session to examine our missteps in the creation of the gallery, acknowledged our privilege, and figured out ways to move forward with our last day, which consisted of “taking action.”

Taking into account this feedback, our class thought of ideas of how the execution of the gallery could have gone better, such as making the elements of the gallery better looking in appearance, and include that structural institutions is a factor in transgender violence. One aspect of the project that we were going to do as well, was to ask (survey) trans



individuals how they would've liked to see Trans Awareness Week at PLU envisioned. These two steps would have made the project's execution have more respectful and meaningful impact to the PLU community.

The above mentioned missteps are ways that being an ally of any sort can be messy and complex. Ally means, "to join (yourself) with another person, group, etc., in order to get or give support" (Merriam-Webster). Within a social justice lens, ally refers to someone not in the same marginalized group (ex: cisgender) who serves as "support" for a marginalized individual (ex: trans). This example above functions on one axis of identity, but an individual can be an ally of many other identities as well. The term "ally" gets thrown around very often while doing social justice work and something I learned recently changed my perspective about what it means to be an ally. Dr. Leticia Nieto, professor of psychology at St. Martin's University, stated at the Seattle Race Conference 2015 that marginalized individuals name allies, allies don't name themselves. This statement made me think about "ally" differently because if allies took this approach, there probably wouldn't be as many allies self-identifying as that. This approach requires individuals to be invited to be allies. Being invited to be an ally, and not automatically calling oneself an ally, opens up many possibilities for new ways of allyship work. If our class had received trans individuals' perspective about the project before we began, I think this would've been an illustration of Dr. Nieto's approach to ally work. I say this because, even though in that moment, we may have not gotten the stamp of "you're an ally now", but by working together, instead within our own privilege, it would have been an experience of collaboration. This collaboration would have expanded our class's knowledge more about trans individuals' needs on campus as well as how they would like their story told. Collaborating is an essential tool in allyship work because it recognizes and puts the voice of the marginalized group first, instead of privileged individuals.

To end, I'd like to clarify and explain the title of this piece as it relates to the journey of becoming a trans ally. "Always Already" is a term coined by French philosopher Jacques Derrida which means that something is in motion. The term "becoming" is similar to this because it refers to the process of which something or someone is doing. It does not allude to a complete end or finish of something. I titled the piece "becoming" because my journey of trans ally is something that is continuously occurring. It is a journey that is ever winding, non-static, and one that I relearn and unlearn things that contribute to my growth as an ally. In the case of this project, I unlearned not to insert myself into this work without acknowledging



privilege and relearned the importance of that. So next time you're doing any type of ally work, take a minute to step back, acknowledge privilege, and navigate how to use that privilege to ensure that the impact of your work is positively thoughtful, respectful, and reaches the mission of your work.



## **The Able and the Sexual: Representations of Disabled Women and Their Sexuality in Bollywood, in the Purview of Social Justice**

Abhimanyu Acharya

The model for social justice based on recognition claims to acknowledge the different minorities in terms of race, class, caste, ethnicity, disability, gender and sexuality. Barbara Hillyer, in her book "*Feminism and Disability*", argues that to take account of and validate the lives of women with disabilities, feminists must reassess many of their views, including notions of bodily integrity, dependence/independence and care.<sup>1</sup> One way to reassess their value system would be to note media and film representations of disabled\* women and engage in active discourse about it.

Films have the means and power to shape and modify the collective conscious. India has the largest film industry in the world, making over 1,250 feature films and large number of short films every year.<sup>2</sup> Most of these films give in to standard formulaic representations of the disabled, perhaps for commercial purposes. It is a subject that demands to be treated with sensitivity and intelligence. Atanu Mohapatra explains, "the depiction of disability in Hindi Cinema swings primarily between two extremes – pity, mockery, caricaturing, sympathy, and heroic representation are at one end of the spectrum while discrimination, emotional swings and aspirations of the human soul are at the other end."<sup>3</sup>

Sex has remained a taboo subject, and women's sexuality has always been a matter of anxiety in our patriarchal structure of society. Women's sexuality is not talked about, it is suppressed, and whenever it is expressed, it comes with its set of connotations. In such society, to address the subject of disabled women's sexuality is exceptional.

In the present paper, I wish to analyze the way in which disabled women's sexuality is treated in Bollywood. For that, I have divided the paper in two parts. In the first part, I shall give an overview of different films that deal with this subject. In doing so, I shall point out the usual tropes which are employed to maintain and reinforce certain stereotypes and myths. In the second part, I shall analyze the film '*Margarita with a Straw*' and show how this film is different from its predecessors in terms of its politics and treatment. I will also point out how '*Margarita with a Straw*', though it subverts certain norms and challenges typecast, maintains some



stereotypes and raises questions in terms of its narrative. In conclusion, I shall indicate that active participation and engagement of feminist-ableist discourse in media representations like films is desirable to create a social justice model based on recognition.

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The major typecasts that can be associated with disabled characters in Bollywood include: Disability as a form of punishment, as a subject of pity and dependence, as a comic interlude, and as a form of heroism.

Most of the films made in Bollywood are male-dominant, and focus on the impairment of men. Movies with disabled women characters in Bollywood are rare. Whatever few characters that we find are portrayed in a problematic manner. In a world bank report entitled “People with disabilities in India: From commitments to outcomes”, in a section called “Attitudes towards disability and people with disability”, one finds the following passage on gender representations of disabled people in Bollywood:

In Bollywood (...) men with disabilities feature far more often than women with disabilities. Second, men with disabilities are often loved by a devoted woman without disabilities (as in Saajan), whereas women with disabilities are rarely loved by men without disabilities (...) Third, women with disabilities almost never attain economic self-sufficiency. While male stars with disabilities may not be very wealthy, they can attain such independence. Finally, the disabilities that women are portrayed with are very rarely ones that impact their physical appearance, so that they largely remain beautiful.” (People with disabilities, 2009)

The disabilities of women portrayed in film often do not harm their appearance; it has become a standard pattern in Bollywood to have a disabled character that is good looking. This does not mean that if a film is made, for instance, about a blind person, she should necessarily be portrayed as ugly, but it is the standard notion that Bollywood heroines ought to be beautiful. Heroines are objectified, and their beauty is seen as one of the elements that help the film commercially.

In Bollywood, initially, disabled women mostly featured as marginal or trivial characters. The other visible representation is that disability of women is cured due to the aid of the hero, in films like Anuraag (1972), Jheel ke us paar (1973), Sunayna (1979) and Neelkamal (1984). Then, films like Koshish (1972) and Khamoshi (1998) featured a disabled couple,



and their combined struggle with life. The sexual dimension of the characters is not addressed in any of these films. Clearly, the stereotypical notion of disabled people as non-sexual beings is at play here. The more recent phenomenon in Bollywood, where disabled characters are not subjects of pity or sympathy, deals with a different set of questions.

Films like *Lafangey Parindey* (2010), *Fanaa* (2006), *Guru* (2007), *Black* (2005), and *Barfi* (2012) fall into this category. These films do not show disabled women characters devoid of sexual urges, but they are definitely problematic in other spheres. For example, *Lafangey Parindey* shows a blind girl who wins a dance competition despite her disability- but only with the help of a male protagonist who trains her to dance using her listening skills. The film is a romantic love story, with a kissing scene in it. It does not deal with the issue of sexuality directly, but it saves itself by not showing the characters as non-sexual. In Bollywood, Kiss has remained a tricky element because it is more often read as a romantic marker of love than that of eroticism or passion. As Joyojeet Pal notes, “The film ends on a note that not only suggests that the rectification of disabilities is largely at the will of the individual, but more importantly, that the path can be revealed to the weak woman by an enlightened man willing to mete out some tough love.”<sup>4</sup> Similar representations can be seen in *Fanaa*, where a blind woman gets pregnant by a man without disabilities, or in *Guru*, where a “normal” man marries a girl suffering from multiple sclerosis for love. In *Guru*, however, it is not easy to tell love from sympathy, which is, again, problematic. The representation is such that one would see the man’s choice as an act of charity more than that of love. Perhaps a little more nuanced depiction of disability can be seen in Anurag Basu’s *Barfi*, but this film too confirms the discomfort attached with disabled women’s sexuality. The film has three major characters, out of which, Barfi and Jhilmil are disabled, and Shruti is without disabilities. Barfi is shown to be romantically involved with both Jhilmil and Shruti. He shares a kiss with Shruti but behaves in a childlike fashion when with Jhilmil who is depicted as a person devoid of sexual desires, despite her efforts to look more “feminine” in order to dazzle Barfi. In the film, Barfi treats Jhilmil as non-sexual, as a child, and Barfi’s point of view becomes the audience’s point of view. We look at Jhilmil only from his eyes, and not otherwise. But in fact, Jhilmil’s efforts to look more feminine to dazzle Barfi confirm the existence of her sexual self, which is very conveniently ignored.

The most famous and perhaps the most remarkable film about disability in Bollywood is Sanjay Leela Bhansali’s ‘*Black*’. It is a story of Michelle McNally who is born blind and deaf. She lives in her “black” world, until



her teacher, Debraj Sahay, teaches her words and how to express them. It has been hailed for its sensitive portrayal of a disabled person and is considered an archetype for films about disability. It is also a film in which a disabled person expresses her sexual urge. The film has been critiqued for its depiction of the power dynamics as well as the representation of the sexual urge of the disabled character. Dr. Anita Ghai, a disability scholar, examines the sexual/power relations of the film: "The deaf-blind student asks her teacher for a kiss, he can't handle this and leaves, and she sadly concludes, 'maybe I've asked too much from life?' How is asking for a kiss asking too much from life?"<sup>5</sup>

Her teacher tells her "*shayad tumhe sharik pyaar kabhi na mile* (Perhaps you might never get physical love in your life)", and then kisses her, as if in charity. Pushpa Naidu notes, "Debraj's masculinist control of Michelle's uncontrolled behavioral expressions as well as a momentary exploration of sexuality reifies the ableist discourses and attitudes that remain uncritiqued in the film."<sup>6</sup> The film ends on inspirational note, with Michelle graduating and being successful in her endeavours. The way the film glorifies a disabled character and puts her on a pedestal, while reinforcing the lack of possible expectations of physical fulfillment, calls for criticism.

The films that we talked about so far feature disabled women as protagonists, and these films have created certain false notions about women's disability and sexuality which are clearly the product of heteropatriarchy. One falsity perpetuated by these films is that disabled women must depend upon the charity, sympathy or help of a man, and the misleading portrayals of disabled women as either non-sexual beings, or of having their sexuality expressed only in heterosexual terms is another myth or falsehood. These films also establish blindness as a standard Bollywood disability; and strengthen the idea that a successful relationship is possible only if both the persons involved are disabled. Disability of women is ignored or considered a matter of lesser importance even by feminists, and this calls for reflection.

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'*Margarita with a straw*' deals with a young, college going student's sexuality. The protagonist is Laila, who is impaired because of cerebral palsy. From watching porn to asking a shopkeeper for a vibrator to making out with her disabled friend Dhruv, we can see Laila in pursuit of her sexual self.



Certain scenes in the movie itself are critiques of the problematic attitudes towards disabled people. Laila showing her middle finger to the lady who gave their band first prize because the lyricist (Laila) was disabled clearly portrays the complexity of attitudes towards disability. Another instance in the film that calls attention to this issue is when Dhruv sarcastically tells Laila: “*Normal logo ke sath dosti karke tum normal nahi ho jaogi* (Being friends with Normal people won’t make you normal)”. This could be read as disabled people not letting other disabled people forget or reconcile with their impairment. It also indicates how normalcy is constructed as an aspiration point, and how everyone is compelled to aspire to be ‘normal’.

This shows how the film does not glorify the disabled characters, but in a very sensitive manner, is able to point out that they too are flawed, just like any of us. The film succeeds in its portrayal of disability in that it does not mock or undermine the inadequacy of the characters, nor does it put them on a pedestal and make them heroic. It also captures Laila’s struggle to find love. Initially, she has a crush on Nima, who is very popular in her college, but who is not disabled and does not feel the same way for Laila. The film shows her crying to her *Aai*, saying “*muje koi pyaar nahi karta* (No one loves me).”

She leaves India, and goes to New York for higher studies, where she is attracted to a blind girl called Khannum. They get into a relationship, and they make love. Here, another myth is broken as the film portrays sexuality not just in heterosexual terms. The notion of a magnanimous man coming to the rescue of a disabled woman is shattered. However, things are more complicated than they seem because Laila wants to make love to someone ‘who can see her’. She cheats on Khannum by making love to another man. Khannum’s reaction to this is important. She says: “So by fucking you, he made you feel normal!” The viewer can read Khannum’s remark as a critique of those who try to “normalize” disabled people by treating them in a certain manner. One can also read it as Khannum, who is hurt and jealous, trying to remind Laila of who she thinks Laila is. The film does not evoke pity or sympathy for them as “the two disabled characters”, nor does one feel awe or hatred. Instead, we find them completely relatable.

As Mihir Fadnavis points out, “Are these both women in a relationship with each other because men don’t find them attractive or desirable? Is Laila heterosexual forced to be in a homosexual relationship due to her disability? Can disability only be accepted by disability?”<sup>7</sup> In the film itself,



Laila is shown getting physical with two men. Regarding her sexual orientation, we find out that she is bisexual towards the end of the film. She is not forced to be in a lesbian relationship. Rather, she herself wishes to explore her sexuality, and a relationship with Khannum seems a part of that exploration.

However, Laila being shown in a serious relationship only with another disabled person seems problematic as it reinforces the Gandhari complex stating that one *has* to be disabled to be with another disabled person. On the other hand, it challenges the notion of such a relationship being successful because the relationship fails. The film loses steam in the second half, when the track of Laila's Aai having cancer assumes the center stage. With her Aai's death and Khannum leaving her, Laila is completely dependent on herself. Laila's reconciliation with her own self is shown in such a way that the movie "succumbs to doing exactly what it had avoided previously- become maudlin."<sup>8</sup>

It seems as if the film deliberately tries to shift focus from the uncomfortable issue of a disabled woman's sexuality to a more acceptable and melodramatic scenario of a mother having cancer. Here, it plays on sentimentality, perhaps for commercial purposes.

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It is desirable that disabled women are also recognized in the mainstream feminist discourse. Feminist theory and disability studies have explicated how certain norms are constructed and imposed regarding bodies and sexuality, and digressing from these norms marks an abject status by identifying certain individuals as abnormal. Although Laila falls into this category, we do not see her as "abnormal" or the "other". The film shows her struggling with her impairment and her queer self, but does not highlight it in an obvious manner. *Margarita with a Straw* deals with disability and sexuality without making it a unique selling point of the film. Such sensitive representations in mediums like films will have a huge effect on the collective conscious, which would, in turn, help in creating and sustaining a model of social justice which is based on the politics of recognition, where, as Nancy Fraser puts it, "assimilation to majority or dominant cultural norms is no longer the price of equal respect"<sup>9</sup>



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<sup>1</sup> Tremain, Shelley. "Feminism & Disability." *Canadian Woman Studies* 13.4 (1993).

\* I am aware of the more politically correct term 'Differently-abled', however, most of the citations used in this paper use 'disabled', and therefore, for the sake of convenience, I have used the term 'Disabled'.

<sup>2</sup> "Citizen Charter, Central Board of Film Certification."

[Http://cbfcindia.gov.in/html/citizencharter/Citizen\\_Charter\\_new.pdf](Http://cbfcindia.gov.in/html/citizencharter/Citizen_Charter_new.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Mohapatra, Atanu. *Asian Journal of Multi-dimensional Research*. 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Pal, Joyojeet. "Physical Disability and Indian Cinema." *Different Bodies: Essays on Disability in Film and Television* (2013).

<sup>5</sup> Ghai, Anita. "Bollywood: Fantasy and Reality." *Bollywood: Fantasy and Reality*. Web. 2011. <http://www.disabilitynow.org.uk/article/bollywood-fantasy-and-reality>

<sup>6</sup> Parekh, Pushpa Naidu. "Gender, disability and the postcolonial nexus." *Wagadu* 4 (2007)

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END

