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Introduction

J. Javier Torres-Fernández

The last few decades have seen a dramatic transformation in terms of the representation of LGBTIQ+ identities and experiences in US popular culture. This space stands as a contested site for queer visibility and cultural negotiation. The special issue at hand, *LGBTIQ+ Representations and Media in US Popular Culture: Exploring New Directions, Challenges and Queer Heritage*, reviews this changing landscape. The contributors question how queer lives and their identities are portrayed, celebrated, commodified or erased in contemporary media and examine how these representations echo with and trouble the legacies of queer history and heritage.

Representation, however, is not just a matter of being seen. Beyond simply reflecting reality, queer media builds possibilities, enabling imaginative projections of lives lived otherwise. The case of US popular culture draws attention to how such representations are commodified to capitalist frameworks, where visibility becomes a place of marketable conformity rather than a space for radical difference. The five essays in this special issue question what kinds of futures such portrayals sustain and what alternatives they obscure. In this line, our contributors critique how queer representations in media destabilize norms, where failure, marginality or disruption become acts of defiance against purely designed stories of progress. In addition, visibility is not merely about inclusion but carries a political charge with it. Judith Butler's work on performativity and recognition provides a critical lens for exploring this. Butler argues resistance emerges from "a space of appearance" (2016, 14). Given that visibility has the potential to disrupt normative frameworks and create conditions for resistance, we must pay close attention to it as it opens queer subjects to new forms of scrutiny. This issue explores how representation can simultaneously empower and constrain, validate and marginalize.

A question at the heart of this special issue is that of queer heritage, particularly its fragility in a cultural context often driven by forward momentum. The amnesia that arguably haunts queer history, erased lives, silenced voices, and forgotten struggles, is not accidental. For queer communities, this inheritance is often partial, fractured by stigma and systemic neglect. The essays included here insist on engaging with this heritage not only to preserve it but also to challenge contemporary narratives that favor sanitized or simplified histories over nuanced truths. Finally, representation entails an ethical and political dimension. How are queer lives made visible, and to what end? Imogen Tyler's

Stigma: The Machinery of Inequality, offers a framework for understanding how representation, even under the guise of inclusivity, can perpetuate systems of inclusion. Tyler argues that "stigma operates as a form of power" (2020, 191) through which hierarchies of value are naturalized, which draws us to how the contributors of this special issue explore the ways in which US media negotiates these structures, asking whose stories are told, who tells them and who is left out.

Leonardo Cascao opens the special dossier with "'We will be citizens': Affect and Citizenship in Representations of the AIDS Crisis" examining the affective portrayals of the 1980s HIV/AIDS epidemic in the United States through Mike Nichols's adaptation of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* (2003) and Ryan Murphy's adaptation of Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart* (2014). Cascao argues that during a period of governmental neglect of a deadly, unknown virus, art served as a critical medium for representing activist and social movements that advanced the fight against AIDS and reshaped public perceptions.

"The Closet Door Is Open: Coming Out (Or Something Like It) in Contemporary Celebrity Culture" by Peter Marra follows with an exploration of the evolving dynamics of celebrity coming out in contemporary US culture, using Billie Eilish's perceived outing as a case study. Drawing on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet*, Michel Foucault's will to knowledge and related theories, Marra examines how coming out operates within the modern media landscape.

Gloria Lizana-Iglesias writes the third essay, "An Identity Problem: Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) in HBO's *Euphoria* (2019)," where she examines HBO's *Euphoria* (2019) through Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, highlighting how the show challenges binary gender norms and compulsory heterosexuality. Focusing on characters like Nate and Cal Jacobs, Lizana-Iglesias explores how hegemonic masculinity and patriarchal expectations regulate identity and desires.

Martín Praga, with "'LOL, let's just put that all together!': Socially Engaged Humor in the Poetry of Tommy Pico," delves into queer Indigenous poet Tommy Pico's innovative use of humor in socially engaged poetry. Pico's epic series confronts issues such as loneliness, homophobia, eating disorders, and cultural erasure, blending biting wit with serious critique.

Closing the special issue, Emilie Buckley's "'I mean, who isn't gay?': An Exploration of Queer Performativity in the TV Series *What We Do in the Shadows*" addresses the FX series *What We Do in the Shadows* through the lens of queer performativity and Gothic studies, exploring how its vampiric characters subvert heteronormativity and the straight gaze. Drawing on the works of Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Buckley questions themes such as chosen families, material culture, and queer relationships. The articles in this special issue move across a range of cultural texts, from television and film to digital platforms and literature, to unpack how LGBTIQ+ representation functions as a

place of both resistance and compromise. Together, they explore the ongoing challenges of representation while celebrating the resilience of queer culture in forging new directions. This special issue invites readers to engage critically with the intricacies of queer visibility, to reflect on the heritage we carry forward, and to imagine more expansive futures for queer media and life.

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"We will be citizens": Affect and Citizenship in Representations of the AIDS Crisis[1]

Leonardo Cascao

Abstract

This article analyzes affective representations of the 1980s HIV/AIDS epidemic in the United States taking Mike Nichols's adaptation of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* (2003) and Ryan Murphy's adaptation of Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart* (2014) as case studies. Looking into affective representations in these works, I argue that throughout a period of government inaction towards an unknown and deadly virus, art was a means of engaging with and representing the activist and social movements of the time that further propelled the fight against AIDS and aimed at changing public perceptions. These portrayals of the epidemic pose questions of belonging and acceptance, which allows to explore and understand broader notions of citizenship, such as affective and intimate citizenship.

Keywords: affect; intimacy; citizenship; *Angels in America*; *The Normal Heart*.

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1. Adaptation and the Visual: The (he)Art of Movi(e)ng People

This article analyzes representations of queer intimate relationships when faced by challenges imposed by HIV/AIDS, exploring how these relationships parallel queer attachments to the nation. It does so by looking at art as a means of engaging with social movements that further impelled the fight against AIDS and aimed at changing public perceptions. Despite not always having large circulation or means of production—such as the support of large studios, publishing houses or theater productions—different authors from the mid-1980s, such as Larry Kramer (*The Normal Heart*, 1985), William H. Hoffman (*As Is*, 1985), Harvey Fierstein (*Safe Sex*, 1987), into the 1990s, the case of Cheryl West (*Before It Hits Home*, 1991), Paula Vogel (*The Baltimore Waltz,* 1991), Paul Rudnick (*Jeffrey*, 1992), and Tony Kushner (*Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*, 1993), turned to drama to reveal something deeper and more fractural about the scourge

[1] This article was supported by the Luso-American Development Foundation (FLAD) and the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT: 2023.03317.BD).

of the epidemic on people's individual lives and relationships. Many affects and emotional charges are brought forward in these representations in a way that does not rely simply on sentimentality but that conveys the complexities of emotional and intimate experience.[2] When mentioning affects, I am adopting Theresa Brennan's notion that one person's affective charges, as well as the energies these entail, can permeate another (2004, 3).

As Michel Foucault makes clear in *The History of Sexuality*, sexual relations can be the site for changing power relations. Foucault claims that this change in power relations through sexuality can happen when the attention to sex is not repressed (Foucault 1978, 8). I follow the Foucauldian notion that attention to language and representations of intimacy can help extract political meanings from narratives. In turn, Nancy Armstrong argues that "the history of the novel cannot be understood apart from the history of sexuality" (1987, 9), meaning that written representations in domestic fiction allowed the modern individual to become an economic and psychological reality. Hence, the written representations of intimacy and desire made way for a conceptualization of identity that relied on more than predetermined novelistic conventions. This study aims at exploring if and how these concepts can be applied to other social groups and narrative forms through the reading of affects at play. There are two main visual narratives upon which this article is built: *Angels in America* (2003) directed by Mike Nichols, a television series based on the play by Tony Kushner (1991), and *The Normal Heart* (2014), directed by Ryan Murphy, a television film based on the play by Larry Kramer (1985). These works stand as ideal case studies given that both focus on queer relationships set against the backdrop of the AIDS epidemic, rendering visible the hindrance of queer attachments to the US, and conveying very strong affective and intimate representations which engage important questions in US culture, such as, the visibility of queer relationships and whether these are considered valid; the value of queer lives and the association of illness with what were perceived as 'deviant' lifestyles; who has the right to adequate healthcare and what is worthy of investment in research, and why; and, ultimately, who are first-rate and second-rate citizens?

Both teleplays for *Angels in America* and *The Normal Heart* were adapted by the original authors, and both are critically acclaimed, award-winning works.[3] This, along with their presence in television accounts for their popularity among viewers. Also,

[2] In this article the use of the term intimacy is not meant to be exclusively synonymous with sexual intimacy, but encompassing of different kinds of personal relations, such as the case of caregivers, family, and friends, allowing space to elaborate on a broader context that expands the concept of citizenship from a legal-based perspective.

[3] *Angels in America*, which had previously won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama and the Tony Award for Best Play when it opened on Broadway in 1993, won the Emmy Award for Outstanding Miniseries, with ten additional wins in other categories, in 2004. *The Normal Heart* won the Tony Award for Best Revival of a Play in 2011 and went on to win the Emmy Award for Outstanding Television Film in 2014.

through adaptation to television, Kushner's and Kramer's plays can reach larger audiences, even nowadays, due to technological advancements and remote access to content on streaming platforms.

Another reason to examine the adaptations of the plays instead of focusing on the original texts, is my belief that there is much to be gained from the visual component of film, and therefore television, when theorizing affect. Recently, Darragh Greene and Graham Price have elaborated on emotion in film, discussing the affective turn in American cinema. According to these authors: "some filmmakers have anatomized emotion and human relationality on screen in a variety of sophisticated ways via their deployment of various aesthetic, philosophical, and psychological tropes (Graham and Greene 2020, 2). This echoes Virginia Woolf's early considerations of the medium, regarding how "cinema has within its grasp innumerable symbols for emotions that have so far failed to find expression" in other mediums (Woolf 1926, 309).

Practically speaking, the act of watching a film or a play is different, too. Of course, the brain and the mood adjust to the circumstance of being in a cinema or a theater (or at home), but when watching a film or television series the whole action is equidistant to the viewer, much more than it would be when watching a play. According to Lynne Joyrich: "TV has has had an intensely political history; as a domestic medium, located in the home, it has long provoked concerns about its influence on politics, social dynamics, and cultural values as well as its impact on the more minute politics of everyday life, personal relations, and intimate relationships" (Joyrich 2013, 133). Hence, the study of adaptation for television is relevant, as the audience that watches these works is, most likely, watching at the nucleus of their intimacy. These features, along with the creation of sets (streets, apartments, vehicles), visual and sound effects, and soundtrack help the viewer *merge into* instead of just *looking at* the unfolding narrative and characters on screen. Specifically for narratives that depict HIV/AIDS, the visual component is important due to the focus it allows on the body—that is the case with the visual representation of skin lesions associated with the illness, known as Kaposi Sarcoma (KS), which were one of the first visual markers of the illness.

A particular case for the importance of film for affective visualization is the nuance of emotion that the actors can bring to the characters, which, in performative terms, is generally more subdued. The actor Ian McKellen claims that this is a crucial difference between acting on stage and on film, because on film "the camera is very like somebody just in the room with you", whereas in theater the audience is not "engaged in the action of the play. They are there only to be an audience who listens and a spectator who watches" (McKellen 1981, n.p.). In other words, there can be greater intimacy in the engagement with the viewer through filmic narratives, which is important for this analysis. As Linda Hutcheon (2006) argues, the different media and genres that stories are transcoded to and from in the adapting process are not just formal entities as they represent

various ways of engaging audiences. They are, in different ways and to different degrees, all "immersive," but while some media and genres are used to tell stories, others show them (xiv).

Still, it is important to look at the films with tools that allow the viewer to critically engage with the works, especially as these are focused on a specific community under the very complex circumstances of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Rosemary Hennessy (1995, 31) warns against the risks of queer visibility in commodity culture ("a process that invariably depends on the lives and labor of invisible others"), whilst pointing out important positive effects, in which "[c]ultural visibility can prepare the ground for gay civil rights protection; affirmative images of lesbians and gays in the mainstream media (...) can be empowering for those of us who have lived of our lives with no validation at all from the dominant culture" (Hennessy 1995, 31). Hence, looking at queer narratives as forms of queer representation attempts to disrupt heteronormative hegemonic representations.

The characters represented in *Angels* and *The Normal Heart* experience what Lawrence Grossberg calls "everyday alienation", something which is different from other more common experiences: "things are not the way [they] want or expected them to be" (2015, 103). This perspective complements Susan Sontag's considerations on the potential of art to be "an instrument for modifying consciousness and organizing new modes of sensibility" (2018, 40). Hence, the processes of identification with the characters and the issues in the narratives can result in the creation of affective common ground both for those who relate to the representations on screen and for those who see the narratives as something that depicts 'the Other'; in this case, 'the Other' as someone defined in opposition to what is the perceived norm, i.e., the non-heterosexual, the queer, or even the non-healthy. Affective visualization of these works can foster an affective atmosphere between different groups.

2. Affective Affordances: Looking for Relational Potentialities

Although one of the main focuses of these narratives is centered around affective relationships, their dealing with the notions of identity and social politics makes way for these concepts to be explored regarding their influence on the experience of citizenship. Affect is not merely a descriptive narrative tool; affects are political and, as Grossberg claims:

> affect functions as the energetic glue that attaches subjects to objects and experiences, that stitches bodies and subjects into formations and organizations of social (rather than individual) experience; it provides the stickiness that binds relations together into larger and larger spaces, each with its own sense of coalescence, coherence or consistency. Affective organizations and formations can become sites of struggle. (2015, 107)

Hence, I will examine how both narratives depict the gay community's struggle in the US, and how the characters' experience of citizenship is affected by their 'intimate

troubles' and hindered by their affective (dis)connection to the nation-state. Through their narrative strategies and attention to language, strengthened by their visual component, these works raise consciousness to issues that the gay community continuously faces and that are here exposed at a fractural period in the fight for gay rights. Nowadays, in Western societies HIV is no longer equivalent to a death sentence, but there is still a stigma—often associated with moral connotations—surrounding it. Consequently, the representation of these experiences in media and culture is important to prevent cultural amnesia surrounding HIV/AIDS that furthers stigmatization. According to Jeffrey Escoffier: "[t]he epidemic provoked a devastating crisis—one that was political, cultural, and sexual. For homosexual men, AIDS was a historical trauma that shattered the experience of sexual freedom and disrupted new patterns of identity and community" (2011, 129).

Undoubtedly, visual works like *Angels* and *The Normal Heart* are in themselves activist pieces of art. As a site of activism, the engagement of these narratives with the cultural imaginary of the US results in a continuous production of social meanings that does not allow the fight for equality to subside and allows for the extension of the notion of citizenship—hence my considerations on affective and intimate citizenship as well.

As Gregg and Seigworth (2011) have said, there is not a "single, generalizable theory of affect" (3), something that can be pointed as a shortcoming but that represents a prospect for discussion and development in research and critical thinking. Gregg and Seigworth's works on affect follow the reflections on affective phenomena as originally elaborated by Baruch Spinoza in 1667, and its later interpretation by Gilles Deleuze in 1968, who placed the generation of affect in the relations between bodies and worlds. The relational aspects of affect were essential to the use of affect studies by feminist, and subsequently queer readings of the theory. Scholars such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Lauren Berlant, Sara Ahmed, and Deborah B. Gould, among others, have reclaimed the body to center-stage as container and vessel of transmission of affective charges and helped dilute the barriers between the private and the public spheres by focusing on the everyday experience and the effects that continuous and enforced social practices have on disciplining bodies willing to traverse the norm.

Spinoza stated that "[n]o one has yet determined what the body can do" (qtd. in Gregg and Seigworth 2011, 3), hinting at the potential of the body as quite an unknown field from which many theories could arise. According to Gregg and Seigworth:

> At once intimate and impersonal, affect *accumulates* across both relatedness and interruptions in relatedness, becoming a palimpsest of force-encounters traversing the ebbs and swells of intensities that pass between 'bodies' (bodies defined not by an outer skin-envelope or other surface boundary but by their potential to reciprocate or co-participate in the passages of affect). (2, italics in the original)

Hence, affects at play are always bouncing off one another's bodies; one *affects* and in turn *is affected*. As Berlant notes, the potential in the attention to emotional and affective

experience is that it does not require substantial likeness between individuals to generate empathy and attentive collective care through ethical practices (2012, 86-87). The selected works portray the gay community as a collectivization of individual bodies with shared identity aspects, under a specific set of circumstances. This collective body comes together in facing the deadly and unknown disease, forming an affective community as it encounters allied forces. These works appeal to the audience through the representation of sensitive topics that merge marginality and basic civil rights, tangled in the weaving of human relationships. It is important to explore the intricacy between the representations of these relations and the meanings from the shared experience of watching these films.

The affective visualization of the works enables the comprehension of the cultural processes behind the representation of the social connections on screen. Depictions of gay experiences are inevitably representations of expressions of intimacy within the community, and the freedom of the community to fulfil intimate desires against the social *status quo*—that of heteronormative relations. Members of the gay community see the potential of their bodies, or the collective body, limited by the reinforcement of the heterosexual norm, and they are constricted to action within certain parameters that may or may not encompass the recognition and validation of queer relationships, queer affects, and, ultimately, even the value of queer lives (Cascão 2023, 7). The boundary separating the intimate from the public realm becomes unclear. It is necessary to consider the importance of alternative narratives to the norm as means of resistance against heteronormativity as the only valid affective form, so that alternative modes of living and loving cease to be seen as a threat to the social order. Works like *Angels* and *The Normal Heart* aim to be counternarratives that expose the value of alternative modes of life, whilst denouncing the social and political work that needs to be done to minimize discrimination and effect normalization. The focus on the affective charges of the visual narratives endows the viewers with tools to make sense of them through the portrayal of relational dynamics and the observation of collective atmospheres. The audience will also grasp how the relations and modes of living represented on screen make space for the normalization of different forms of relationships and expressions of intimacy. Therefore, interpreting these narratives invested in affective and emotional visualization allows one to become attentive to the spectrum of affects displayed in these dynamics, and hence fulfil the potential for the cultivation of collective affective ground. As Berlant states, "[i]n attending to, representing, and standing for these alternative modes of being, we seek to provide new infrastructures for extending their potential to new planes of convergence" (2012, 88). These new infrastructures help make sense of new experiences and social relations, developing in a particular context. Along with the representations of intimacy, other affects are common to the two works, such as grief, shame, and, of course, love in its different manifestations.

3. Can There Be Angels in America? Affective Representations in Queer Stories

Film is an emotional medium of storytelling, as stated in the first section of this article. In the selected works, the interactions and emotional representation between the characters aim at giving visibility to a disenfranchised community in the wake of an unknown and fatal illness. The affective turn in film studies allowed for the appearance of multiple threads of academic work that converged from multidisciplinary fields inspired by feminist and queer theory, and literary and cultural studies. Hence, an affective visualization of film can help the viewer see beyond the aesthetic components of the work. It must not be seen as a reduction to empathy but as a way of strengthening the viewer's gaze and activate their sensibility to what is shown and told on screen.

Consider the opening of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*. The story begins in October 1985 and revolves around an ensemble of characters that are all connected in some way or another. If experiencing intimacy amid living with HIV/AIDS is one of the main themes of the plot, the entanglement of that struggle with the individuals' confrontation with social, religious, and political issues reveals the blurring lines between what may be deemed a private or a public concern.

The series opens with the funeral of Sarah Ironson, an American Jewish. As the Rabbi speaks, his words create a collective atmosphere in a sermon that links Sarah's personal history with that of her community, dissipating the frontiers of where the individual ends and the collective begins, as he reflects on how he is able to know Sarah through the history of her community:

> I do not know her and yet I know her. She was… (*he touches the coffin*) … not a person but a whole kind of person, the ones who crossed the ocean, who brought with us to America the villages of Russia and Lithuania—and how we struggled, and how we fought, for the family, for the Jewish home, so that you would not grow up *here*, in this strange place, in the melting pot where nothing melted. Descendants of this immigrant woman, you do not grow up in America, you and your children and their children with the goyische names, you do not live in America, no such place exists. (…) You can never make that crossing that she made, for such Great Voyages in this world do not any more exist. But every day of your lives the miles of that voyage between that place and this one you cross. Every day. You understand me? In you that journey is. (Nichols, Ep. 1, 00:03:40—00:05:46)

From the Rabbi's eulogy, the quest of belonging, and what that means in the US, stands out and starts the narrative. Gradually, it will become clear that the great voyage for the characters in *Angels* will not be one of a geographical kind but the great voyage for acceptance, for the feeling of belonging and coming to terms with oneself and with others. The complete title of the original play is *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*. The title engages with the idea of national issues seen and delt with from the gay community's point of view, dwelling on how the national themes—religion, race, health, politics—shape gay experiences. The opening scene sets the tone for this continuum of the national *versus* the personal and starts to dilute the boundaries between the

public and the private. In the Rabbi's speech about the journey of the ancestors that still lives within people to this day, we can draw a parallel with the quest for belonging, for citizenship, that queer people aim at in US society, just as their ancestors sought full belonging and citizenship. Albeit the circumstances and the protagonists of the journey have changed, the aspiration to belong remains, not necessarily through assimilation but to feel and be regarded as a first-rate citizen. Hence, the America portrayed is no longer a destination but rather where the voyage constantly takes place, in each of its citizens.

The subsequent representations on *Angels* bring to screen the fight against a deadly epidemic and the pressure that such epidemic puts on intimate lives, already marginalized in so many social and political ways. We witness Joe Pitt, a Mormon man married to a woman, Harper, being ridiculed by his mother, Hannah, a very strict Mormon, when he comes out to her.[4] We witness Harper's realization of the lies that her marriage to Joe is built upon and face the fact that her emotional problems are exacerbated by the insecurity in her marriage and the lack of intimacy and affection. We witness a bedridden but raging Prior, visibly scarred from AIDS with noticeable skin lesions in his face, being left by his lover, Louis, whose fear of the physical aspects of this illness is too overwhelming to stand by his side. The visual representation of the emotional hardships and struggles of these characters is key to enable the viewers to understand the multi-layered difficulties that are synonymous with the epidemic, and often, with queer relationships. In these scenarios, the audience is affected by the relational dynamics on screen, and through the fostering of affective recognition they take part almost as a third element in the visualisation of the scenes.

The Pitts' intimate problems show that those who follow the rule of enforced heterosexuality in the US can be prone to failure, too, and that queer people or those who embrace alternative ways of life are not the only ones who fail to realize the nation's idealization of family values. Joe is adamant in not admitting such failure. When Harper confronts his sexual orientation, Joe's despair in concealing that aspect of his life transpires:

> Joe: Stop it. I'm warning you. Does it make any difference? That I might be one thing deep within, no matter how wrong or ugly that thing is, so long as I have fought, with everything I have, to kill it. What do you want from me, Harper? More than that? For God's sake, there's

[4] Twenty years after the theater premiere of *Angels in America,* Marcia Gay Harden, who originated the role of Harper, considers that *Angels* is a moment when "there is a synchronicity with art and a mission of illuminating the human condition," reminiscing about young gay men who would take their parents to watch the play and then come out to them as gay (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yFiJAI13SiQ—Accessed March 11, 2024). Ellen McLaughlin, who originated the role of Angel, recalls one Mormon audience member that came to the actor playing Prior and said "Everything in my training, every school that I've been too, the Mormon church, at home, everybody has trained me to hate you. And I love you." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sGSETCmLOYw—Accessed on March 11, 2024)

> nothing left, I'm a shell. There's nothing left to kill (...) All I will say is that I am a very good man who has worked very hard to become good and you want to destroy that. You want to destroy me, but I am not going to let you do that. (Nichols, Ep. 1, 00:50:12)

Thinking in parallel of an infection like HIV/AIDS, Joe tries to find a cure for his condition by killing a hidden part of himself, his true sexuality, restrained by the imposed heteronormativity at both socio-political and religious levels. When Joe demonstrates his refusal to face his true sexual orientation, we can see a representation on screen of Lauren Berlant's concept of 'cruel optimism'. According to Berlant, all attachments are optimistic even if they don't feel optimistic, as the connection to an object of desire represents the promise of something and being close to that object furthers the feeling of being close to the fulfilment of such promise. Consequently, "cruel optimism names a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or too possible, and toxic" (Berlant 2011, 93). The cruelty then is that the subjects cannot endure the loss of their object of desire, even though possessing this object may negatively affect their well-being; losing the object signifies losing what it promises (either realistically or not) and makes the subject question their certainties and ideologies. For Joe, leading a heteronormative lifestyle is the cruel object of desire and embracing his homosexuality and being honest about it with his wife would mean being farther away from the promise of achieving his object of desire.

In the opening scene, Kushner connected one individual casualty with a collective experience. Similarly, *The Normal Heart* gives visibility to the collective casualties caused by HIV/AIDS, not only through the historical allusions to the increasing numbers of deaths as the years passed by, but through the specific representation on screen of gay grief. Gay grief gets its specificity from being a form of feeling or an emotion that is not permitted to be fully experienced. As Ahmed (2014) explains:

> Queer histories tell us of inescapable injustices, for example, when gay or lesbian mourners are not recognized as mourners in hospitals, by families, in law courts. (...) As such, homosexuality becomes an 'ungrievable loss', which returns to haunt the heterosexual subject through its melancholic identification with that which has been permanently cast out. (155)

This melancholic identification that Ahmed refers is where the affective appeal to larger audiences works, alerting to the need for normalizing queer relationships whose lack of equal rights is a constant throughout life. For "the failure to recognize queer loss *as* loss is also a failure to recognize queer relationships as significant bonds, or that queer lives are lives worth living" (Ahmed 2014, 156.) This argument pairs Grossberg's claim that "different groups have available to them different possibilities for how they might be located within and occupy such affective modes of living" (2015, 109).

In *The Normal Heart*, we see doctors refuse to examine patients and declare a cause of death. We see patients put into garbage bags, dumped in the alley like trash. We see dehumanization of death as casualties are not recognized by the authorities, nor are they

provided with a dignified funeral. Echoing Ahmed's words, it is as if the lives represented on screen are devoid of meaning or value—closer to be considered disposable lives.

4. "Cardboard tombstones bound together with a rubber band": Shared Grief, Community and Citizenship

A particularly successful visuality of grief and the claim of visibility to HIV/AIDS victims in *The Normal Heart* comes through the character of Tommy Boatwright and his collection of Rolodex cards at a friend's funeral:

> Tommy: I have this tradition. It's something I do now when a friend dies. I save his Rolodex card. What am I supposed to do? Throw it away in a trashcan? I won't do that. No, I won't. It's too final. Last year I had five cards. Now I have fifty. A collection of cardboard tombstones bound together with a rubber band. (Murphy, 1:15:30)

The collection of cardboard tombstones keeps growing as the narrative progresses, displayed in Tommy's desk drawer, multiplied into smaller groups of Rolodex cards, each with a name and other personal details, representing another life lost. This visual strategy intends to have impact by naming victims and showing on screen how the ravage of the virus quickly decimated so many lives. It conveys that if a Rolodex card with someone's personal details would not be thrown into a trashcan, much less should a human body be disposed in an alley. The film ends with shots of bound up Rolodex cards piling up in Tommy's desk drawer. By delving deeply into the theme of death, visually representing hospitalized patients, funerals and grieving friends, families, and lovers, both *Angels in America* and *The Normal Heart* function as sites for affective prodding on the viewer.

But how does the process of affective visualization engage with the notions of affective and intimate citizenship? First, it is important to establish some distinctions. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, for example, defines citizenship as the

> relationship between an individual and a state to which the individual owes allegiance and in turn is entitled to its protection. Citizenship implies the status of freedom with accompanying responsibilities. Citizens have certain rights, duties, and responsibilities that are denied or only partially extended to aliens and other noncitizens residing in a country.

At the same time, citizenship is defined as a relation among individuals who share common identities, integrating personal identity with nationality. As Lauren Berlant argues:

> [P]eople are asked to love their country, and to recognize certain stories, events, experiences, practices, and ways of life as related to the core of who they are, their public status, and their resemblance to other people. This training in politicized intimacy has also served as a way of turning political boundaries into visceral, emotional, and seemingly hardwired responses of "insiders" to "outsiders." (2007, 37)

Both works deal with questions of identity—individual and collective –, social and emotional belonging, and relations of race, gender, class, and sexuality by addressing intimate issues in a political and public way. As mentioned, affective visualization makes

way for an emotional connection between the viewer and the object, with the viewer sometimes *merging into* as opposed to *looking at* the characters on screen. These works can foster processes of identification and thus create a sense of belonging, which engages with the notions of affective and intimate citizenship. Indeed, these concepts of citizenship gain relevance with these films, as we can explore how national and political issues impact on intimate aspects of people's lives, and how they affect people's participation in the political sphere. Alongside the issues of discrimination towards the queer community and the health crisis caused by the epidemic, the works deal with political action in the US during that period, and with the representation of fictionalized versions of real people and real activist organizations that gained power from collective mobilization.

Regarding collectivization, it is important to consider narrative imagination and storytelling as affective collectivization occurs not just through identification with but also through affective recognition of 'the Other.' Martha Nussbaum argues that some moral and social concerns benefit from being expressed in the form of a story: "[c]itizens cannot relate well to the complex world around them by factual knowledge and logic alone" (2010, 95). Moreover, through "a wide range of narratives [we] must learn to identify with the lot of others, to see the world through their eyes, and to feel their sufferings vividly through the imagination" (2010, 40). Through engagement with works of literature and art, such as film, our connection towards another becomes activated by affective resonance and processes of identification. In turn, to be able to experience full citizenship, one must be accepted by society and have the right to be seen and represented, too. Here, we can establish a link with Judith Butler's thoughts on resistance as emerging from the vulnerability of being seen: "we are first vulnerable and then overcome that vulnerability, at least provisionally, through acts of resistance" (Butler 2016, 12). These television works then provide a representation of what happens when the citizens' basic needs are not met: they are left without support as the infrastructure on which people depend on is, in fact, not there for them (Butler 2016, 13). The feeling of belonging is strengthened by gaining access to more platforms of representation that can engage processes of identification and affective ties to those who relate to or connect with those representations.

Affective visualization can thus generate an emotional connection between the viewer and the art object and this emotional connection, shared by multiple viewers, allows for the creation of an affective community that shares an affective attachment to the same cultural objects. This ideology is aligned with Veronika Zink's argument for the creation of affective communities, as it "focuses on sensual infrastructures of social encounters and on modes of affective exchange that make up the fabric of the formation and transformation of the social" (2019, 289). Affective communities are based on emotional solidarity, an organic process sensitive to the dynamics of social movements that contrast the image of a persistent social body, and thus they are able to generate collectivization and open a space for the integration of alien communities. We can then see an affective

component in the conventional understanding of citizenship as a rights-based political membership of the individual with the state. Thus, it may become easier to understand how affect and emotion are employed as mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion, as these categories can reinforce difference and differential treatment. Due to differences in religion, race, sex, gender, or class one individual may be perceived as a "quasi" or "technical" citizen whose belonging to the political community remains in question despite legal citizenship (Ayata 2019, 330). When that occurs, additional affective and emotional efforts must be performed to confirm rightful belonging. Hence, bearing in mind the concept of affective citizenship is helpful to understand what is necessary beyond legal concerns in order to partake in the full experience of citizenship. As I see it, when the individuals' political spheres and social rights are limited due to intimate aspects, the affective connection with the nation-state is hindered and herein lies the connection between the concepts of affective and intimate citizenship.

The concept of intimate citizenship is useful in alerting to the necessity of public discourse around intimate issues in the private life of individuals. According to Ken Plummer, the concept looks at the decisions people must make regarding the control, or lack thereof, over one's body, feelings, and relationships, as well as their access, or lack thereof, to representations, relationships, public spaces, and equal opportunities. Intimate citizenship is rooted on socially grounded choices, if choice is a possibility, over identities, gender experiences, and erotic experiences, not implying one model, one pattern or one way (Plummer 2003, 13).

The autobiographical aspect of Larry Kramer's work allows for his engagement with AIDS activism and social movements to transpire and renders visible some of the work behind the social collectivization in the fight against the virus and in trying to provoke a governmental response. Through his alter-ego, Ned Weeks, we can see the struggle to fully fit in with his companions throughout the entire film, even when he funds Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC)[5] to reach out to people and political representatives, looking for research funding. Kramer's art is part of his activist work, which, following Engin Isin's theory, can be regarded as an act of citizenship: an active rather than passive form of participation that break with "social-historical patterns" (Isin 2008, 2). According to Isin: "[i]f people invest themselves in claiming rights, we are told, they are producing not only new ways of being subjects with rights but also new ways of becoming subjects with responsibilities, since claiming rights certainly involves 'responsibilizing' selves" (2008, 1). Ned's outspokenness is not well-accepted by his friends, as his views are often considered to be another attack on the queer community; something that echoes Kramer's own

[5] This non-profit volunteer-supported and community-based organization, that was the first service organization for HIV positive people, still exists under the mission "End AIDS. Live Life" (https://www.gmhc.org). Kramer was also a founder of the group ACT UP, in 1987, committed to end the AIDS crisis (https://actupny.org).

backlash. As Kushner explains in his introduction[6] to Kramer's work, this choice for representation was susceptible to criticism from radical queer theorists who believed that approximation to prescribed monogamic relationships (akin to the enforced heterosexual form) are another form of assimilation and subjugation of the community. However, Kushner's interpretation is that "Kramer is telling us *we must save ourselves*. He is forcefully reminding us that being the object of hatred for millennia will make any subject hate her- or himself" (Kushner 2011, xxii).

Much like Kramer, Ned wants the gay community to fight, engage politically, and to take sexual precaution and responsibility. To Ned, it is evident from the start that the fight against HIV/AIDS must depend on the community, as he tells Bruce "We have to do something. No one else will." (Murphy, 00:12:26). Although gay and lesbian movements originated with the sexual revolution, the public sphere debate over sex was not mainly concerned with non-heterosexual identities.

While writing provocative articles that urge gay men to come out, fight back prejudice and claim space in the public sphere, thereby claiming responsibility upon the community, Ned keeps meeting obstacles in this struggle, something that the meetings at the GMHC make evident. When preparing invitations for a charity event to support funding for the organization, Ned puts "The Gay Men's Health Crisis Committee" as the return address on the envelopes, but the group believes that the envelopes should contain just the initials of the association, as the word 'gay' will jeopardize the cause and even harm the reputation of the men receiving those envelopes in the mail. Still, the event is successful and the GMHC raises more money than any other gay group ever in New York. This event, showing the involvement of the gay community in the fight against AIDS, takes the form of a dance where men can dance together in a safe space. As Ned dances with his partner Felix, he says: "Imagine if we had this when we were young, no fear, no shame" (00:45:38), while Billie Holiday's "The Man I Love" plays in the background, sung by an all-gay men choir.

The work of the GMHC is explored throughout the narrative and that allows for greater visibility of the activist work that generated from the HIV/AIDS outbreak. The arts, whether dramatic, literary or visual and musical movements, can have a prominent role in the activist fight and shine light on the social issues at hand. Douglas Crimp stated that within the arts there is the assumption that cultural producers could respond to the epidemic in only two ways: by raising money for scientific research and service

[6] In 2013, Kramer joined *Angels in America* playwright Tony Kushner, during the run of New York Historical's exhibition 'AIDS in New York: The First Five Years'. They discussed Kramer's legacy and the enduring relevance of *The Normal Heart*. Coincidently, the program took place on the day the US Supreme Court struck down the Defense of Marriage Act, a major step on the way to marriage equality. (https://behindthescenes.nyhistory.org/history-home-larry-kramer-tony-kushner-normal-heart/—Accessed March 12, 2024)

organizations or by creating works that express human suffering and loss (1987, 3). With *The Normal Heart*, Kramer responded in both ways, and his characters depict the difficulties in the campaign for raising awareness and money for scientific research. Crimp goes on to say that "[a]rt is what survives, endures, transcends; art constitutes our legacy" (1987, 4), and Kramer's art and activism have indeed endured and materialized as part of the Gay Rights Movement to this day.[7]

Kramer's writing reveals struggles within the community in the attempt to balance the fight against AIDS with holding the ground that the Gay Rights Movement had gained thus far. As incremental pieces of evidence pointed to sexual transmission, the prescription for the gays to "cool it off" and the impositions of sexual restraint were met with resistance as the gay community struggled to face the fact that the sexual freedom they had been fighting for was the cause of their demise. "Cooling it off" would give a larger margin to moralists in assuming that gays were the ones to blame for the virus, again enforcing views of a moral disease whose only responsibility belonged to the gay community. This is vocalized by the character of Mickey, who worked in the city's Department of Health, a job threatened by Mayor Koch's office after denying support to the GMHC:

> Mickey: You think I am killing people?
> Ned: That is not what I said.
> Mickey. It is, you've said it! I've spent 15 years of my life fighting for our right to be free and to make love wherever, whenever, and you're telling me all those years of what being gay stood for is wrong and I'm a murderer! We have been so oppressed, don't you remember? Can't you see how important it is for us to love openly without hiding, without guilt? *(voice breaking)* Why can't you see that? (Murphy, 1:27:16)

What could initially be seen as resistance for the sake of sexual freedom alone is later made explicit as resistance and refusal to hide and assume a guilt they did not have, since they had fought for equality for so long.

During this breakdown, Mickey says: "I used to love my country" (01:26:19). I will begin to conclude this article by drawing a parallel between this and another scene from *Angels.* In the latter, a character named Belize, who is an African American nurse, former drag queen and Prior's best friend, talks to Louis about his thoughts on the US, shaped by his experience:

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[7] Though Kramer's activist work is more notorious and evinced in the representation of the GMHC in *The Normal Heart*, Kushner's work has been inspiring too, namely, after the death of Matthew Shepard, 21-year-old student who was brutally attacked in Wyoming and died. Protesters from the Westboro Baptist Church, incited by pastor Fred Phelps, picketed Shepard's bearing signs with homophobic slogans. Allies dressed as angels to block the protesters. (https://www.matthewshepard.org—Accessed on July 2, 2024) Angel Action was repeated in 2018 after protesters invaded the funerals of the victims of the Pulse massacre (https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/orlando-nightclub-massacre/angels-quietly-block-westboro-protesters-orlando-funeral-n595311—Accessed on July 2, 2024).

> Belize: Big ideas are all you love. America is what Louis loves. (…) I hate America, Louis, I hate this country. Nothing but a bunch of big ideas and stories and people dying, and then people like you. The white cracker who wrote the National Anthem knew what he was doing. He set the word 'free' to a note so high nobody could reach it. That was deliberate. Nothing on Earth sounds less like freedom to me. You come with me to room 1013 over at the hospital, Louis, I'll show you America. Terminal, crazy and mean. I live in America, Louis. I don't have to love it. You do that. Everybody's gotta love somethin'. (Nichols, Ep. 5, 00:39:01)

This interaction comes off short in a miniseries that spans over six hours, but from it we can infer on the different levels of affective attachment to the state that derives from different levels of privilege even within the gay community, such as differences that arise from being a white cisgender man or a black man, as well as a healthy or sick person, in which those less privileged are often further alienated. These differences align with Suzanna Danuta Walters's views on how multiple markers of difference shape people's identities in profound ways. In Walter's words: "[q]ueer men, queer women, and now the visible category of queer transgender people often remain in separate worlds, with their own politics, culture, and language that mark them as different both from other queers and from the rest of US society" (Walters 2006, 146). The distance between what is one's nationality and a true feeling of belonging is represented in both *Angels in America* and *The Normal Heart* in how the characters' affective disconnections with the US are shown to come from their hindered experiences of citizenship.

Still, it is fundamental to point out that the marginalized experiences that are portrayed in both works still account only for the relationships of white, cisgender, homosexual men. In their claim for attention, these accounts exclude the representation of Black and Latinx people with AIDS, as well women and trans women with AIDS.[8] Indeed, in these works, women are crystalized as beings that are free of disease; even the titular Angel of Kushner's work, albeit nonhuman, is played by a woman.

Despite the works' shortcomings, both Kushner and Kramer aimed at calling attention to the community's problems, and affective attention can help foster connections and involve partial citizens in a more concrete feeling of belonging and a more fulfilling experience of citizenship. As Ken Plummer argues, "[f]or would be citizens, telling sexual personal stories about 'their rights' and establishing 'communities of support' is a crucial part of [the] process" (Plummer 2003, 56)—the process of attributing rights but also responsibilities. In the closing remarks from *Angels*, Prior breaks the fourth wall and addresses the audience directly, looking into the camera and saying: "This disease will be the end of many of us, but not nearly all, and the dead will be commemorated and will struggle on with the living, and we are not going away. We won't die secret deaths anymore. The world only spins forward. We will be citizens. The time has come" (Nichols,

[8] According to Douglas Crimp, in 1987 54% of the people with AIDS in New York City were Black and Hispanic: www.jstor.org/stable/3397562—Accessed July 2, 2024.

Ep. 6, 01:07:18). The monologue is addressed directly at the audience, creating a dialogic relation and aiming at a direct connection. At a time of extreme crisis, when governmental and institutional action were faltering, through the creation of these narratives, these authors and artists were able to find a form of making a stance on the value and visibility of queer lives.

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The Closet Door Is Open: Coming Out (Or Something Like It) in Contemporary Celebrity Culture

Peter Marra

Abstract

Contemporary celebrity culture embodies a dissonant tension between a want to end the social demand to "come out" and a hypervigilant culture of digital surveillance via social media that looks for traces of outness. Such that during a recent red carpet interview Billie Eilish describes how she did come out, need not come out, does not believe in coming out, and, later, was outed. This article utilizes Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* and Michel Foucault's "will to knowledge" to explain how the closet works in contemporary celebrity culture. It outlines a successive chronology of celebrity coming out genres beginning with Ellen DeGeneres' influential TIME magazine cover and continuing through deviations from this modern standard that trend toward more obscure and indirect expressions over time. It concludes that the contemporary closet door is best understood as "open," meaning that nonchalant transparency is coveted, and yet personal interiority remains vulnerably put on display for scrutiny. This results in modern celebrity coming outs taking the form of puzzling incoherence, to the extent that whether a coming out has occurred is unclear, and viscerally direct statements seemingly designed to quell inquiry and accusations of queer baiting.

Keywords: celebrity, queerness, coming out, closeting.

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In the 2023 *Variety* Power of Women cover story, singer/songwriter Billie Eilish was credited by the publication with "coming out" via remarks she made about being attracted to women. Eilish said about women: "I love them so much. I love them as people. I'm attracted to them as people, I'm physically attracted to them. But I'm also so intimidated by them and their beauty and their presence" (Katcy 2023). At the Power of Women event that occurred two weeks following the cover story's release, a *Variety* reporter followed up with Eilish during a red carpet interview and asked, "Did you mean to come out in this story?" Eilish responded: "No, I didn't. But I kind of thought, 'Wasn't it obvious?' I didn't realize people didn't know. I just don't really believe in it. I'm just, like, 'Why can't we just exist?'" (Thompson 2023). Despite her initial suggestion that "coming out" was itself passe or unneeded, Eilish went on to describe it as "cool" and yet simultaneously as

something that creates nervous feelings for her. She said, "But I saw the article, and I was like, 'Oh I guess I came out today.' OK cool. It's exciting to me because I guess people didn't know, but it's cool that they know, but ooh, I'm nervous talking about it" (Thompson 2023). In an Instagram post following the event, Eilish described the in-person interview as an "outing," a term commonly used to describe a disclosure of identity made without permission. She posted: "thanks variety for my award and for also outing me on a red carpet at 11 am instead of talking about anything else that matters i like boys and girls leave me alone about it please literally who cares" (@billieeilish, December 3, 2023). Three years prior to the *Variety* story, Eilish's femme-centric dance video for her single "Lost Cause" elicited accusations from fans that the star was "queer baiting," a term that has become used to describe the lucrative cooption and mass marketing of queer sexuality by those not (or not known to be) queer (Bryony 2021, Kelly 2021). Eilish then posted to Instagram the ambiguous phrase "i like girls" (@billieeilish, June 10, 2021), which prompted speculation by news sites that she intended to confirm a queer identity with the post, though no certainty formed in the public consciousness about the message's intent at that time (Robledo 2021; Barglowski 2021).

1. Opening the Closet

The timeline of events surrounding Eilish's perceived public coming out reflects a fractured understanding of the historical situation of the closet. One so dense and varied that Eilish seems to suggest at once that she was out, need not come out, did come out, and was outed. All of which are feasibly true. In *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick laid the groundwork for our contemporary understandings of how the closet has and continues to function. In it, she relays among many accounts, the case of Acanfora, an eighth-grade earth science teacher who in 1973 was transferred to a non-teaching position in Montgomery County, Maryland after the Board of Education learned he was gay. When the teacher sued, the federal district court upheld the Board of Education's decision, claiming that he brought undue attention to himself and his sexuality that would obstruct the students' education. An appeals court ruled instead that Acanfora had no standing to sue at all, citing his failure to disclose past involvement with homophile organizations which would have prevented him from being hired in the first place. Sedgwick offers here that Acanfora is found to have simultaneously shared too much about his sexuality and too little (Sedgwick 1990, 69–70). The contradictions located in cases such as this, and Eilish's, convey the multiplicity of meaning that the closet holds for queer people. Such that we may be seen at once as queer, closeted, out, avoidant, negligent, too silent, oversharing, deluded, ashamed, unremarkable, attention-seeking, too queer, not really queer, questioning, confused, or queer baiting.

This intricate overlap in comprehension of "the closet" and "coming out" has reverberated in subsequent scholarship probing the evolution of queer language and queer

life since Sedgwick theorized these terms. Scholars have wondered whether we have in fact reached a place "beyond the closet" (Seidman 2002) while others have instead posited new dynamics for language of queer disclosure, especially among queer youth (Guittar 2014; Morris and Sauntson 2007). These tensions demand further consideration of the divide between an expectation that the structure of the closet is "over," and the persistent demand in everyday queer life to engage with its legacy. Within contemporary US celebrity culture, stars find their existences more visible and commented upon through journalism and social media (Motschenbacher 2019; Hardie 2010). Scholars have critically considered the structure of the celebrity closet, offering language to describe public figures who resisted the basic binary of in/out or challenged the existence of a closet at all. Vincent L. Stephens describes a bowing of binary distinctions within the history of popular music wherein several major artists morph or distend the idea of the closet rather than neatly participate in the in/out binary. He calls this first "shaking the closet" (2010) and later "rocking the closet" (2019), noting the insufficiency of the term "closeted" to encompass the rich history of gender and identity performance in the work of Little Richard and Johnny Matthis, among others. Stephen contests the binarized idea that pre-Stonewall artists were innately closeted and instead outlines a range of "queering tools" that push and pull public perception in disparate directions. For example, the contrast between "self-neutering," or downplaying discussions of one's own romantic and sexual relationships to fit within hetero norms, and "self-enfreaking," or "playing the freak" as a form of audacious self-expression that challenges masculine gender norms (Stephens 2019, 12–19). Nicholas de Villiers additionally notes the limitations of the term "closeted" as applied to the work of queer authors and cultural celebrities such as Michel Foucault and Andy Warhol (2012). de Villiers posits "opacity" to think through the resistance of these figures to the typical confessional structure of closet discourse. "Opacity" here means "an alternative queer strategy or tactic that is not linked to an interpretation of hidden depths, concealed meanings, or a neat opposition between silence and speech" (de Villiers 2012, 6). Rather than valorizing hegemonic notions of "transparency," de Villiers instead offers opacity as a productive site of contestation which resists the notion of sexual secrets.

These theories of the closet as a gradient rather than a binary build upon Eve Sedgwick's argument that coming out does not only (or even most often) take the form of direct statements such as "I am gay." Sedgwick acknowledges that what constitutes a speech act of coming out is uncertain and may vary depending on context. For example, she offers an anecdote wherein two friends, a man and a woman, describe how despite her knowing of the man's sexual relationships with men, she did not understand him to be out until he relayed to her that he had come out to someone else. Thus, transparency about queer sexual relations did not seem to suggest to her that he was out, but his account of coming out did (Sedgwick 1990, 3–4). Additionally, Sedgwick's work invests in

the disruption of binary thinking. In terms of gender and sexuality, this means that binary distinctions between homosexual/heterosexual are themselves less rigid than commonly believed. However, it further expands to other distinctions, including the perception of being out/in regarding the closet, and importantly asks readers to see enmeshed overlap as a feasible means to understand the complexities of queer life. Sedgwick characterizes queerness as the "open mesh of possibilities" (Sedgwick 1993, 8) such that constructions of sex and gender, along with everything else, might be seen and understood to mean more than one thing at the same time.

Queerness represents for Sedgwick a decidedly unique category surrounding topics of disclosure. Notably, queer disclosures carry meaning for both the speaker and the listener. They invite the listener to investigate the self, questioning what the disclosure says about them: their gender, sexuality, social relations, and societal standing. This differs from other disclosures of identity such as disclosing that one is Jewish, for example. The listener in this instance does not wonder of themselves: "Am I Jewish?" It is this inquiry of the self that she says underlies the egregious historical practice of gay panic defenses, which make the case that a violent attacker had a reasonable moment of panic when interacting with a homosexual. This panic is rooted in self-evaluation, wondering if one might also be queer and be open (or seem open) to queer engagements. To understand the complex phenomenon by which queerness affects both the queer victim and their attacker, Sedgwick devises a theory of overlapping minoritizing and universalizing discourses. There is a queer minority, a category of individuals who self-describe as queer. However, queerness has an overlapping and simultaneous universalizing relationality to all people (Sedgwick 1990, 18–21). We all experience gender and sexuality. Societal norms about sex and gender affect more than just those who self-describe as queer.

Sedgwick's description of indirect and direct speech acts (uncertain as they are) and minoritizing and universalizing discourses (overlapping as they are) help us to better understand the complexities of contemporary US celebrity coming outs (or not coming outs) as was the case with Billie Eilish who did and didn't come out and was outed. This accounts for one half of the contemporary trend toward coming out's ever advancing obfuscation. The way we seem increasingly less certain amid diffuse statements across the internet as to whether any central act of coming out, addressed to us one and all, has occurred. So much so that Billie Eilish recounts that for herself she felt as though she had come out when she read someone describing her statements as coming out. One trend among contemporary queer celebrity culture has been toward more implicit remarks rather than direct and highly publicized statements. A trend that reflects a social move away from a rigid perception of out/in and toward a queered non-binary mélange of states of the closet. The social attitude Eilish signals when she says "I don't really believe in it" about coming out.

Simultaneously, we are finding our private lives ever more scrutinized and surveilled via the mass distribution of personal information, including images and videos, across social medial platforms. This latter, contradictory, urge away from the nonchalant feeling that coming out is no longer needed, can be better understood via what Michel Foucault calls the "will to knowledge," or a desire to detect and uncover queer identity as a feature of public life. (Foucault 1978, 11–13). For Foucault, this desire is intimately linked to the invention of the homosexual as an identity category in the late nineteenth century, which set the stage for a perceptive shift from thinking about queer sexuality as behaviors to indicators of homosexual identity. In Foucault's words, the medicalizing language which enshrined the homosexual as a category of sexual deviant created for them "a past, a case history, and a childhood … a secret that always gave itself away" (Foucault 1978, 43). This shift can also be understood through what Christopher Nealon describes as the "ethnic" model for understanding homosexuality as denoting "peoplehood" rather than seeing sex acts as individual and unrelated (Nealon 2001, 1–8). This understanding explains the public compulsion to know someone's sexuality, the want or belief that we bear traces of an underlying queer self to be discovered. Queerness is therefore something to be detected about someone, an identity from which all manifestations in speech and mannerism now follow.

In this article, I will use Sedgwick's theory of the closet and Michel Foucault's "will to knowledge" as foundational tools for understanding how coming out functions (or perhaps no longer does) in contemporary celebrity culture, expanding and altering these concepts to address the development of social media and conflicting urges to both erase coming out as a cultural practice and simultaneously scrutinize every expression for traces of coming out-ness. I will present a chronology of the modern US celebrity coming out, outlining three successive genres (Swales 1990, 45–58) by which to understand some methodological approaches to the act. These three coming out genres are not comprehensive and do not account for all forms of celebrity coming out. However, they feel prototypical of major trends and indicative of how coming out has morphed in celebrity public relations since the 1990s. I take Ellen DeGeneres' coming out via broadcast television event as a baseline for the modern US celebrity coming out and break down how subsequent iterations have moved away from broadcast genres toward narrowcast genres by decreasing the prominence of their placement and the explicitness of their messaging toward gradually quieter, nonchalant and niche media coming outs. I then outline a range of disparate contemporary strategies for celebrity coming outs and try to contextualize their varied approaches within a cultural logic that sees outness as unnecessary and yet everywhere all at once. In adding to discussions which linguistically frame the closet door as shaken/rocked (Stephens), opaque (de Villiers), or, as in the case of Suzanne M. Johnson, "revolving" (2008), I settled on the title of "open" here to emphasize both the perceived invitation for foraging social media has nourished and the vulnerability for the

subject to have their interiority set on display by the perceived invitation of the door ajar. A door left open suggests a casual act, a blasé "who cares?" yet the nosey voyeurs in each of us cannot help but peek inside. This seems to me to best describe our current moment of the closet as I unpack it here. A potent contradiction between wanting to casually exist and yet feeling constantly on display.

2. "The Ellen"

In the 1997 episode of the TV sitcom Ellen titled "The Puppy Episode," comedian/actress Ellen DeGeneres' eponymous character Ellen Morgan accidentally announces over an airport loudspeaker the infamous words "I'm gay." In its diegetic context, the act is a snafu. Ellen means to confess only to Susan (guest star Laura Dern) that she is gay. However, a misstep in the direction of a microphone turns this into public knowledge. In mass culture, Ellen (the actor) was also simultaneously coming out to the public. The character's snafu, which accidentally broadcasts an intimate moment to the entire airport, allegorizes DeGeneres' own broadcast model of disclosure. The April 14, 1997, cover of *TIME* magazine with DeGeneres front and center read in unquestionably clear bright red font "Yep, I'm gay." The folksy, affirmative language of "Yep" speaks to DeGeneres' comedy persona while also signaling her belief that she need reply to public scrutiny. While she, like many stars before and since, questioned the idea of the closet, she admitted that it loomed large over nearly every prior press appearance, stating "In every interview I ever did everyone tried to trap me into saying I was gay. I mean, I really tried to figure out every way to avoid answering that question for as long as I could" (Handy 1997).

DeGeneres' explicit statement and the accompanying media fanfare set a precedent for the modern celebrity coming out. It suggested that in 1997, a celebrity coming out was a major news event. It would be direct, indisputable. Not shyly, or implicitly suggested. It was a broadcast model for coming out befitting the age of broadcast television. She came out at once to all of America. Ellen Morgan instantly became the first gay lead character on US network television. A precedent that would pave the way for future television representation. However, Ellen would falter and be canceled the following season.

DeGeneres' style of coming out went on to be emulated as if it was a standardized procedure. In 2006, former *NSYNC group member Lance Bass appeared on a *People Magazine* cover which read plainly "I'm gay." In 2008, American Idol's season two runner-up Clay Aiken reiterated DeGeneres' affirmative headline with a *People Magazine* cover announcing "Yes, I'm gay." A consistent pattern among these statements is the tacit acknowledgement that the question has always, already been asked. Hence the affirmative "Yep" or "Yes." Bass' relationship with Reichen Lehmkuhl, a past contestant on the NBC reality competition series The Apprentice, received a fair share of tabloid speculation, especially via gay gossip blogger Perez Hilton, with articles dedicated to shows of intimacy between the two as slight as wearing articles of each other's clothing

(dubbed: "man sharing") ("YOURS, MINE & HIS" 2006, Advocate.com Editors 2010). Aiken had been similarly targeted with speculation after former Green Beret John Paulus gave an account of a one-night stand he had with Aiken to the *National Enquirer* (Admin 2008). Paulus further recounted the experience during an interview on The Howard Stern Show where he claimed to have DNA proof of the encounter in the form of a towel he saved after Aiken used it to wipe his ejaculate ("Show Rundown: February 9, 2006"). Stories such as these cement a creepily graphic level of observation and detection, seeking to uncover queer humans as if we were spies, or pod people in disguise.

Other actors who made such disclosures at this time did so with the direct acknowledgement that they felt urged to respond, despite complex feelings about the act itself. This includes Neil Patrick Harris' 2006 assertion in a statement to *People Magazine* that "it seems there is speculation and interest in my private life and relationships. I am happy to dispel any rumors or misconceptions and am quite proud to say that I am a very content gay man living my life to the fullest" (People Staff 2006). Gossip blogger Perez Hilton had sought to out Harris by publicly soliciting stories from men who had sexual experiences with him (Editors 2021). Actor T.R. Knight's awaited response, also via *People*, after being indirectly outed by tabloid reports that he was called a homophobic slur by co-star Isaiah Washington on the set of *Grey's Anatomy* stated, "I guess there have been a few questions about my sexuality, and I'd like to quiet any unnecessary rumors that may be out there. While I prefer to keep my personal life private, I hope the fact that I'm gay isn't the most interesting part of me" (People Staff 2006). These instances avow the demand to address public inquiry, whether implicit or explicit, felt by performers. Their want to "clear up" speculation, and simultaneously make transparent an identity already spoken about in whispers and gossip. Additionally, none of these has the luxury of being demur. As with Ellen Morgan accidentally amplifying her voice for all to hear, the trend was a direct and irrefutable statement of fact ("I am gay") made known to as wide an audience as possible.

3. "The Jodie"

While the experiences of actor/director Jodie Foster also include a persistent demand for disclosure, her public engagements with the closet reflect a renegotiation of coming out that popularizes more nuanced and indirect expressions. In 1991, Jodie Foster's face was one of several allegedly closeted celebs whose image appeared on posters plastered around New York City by queer activist group Outpost that read "Absolutely Queer" (Turque 1991). The action reflected a desperate want among queer activists for out, visible queer celebrities amid the tragic death and devastation of the AIDS epidemic. This desperation was fueled by a belief that if every queer person were out, it would dilute collective bigotry and discrimination by putting a more immediate, sentimental face (a relative, a friend) to queer pain for more Americans. Simultaneously, closeted figures such as New York City's mayor Ed Koch (Flegenheimer and Goldensohn 2022) were seen as uniquely

at fault for inaction around the threat of HIV/AIDS, as any intimation of queer allyship might tip their hand.

In September of 2008, Foster's likeness appeared on the cover of *Out* magazine accompanied by the text "The Glass Closet" (Musto 2008). The image reflected a belief that queer celebrities were living lives of semi-transparency. Foster was often seen and photographed with her then partner Cydney Bernard and their children. However, she resisted the media's plea for her to perform "The Ellen," the altogether irrefutable broadcast affirmation "Yep, I'm gay." The semi-transparency of "The Glass Closet" can be felt in the 2007 remarks that are often cited as Foster's first public acknowledgement of her partner, Bernard. During an untelevised breakfast event celebrating the *Hollywood Reporter*'s Women in Entertainment Power 100 at which Foster accepted the Sherry Lansing Leadership Award, she was quoted by press in attendance thanking "my beautiful Cydney who sticks with me through all the rotten and the bliss" (Hankins 2007). The statement marks a trend toward greater obscurity and less visible transmission of the coming out statement. Not a magazine cover stating "Yep, I'm gay" (i.e. a broadcast media event) but an untelevised and primarily anecdotal account of a statement of thanks to someone, we presume Bernard, named Cydney of indeterminate connection and relation. And while the remarks are seen as uniquely public, breaking Foster's history of not commenting, they are still only semi-transparent. Some news outlets stoked gay interests with headlines about Foster's statement (Warn 2007). Yet much of the wide-reaching mainstream coverage made no mention of it (Nordyke 2007; CBS News 2007).

The reverberations of "The Jodie" are felt in Matt Bomer's comparable remarks made at an untelevised event in 2012. Accepting the Steve Chase Foundation's New Generation Arts and Activism Award, Bomer made what were seen as his first public remarks acknowledging his partner Simon Halls and their children. Bomer was quoted saying, "I'd really especially like to thank my beautiful family: Simon, Kit, Walker, Henry … Thank you for teaching me what unconditional love is. You will always be my proudest accomplishment" (Out.com Editors 2012). Though there was no official broadcast of the event, audio and video recordings of Bomer's speech made their way to social media, indirectly preserving it in digital ink.

Foster's legacy of indirect coming outs is further solidified by her 2013 televised acceptance of the Cecille B. DeMille Award at the Golden Globes. Foster primed the audience for a big announcement, something people have wanted her to say for a long time. She then leaned into the microphone, taunting the audience with the allure of a direct "I am…" statement, only to defer the coveted ending with "…single." Foster then went on to assert, "there won't be a big coming-out speech tonight because I already did my coming out … in those very quaint days when a fragile young girl would open up to trusted friends and family and co-workers" (ABC News 2013). The speech acknowledges her two children and her now former partner, Cydney Bernard, by name. It is a coming out speech

in which Foster comes out by announcing that there will not be a coming out speech. She comes out by telling us she will not come out, that she already has. And yet, interestingly, her un-coming out, is perhaps regarded as her clearest and most widely broadcast coming out moment. Eight years later, amid the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021, Foster won the Best Supporting Actress Golden Globe and accepted from home wearing pajamas in bed with wife, Alexandra Hedison, and their dog. It is a strikingly casual moment, indicating the evolution of Foster's public life as well as a larger cultural trend toward nonchalant transparency.

4. "The Zachary"

Contemporary US celebrity coming outs have trended further toward concise disclosures made amid large public profiles, sandwiched discreetly within bulk text. This gives the statements an air of neutrality and nonimportance relative to prior magazine covers and televised broadcast announcements. *Star Trek* actor Zachary Quinto made his first press remarks about being gay as part of a 2011 profile published in New York Magazine titled "What's Up, Spock?" Nestled within a paragraph of text, Quinto was quoted on the topic of his recent performance in the Tony Kushner play Angels in America, a Pulitzer Prize winning work of queer drama about the subject of HIV/AIDS. Quinto stated: "As a gay man, it made me feel like there's so much work to be done" (Wallace 2011). While the statement would go on to be reposted in articles touting Quinto's interview as a coming out (US Weekly 2011; Reuters 2011), the original article does not frame itself as such, nor does it emphasize the remark more than any other within the body of text. Statements such as this cultivate an initial niche appeal. They are to be stumbled upon by readers of a publication invested enough to consider the lengthy text. They are not headlines, just copy. And yet, celebrity media outlets report and share such statements as if they were as widely and intentionally broadcast as the classic Ellen cover of *TIME*.

A subsequent statement of similarly quiet initial scope was Sam Smith's first remarks regarding their inspiration for their debut album In the Lonely Hour being about unrequited love for a man in a 2014 cover story of music magazine *FADER*. They explained that "In the Lonely Hour is about a guy I fell in love with last year, and he didn't love me back" (Robertson 2014). Smith's sexuality had been carefully managed in their public image up until this point. The music video for their breakout single "Stay with Me" did not visualize the object of the song's request to "stay," showing only Smith sitting in an empty bed. The video for the follow-up hit "I'm Not the Only One" told a story of infidelity between a heterosexual couple played by Dianna Agron and Chris Messina. The 2015 video for "Lay Me Down" was the first to irrefutably showcase a man as Smith's love

interest. Although, admittedly, even in this context the lover was deceased and shown only in flashbacks.[1]

Frank Ocean migrated "The Zachary" to personal social media in 2012 when, on the eve of the release of his album channel ORANGE, he posted a block text statement about the album's inspiration on the blog site Tumblr. Included within the text were the statements "4 SUMMERS AGO, I MET SOMEBODY. I WAS 19 YEARS OLD. HE WAS TOO … IT WAS MY FIRST LOVE. IT CHANGED MY LIFE" (Frank Ocean 2012). Though the message directly addresses his audience on Tumblr and is signed casually "-FRANK," as if a direct and private correspondence, the simultaneity of Tumblr's public availability allowed for the proliferation of Ocean's speech act. Therefore, his statement about artistic inspiration to fans was widely reposted as a universal coming out. Publicly visible social media often feels as though we are speaking to a finite network of followers and friends, yet it can be accessed, reposted, retweeted, and turned into a massively visible public artifact. This duality speaks to the shifting landscape of celebrity coming outs, one that seems at once to be about nonchalance (the push away from coming out at all) and a hypervigilant scrutiny (the feeling that every aspect of the social should be accessible to the masses).

5. New Directions

The overlapping chronology of these loosely shaped celebrity coming out genres "The Ellen" ⇢ "The Jodie" ⇢ "The Zachary" helps us understand a nuanced but progressing sea change away from broadcast announcements toward narrowcast announcements or un-announcements. Contemporary queer disclosures have entered a unique stage of simultaneous vagueness and overt directness. Social media has created a digital portrait of each star's life such that photos and statements are pored over with inquisitive eyes that seek affirmation of queer identity everywhere. Yet the blasé post-coming out attitudes espoused in statements such as that of Billie Eilish ("Why can't we just exist?") speak to a concurrent scrutiny about this hypervigilant evaluation of visual evidence. In a strange way, the two sustain each other. The feeling that no one "comes out" anymore, means that outness must then somehow be detected via audiovisual evidence. As queer people exist and their lives are preserved by social media, each trace becomes a part of a dossier one might use to conclusively determine if queerness happened. Furthermore, the dissolution of binaries such as straight/queer makes these methodologies simultaneously moot. When some of music's biggest heartthrobs, such as Harry Styles and Bad Bunny, cultivate a public image that blends the classically masculine appeals of chiseled jaws and pectoral muscles with nail polish, women's clothing, and comfortable same sex flirtations, the methodology of accumulating audiovisual evidence alone short circuits. Bad

[1] As a caveat, the earlier music video for "Leave Your Lover" did suggest a mixed gender love triangle but its ambiguities made it unclear whom Smith coveted.

Bunny kissing a man on stage at the MTV Video Music Awards doesn't make him queer. Harry Styles wearing a dress on the cover of *Vogue* doesn't make him queer. So, what does? How is coming out simultaneously "over" and omnipresent?

Contemporary life as documented in social media represents a continuous flow of implicit statements and disclosures. Choices of clothing, of friends, of where to rest your hand on someone's body when you hug them, of if and how we are tender and with whom. Ubiquitous surveillance in the age of social media makes the closet omnipresent and coming out readable in every Tweet, post, or Gram. So much so that queer lives in progress become surveilled by a vigilant detective spirit to identify trace proof of their existence. Recently, young stars have faced scrutiny about their actions and statements from a public that expects full transparency regarding sexual details. Demands for outness have been placed upon them at the same time as proclamations that coming out "doesn't matter" anymore, a potent contradiction that resists binarization in a classically Sedgwick sort of way. Joshua Bassett, star of Disney's *High School Musical: The Musical: The Series*, mentioned off-handedly during a promotional interview with *Clevver News* that he thought Harry Styles was "hot." Before adding demurely, "This is also my coming out video, I guess" (Clevver News 2021). While Bassett's quip about this being his "coming out video" might suggest an obvious intention to convey queer identity, the potential to misunderstand or misinterpret such a statement is often invoked to raise questions. Perhaps he was joking? Consider, for example, a 2016 incident in which *Teen Wolf* star Tyler Posey appeared to make such a declaration via Snapchat when he posted a video of himself standing beneath the sign for Gay Street in New York City and announced, "I'm gay!" (Avery 2016). The actor later apologized for the video via a series of Tweets, stating "Although I'm not gay, I fully support the LGBTQ community. This was a moment intended to reflect that … I am truly sorry to the people I've offended or lessened how big coming out is" (Crispim 2016).[2]

And so, the meaning of Bassett's statement—earnest coming out or coy joke about flirting with homosexuality—lingered among a vexed public. Importantly, both meanings invoke Sedgwick's universalizing and minoritizing discourses. Truly, who among us does not think that Harry Styles is hot? Straight, queer, or otherwise. Yet the relatively banal statement became a point of social media obsession, begging the question "Did Joshua Bassett just come out?" "Out" here would mean he, in a minoritized sense, self-describes as queer (or any number of identities under the umbrella term queer). Bassett's formal reply to this public inquiry was a Tweet which included a row of rainbow hearts in the color scheme of the Pride flag that claimed no specific minoritized identity but instead gestured toward a still nascent self-discovery, stating "my entire life people have

[2] Posey did years later publicly describe past sexual experiences with men, though asserted no specific queer identity (Malkin 2021).

told me my sexuality. people have shamed me for things they know nothing about. i want to say thank you for those who stand for love and acceptance" (@joshuatbassett, May 11, 2021). Some interpreted the message as acknowledging his unlabeled queerness. Yet the text itself suggests misunderstanding, that people don't know what they are talking about. Perhaps this is to suggest people "reading in" to his statements misunderstood him? Presumed his sexuality incorrectly? Like Posey, Bassett could here be denying that he is queer himself but affirming a pro-queer and inclusive stance. The rainbow hearts appear directly beneath text that reads "love who you love shamelessly. it's ok to still be figuring out who you are. life's too short to let ignorance and hatred win." Again, perhaps this can be read to mean he is still figuring out who he is, but also it says most plainly "you." Who "you" are. Love who "you" love. In one reading of the post, Bassett says, people have tried to tell him what his sexuality is, and he is still figuring it out, but he appreciates your love and support. In another (perhaps among many more) he says I have been told my sexuality incorrectly by people who don't understand, but you do you (i.e. I am not queer, but I support you, if you are). What seems apparent is that the manner of coming out here, if indeed this is taken as a coming out, could perhaps be best categorically understood as a bewildering "Huh?" That is, the methodology of coming out, if Bassett came out, increases public confusion, and feels indiscernible at every turn. It is a coming out that at first appears to happen plainly ("This is also my coming out video, I guess") and yet digital ephemera has created a feeling of uncertainty as to whether it happened at all.[3]

Digital artifacts such as Posey's and Bassett's convey how nebulous coming out truly is now. Apparently, a man shouting, "I'm gay!" is not enough to be certain anymore. He may just be showing solidarity. Do rainbow hearts a coming out make? Unclear. While the "Huh?" category embodies coming out's slipperiness, its indiscernibility. There is yet another inverse and fascinating reciprocal strategy. The clear as day, "let's get it over with" transparency of a statement so irrefutable it ends all speculation. I am especially enamored with the terse stoicism of Carl Nassib, who in 2021 posted a video to Instagram beginning with the at once fatigued and urgent expression "I just want to take a quick moment to say that I'm gay" (@carlnassib, June 21, 2021). While Nassib's video goes on to discuss his larger thoughts on the importance of visibility, this initial statement marks such a sharp and stunning linguistic disjunction. "I just want to take a quick moment"

[3] Bassett's sexuality remains under scrutiny. Subsequent interviews feature more unambiguous statements of queer identity from Bassett (framed predominantly as reflections on his "coming out" via the Clevver News video and Tweet) (Bennett 2021; Tracy 2022). However, Bassett seemed to delete some social media posts regarding his queer identity and was very publicly baptized at a homophobic church in 2023, leading some fans to express concern for his well-being amid homophobic religious rhetoric (Rude 2023, Dailey 2023).

speaks of incidental things, trivial matters so small they deserve not more than one moment's time. While "to say that I'm gay" makes Nassib the first active player in NFL history to come out as gay. The overture of nonchalant compliance gives way to a history-making shift in professional sports within 13 words. Nassib seems to be addressing the perilous uncertainty, the belabored detective work, the frustrating inspection of life, by saying this is something to do quickly, to move past. Rip off the Band-Aid, so to speak. But also, at the same time, I like to imagine that he was busy practicing and just out of frame is a sports team mid-huddle, and he's all like "Just a minute guys, I gotta do something real fast" and then pivots to the sidelines to make a quick announcement before he rejoins the group. That the parameters of the event are so expansive as to be everything and nothing all at once.

Even more directly, singer Omar Apollo replied to a Tweet speculating that he may be "queer baiting" with intimations of queerness in his songs and videos with the debate-ending retort "no ib sucking dick fr" (@omarapollo, Nov 28, 2022). Apollo's remarks perhaps best embody the volatile surveillance and disparate nonchalance of the contemporary closet. The want for a star not to only say "Yep, I'm gay" or acknowledge their partner by name, but to see and know every aspect of their sexuality. He at once communicates the frankness it takes to end speculation, to resolve the surveillance of every lyric or photo, and the invasiveness one may feel being surveilled. To feel it wanted to be known what you do in your private sex life. The coveting of knowledge about the body in active moments of sexual contact. Yet its bluntness also implies the visceral plainness of coming out, the negligible slim-ness of it, the anti-climax. How coveted and yet how run-of-the-mill it has become: {insert coming out here}.

6. Conclusion

The journey from Eilish's quizzical disclosure (or non-disclosure) to the vulgar simplicity of Apollo's offers us a gradient of experiences through which to understand the contemporary closet's overlaps in meaning (as in Sedgwick) and the invasiveness of its scrutiny (as in Foucault's "will to knowledge"). Moreover, the historical context of US celebrity coming out genres allows us to see evolving trends across approximately three decades. In some ways, we can see just how little has changed. The responsive "Yep, I'm gay" of Ellen and the reluctant "I guess I came out today" of Eilish both showcase a target of scrutiny uncomfortably conceding to the public demand for a disclosure that inversely constitutes the idea of a secret, as in Judith Butler's assertion that to "come out" retroactively constructs the idea of having been "in." This means "being 'out' must produce the closet again and again" (Butler 1991, 16). Yet there is simultaneously no way to fathom a world in which Ellen's disclosure could have been made with the direct and sexual language of Omar Apollo. Both because it vividly detects the invasive public curiosity to know what one's sex looks like and because of its responsiveness to a public skepticism

about "queer baiting," or opportunistic queer adjacency. While "Yep, I'm gay" and "ib be sucking dick fr" both aim to dissolve invasive public inquiry, they do so in different terms and contexts: the magazine cover vs. the personal twitter account, "gay" (a sanitized catch all) vs. "sucking dick" (a visceral distillation of the coveted information of sexual behavior). The closet door is open, because contemporary life asks us to put our intimacies on digital display for inspection and judgment. And as much as the closet may not uphold binary distinctions of in/out and speech acts may range from casually shared details of life to a non-verbal cue like a t-shirt (Crabtree 2021), we are all nonetheless standing in the door frame with our interior lives on display for public perusal and investigation. The will to know what "doesn't really matter" anymore.

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"I MEAN, WHO ISN'T GAY?": AN EXPLORATION OF QUEER PERFORMATIVITY IN THE TV SERIES *WHAT WE DO IN THE SHADOWS*

Emilie Buckley

ABSTRACT

This article aims to apply Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's theories on performativity to evaluate examples of queer performativity in the FX original series, *What We Do in the Shadows.* The series uses symbolism to code characters as queer, as well as modern-day performative acts such as fashion choices, chosen family, preservation, and antiques, and attending pride parades. The article uses visual imagery and a corpus of fifty scripts from the series to conduct a content analysis. Taking a mixed methodological approach, the article explores the impact of queer performativity on its fanbase's creation of memes and fan fiction.

Keywords: queerness, performativity, TV series, vampires, Gothic.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Vampires, often portrayed with their iconic thirst for blood, immortality, and aversion to sunlight, have long served as a compelling metaphor for queerness, challenging societal norms and defying heteronormativity. Queer coding can be witnessed across vampire media and has become more overt as social acceptance of the queer community has grown. Sociologist David Halperin defines queer as "whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant," specifically defying heteronormativity or the straight gaze (Halperin 1995, 62). The straight gaze is the assumption that heterosexuality is the default way of being. Vampires lie outside of the confines of societal expectations, much like the queer community. Foucault, cited in the classic text *Skin Shows,* writes that "the soul is the prison of the body," also claiming that a soul is born out of "methods of punishment, supervision, and constraint," equating the regulation of bodies with the production of normative identities. In this context, queerness emerges as a rebellion against these regulatory forces, particularly in the Gothic tradition (Halberstam 1995, 2). By existing outside the bounds of societal control, queer bodies and desires in Gothic horror challenge

the very mechanisms of punishment and constraint that Foucault describes, positioning queer figures as transgressive, subversive, and defiant of heteronormative structures. Through this lens, *What We Do in the Shadows* explores how queer identity is linked to monstrosity, offering a critique of the ways bodies and desires are policed and disciplined in heteronormative society.

The queerness of vampire characters was once subtle or used as a metaphor, but this theme is no longer a subtext within modern-day media. Supernatural genres, where societal ideals and limitations do not bind characters, have historically offered safe spaces for queer characters, depicting non-normative sexualities and identities. Gothic studies provide a lens through which the figure of the vampire is understood as inherently transgressive, subverting societal norms surrounding sexuality, gender, and power. Scholars in this field have long recognized vampirism as a metaphor for queerness, reflecting anxieties around non-normative desires, as seen in seminal works like Le Fanu's *Carmilla* and Stoker's *Dracula.* Vampires specifically have challenged norms and conventions and provide a lens to examine queer performativity, and the series' textual and visual symbolism provide evidence of this.

This article aims to explore examples of queer performativity in supernatural television in the 21st Century, focusing on FX series, *What We Do in the Shadows*. Episodes show them navigating both human and vampiric government, relationships both sexual and platonic, and the mundane such as household duties. *What We Do in the Shadows* defies heteronormativity and offers complex characters whose sexual fluidity is an underlying current within the series. Executive producer, co-showrunner, and writer Paul Simms states in an interview with *The Advocate*, "All of our characters are completely pansexual" (Reynolds 2020). This openness about sexual orientation and presentation as a non-issue sets it apart. The series plays off the straight gaze, satirizing stereotypes of both the queer community as well as vampires. This article will evaluate examples of queer performativity, drawing from examples from the series as well as offer a textual analysis of the show's scripts. This article explores examples of queer performativity in the 21st-century supernatural television series *What We Do in the Shadows*, using content and visual cultural analysis to examine how the show subverts the straight gaze, challenges heteronormativity, and contributes to the discourse on queer identity and expression.

What We Do in the Shadows draws heavily on the Gothic tradition of using vampirism to explore queerness. However, where earlier vampire media, examined through queer Gothic studies, often relied on subtext and metaphor, the series makes queer identities and relationships explicit. This shift aligns with the evolution of queer representation in media, reflecting more contemporary understandings of sexual fluidity and identity that go beyond the confines of the straight gaze. Vampires have exuded sexuality and implied queerness from their earliest iterations in the 19th century, a topic that has been

researched within gothic studies for some time. Criticism of Gothic horror media takes issue with the othering of supernatural creatures, stating that monsters are people "on the margins of humanity" and "must serve a purpose or perish" (Nixon 2023). In the 21st century, queerness in vampires was no longer just implied and became prominent in television and film, reflecting evolving societal attitudes toward sexuality and gender. These contemporary depictions not only acknowledge queerness but embrace it as a core part of the vampire identity, moving beyond earlier metaphors and subtext. In contrast to early vampire literature, which used vampirism as a veiled allegory for queerness, modern narratives explore queer relationships and identities openly, intertwining these themes with vampirism.

As society evolved in its views regarding the LGBTQ+ community, so did media representations. *The Lair* (2007–2009), produced by the queer network here!, was one of the first shows to center on a gay vampire narrative. Set in a gay nightclub, the series featured overt portrayals of queer sexuality and relationships, with its storyline about vampires being persecuted by law enforcement paralleling real-world experiences of discrimination faced by queer spaces. *True Blood* (2008–2014) took the metaphor of "coming out of the coffin" and ran with it, presenting a world where vampires live openly among humans, heavily relying on the straight gaze as vampires and humans attempt to coexist. The series embraced queer identities through its vampire characters, such as Eric Northman and Russell Edgington, and addressed issues of discrimination and acceptance. The show's portrayal of vampires as a marginalized group facing prejudice mirrored real-world LGBTQ+ struggles, making it a significant contribution to queer vampire media.

A recent example, The *Interview with the Vampire* series, premiered on AMC in 2022 and is a reimagining of Anne Rice's 1976 novel, which included a queer subtext. This adaptation brings queer themes to the forefront, with a more explicit portrayal of the relationship between Louis de Pointe du Lac and Lestat de Lioncourt. Their relationship is central to the narrative, highlighting queer desire and intimacy in a way that was more subtly depicted in earlier versions. The series explores the complexities of queer identity in the context of power, control, and desire while also emphasizing the deep emotional and romantic bond between the two characters. This modern retelling pushes the boundaries of queer representation in vampire media, aligning vampirism with queer experiences of otherness and the struggle for acceptance (Taylor 2023).

What We Do in the Shadows (2019–present) offers a comedic take on queer vampires, featuring characters like Nandor and Guillermo, whose homoerotic relationship dynamics challenge traditional norms. Additionally, husband and wife, Laszlo and Nadja explore non-monogamous relationships, reflecting fluid sexual identities within the vampire community. The series weaves queerness into its humor and narrative, presenting it as an inherent part of the characters' identities. These contemporary depictions of queer vampires emphasize a shift from subtextual metaphors to open, explicit

representations of queerness. Vampirism remains a powerful vehicle for exploring transgressive identities and relationships, but the focus has evolved to explore themes of acceptance, visibility, and the breaking of societal norms in the modern era, mirroring the journey of the queer community.

Little academic work exists surrounding the television series *What We Do in the Shadows,* despite it receiving twenty-one Emmy nominations and one win. The FX series is based on the 2014 mockumentary film of the same name, which has been written about for its approach to masculinity and domesticity. *What We Do in the Shadows* the series significantly expounds upon these themes while also delving into questions surrounding heteronormativity through the straight gaze. Bojan Žikić explores the series for its depiction of vampires as a "cultural other" in their work *The Vampire as a Model of Cultural Otherness in the Television Series "What We Do in the Shadows,"* setting the characters as outsiders in a human world (Žikić 2022, 1). Gaps in research exist in queer visual cultural analysis as described by Kent Chang in the chapter *The Queer Gap in Cultural Analytics* how queerness has been overlooked by this methodology (Chang 2023, 105). Each episode of the series is rich in symbolism regarding vampires and queer identity, making it an appropriate case study for these methodologies. Scholars Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick write at length about gender and sexuality, including performativity, but do not provide specific examples of queer performative acts. The authors instead focus on the theoretical framework and leave the instances of performativity within queer communities and their application within vampire media, specifically the series, *What We Do in the Shadows*.

2. Theoretical Framework

Philosopher and gender studies scholar Judith Butler first defined gender performativity in her 1990 text, *Gender Trouble*, it was later expanded upon in the works *Bodies That Matter* and *Excitable Speech.* Butler's work posits that gender is not an inherent quality, but rather a socially constructed performance; gender is something done with repetition (Butler 1990, 177). While the text does not explicitly mention queer performativity, Butler is a Distinguished Scholar and former Maxine Elliot Chair in the Department of Comparative Literature and the Program of Critical Theory at the University of California Berkley who has greatly influenced queer studies The book, *Butler Matters: Judith Butler's Impact on Feminist and Queer Studies* (2005) outlines the importance of their work in these fields, making them essential to the analysis within this article. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, the winner of the Guggenheim Fellowship for literary criticism and author of five books within the queer studies field, builds upon Butler's work with performativity. Both Butler and Sedgwick, through their respective works, exemplify how queer individuals challenge and subvert heteronormativity. Queer performativity is derived from interactions with the outside world. Sedgwick describes it as a "strategy for the production of meaning

and being" (Sedgwick 2003, 61). Author Chris Brickell writes that "sexuality takes its meaning from its social, cultural, and historical contexts." The author elaborates on the constructs of sexuality and how it is formed through chosen and biological family dynamics, educational settings, and religious institutions (Brickell 2014, 5). These works provide a holistic overview of queer performativity, which can then be applied to classic archetypes of supernatural characters.

Butler and Kosofsky Sedgwick's theories of performativity have been applied to the study of monsters and the monstrous, ranging from Gothic horror literature to present-day video games. Kosofsky Sedgwick wrote at length about Gothic horror and sexuality in her books *The Epistemology and the Closet* and *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1993). Butler is cited extensively in Gothic criticism with their equation of queer to being an outsider serving as a framework for many texts such as *Queer Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion* and *Queer Gothic* by George Haggerty. Haggerty goes as far as to state that Gothic studies set the stage for queer studies as a discipline (2006, 68; Haefele-Thomas 2023, 1). Butler's outsider positioning of queer individuals transcends media. In the article, *Wendigo, Vampires and Lovecraft: Intertextual Monstrosity and Cultural Otherness in Video Games*, author Andre Cowan explores how supernatural video game enemies lie outside the hegemonic norm in their role as non-player characters (Cowen 2023). The depiction of the monstrous as a societal outsider can be seen in media through visuals, performance, and scripted language.

Content analysis and visual cultural analysis can be used to assess the subversion of norms and audience reception of queer relationships and representation in supernatural television series. These methodologies have been employed in art, literature, and mass media research and will be used in this article to assess queer performativity through the FX series, *What We Do in the Shadows* due to its intricate set design and dialogue-rich script (Krippendorff 2019). Queer performativity can be observed through visual cultural analysis by studying how the evaluation of media products for the role that they play in shaping values, beliefs, ideologies, and social practices (Morra and Smith 2010, para 2). Pioneered within the discipline of art history, visual cultural analysis has been recently applied to the study of race, ethnic, and gender-identified cultures in Lisa Nakamura's *Digitizing Race* (2007, 5). This article will utilize content and visual cultural analysis to assess *What We Do in the Shadows* for queer performativity through its use of symbols, themes, and cultural impact among the queer community.

3. Analysis

The mockumentary horror comedy television series What We Do in The Shadows, created by Jermaine Clement (*Flight of the Conchords*) and produced by Taika Waititi (*Our Flag Means Death*), debuted on the FX network on March 27th, 2019 (Waititi 2019). The series follows four vampires, Laszlo Cravensworth, Nadja of Antipaxos, Nandor the Relentless,

and energy vampire Colin Robinson, along with their human familiar Guillermo de la Cruz as they navigate both human and vampire society in Staten Island, New York. The mockumentary aspect of the series plays upon the straight gaze, placing the vampires under a lens to be viewed by a heteronormative society. Over the series' five-season run (as of November 2023), the characters explore complex interpersonal relationships, vampire politics, and themes of both immortality and death. Queerness is an underlying current within the show and is observable within the show's dialogue as well as visuals. In Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's 1986 book, *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*, the author uses queerness as a metaphor for the oppressed (60). *What We Do in the Shadows* rejects heteronormativity, and queerness is expressed freely, not as a metaphor for repression. For the vampires in the show, pansexuality is implied, there's an absence of coming out narratives, and all lead characters exhibit queer performativity.

The show's only coming out reference involves familiar Guillermo, who longs to be a vampire and, quite literally, lives in a closet. In the episode "The Pine Barrens," Guillermo comes out to his family and is met with a response of "We don't give a shit about you being gay; we've known that forever" (Newacheck 2022). In an article written for *Esquire*, actor Harvey Guillén reflects on being asked about Guillermo's sexuality early on in the series, "I suppose now the answer is that he was hiding in the shadows all along" (Guillén, 2022). Guillermo, who began as Nandor's familiar 10 years prior to the pilot episode has a classic "will they, won't they" relationship with Nandor, longing to be turned into a vampire (Waititi 2019). Eager to please his master, Guillermo lives in servitude, cleaning the home, grooming Nandor, and disposing of the bodies of his victims. While Nandor is neglectful of Guillermo, at times during the series when Guillermo shows dissatisfaction with his lot or decides to walk away, Nandor demonstrates acts of affection such as creating artwork, giving gifts such as new pillows, or holding Guillermo while he flies above the city. The relationship between the two characters is reminiscent of the queer-coded age-gap relationships of 19th-century Gothic literature such as Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* or Bram Stoker's *Dracula,* which played off male same-sex relationships of their era.

Nandor's relationships with both men and women are referenced throughout the series. In "The Lamp" Nandor uses a djinn from a magic lamp to find his true love. He tells the camera that he had thirty-seven wives and "some of my wives were girl wives, and some of them were guy wives" (Gorskaya 2022). This explanation is made as an aside when explaining how he intends to find a wife and not for laughs. The casual nature of his remark differentiates the character as well as the show from much of vampire media, that often makes sexual orientation either the plotline or symbolic of inner turmoil. While queer vampire fiction is prevalent, what sets What We Do in the Shadows apart is that romance is not a focus, it's simply another attribute of the character. While not explicitly shown on screen, Nandor and Laszlo's sexual relationship is mentioned in several

episodes throughout the series. When asked by wife Nadja, "Nandor's got long dark hair and an accent, have you slept with him?", the camera zooms in to Laszlo as he shares a sly smile (Newacheck 2020b). Laszlo's sexual conquests are frequently mentioned and embraced by his wife Nadja with whom he shares an open relationship. Upon finding the collection of vampire pornography in which he starred, Laszlo shares them with Nadja, including gay sex scenes such as "Vampire Tricked in Steam Room". Rather than act disapprovingly, Nadja tells the documentary crew, "There is nothing more devastating than finding out your husband has made porn and it's so bloody boring" (Woliner 2019). Nadja's own pansexuality plays out more similarly to traditional queer vampire narratives, transforming a college-aged virgin into a vampire as a means of empowering her (Clement 2019).

The performative act of queer relationships is elevated within the show as it rejects heteronormativity. Despite this, certain characters still struggle with the otherness of being a vampire, drawing comparisons to the internalized oppression felt by some queer individuals. The episode "Wellness Center" begins with the housemates acknowledging Nandor's Ascension Day, the anniversary of when he became Supreme Viceroy for Al Qolnidar in the 13th century. In a bout of depression over his immortality, Nandor finds himself in a cult of vampires determined to live as humans through vigorous dance and exercise, extracting their fangs nightly, and preparing human food before being rescued (Gorskaya 2021). It is difficult to watch the episode and not be reminded of the campy cult classic *But I'm a Cheerleader,* the 1999 film that takes a satirical look at conversion therapy camps. Wrestling with one's immortality serves as a metaphor for coming to terms with one's queerness. This is not a universal experience among the queer community, but for many, it's a performative act and part of the self-discovery process.

Queer performativity is present throughout the entirety of the series, *What We Do in the Shadows* and can be seen in queer symbolism and fashion, belonging to a chosen family, home preservation and antiques, and participation in pride parades. The following section delves into the history and societal implications of queer performative acts in relation to their depiction in the series. Borrowing from Butler's gender performativity and Kosofsky Sedgwick's queer performativity, this article draws from popular culture to illustrate how identities are shaped by the outside world. The following sections aim to explore how the series reflects and contributes to the overall discourse on queer identity and expression.

Queer fashion, appearance, and dress has a strong history, whether to serve as a symbol of oppression, discreet tool of identification in otherwise unsafe spaces, or to overtly laud one's selfhood. Within the 19th and 20th century, flowers, monocles, and lavender were used as clandestine symbols to identify other queer individuals, with queer icon Oscar Wilde sporting a carnation at the opening night of his play, *Lady Windermere's Fan* ("Secret Symbols and Signals" n.d.). Today, the rainbow is the most

common and capitalized upon example of queer iconography, with corporations profiting from rainbow merchandise every June, flags adorning queer-friendly establishments, and bracelets and pins denotating members of the queer community and their allies.

Oscar Wilde, who stood trial in 1895 for "gross indecency", is seen as an icon of gay men's fashion in the latter part of the 19th Century (Janes 2016, 120). Wilde's flamboyant style, often dressed in photographs in velvet, furs, and capes and other attire thought to be effeminate for the time ("Photos" n.d.). More modern-day men's fashion varies from leather men, bears, and "Castro clones" a style that emerged out of American cowboy blue-collar dress (Levi's, mustaches, T-shirts, and short hair) as a way to assert strength and virility (Reddy-Best 2020, Section 9.3). Queer style is extremely diverse, with some members of the community choosing to opt out of queer aesthetics all together, yet for many, fashion is embraced as a symbol of belonging key themes in Butler and Kosofsky Sedgwick's work.

Costumes in *What We Do in the Shadows* draw from a vast number of influences and time periods, including 15th century Persia, the Victorian era, and queer clubwear. The character's fashion is used to code them as mortals or vampires and in turn, conform to or subvert heteronormativity. Emmy award winning costume designer Laura Montgomery shares how the vampire's long lifespan allowed her to borrow from different time periods that reflect the times that the characters lived through. Admittedly inspired by queer fashion of RuPaul's Drag Race, the designer shares how binge watching the drag competition during COVID-19 lockdown provided inspiration for vampire nightclub attire.

Montgomery reflects on how Guillermo's fashion choices grow more sophisticated as he gains esteem with the vampires, donning waistcoats and jackets after being promoted to vampire bodyguard (Williams 2021). Similarly, Guillermo's fashion choices align with growing comfort with his sexuality. In the episode "Pine Barrons", Guillermo wears a Versace Jeans Couture shirt as he comes out to his family, compared to his typical uniform of dress slacks and patterned sweaters. The change in attire is noticed by aggressively heterosexual cousin Miguel who mocks the Versace shirt, "You know they make that in menswear right?" before ultimately accepting Guillermo at the end of the episode (Newacheck 2022). This change in clothing choice reflects Guillermo's new openness about his identity on-screen through the performative act of fashion.

Laszlo's fashion decisions also reflect his sexuality and are straight-coded when he attempts to pass as human at various points across the series. In the episode, "On the Run", a past enemy attempts to hunt Laszlo down and he goes into disguise as "regular human bartender", Jackie Daytona, in Clairton, Pennsylvania. In addition to the change in attire, Laszlo drives a large pickup truck and takes on an interest in sports (Gorskaya 2020). Fashion is used as queer performativity here as Laszlo hides his vampire identity for safety, much like how queer individuals conform to heteronormative clothing

expectations prior to coming out in fear of their sexual orientation being exposed (Peoples 2018). In his typical vampire attire, Laszlo favors late 19th century dandy fashion, reminiscent of Oscar Wilde, with capes, waistcoats, ascots, and luxurious fabrics, while in other scenes he favors flamboyant sequin jackets and colorful hair streaks.

Facing discrimination and adversity from all sectors of society, the queer community has often found solace in "chosen family," a small community often born out of necessity. Defined by Queer Queries, a lexicon assembled by students at Mills College, chosen family is a "group of people to whom you are emotionally close and consider 'family' even though you are not biologically or legally related" ("Chosen Family" n.d.). Queer individuals run the risk of being exiled from their biological families, face discrimination by society at large, or lack the means to start a biological family of their own should they desire. In a 2020 survey by the Center for American Progress of 1,528 LGBTQ+ individuals, it was found that 1 in 3 LGBTQ individuals and 2 in 3 transgender individuals experienced some form of discrimination in the last year ("Discrimination and Experiences Among LGBTQ People in the US: 2020 Survey Results—Center for American Progress" n.d.). The performative act of creating a chosen family provides not only community but also safety.

In an article for Esquire, actor Harvey Guillén describes his experience coming out, writing, "Those kids may not have accepted me, but the people who mattered the most always did" (Guillén 2022). Vampires share a similar narrative as they are forced to go into hiding from their families of origin and homelands. Nadja describes the experience of being displaced from one's home in the episode, "Local News," "Vampires must always be prepared to skip towns at a moment's notice. I have been chased out of five, maybe six villages over the course of my vampiric life" (Gorskaya 2023a). The housemates, all from drastically different backgrounds came together in the 19th century in Staten Island after being ordered to take over the "New World" by Baron Afanas (Waititi 2019). Guillermo joins the vampires of the household ten years prior to the pilot episode and frequently expresses his desire to become one of them after idolizing Antonio Banderas in *Interview with The Vampire* as a child. His feelings of otherness around humans (heteronormativity) can be observed in his interactions with his birth family as he renounces his Van Helsing blood as a means to live with his vampiric chosen family. After his vampirization by his friend Derek, Guillermo has a heart-to-heart with his mother, where he expresses his need to leave his old life. Unaware of the transition, Guillermo's mother gifts him a cross, which instantaneously singes his skin (Gorskaya 2023a). This scene in the episode "Local News" mirrors the daunting conversations that queer individuals are faced with as they choose between old and new lives.

Beyond the confines of the home, queer performativity exists at the community level within urban gay enclaves known as gay villages, gay neighborhoods, or gayborhoods. Examples of queer-friendly areas within the United States include the Castro District in San Francisco, Chelsea in New York City, and Capitol Hill in Seattle (Vondran

2023). Gayborhoods use of historic markers and sense of pride in ownership have preserved the original charm of these areas, shielding them from urban renewal projects that would otherwise tear down and rebuild rather than restore original structures (Hess and Bitterman 2020). Queer performativity extends to homes and even the material objects held within them. In the book *A Passion to Preserve: Gay Men as Keepers of Culture*, author Will Fellows addresses the tendency for gay men to be drawn to home restoration, antiques, and interior design, stating, "Rather than dismissing these realities as the stuff of stereotype, I see them as the stuff of archetype, significant truths worthy of exploration" (Fellows 2005, 24). Fellow's book uses twenty-nine case studies of gay men or gay couples who have been involved in home restoration across the United States. It can be concluded from Fellow's work that this hobby is a form of queer performativity, as defined by Butler and Kosofsky Sedgwick.

Preservation as a performative act can be seen in vampire media and a collection of antiques within an older home is a common trope. Symbolisms of immortality and a connection to a mortal life that has spanned centuries, as well as antiques, connote agelessness and a sense of camp. In the show *What We Do in The Shadows,* material cultural studies can be used to assess how the show's imagery, the vampire's home, and belongings are indicative of their queerness. The opening sequence of the show integrates artwork of the of the show's vampires inspired by works from the 16th to 19th century, such as one of Nadja inspired by Henri Regnault's 1870 painting, *Salome* (Waititi 2019). Within the home, Nandor's bedroom contains fringe-trimmed Victorian lamps, gold leafed Persian artwork, and a chaise lounge strewn with luxurious fabrics and pillows.

Other rooms of the home, notably the mansion's "fancy room", an ornately decorated sitting room, contain remnants of the past, including Persian rugs, brocade curtains, stained glass, a suit of armor, candelabra, model ship, 19th century German lute, and more fringed Victorian lamps (Fig. 1). In the episode, "Freddie", Guillermo introduces Nandor to his boyfriend Freddie, a junior associate at an auction house in London and art buff. In this episode Guillermo officially comes out to Nandor by introducing Freddie as his boyfriend, who then remarks, "Your home is beautiful, this tapestry is this Turkish? Around the 15th century?" (Stipson 2022). Nandor is instantly smitten by Freddie, who provides him with a business card and expresses interest in his antique possessions. This episode is noteworthy for both Nandor and Guillermo being engaged in queer relationships, and while the character's sexuality is previously alluded to in the series, it is the first time they are shown with same-sex partners. The home serves as a setting for the relationships, as Nandor and Freddie lounge nude under an animal skin in the fancy room, as well as a source of material connection for the two in shared appreciation of Nandor's collection of treasures.

Fig 1. The mansion's "fancy room" in *What We Do in The Shadows* (2019–2023) © FX Productions and Disney Platform Distribution. Source: Lezotte, S., 2020. "Cinematographer DJ Stipsen Lights the Dark in What We Do in the Shadows," Sony Cine, 3 December 2020. Available at: https://sonycine.com/articles/cinematographer-dj-stipsen-lights-the-dark-in--what-we-do-in-the-shadows-/ [Accessed 22 November 2024]

The series' cinematographer, DJ Stipson, who was nominated for his work on the show, describes the house as being almost another character. Stipson describes what sets the vampire's home apart in stating, "the house is … part of the Gothic feel, unlike the neighbor's house, which is ugly" (Lezotte 2020). The queerness of the Gothic mansion is highlighted in contrast to neighbor and Laszlo's friend Sean Rinaldi's Staten Island home. Exuding stereotypical heterosexual male energy, complete with a love of sports and Oceans 12, the interior Sean's home includes a "man cave" complete with a shrine to the film, recliners, and unremarkable décor which are shown in the episode "Brain Scramblies" (Newacheck 2020a). The juxtaposition of the two homes in "Brain Scramblies" emphasizes the otherness of the vampires and their surroundings. Attending a Superbowl party at Sean's house, the vampires are profoundly out of place as they sit in front of beige-painted living room walls adorned with a plastic football garland. This otherness reflects the outsider status that many queer individuals hold when in aggressively heteronormative settings.

Despite being othered by a heteronormative world, queer individuals have found ways to celebrate and band together. Lyndsey Benharris writes of the beginnings of queer theory in the United States in the *Research Anthology on Inclusivity and Equity for the LGBTQ+ Community*. Benharris cites the post-WWII period as the beginning of the study of queer theory, stating that it's deeply connected to "race, racism, and oppression with the increasing and often simultaneous policing and legislating of both racial and sexual boundaries" (Benharris 2021, 2). LGBTQ+ activism, a form of performativity, is entrenched in the identities of many queer individuals. While LGBTQ+ affiliation groups

grew underground following the post-war period, the first organized Pride demonstrations began in 1970 following the Stonewall Uprising in 1969; today, parades and festivals in the Western world are a blend of community, politics, and even commercialization (MacFarland Bruce 2016, 134). Allowing queer individuals to perform their sexual identity through celebration and joining with like-minded people.

While queerness has come to be expected in vampire media, whether through allusion or explicit actions, *What We Do in The Shadows* the season five episode, "Pride Parade," to outright celebrates how unapologetically queer the characters are. Neighbor Sean Rinaldi is running for comptroller of Staten Island and proposes that the household aid him in organizing a pride parade to support his campaign. Sean's wife Charmaine lovingly refers to the vampires and Guillermo as "literally the gayest things on the block" upon asking for their assistance. Laszlo excitedly responds, "I know why you're here; you want us to grand marshal your gay parade? That's one thumbs up. You want to start your gay parade on our front yard? That's two thumbs up" (Gorskaya 2023b). This episode exhibits pride parades as a rite of passage for members of the queer community, with Guillermo, who came out to his family in season four, stating that he has never attended before. At the end of the episode, Guillermo is shown on a parade float, looking either uncertain about being the center of attention or amused, holding a sign that states "Gay Guy" (Fig. 2). Being newly out, this opportunity for performativity serves as an affirming moment for Guillermo as well as the vampires who enthusiastically ride or march alongside parade floats or participate on stage during Sean's pride event. The characters are shown as authentically queer and fully embraced by the community of Staten Island.

Fig 2. Guillermo participates in a pride parade holding a sign that reads "Gay Guy."
Screenshot from What We Do in the Shadows, Season 5, Episode 3, "Pride Parade." Produced by FX Productions. © FX Productions and Disney Platform Distribution, 20 July 2023.

4. Conclusion

This article has endeavored to explore queer performativity in the FX series *What We Do in the Shadows* using content and visual cultural analysis. Through an exploration of the show's textual content and visuals, it identifies several key areas of queer performativity, including fashion, chosen family, home preservation, antiques, and participation in pride parades. These elements collectively resist heteronormative structures and reflect a more fluid understanding of sexuality and identity, positioning the show as a prime example of queer coding in vampire media.

One of the central concepts explored in this article is the straight gaze—the presumption that heterosexuality is the normative framework through which society views relationships, identities, and desires. *What We Do in the Shadows* deftly subverts the straight gaze, both in how it presents its characters and in its narrative choices. For example, queer relationships are not sensationalized or positioned as exceptional but instead are integrated seamlessly into the characters' daily lives. The absence of traditional coming-out narratives for the vampires, who fluidly engage in both same-sex and opposite-sex relationships, highlights how the show critiques and ultimately rejects the straight gaze.

By placing queer characters at the forefront without framing them as outsiders in need of societal acceptance, the show destabilizes the assumptions of heterosexuality as the default. Instead, it presents queerness as a natural part of the vampire characters' existence. This contrasts sharply with earlier vampire media, where queer coding often operated through subtext and where the straight gaze dictated the limits of how queerness could be expressed. This article expands on work within Gothic studies where vampires are positioned as the "other." The vampires in *What We Do in the Shadows* are free from the normative constraints of the straight gaze, allowing the show to embrace queerness openly and without apology.

Furthermore, the series uses humor and satire to expose the absurdity of heteronormative expectations, as seen in moments where vampires are forced to navigate human society, often to comedic effect. The juxtaposition of the vampires' queerness against aggressively heterosexual settings (such as Sean's "man cave" or a Superbowl party) makes explicit how out-of-place rigid norms are in a world where fluidity is celebrated. This critique of the straight gaze is not only humorous but also a powerful commentary on how heteronormativity polices bodies and desires in everyday life.

What We Do in the Shadows challenges the straight gaze by embracing queerness as a fundamental part of its characters and narrative structure. Through its satirical approach, the show critiques and subverts heteronormativity, offering a space where queer performativity flourishes without the constraints of traditional societal expectations. This satirical yet celebratory take on queerness places the show within a larger cultural shift,

where queer identities are no longer relegated to the margins but are central to the exploration of identity, performance, and power in popular media.

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AN IDENTITY PROBLEM: JUDITH BUTLER'S *GENDER TROUBLE* (1990) IN HBO'S *EUPHORIA* (2019)

Gloria Lizana-Iglesias

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this project is to analyse different gender formulations and their manifestation within the fictional narrative of HBO TV show *Euphoria* (2019). This analysis will be done following the constructivist perspective offered by Judith Butler upon the performativity of gender configuration in her 1990 work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Butler's claims with regards to the outer and performative existence of gender, rather than it being part of the individual's interior nature, will be central to the development of this paper, along with her statement as to how gender identity is consolidated according to society's unilateral imposition of a strict patriarchal model that can and must be followed or otherwise subverted. Taking as a point of reference these two possibilities, characters of *Euphoria* such as Nate Jacobs and Cal Jacobs will serve as examples of the ways in which individuals in society may accept the patriarchal imposition and suffer from it, specially taking into account the analysis that Butler provides upon previous feminist writers such as Beauvoir, Wittig and Irigaray, and psychoanalysts like Lacan and Freud. As a counterpoint to this, her discussion of Foucault's Herculine upon the subversion of gender identity within society will be considered so as to explain Jules Vaughn' troubling entrance in western binarism and her willingly failing into conforming to the patriarchal law in terms of attitude, behaviour and physical appearance.

Keywords: Judith Butler, TV series, feminism, Gender studies, queerness, performance, subversion.

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1. INTRODUCTION: JUDITH BUTLER'S THEORY WITHIN THE HISTORICAL FRAMEWORK OF QUEER STUDIES

Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* was published in 1990 as a work revising previous feminist theory, specially the one dominating 1970s theoretical frameworks concerned with the signification of gender and more specifically with what "being a woman" meant at all. Their book became a turning point in this respect along with authors like Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, since up until that moment feminist writers analysed gender and sexuality as a whole, consequently ignoring the possibilities that both concepts individually produced and how each of them manifested within society, affecting individuals in many different senses. Works like Butler's offered

a separation of these two notions and, along with their departure from the essentialist perspective that dominated 1970s feminism, their work later came to be reviewed as part of the foundational origins of Queer Studies, an academic discipline that was scarcely present at the time in the United States and even more so in Europe.

Gender Trouble, therefore, contested all aspects of feminist theory by aiming straight to its roots and dismantling the basic concepts upon which it was built, that is, that women were those who had been "born women," or rather in possession of a vagina, and therefore identifying gender roles applied to women as a result of this assignation. Simone de Beauvoir's famous sentence "one is not born a woman but rather becomes one" (1973, 301) from her work *The Second Sex* (1949) was certainly pointing towards a separation between sex and gender, and it called attention to the cultural component that gender identification holds and its subsequent artificiality in favour of liberating women from a subjection that was claimed to be based upon the nature of the female sex. However, Butler's analysis of Beauvoir highlights that she unintendedly questioned the cultural aspect of assigning sex to an individual according to their genitals:

> For Beauvoir, gender is "constructed," but implied in her formulation as an agent, a *cogito*, who somehow takes on or appropriates that gender and could, in principle, take on some other gender. … Beauvoir is clear that one becomes a woman, but always under a cultural compulsion to become one. And clearly, the compulsion does not come from "sex." There is nothing in her account that guarantees that the "one" who becomes a woman is necessarily female. (Butler 1990, 8)

Here lies the radical factor of Butler's theory on gender, going as far as questioning the nature of "sex" and consequently devirtualising the structure on which Western social identification is founded. Since the body is judged from a cultural sense from the moment an individual is born, then "sex, by definition, will be shown to have been gender all along" (8). From this point on, Butler digs into the extent of the cultural significance of gender and sex by revising mainly Wittig, Beauvoir, and Irigaray as part of the leaders of feminist's writings up to that moment and a great part of psychoanalysis theoretical framework through Lacan, Freud and Kristeva.

Butler's main claim is that gender is performative, that is, an external reality of the individual that can only be "performed" in the sense of constantly repeating a certain pattern that will create a certain image. As Postmodern as Butler is, their conceptualization of gender serves to dismantle the grand narrative under which Western civilization strives, one that imposes a strict binary system in which individuals that do not fall into the two main categories of "men" and "women" are bound to "make trouble" (vii). The absurdity of this imposition is what is questioned throughout the book, following the implication that reifying gender categories solely through repetition makes them unstable, its aim centred on following an unreachable ideal that does not exist as it has been produced by the same system that creates and naturalises it:

> I asked, what configuration of power constructs the subject and the Other, that binary relation between "men" and "women," and the internal stability of those terms? … What happens to the subject and to the stability of gender categories when the epistemic regime of presumptive heterosexuality is unmasked as that which produces and reifies these ostensible categories of ontology? (Butler 1990, vii-viii)

This "presumptive heterosexuality" is therefore what creates gender categories and poses them as a logical extension of natural sex, but it is ultimately all part of an illusion that the very same concept produces as what is natural so as to not be contested by individuals. Butler will reject this and the whole narrative of looking for the origin of gender and will focus instead on overviewing the configuration of American and European social and political systems, laying the ground for a radical reconceptualization concerning how society functions within such structure and the ways in which it could be subverted. In this respect, Butler will follow Foucault's analysis of power, since "Foucault points out that juridical systems of power *produce* the subjects they come to represent" (Butler 1990, 2). Butler's externalisation of gender performance will function as an equivalent of his concept of "soul," which, in general terms, he considers to be "the prison of the body," radically contrasting traditional Christian thinking where the state of the inner soul serves as a justification of either the nurturing or mistreatment of the external body.

With "women" being a category now not so clearly established, Butler starts by analysing this concept thoroughly within feminism and sex/gender distinction, arriving to compulsory heterosexuality and phallogocentrism as central notions in gender analysis, since they dictate the discourse that has to be deconstructed according to the ways in which language operates. Cultural discourse is founded in intelligibility and therefore will codify heterosexuality as hegemonic while placing other sexual orientations as deviant or impossible to codify. This is the same for the concept of "women," which is regarded as an Other or even nonexistent (depending on which Feminist writer is followed) when codified against "men." A different possibility of identity would be, therefore, impossible:

> It would be wrong to think that the discussion of 'identity' ought to proceed prior to a discussion of gender identity for the simple reason that 'persons' only become intelligible through becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility. (Butler 1990, 16)

Therefore, the patterns of gender configuration must be studied with regards to what logic is being followed when assigning a role to an individual and the constriction that it implies; how individuals will struggle to be considered part of a hermetic category or otherwise become obscure within society; how those who are deviant to the hegemonic norm would be regarded as multiple for taking aspects from either different categories of the known-to-all binarism or an uncodified dimension, becoming objects of study deeply

demonised or idealised (as Foucault does with Herculine, to be further analysed), but ultimately rejected by the system.

The characters in Euphoria studied in this paper come to represent precisely all of these possibilities: from the social struggles produced from striving to fit into the hegemonic norm, as in the case of Cal and Nate Jacobs, to the disruption and potential subversive quality of characters such as Jules Vaughn, whose presence defies binary configurations of gender. The interest lies in the analysis of a contemporary show like *Euphoria* under this light for its play with gender performativity as the core of the characters' identity development and their conflicts between each other. The novelty of the show makes it a suitable object of study as its representation of gender performance becomes transgressive in highlighting the dangers of hegemonic masculinity and displaying transness while meeting the aesthetics and concerns of the so-called Gen Z culture (Macintosh 2022, 15).

On this basis, in the second section of this paper Nate Jacobs will be analysed regarding the metaphorical loss of his father and subsequent rejection of his figure following Butler studies on the incest and the homosexuality taboos as primary concepts within Psychoanalysis in the configuration of the compulsory-heterosexual frame. The Freudian concept of melancholia will become central for analysing gender construction through the subject's identification with the loved object in the process of mourning its loss.

Finally, in section 3 Jules Vaughn will be revised as a disruptive character within the normative binary framework contrasting with previously discussed Nate Jacobs and his father. Butler revises subversive identities thoroughly to support the foundation of their main claim, i.e., that the imposition of grand narratives that codify identification in society is not useful for the liberation of the individual, in favour of creating discrete agreements convenient for each subject in context. Accordingly, the analysis of Jules will work in parallel to Butler's critique on Foucault examining Herculine's case and his idealisation of a previous multiplicity of the subject previous to the paternal law.

2. Nate and Cal Jacobs: Compulsory Heterosexuality and Performative Gender

Euphoria is an American teenage show that aired for the first time in 2019. With two seasons containing eight episodes each, the show deals with the story of Rue Bennett (Zendaya Coleman), a seventeen-year-old drug addict who suffers from OCD (Obsessive Compulsive Disorder), General Anxiety Disorder and Bipolar Disorder, among other mental health problems which eventually contribute to her current depression. Rue's character serves as the background for the whole show's plot, being also the narrator of all the different stories that intertwine in it, particularly of other pupils in her high school. Accordingly, Jules Vaughn (Hunter Schafer), the new transgender teenage girl in town, is also one of the main characters since she becomes Rue's love interest. Jules will have sexual intercourse with the most important adult man of East Highland (a fictional place

in California), Cal Jacobs (Eric Dane), and will afterwards hold an emotional relationship via a dating app with his son, Nate Jacobs (Jacob Elordi), who has an anonymous profile, consequently making Jules unaware of his true identity. Maddy Pérez (Alexa Demie) is another star of the show, enduring an on-and-off relationship with Nate. Among them, her best friend, Cassie Howard (Sydney Sweeney), will be the significant other of Chris Mckay (Algee Smith) in season one and secret lover to Nate Jacobs in season two.

From the very beginning of the show, Nate Jacobs is portrayed as a hyper-masculine, violent character, quarterback and captain of the high school's football team, whose loud personality tends to make a strong impression on those around him. Generally, girls hold him in low esteem as he is often abusive, practicing non-consented sexual acts on them (Levinson S1:E1, 11:07–11:19) or making them fall off their bikes after swearing at them from his car (12:07–12:28), these being simply a couple of examples happening at the start of the series. In short, it does not take too long for the audience to perceive him as the typical leading high school bully. Despite how clear his type of character is established, interestingly enough throughout the series Nate is developed as another subject struggling to find and accept his own identity. This will be understood as resulting in his characteristic misogynistic, violent attitude, most audibly seen in the toxic relationship he shares with his girlfriend Maddy, who comes to perform the role of an asset for Nate's masculinity and, as such, will suffer physical abuse from him when behaving against the coherence of this hegemonic gender performance.

In Butlerian terms, Nate's behaviour is part of the obsessive repetition of a masculine pattern that he reproduces in order to reify his heterosexuality. Nate is perpetually searching for this sort of coherence in his identity while suffocating any other possibility that could interrupt his gender expression:

> The appearance of an abiding substance or gendered self … is thus produced by the regulation of attributes along culturally established lines of coherence. … But if these substances are nothing other than coherences contingently created through the regulation of attributes, it would seem that the ontology of substances itself is not only an artificial effect, but essentially superfluous. (Butler 1990, 24)

Contrasting with the feeling that Nate is inevitably violent as a cause of his inherent masculinity, Butler's argument would point to an analysis of this kind of behaviour as being based on the "regulation of attributes" or repetition of a masculinist pattern, his gender expression being therefore an artificial—in the sense of "constructed," not "unreal" (32)—recourse that he must feel compelled to portray for some reason. Consequently, if Nate's masculinity seems to be an inevitable feature of his character at first, after reading Butler the reasoning could be that he can, in fact, avoid it, since it is not part of his "nature" but the product of a repressive paternal law that is embedded not only in hegemonic masculinity and the patriarchal order of society but also in gender performativity.

This type of constriction is internalised by Nate rather deeply, getting involved in the regulation of his sexual desires. In episode two, minute 5:10 of the show, the narrator offers an account of all the characteristics Nate hates about women and makes him repudiate them as sexual partners. Interestingly enough, this scene not only exhibits the obsessive behaviour he has developed, as seen in the absurd amount of details that this list contains, but also how strongly he rejects any deviant attraction to heterosexuality, since all of the features in the list are traditionally classified as masculine:

> Nate presents himself, thus, as a homophobic person who cannot accept his own sexuality. In fact, Nate is obsessed with building a hyper-masculinity that helps him hide his non-normative sexual orientation. (Masanet 2022, 149)

His girlfriend Maddy—and later Cassie—is, therefore, key for the composition of Nate's struggle, as she personifies the codification of femininity in the heterosexual frame, necessary for the reaffirmation of his own masculinity. He then becomes, by assuming several patriarchal masculine traits, "intelligible" within the discourse of the patriarchal law and at the same time coherent for his own self, in other words, he understands himself under that language. Moreover, Nate particularly strives to embody a hegemonic masculinity that requires a constant assertion of his authority. As defined by Raewyn Connell in *Masculinities* (1995), hegemonic masculinity depends on the reification of the dominant position of men in society through a successful claim to authority given by its relation to some kind of institutional power (Connell 2005, 77). However, violence is not necessary *per se*, although it serves to reify his gender pattern since "hegemonic masculinity" has to do with "the way in which they negotiate their identities in relation to others" (Duncanson 2015, 233). In this sense, Nate's violent character suggests he is in need of compensating for a lack of such direct link to authority. The question therefore becomes, where does the strict imposition of patriarchal law into Nate's conscience come from, and why is it apparently so necessary for him to constantly reify it? In order to answer this, the conduct of his father, Cal Jacobs, requires proper analysis.

Cal also dedicates himself to the arts of building a social image, in this case that of the perfect father. Not as violently as Nate, he personifies the epitome of patriarchy. He is the most influential man in town and represents the leading figure in the model of the nuclear family, central within European and American patriarchal societies and especially in the United States. As such, Cal would seem unproblematic for everyone around him, publicly embodying a hegemonic masculinity reified by his dominant status as a businessman. The audience of the show, however, has a very different image of him since, in opposition to the development of Nate's character, his obscure side is first shown in the series throughout the pilot chapter, previous even to his ideal father facade, as he turns out to be the mysterious sexual encounter Jules has the night of Mckay's party (Levinson S1:E1, 48:59). At some point, the audience discovers that Cal's secret meetings with especially young men and transgender girls have been taking place for a long time

(S1:E2). Later in the show, Cal's backstory comes to portray him as a husband who had to repress his homosexual desires when he was a teenager and get married to his pregnant girlfriend, who would eventually become his current wife (S2:E4). Thus, Cal leading two different lives parallel to each other and therefore incompatible comes to show that, complementary to the recalcitrant reification of his masculinity for the public sphere, an escape becomes necessary, a hole through which the reality of the constructed fantasy leaks, where the facade is reified as such: an artificial image created with a specific purpose. This is part of the instability that Butler associates with the construction of gender by the repetition of certain patterns, a mode that is ultimately condemned to break down:

> the disruptions of this coherence through the inadvertent reemergence of the repressed [sexuality] reveal not only that "identity" is constructed, but that the prohibition that constructs identity is inefficacious (the paternal law ought to be understood not as a deterministic divine will, but as a perpetual bumbler, preparing the ground for the insurrections against him). (Butler 1990, 28)

This aligns with Foucault's theories on biopower and biopolitics developed in *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1* (1976), by which the State is understood to regulate individuals in society biologically, that is, promoting behaviours to control how people live in order to optimise their lives in favour of productivity. Gender will be posed by Butler as one regulatory ideal in this sense, producing subjects –like Cal or Nate– which regulate themselves. As a result, if the coherence in character is disrupted because of repressed sexuality, as Butler argues, the purpose of Cal Jacobs hiding his true sexuality is to avoid breaking the paternal law with a non-codified element. In other words, his sexual desires are seen as deviant from the compulsory heterosexual frame, whether they are exclusively homosexual or bisexual, and since such frame is the foundation of his public image, he is unable to reconcile his eccentric sexuality with it.

However, such deviation is not something the paternal law does not actually contemplate within its discourse since, through the act of prohibiting the homosexual taboo, it is simply being codified as out of the norm, but not necessarily obscure or unknown. Cal's need for a break in the performance of the hegemonic masculine pattern invokes Foucault's "points of resistance," produced by the same power relationships and, therefore, reifying them (Foucault 1978, 95). Butler is influenced by Foucault on this point since the latter discusses sexuality as inscribed in power and, therefore, lacking an existence outside of it:

> "the before" of the law and "the after" are discursively and performatively instituted modes of temporality that are invoked within the terms of a normative framework which asserts that subversion, destabilization, or displacement requires a sexuality that somehow escapes the hegemonic prohibitions on sex. (Butler 1990, 29)

In other words, by founding their arguments in Foucault's view on sex and power, Butler argues that deviant sexuality is only so within a determined "normative framework," in

this case the patriarchal law, and therefore heterosexuality would be defined only in terms of opposition to homosexuality. That is, the heterosexuality that Cal is compelled to portray is only compulsory in the patriarchy, which is why his repression of homosexual desire leads him to live a different life in the shadows than that he performs in the sunlight.

On the other hand, Nate contrasts with Cal in his impossibility of emotionally managing that repression, since his acting in the shadows is never fulfilled, as he enjoys sexual conversations with gay men on the internet but never meets up with them. In addition, the emotional relationship he shares with Jules ends up in his legally threatening her once they finally meet personally in order to avoid the uncovering of his secret. In this sense, he is more invested in reaffirming his masculinity more deeply to himself through his relationship with Maddy, resulting in his violent temperament. Violence would presumably serve him therefore as a reaffirmation of his masculinity and simultaneously as a way to cope with repressed homosexuality. However, understanding Nate's behaviour in these terms is simply playing within the patriarchal codification of heterosexuality and homosexuality. Butler, while overviewing Riviere's work, questioned the accuracy of the gay man's identification with "heterosexual traits" as a reflection of his sexual repression:

> This lack of an overt differentiating style [from heterosexual men] or appearance may be diagnosed as a symptomatic defence [against their own homosexuality] only because the gay man in question does not conform to the idea of the homosexual that the analyst has drawn and sustained from cultural stereotypes. (Butler 1990, 51)

Since gender is performative, the assimilation of heterosexuality with violence, for instance, and the equivalent relation between homosexuality and femininity are cultural artefacts, and, as a result, there is no necessary correlation between a man who is violent in his gender performance of heterosexuality and his repression of homosexual desire. Accordingly, in order to find a different scheme of justification for Nate's abuse, it would be necessary to trace his conduct back to its origin.

What seems to become central in Nate Jacobs throughout the whole series is the moment he discovers his father's secret sex tapes, as narrated at the start of the first season's episode two. Following this scene, Nate's hyperfixation with his own physical training comes to show the continuity of the tapes discovery with his current situation as football-team captain and uncomfortability with the presence of other masculine bodies. That is, the narrative appears to revolve around how Nate's personality was determined by the precise moment he started watching his father practice sex. This will become more deeply developed with the speech of Nate's mother in the sixth episode of season two, where she struggles to explain how and why he quickly changed, becoming generally a sadder young boy: "It's just a mystery to me, 'cause you were such a sweet little baby. … And then, I don't know, somewhere, like, around eight or nine, you darkened" (Levinson

S2:E6, 26:17-27:01). When discussing "the melancholic denial/preservation of homosexuality in the production of gender within the heterosexual frame" (Butler 1990, 57) following Freudian psychoanalysis, Butler argues:

> This process of internalizing lost loves becomes pertinent to gender formation when we realize that the incest taboo, among other functions, initiates a loss of a love-object for the ego and that this ego recuperates from this loss through the internalization of the tabooed object of desire. In the case of a prohibited heterosexual union, it is the object which is denied, but not the modality of desire, so that the desire is deflected from that object onto other objects of the opposite sex. But in the case of a prohibited homosexual union, it is clear that both the desire and the object require renunciation and so become subject to the internalizing strategies of melancholia. Hence "the young boy deals with his father by identifying himself with him." (Butler 1990, 59)

In this sense, Nate would identify with Cal since, from the moment he watches the sex tapes, he loses his father and, in the process of mourning, the internalisation of his father's actions become part of his own. Furthermore, both the incest and the homosexual taboos grow into the core of Nate's trauma, and, because the tapes discovery happens in secrecy, from the beginning he understands their content as prohibited and therefore gets involved in the paternal law's gender discourse. In other words, Nate recognizes heterosexuality as compulsory for success in the public sphere and different sexual practices as deviant, just like his father demonstrates. This seems more like a play between the glorification of masculinity and, therefore, the necessary detriment of femininity. Resulting from this line of thought, the consequential "repudiation of the mother" would be explained by Butler as follows:

> Clearly, Freud means to suggest that the boy must choose not only between the two object choices, but the two sexual dispositions, masculine and feminine. That the boy usually chooses the heterosexual would, then, be the result, not of the fear of castration by the father, but of the fear of castration –that is, the fear of "feminization" associated within heterosexual cultures with male homosexuality. (Butler 1990, 59)

Therefore, ultimately what Nate interiorizes is the need to differentiate himself from femininity at all instances to avoid the social "castration," and the repression that comes with it means neglecting a proper search for his own identity, one that is established as obscure and deviant from the beginning as his father's. This idea is reified in the speech Cal delivers to Nate when he is still a child, as he has already found the sex tapes. Even though Cal's awareness of his son's discovery is doubtful, there seems to be still an intimate connection between them that goes beyond what is explicitly stated in words:

> You're a strong man, Nathaniel. … You have an iron will. … someday it will lead you to greatness. But no one in this world will ever root for you. They'll see what I see and despise you for it. Sometimes you'll know, sometimes you won't. But the farther you go the sharper their blades. Just don't ever give them an opening. (Levinson S1:E2, 1:50-2:56)

In his direct address, Cal reinforces Nate's simultaneous internalisation of his father's conduct and the paternal law as determinants in social survival "for a man." The metaphor of the blade becomes meaningful as it aligns precisely with Butler's theorising of gender performance as the repetition of a coherent pattern which exposes its artificiality through intervals between repetitions. As scarcely specific as the reference for those holding "their blades" is, it is perfectly understood by both Nate and the audience as a menace coming from society, which will potentially stab in any given "opening" to destabilise Nate's –and Cal's– gender performance and, hence, identity.

3. Jules Vaughn: Gender and Body Subversion

In opposition to the submissive adaptation of the previously revised individuals into social gender norms, the character of Jules Vaughn is introduced as an apparently misfit girl who creates trouble against binarism. Here lies the interest in *Euphoria* as it contrasts with historically stigmatising representations of trans experiences in popular media (McLaren 2021, 172) by refusing to define Jules' gender identity explicitly, which is explained by Macintosh as an act of "eliding labels in favor of a more fluid representation of their developing intimacy" (2022, 22). This is part of the show's transgressive character, as the incognita demands for the audience to become active watchers and deconstruct stereotypes present in popular media, which has traditionally demonstrated to be uninterested in "explor[ing] the complexity of a prescribed character" given that stereotypes are useful in making a product easily understandable and, therefore, characters are usually "purposefully constructed to perpetuate gay [or queer] stereotypes" (Chung 2007, 100).

The mystery of Jules' character at the beginning of the series is partly provoked by her striking appearance, as she contrasts performative elements such as different layers of fabric in her vibrant-coloured outfits, and the fact that she is new in the suburbs, having previously lived in the city with her currently divorced parents (Levinson S1:E1, 12:37). Therefore, she is basically a stranger in a very small area where everyone is known to each other. This, along with Jules' tendency to independently decide her own plans, substituting her attendance at a popular party for a meeting with an anonymous man in a remote apartment (S1:E1, 13:30–14:00), adds meaning to her portrayal as an autonomous individual who is accustomed to living in the dark, apathetic towards social approval. In so doing, she inevitably fits in the obscurity that is created by the coherent discourse of the paternal law, as an undetermined subject that threatens to alter the binary order and could, as a result, potentially contribute to its subversion. But is Jules actually subversive? Does she in reality defeat the paternal law successfully?

For the purpose of this inquiry, this section will focus on the third chapter of Butler's work, titled "Subversive Bodily Acts" (1990, 79–141), where they discuss the nature of subversion and its possibilities. In the section "The Body Politics of Julia Kristeva" (1990,

79–93), Butler revises the concept of the semiotic that Kristeva introduces into the Lacanian division between the Symbolic and the Real, directly defying its fundamentals. As Butler writes:

> Kristeva challenges the Lacanian narrative which assumes cultural meaning requires the repression of that primary relationship to the maternal body. She argues that the "semiotic" is a dimension of language occasioned by that primary maternal body, which not only refutes Lacan's primary premise, but serves as a perpetual source of subversion within the Symbolic. (Butler 1990, 79)

Where Lacan places the Symbolic—as codified by the discourse of paternal law—completely parallel to the Real because of the latter's pre-discursive nature, in *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974) Kristeva institutes the semiotic as part of language connected to the maternal sphere of the Real. In this sense, the semiotic would be subversive to the paternal law since, through using its language, it is capable of breaking apart from its rules and simultaneously returning to the maternal origin, deprived of the strict rules of the Symbolic. Specifically, poetic language serves this purpose for the multiplicity and lack of a necessary coherent structure that it implies, which would result in the alteration of the unilateral Symbolic discourse (Butler 1990, 79–80).

At first, the semiotic strongly reminds of Jules in this respect, since she is a girl who plays within the norm by using its instruments, but still becomes subversive in it. She is poetic speech in a general sense when compared to Nate and Cal Jacobs or Maddy and Cassie as representatives of the paternal law's function in society, as her multiplicity allows her to conform to different patterns according to her own desires without necessarily fulfilling every aspect that being a normative girl requires. She undoubtedly repeats a feminine pattern but is not sexualized or starved for masculine attention, which contrasts drastically with Maddy and Cassie's development. The different outstanding colours of her outfit, apparently not following any pre-established social code, and her still being very feminine while having a penis is what makes her "poetic" in Kristeva's sense, as a breakage in the paternal law that, in fact, does not follow its norms. From Kristeva's psychoanalytic perspective, this idea is actually reinforced: "Kristeva describes the maternal body as bearing a set of meanings that are prior to culture itself. She thereby safeguards the notion of culture as a paternal structure and delimits maternity as an essentially precultural reality" (Butler 1990, 80). When Jules is perceived as a character who has lost connection with her mother, the simultaneous moving to the suburbs with her father could be regarded as entering the Symbolic order after the rupture of her maternal link. By becoming a place of subversion, Jules would be recovering the link with her mother, in this sense: "While the Symbolic is predicated upon the rejection of the mother, the semiotic, through rhythm, assonance, sound play, and repetition, re-presents or recovers the maternal body in poetic speech" (Butler 1990, 82). Jules would be, therefore,

manifesting multiplicity as a way of coping with the suffocating reality of living without her mother.

However, this vision only works by considering a vast general view of her situation, and it is, in fact, not true. In reality, Jules' mother lost custody over her because of mistreatment, she obliged her to undergo psychiatric treatment in order to "cure her queerness" (Levinson S2:E4, 0:07–3:20). That is, Jules' mother was precisely the embodiment of the paternal law's repression, who made her daughter suffer physically the consequences of binary imposition. In this regard, moving with her father implies freedom from the Symbolic as Jules is able to explore and enact her identity freely—at least, in principle. Then the imposition of the paternal law would not be necessarily related to the rupture of the maternal link and the repression of its multiplicity, since Jules did not lose a mother that allowed her freedom of identity.

Following this line of thought, Butler refutes Kristeva's theory—and Lacan's simultaneously—since they do not believe in the maternal link as a prediscursive locus of the individual from which multiplicity is recovered, and considers that "it is unclear whether the primary relationship to the maternal body … is a viable construct and whether it is even a knowable experience according to either of their linguistic theories" (Butler 1990, 80). The character of Jules seems to be more suitable with Butler's view that the prediscursive maternal link is not a concept created after studying practical experience, as she, in fact, proves to be contradictory to it. As Butler argues against Kristeva, the concept of the paternal law as the place of restriction and the opposite maternal locus of liberation are just effects created by the same configuration of culture, and not a challenge against it. That is, this separation is not made by taking an outer perspective of society, but within the same rule that the culture which is attempted to be studied imposes: "the repression of the feminine does not require that the agency of repression and the object of repression be ontologically distinct. Indeed, repression may be understood to produce the object it comes to deny" (Butler 1990, 93). The feminine as repressed by the paternal law and reappearing in poetic language is, therefore, simply amplifying the current cultural configuration, lacking any sense of subversion at all. In fact, the character of Jules could not be considered as actually subversive under this light since her performative appearance and movements in the shadows would only add to her configuration as a subject in the margins of society, rather than present her as successful in displacing social codes embedded in the paternal law.

However, that Kristeva's theory does not work in justifying Jules's subversion does not necessarily mean that Jules *per se* is not subversive, although it takes her back to the beginning. Indeed, Jules will appear as interested in disrupting the patriarchal framework from the inside, as shown in her claim: "In my head, it's like if I can conquer men, I can conquer femininity. … But it's not like I even want to conquer it. It's like I want to fucking obliterate it" (Levinson S1:E7, 38:35–39:20). Paige Macintosh analyses this

fragment as an argument on gender and sexuality "clearly anchored in the safe, explicitly trans space of the city" (2022, 23) as it takes place in a trip to the city with Anna, an outside character, stranger to the city and the main group of teenagers in the show. It is clear that Jules reads herself as deviant from the canon and that her intentionality is based on a play within the binary frame of definition, and yet she does not exactly wish to fit into the norm, but make it her own. In this regard, Foucault plays an important part when explaining subversion, since he also believed in the simultaneous "generative" and "prohibitive" nature of repression, as Butler explains: "If subversion is possible, it will be a subversion from within the terms of the law, through the possibilities that emerge when the law turns against itself and spawns unexpected permutations of itself" (93). Then, subversive acts would be those that, happening from within cultural configuration, contradict it to the point of disruption, allowing a multiplicity that is not necessarily prediscursive.

In the section "Foucault, Herculine, and the Politics of Sexual Discontinuity" (Butler 1990, 93-111) Butler reviews Foucault's theory on the coextensiveness of power and sex, and his overview in this regard of Herculine Barbin as a figure of bodily multiplicity, being an hermaphrodite in the nineteenth century who was assigned female gender and obliged to change it to male around the age of twenty:

> To be sexed, for Foucault, is to be subjected to a set of social regulations, to have the law that directs those regulations reside both as the formative principle of one's sex, gender, pleasures, and desires and as the hermeneutic principle of self-interpretation. The category of sex is thus inevitably regulative. (Butler 1990, 96)

In this sense, Foucault positions the core of gender categorization in the assignment of sex, for which not only Herculine but Jules too would serve as suitable examples, since the assignment of the male sex when the latter was born according to her genitals is what led her mother to intern Jules in a psychiatric hospital so as to make sure she did not deviate from the social rules that surround having a penis and, accordingly, being a boy. Butler follows Foucault in this perspective on sex and further social configurations as an artifice. However, they do not share the same view on Herculine's case and consequently offer different conceptualizations upon analysing Jules' gender identity.

For Foucault, Herculine's sexual ambivalence embodies a realm of multiplicity that successfully defeats sexual categorization and allows for its riddance. In *Herculine Barbin, Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth Century Hermaphrodite* (1978) he idealises her case and considers that under "the disappearance of 'sex'" the body becomes able to explore numerous processes that result "in the proliferation of pleasures outside of the framework of intelligibility enforced by univocal sexes within a binary relation" (Butler 1990, 96). Essentially, Herculine would be proof of culture's artificiality in decoding sex and the world of possibilities that the imposition of the law forbids. This inevitably reminds us of Lacan's and Kristeva's maternal origin, although

Foucault maintains in *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1* (1976) that "recourse to a sexuality before the law is an illusory and complicitous conceit of emancipatory sexual politics" (Butler 1990, 97), which makes him assert the pre-discursive multiplicity of identity while rejecting it at the same time. Furthermore, he considers that previous to h/er change into the male sex, Herculine was open to enjoying the multiplicity of pleasures, which works similarly to Jules' preservation of her penis while maintaining a female gender identification, since it could be regarded as materialising the free benefit of this ambivalence. Both Herculine and Jules suffered from the imposition of a univocal gender, with the difference that the former had to endure it for the rest of h/er life and therefore decided to commit suicide, while the latter, living in a more modern sociopolitical context, is allowed to get rid of such enforcement when she is still very young.

However, Foucault's statement is completely refuted by Butler for not taking into account the subjection to the law that Herculine suffered from the beginning of h/er life:

> Whether "before" the law as a multiplicitous sexuality or "outside" the law as an unnatural transgression, those positionings are invariably "inside" a discourse which produces sexuality and then conceals that production through a configuring of a courageous and rebellious sexuality "outside" of the text itself. (Butler 1990, 99)

This would mean that both Herculine's and Jules's "multiplicity" falls within the law, which is the one that produces this effect of ambiguity and, therefore, they actually never get rid of or subvert its imposition, but are always codified as extraordinary according to it.

Interestingly enough, Foucault also discusses how Herculine's homosexual practices among women in the convent at the beginning of her life allowed her to bear a "non-identity," from which Butler suggests the idea that "homosexuality is instrumental to the overthrow the category of sex" (Butler 1990, 100). That is, rather than being able to experience multiplicity, in homosexual contexts Herculine was able to get rid of any sex categorization. In this sense, it is important to analyse Jules and the different relationships she maintains as "the narrative moves from the construction of Jules as an object of fetishism and violence to a subject of love and intimacy" (Masanet 2022, 147). On the one hand, she shares "female homosexual" experiences with Rue during the whole show and briefly with Anna and the general feeling is that she can live freely around them. This attitude directly contrasts with the moment he encounters Nate for the first time when he confronts Jules about her identity with a "Nobody that looks like you is minding their own business. I know what you are" while behaving aggressively with her (Levinson S1:E1, 42:03–44:48). Furthermore, when Nate and Jules see each other for the first time and she sexually rejects him he takes advantage of her powerless situation and accuses her of being a menace to himself and his family, threatening to publicly reveal the sexual pictures she has sent, which could be considered "child pornography" (S1:E4, 44:48–47:40). Analysed from a general perspective it would be clear how safe Jules feels around

other women, where she can portray her non-identity unrestrained, and the dangers that come along with her heterosexual relationships since her sexual categorization becomes central to their development.

Her encounter with Nate reveals how Jules is received when she leaves the margins and attempts to insert herself into the norm as she is, causing her to use violent words related to battle when exposing her concerns with gender (as previously explained in "conquer men" to "conquer femininity" and even "obliterate it") and describe her life in the suburbs as "claustrophobic" (S1:E7, 34:45). This is precisely what makes the dynamic between Nate and Jules so interesting since, as Macintosh argues, "While she is clearly accepted and treated as 'one-of-the-girls' by the other high schoolers, the presence of Nate and his father reminds viewers of the constant threat suburbia poses to nonnormative identities" (2022, 23). However, these encounters still fall under the same reading of the law and work according to it. Where Jules poses a threat to the binary frame of definition, she is silenced and expelled back to the margins by a hegemonic representative of masculinity and, therefore, the paternal law. In this sense, what differentiates Foucault from Butler is that the latter insists on how these homosexual relationships are "gender transgressions" that succeed in reconfiguring the binary social structure, but do not, in any case, fall out of it, so that Herculine's sexuality "is not outside the law, but is the ambivalent production of the law" (Butler 1990, 105), as would Jules's bodily and sexual variability be.

From Butler's perspective, Herculine's constriction to the law is again part of the performativity of gender, since the binary imposition goes beyond the legal sphere and affects her mentally and physically, which eventually leads h/er to a fatal end. According to them, this is part of the naturalisation of sex which constricts bodies different to the binary imposition as "trouble," as they are not part of the genital distinction that results in gender categories (106). Butler revises this more in-depth, as they assert the idea of gender expression as an artifice:

> acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts … are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. (Butler 1990, 136)

Consequently, both Herculine's and Jules's genitals do not necessarily connect with either their gender identity or with their sexuality or desires. That gender is constructed by the repetition of some acts performed on the body suggests the real width of identity possibilities and reveals gender as regulated by the law to be simply the imposition of a particular mode of appearance for a particular number of reasons which could be different altogether, depending on the social interest. Instead of portraying nature as the genesis

of true gender, Butler argues that the "original nature" is an effect, an illusion, produced by the discourse that regulates gender identification, as gender is an overt reality that can be constructed in different ways. As a result, Jules should not be constricted to behave in any specific manner as Herculine should not have been either, but the ambiguity that their body configuration suggested to the binary system provoked their perception as subversive, for which they were both silenced: Herculine with legal transitioning and her following suicide, and Jules through Nate's threatening against the revealing of his relationship with a transgender girl.

4. Conclusion

As a contemporary show dealing with Gen Z teenagers issues on sex and gender, *Euphoria* serves as a modern cultural product worth analysing for its transgressive nature in displaying in detail current dynamics produced by gender performativity. Its characters and their behaviour serve as suitable examples to demonstrate how Butler's theory of performativity of gender operates. As Butler considers that genders are fabrications performed over the body, they hold a sense of variability according to each social context that discloses them as non-compulsory in essence, being subjected only to cultural conventions rather than to any natural instinct. On the one hand, Nate and Cal Jacobs would serve as an embodied example of how the compulsory-heterosexuality frame works in society and constricts individuals to follow a series of conducts according to their assigned gender that entails them to strategies in relationships that can become suffocating. Meanwhile, Jules Vaughn's apparent contradiction between the configuration of her body and her gender identity successfully proves, not her obscurity and configuration outside of the law, but rather, in a deeper sense, the artificiality of gender and how binarism defeats itself through the imposition of a unilateral strict pattern. In sum, a great part of the conflicts that take place in the storylines of the characters analysed are related to gender identity and performativity as its artificiality and the striving to conform to a particular and idealistic pattern becomes conflicting for the development of different behaviours that fall out of binary patterns of definition. Hence, the need for constant reaffirmation in gender identities due to their instability becomes the source for the complexities of each character's development individually and between each other.

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"LOL, LET'S JUST PUT THAT ALL TOGETHER!" SOCIALLY ENGAGED HUMOR IN THE POETRY OF TOMMY PICO

Martín Praga

ABSTRACT

Given its serious object, socially engaged poetry is seldom associated with laid-back humor. In his four-book long epic series, queer Indigenous poet Tommy Pico (Kumeyaay) challenges this approach to violence and oppression by addressing individual and social maladies across time and space, from loneliness in the era of self-exposure to egregious homophobia, to eating disorders, to cultural erasure. While many scholars acknowledge Pico's biting wits, there is a tendency to understand this humor as secondary to the seriousness of his themes. Conversely, I propose conceiving of it as the pillar of Pico's potential as a socially engaged author. Vine DeLoria (Standing Rock Sioux) has claimed that "One of the best ways to understand a people is to know what makes them laugh." While moral superiority tends to undergird most political humor, Pico strategically deploys a blend of self-deprecating comedy based on a suspicion of binaries that aims at dismantling all forms of reified stereotypes. By placing himself in the first line of humorous critiques, Pico avoids any form of glorification and invites readers to join in the self-deconstructing process. This attitude aligns with Diné scholar Ho'hesta Mo'e'hahne's suggestion that twenty-first century queer Indigenous authors seek "alternative modes of relationality and connection across space and time." Indeed, in contrast with what occurs in more somber approaches to such urgent themes, there is in Pico's will to deconstruct himself and create something new from the ruins of settler colonialism a necessary belief in the possibility of change.

Keywords: neoconfessional poetry, socially engaged poetry, Tommy Pico, queerness, humor.

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For most, tackling the embodied consequences of settler colonialism, racism, and homophobia would be at odds with cracking self-deprecating jokes and coming up with low brow play on words revolving too frequently around male genitalia. Originally from the Viejas Reservation, close to what is today San Diego, California, Kumeyaay poet, screenwriter, and podcaster Tommy Pico has made of that unlikely combination his signature style.[1] Perhaps because engaged poetry is generally expected to address serious matters

[1] Pico has written many episodes of the acclaimed HBO series *Reservation Dogs* and is the co-host of the very popular podcast *Food for Thot* with Denne Michele Norris, Joseph Osmundson, and Fran Tirado.

in a grave tone, and particularly because "Native humor has traditionally been dismissed or ignored altogether" (Andrews 2011, 10), Pico's comedic approach is often placed in a secondary tier of relevance. "America," claims the poet, "wants its NDNs weary, slumped / over the broken horse;" instead, he brings "NDN joy NDN laughter NDN freedom" (2016, 52). Numerous scholars have shown how Pico's poetry braves both homophobic bigotry and the malicious stereotypes configured and reproduced by settler colonialism.[2] In line with Joseph L. Coulombe, who maintains that comedy is perfect "to reveal injustice, protect self-esteem, heal wounds, and create bonds" (2010, 94), I argue that humor is not ancillary to Pico's agenda but is precisely the reason behind its effectiveness in deconstructing prejudice, opposing discursive violence, and, above all, building ties beyond queer and Indigenous communities. Part of the long tradition of the Indian Trickster—"an antiheroic comic teacher and holy fool" (Lincoln, 5)—which includes sarcastic urban NDNs like Sherman Alexie (Spokane and Coeur d'Alene), Diane Burns (Anishinaabe and Chemehuevi), and artist Kent Monkman (Fisher River Cree), Pico achieves all this through the strategic deployment of a particular strain of self-deprecating humor.

Jennifer Andrews's remark that "humor and irony are particularly effective methods of expressing the contradictions and dichotomies that shape the lives of Native populations today, as individuals and communities blend 'tribal tradition' and 'contemporary experience'" (3) fits Pico like a glove. His four book-length poems—*IRL* (2016), *Nature Poem* (2017), *Junk* (2018), and *Feed* (2019)—are a stream-of-consciousness wild ride that follows the adventures of the poet's "bratty diva" alter ego, Teebs, as he enjoys New York's dating scene, philosophizes during lonely promotion tours, and reminisces about his childhood in the "Rez." Through these poems, Pico explores queer identity, tackles colonial genocide and cultural erasure, challenges stereotypes attached to Native Americans, lampoons consumerism, and more. His style can be described as both torrential for its volume and electric due to the brevity of his tweet-like witty verses, which carry hefty reflections, perfunctory aesthetic judgments, and deadpan dad puns. Pico's bubbliness smooths an otherwise violently intimate encounter, given the constant sharing of Teebs's daily deeds—from hookups to passing wind on planes, from homophobic harassment to writer's block. In fact, peeking into Teebs's musings on bygone lovers and current crushes, idle nightlife, and hot Cheetos feels like browsing through someone's social

[2] In her urgent analysis of food colonization, Nicole Seymour mentions that the poet is "known for his biting wit" (2022, 120), but chooses to analyze how his "poetry helps readers understand how issues of food, environment, colonialism, and queerness are deeply interrelated" (121) through other means. June Scudeler notices Pico's "deceptively simple, breezy, and humorous style" (2021, 163), but focuses on the epic; Ho'hesta Mo'e'hahne claims that Pico's "work enacts queer Indigeneity as a mode of perception, spatiality, and decolonial critique" (2022, 316), but pays little attention to his humor, John Gamber explores the way the poem challenges hetero-normative forms of masculinity. Kyle Bladow (2020) is an exception, dedicating part of his analysis to Pico's humor.

media feed. This resemblance highlights the inspiration his work draws from Web 2.0, evident in the use of Internet slang, shorthand, hashtags, or ampersands.

The tetralogy's larger-than-life scope calls for a platform that allows the writing to expand and grow like a ramble with little or no confines. Understandably, Pico's work has been regarded as epic, with scholars placing him rightfully among poets who either rewrite the classics "in their own idiom and in the light of their own concerns" (Hurley and O'Neill 2012, 122), such as Derek Walcott or James Joyce, or engage with the form to create their own narratives, as do, for example, Craig Santos Perez or Cathy Park Hong.[3] Although the poet himself has labeled his work as epic, this categorization may overshadow the relevance of the individual in it. Indeed, there exists an unresolved tension with tradition in Pico's work.[4] In conversation with Ruby Brunton, he states that his books are "just like epic poems" (2016d). Elsewhere, he suggests having drawn inspiration from A.R. Ammons's long works.[5] Finally, Pico explains that after writing the books, he "realized that their origin was more in these Bird Songs I grew up hearing my whole life and less [in] Whitman or A.R. Ammons" (Pico 2019b), referencing traditional "travelogues that detail how Kumeyaay people made it to the ancestral homeland and what we passed on the way" (2019b). Yet, even if modeled after Bird Songs, Pico's poems present a capital difference: these "new Bird Songs" (emphasis added) depict "how the character left the Rez and what he passed on his way" (2019b, emphasis in original). This prominence of the individual—"I don't want to be an identity or a belief or a feedbag. I wanna b me" (2017, 33)—is significant and helps to illuminate the social potential of Pico's humor.

Interviewed by Tara Kenny, Pico nonchalantly admits that "I wasn't writing in a reparative way for Native American communities. It was purely selfish. I was just making these comparisons, making these jokes, but then also talking about genocide. LOL, let's just put that all together!" (2018b). The poet's bravado, which may come off as aloof individualism, should not be regarded negatively, as it conceals one of the driving forces behind his work: an undeniable yearning to belong to something larger while retaining a sense of selfhood. Beyond the tension between the Rez boy and the New York tech-savvy

[3] Kadji Amin, Amber Jamilla Musser and Roy Pérez call Pico's work "an epic that refuses to posture as high art" (2017, 238). Will Clark claims that Pico "modernizes the form and explodes the reverentiality of the epic" (2022, 529). Scudeler, while noting that that Pico "rejects slotting himself too easily into the epic tradition" (2021, 160), claims that he "queers" and "Indigenizes it to reflect contemporary urban Indigenous experiences" (189).

[4] In his own words: "I can't ever see / where I stand in the lineage / of art" (2016).

[5] The author has explicitly mentioned Ammon's import in both *Junk*, an estranged heir to Ammons's 1993 *Garbage*, and *IRL*, which visually and perhaps programmatically resembles *Tape for the Turn of the Year*, a long poem where Ammons recorded random thoughts on an adding-machine tape every day for over a month and a half between 1963 and 1964.

hipster, as Gamber has noted, there is a constant struggle to balance the socially accepted forms of a queer man ("I hate gay guys so much" [2018, 16]), an Indian ("Haven't figured out how to be NDN" [2018, 48]), and a poet ("I can't write poems / the way they must come / to others" [2016, 79]). Jen Hedler Phillis has proposed a hybrid of epic and lyric where she places authors like Pound and Williams alongside dg nanouk okpik (Inuit-Iñupiaq), Douglas Kearney, and Hong. According to Phillis, the balance between these modes ensures that minority voices are heard, since "the victors tell the story of their triumph, and their victims lose the linear structure of narrative" (2019, 5) in favor of the fragmented polyvocality of the lyric.

If, epic-like, the tetralogy begins in media res, its first word instantly challenges the third-person narrator characteristic of the genre: "I text Girard" (2016, 7). An analysis of the lyric "I" and the Teebs persona would require an article of its own. However, to support my point on the role of the individual in Pico's poetry, I will simply note that the doubts present in the early poems find a form of resolution halfway into the last book of the series. Right after one of the fragments discussing the Fermi Paradox—an allegory for the search for true love—Teebs muses:

> The idea
> is that a "true self" exists somewhere below the layers and layers of scarves—
> all squishy eternity and Cèdre Atlas Atelier toilet water
>
> and in the contour, a false self
> The persona
> we create to conform to society
> Maison de Parfum (43–44)

At first glance, Pico is merely reproducing the trope that we all play a part on the stage of life, keeping our "real" self hidden from public view. However, his humorous literal translation of the French *eau de toilette* suggests that everyone's "true self" is actually cheap, unfashionable, or, in any case, mockable. Thus, the key idea here is not (only) that identity is complex,[6] but that no part of it is inherently good or bad.[7] Immediately following this reflection, Pico quotes George Orwell's essay "Why I Write": "'The job is to reconcile my / ingrained likes and dislikes with the essentially public, non-individual / activities that this age forces on all of us. It is not easy. It raises / problems of construction and of language, and it raises in a new way / the problem of truthfulness" (44). These lines explain much of the social potential of Pico's poetic enterprise, which acknowledges

[6] The Teebs persona is one of the characters the man Tommy Pico performs, as he lets on in this Whitmanian spoof: "(but there are so many people inside me)" (*Feed*, 36).

[7] Pico has said so explicitly, claiming that "binaries like 'right' and 'wrong' or 'good' and 'bad'" are "imposed on me & my body specifically by settler colonialism" ("Beauty").

the need to sacrifice something in order to create. This concession is expressed by Pico through snarky comments, piercing comebacks, and disarming comedy.

Humor scholars agree that "laughter appears to stand in need of an echo" (Bergson, 5). In other words, humor is a social phenomenon. Arguably, the most common form of humor found in socially engaged texts is superiority-based, where in line with the Aristotelian tradition, laughter springs from a sense of moral high ground. When Rachel Trousdale explains that while "Racist laughter builds a wall between the joker and the object of the joke [...] Anti-racist laughter, by contrast, makes racism itself the object of mockery" (2021, 19-20), she overlooks the fact that this form of humor, however, is likely to be antagonizing and divisive, as its end goal is the depreciation of a set of beliefs, regardless of their being right or wrong. Henri Bergson adds an interesting nuance to Aristotle's position, suggesting that a person who is object of derision becomes "less abstracted, more flexible, and responsive," making them "more fully human and part of the society we live in" (Trousdale 2021, 7). Expanding the "integrating effect" (Allen 1992, 158) of humor in Native poetry, Pico's work engages readers in two related ways. First, through the cheeky critique of activities Teebs participate in like foodie culture, dating apps, or the shallow cult of the self. Secondly, by looking at himself in the proverbial mirror, this criticism paves the way for "the potential racist—the white/male/dominant figure—to laugh at himself" (Trousdale 2021, 20) when it is their turn on the receiving end of Pico's scathing insights. Laughter may have transformative power and, in this sense, Pico's comedy catalogue is vast and operates differently according to whom the gibe is addressed.

An excellent entry point can be found in the Kumeyaay poet's feigned anti-intellectualism, a form of self-deprecation which functions on two different levels. After sending the message to Girard and feeling guilty about it, Teebs parades his anti-intellectual mood in incongruously humorous fashion: "Regret is a gift / that keeps on giving I / think it was Sontag / or Sonic the Hedgehog / who said just dash dodge / weave faster than you / can think" (*IRL* 7). In line with Anishinaabe scholar Gerald Vizenor's description of the Native trickster as essentially "postmodern" (1993, 9), Pico jumps in only eight lines from twisting a popular saying to apparently quoting philosopher Susan Sontag only to place her in some category where she shares space with a popular video game porcupine. Similarly, in *Feed*, Teebs narrates the myth told by Aristophanes in Plato's *Symposium* about the origin of the "other half" trope. Without even giving the reader time to reflect, the lyric voice spouts: "Now before you get all / sapiosexual / on me, I don't know this from Plato / I know this from *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*" (39).[8] This playful ignorance is in part consequence of Pico's admitted fondness of accessibility—"my rancor isn't anti-intellectual I just hate it when / you never use contractions" (2018, 48)—but also a

[8] Sapiosexuality refers to the people who are attracted to intelligence over physical appearance.

statement against what I would call the intellectualization of suffering, which also transpires in his treatment of language and the literary tradition.

All throughout the series, there is clever word play: "I'm / totally caught / off guard when Muse / texts me *don't respond* / *don't respond don't* / *respond don't spondee* / *respond don't respond*" (2016, 14); plain silly puns: "I've got Swedish Fish in my bag. / Swag" (2019, 44); and the toying with language on the goofier end that conceals more than meets the eye: "Linguists say a language is dead when its only speakers are adult, that in a / hundred years 90% of the worlds languages will be kaput [...] A blue orbit suggested by echoes. / lol the word of the day on dictionary.com is diddle. / I will always be alone" (2017, 52). In this last example, the pun points to that urge to belong mentioned earlier, but the buildup, beyond the on-the-fly social commentary, places Pico as an outsider within a group to which he belongs: the poetic guild. The choice of a Germanism, "kaput," to discuss extermination (of languages) is defiant enough,[9] but Pico produces a meta-elegiac image, "the blue orbit," as an example of the evocative subtlety of poetic language, only to be distracted by the double entendre of the admittedly funny word "diddle," which suggests a discomfort with the genre's traditional solemnity.

This struggle with lyricism runs through the tetralogy. In *IRL* Teebs "Can't use words / like *tamp* or *tincture*, n that / makes me feel like a chump / fraud fool" (79). In *Nature Poem*, Pico comes back to the same words, but with a different attitude: "why shd I give a fuck abt "poetry"? It's a / container for words like *whilst* and *hither* and *tamp*" (49). Eventually, in *Feed*, the respect for the gravitas of poetry is flushed down the toilet: "Candlelight is not too poetic to mention in a poem if we say the light / slicks across our faces like mud butt. / The candlelight slicked across our faces like mud butt" (35).[10] This playful fiddling with his own craft opens the door for a deeper scrutiny of the fraught relationship between erasure, tradition, and language, poetic or otherwise.

This relationship is particularly problematic for Indigenous peoples, for whom, as Natalie Diaz puts it, "English [...] exists in a state of emergency" (2020). Yet even when claiming that, since his native tongue is disappearing, "there is something primordially indigenous and Kumeyaay about me that I don't have access to any longer" (2016c), the poet manages to buffer the pain with mirth. Throughout the books, he mourns his losses as a member of "a group whose culture history language gods / cosmology calendar stories government gait was capital O / Obliterated" (2018, 66). Here, both the inclusion of the word "gait" and the delivery cushion the message. If the explicit capitalization is removed, the tone of the line becomes somber and remains a simple denouncement of a fact. However, as a craftsman and storyteller, Pico has the power to create. In *IRL*, he plays with the tension of destruction and creation when he teases the reader claiming

[9] "Extinction wipes words from earth" (29), says Teebs in *Junk*.

[10] It is worth noting that, in another twist, the words "tamp" (57) and "hither" (13) actually appear in *Feed*.

there is a Kumeyaay word akin to "in-between" (95) that means uncertainty or doubt, only to later admit he has made this up. His point is that "even if I'm lyin to you" (96), the possibility of creating the word is "breath tethering" (96). In *Feed*, a book driven by the will to learn to cook with friends as a means to compensate for the lack of traditional Kumeyaay cuisine, yet another consequence of cultural genocide, Pico scornfully blurts: "Dear reader, let's make a culture! / Let's make a dough. Like anyone whose culture has been scrubbed / from history, you can scrub my apple crumble" (22). The alliteration softens the criticism and what stands out is the will to build something new.

Eva Gruber explains that given their hybrid cultural history, "Native texts are often linked to canonical American literary texts, master narratives of Western civilization, and elements of American popular culture" (2008, 80). Pico does not reject his hybrid inheritance, and before this complicated relationship with the colonizer's language and imposed tradition, instead, one must "try to find a beauty in the complication" (2016b). Of Pico's work, Calhoun Jeanetta Mish has said that there is a conversation in it on "how to resist it, how to work within it, how to *make it new*" (2018, 182). Although Pound may not feature in Pico's list of influences, these are numerous, ranging from Alexie to "Kandi Burruss from *Real Housewives of Atlanta"* (2017b), from Beyoncé to the aforementioned Ammons. The nods to these artists in the books can be reverential or not. Of Alexie, for example, Pico says that he "gives me permission / to leave the reservation" (2016, 46) in an obviously playful but sarcastic tone that questions his power over his creativity. Of the otherwise praised author of *Garbage*, Pico writes "A. R. Ammons is like, / *I have this feeling to write a poem but it was a boner*" (2018, 63). As for popular culture, while the untrained eye may find in Pico's work a general interest in pop divas, Teebs openly states that "My safe / word is *Go to hell Katy Perry* pronounced 'Catty'" (2018, 5), or "Taylor / Swift is an idiot" (2017, 72), ostracizing these two popstars from the category of strong, independent women who have been of inspiration to the gay community for decades.

"A lot of the humor-overlap between LGBTQIA+ stuff and Native stuff is a real sense of tragedy, of adversity" ("Meet"), explains Pico. Yet jokes that have the gay community as an object are constructed differently than the ones aimed at tackling Native American stereotypes. The tetralogy is joyfully queer, but the community is not idealized. Mostly in *Nature Poem* and *Junk*, Pico denounces the vacuousness, racism, and xenophobia of gay dating culture: "*oh, but you don't look very Indian* is a thing ppl feel comfortable saying to / me on dates. / What rhymes with, *fuck off and die*?" (2017, 17-18). Numerous similar episodes drive Pico to conclude that "Dating is hard / bc gay men are a garbage fire" (2018, 21). Once again, by making one of his groups the object of scorn or doubt, Pico does something utterly uncommon in today's engaged poetry: he shows them as flawed and vulnerable. While cis-hetero whites are hardly responsible for the behavior of certain gay men, these passages are a perfect example of how Pico's books are for everyone, "Even though it might be 'for' you differently. Even though parts of it may be asking you to

observe or appreciate rather than participate. Idk I haven't had lunch yet" (2018c, emphasis added).

Interestingly, an inverse relation can be traced between humor and violence in Pico's work. Arturo Aldama distinguishes between discursive violence, found in narratives of fear, i.e., "fear-based discourses of otherization and pathologization of subjects whose positions are at the margins and borders of dominant political and cultural apparatuses" (2003, 5); and the material, physical violence exerted on those bodies. While the stricture of a white literary canon can be symbolically oppressive, and reductive stereotypes are at the base of biases and discrimination, they represent a less pressing threat than direct physical violence. In *IRL*, between pages 60 and 64, Teebs traces a nightmarish route of homophobic behavior that includes harassment, jeering, and spitting in public spaces like movie theaters or chain stores. The passage, however, can be read as a reminder of the importance of communal care, as Teebs admits that "W/ / a friend, you will forget / to pay attention" (62). Moreover, when walking with female friends, the perception of him as a "man-thing" enables an awkward "safety / exchange" (62). In the face of danger, what is commendable here is the realization that "There is a kind of power / in being reviled / for just *being*," something that "destabilizes some- / thing about their everyday" (62). The direct threat of physical harm, nonetheless, has Pico understandably address homophobia in a less humorous tone.

Between symbolic oppression and assault, there is Pico's treatment of death as a consequence of slow violence in its neocolonial mode. In *Nature Poem*, Teebs comments "how freakishly routine it is to hear someone / died" (2017, 33), and throughout the series numerous cases of young relatives who have passed are mentioned. Inevitably, this fear haunts the poet, who faces it in an unexpected exchange:

> Is it normal to get a nose ring at 30?
> *Normal is defined not by what it is, but what surrounds it. Meaning it could literally be anything, and is nothing.*
> Is it normal to get a nose ring at 30?
> *No, it's not.*
> Am I just afraid of death?
> *Yes, probably.*
> Is there nothing more normal than fearing death?
> *It is very natural to fear death.*
> Should I get a nose ring?
> *It would look very cute on you.* (2017, 43)

The repeated question suggests an interesting turn on the idea of uncertainty. While existential doubts are allowed leeway, context-related situations—such as the appropriateness of a certain look—demand concreteness. It is worth noting that here Teebs goes against the grain, too. Furthermore, with this juxtaposition of a somewhat vain aesthetic choice and a genuine and universal fear, Pico places death as a quotidian event that

permeates life. In the series, stars, plants and animals, and celebrities die. Once this has been established, Pico is not afraid to point fingers at the origin of some health problems that affect his community:

> Then isolated reservations on stone mountains where not
> even a goat could live. Then the starvation. Then the Food Distribution
> Program on Indian Reservations. Whatever the military would throw away
> came canned in the backs of trucks. The commodities. The powdered milk,
> worms in the oatmeal, corn syrupy canned peaches. Food stripped of its
> nutrients. Then came the sugar blood. The sickness. The glucose meter goes
> up and up and up. (2019, 12)

As Pico suggests, land expropriation and thoughtless relocation are behind the food poverty affecting Native Americans. However, with his characteristic optimism and candor, Pico admits that "Resisting death for / generations, I want to make the opposite of death No excuse / for a vanilla bean tapioca ball attitude" (2017, 76). The omnipresence of junk food in the first three books of the series is replaced in the last one with the mentioned interest in healthier recipes that goes beyond self-care, signaling a will to challenge an inherited malady. After another mention of a dreadful fate—"did u not just read? My cousin died today / and he was only two years older / than me and it's been this way my whole / life like biiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiinch" (2019, 14), Teebs tells a publisher who suggests waiting some years before releasing his next book—, Pico admits in a fitting double-edged pun, "I'm tired of being grave" (15).

Although his comedic range is wide, Pico's most effective formula, which can be described as a caustic dialectics, functions on multilayered delayed parataxis. There is a slow burn wanton pun in *Junk* that perfectly exemplifies this. Right after commenting on a lover's attributes, Teebs's mention "bananas are dying and this is not a metaphor" (44), referencing the fact that due to human manipulation most banana varieties do not reproduce, and hence subtly commenting on artificial agriculture and how "settler colonialism has made traditional Indigenous foodways nearly impossible" (Seymour 2021, 130).[11] The seriousness of the topic makes the reader forget the puerile likening of bananas to genitalia until Pico calls them "Commercially produced yellow penis proxies" (Pico 2018, 44-45) only two lines later. A few couplets on, after another allusion to buttocks and watermelon flavored candy, Teebs surprises the reader not only once, "You expect me to tie bananas into the narrative," but twice: "I expected my Ancestors wd b treated as human beings" (45). It is precisely through this kind of humor that Pico achieves his double social reach.

[11] In her superb essay on Pico's treatment of food, Seymour notes how his "poetry helps readers understand how issues of food, environment, colonialism, and queerness are deeply interrelated" (2022, 121).

The closest to the relatability mark are those who find themselves, or their ancestors, victims of colonialism and state structured genocide. A close second tier finds readers who are otherwise oppressed. A third line is formed by engaged readers who might not identify as oppressed minorities but stand against said oppression. These reactions can be—and most typically are—elicited by works of grave and sober tone. However, the simple acknowledgment of some form of injustice or other allows readers to participate in an arguably sterile socially approved form of empathy. Anti-racist jokes, on the other hand, have the intention "to stimulate change" since they "emphasize that racism is an ideology, and can be abandoned" (Trousdale 2021, 20). The genius in Pico's work is the fearless self-exposure to being the object of derision, which both allows him to be in control of what is to be lampooned and brings the barriers of his audience down.

Authors like Alexie, who shares with Pico "a penchant for humorous self-regard and a tendency to alternate between the melancholic and the irreverent" (Seymour 2022, 123), have been criticized, mostly by other Native authors, for their humorous treatment of the Native reality. In this line, Trousdale warns that self-joking by minorities, which could reproduce and strengthen racist stereotypes, "may happen when members of an oppressed group identify with their oppressors" (2021, 21). However, this is not the case with Pico, who moves comfortably in the oppressor's culture and is well aware of its flaws; and, despite appearing coy, is in full command of the stage. A fragment in *IRL* confirms this when, after toying with the stereotype that presents Natives as less inclined to engage in unfiltered blathering, a misconception which, by the way, the tetralogy shatters, the poet produces a stand-up comedy scenario:

> They ask what do Indians use
> to treat poison oak? Mable McKay
> takes a drag from her cig on-
> stage *Calamine lotion* takes
> a puff of history. I slap myself.
> Ppl know when they're being
> condescended to. (2016, 26)

The slap serves as a reminder to Pico that jokes function as catalysts for change when aimed correctly. This does not diminish their sharpness or poignancy, but rather highlights the importance of timing and delivery, skills which Pico masters. By transforming McKay—a member of the Long Valley Cache Creek Pomo, a basket weaver, and an activist—into a sardonic 80s comedian, he skillfully offloads the weight of his own lyric voice. This comedic persona is not merely ornamental, but it connects to a broader Indigenous tradition of stand-up comedians, from Charlie Hill to the members of the comedy group 1491s.

Lawrence E. Mintz posits that stand-up represents "the purest public comic communication, performing essentially the same social and cultural roles in practically every

known society, past and present" (1985, 70). What I have described as delayed multilayered parataxis structurally resembles the comedic actor's delivery of incongruous humor. William O. Beeman describes its four stages:

> The setup involves the presentation of the original content material and the first interpretive frame. The paradox involves the creation of the additional frame or frames. The dénouement is the point at which the initial and subsequent frames are shown to coexist, creating tension. The release is the enjoyment registered by the audience in the process of realization and the release resulting therefrom. (2001, 101)

The banana joke quoted earlier, for example, is built upon very similar foundations. Although Pico already flaunts his facetious wits in *IRL*, it is in his apophatic masterpiece, *Nature Poem*—a metaliterary tug of war where the author struggles with a self-imposed prohibition to write the kind of book which is expected of him—that this stand-up style delivery and caustic dialectics reach full form buttressed by Pico's constant mention of his "audience."

The book opens with a line of fragile beauty: "The stars are dying" (2017, 1), calls a sage cosmic voice, which goes on to explain how the perishing light connects us to the stars, which are so far away, "But also close, like the sea stars on the Pacific coast" (1). The message is coming through: everything is connected, we are one with the cosmos, with nature. The charade lasts only seven lines, as next to the sea, stars, and the waves, Pico presents "Anemones n shit. Sand crabs n shit" (1). Disgusted, he confesses: "Ugh / I swore to myself I would never write a nature poem" (1). The reasons for the reluctance range from the rejection of stereotypes—"bc it's fodder for the noble savage / narrative" (6)—to the affirmation of individuality—"bc I only fuck with the city" (8). And yet, as the reader knows, he did.

To convince his audience of his hatred of nature, Pico states early on that he "wd slap a tree across the face" (2). In line with Seymour, who claims "the poem hereby invokes tree-slapping as a kind of counterpoint to tree-hugging" (2022, 120), Gamber contends that by "embodying a settler masculinity that also refuses to be kind to the other-than-human" (2022, 277) Pico problematizes the "Ecological Indian" trope. I would argue that Pico is mainly concocting a ludicrously funny image where nature become anthropomorphized—and not just anthropomorphized, but, apparently, Teebs's partner, too: "think I'm in an abusive relationship w/nature" (26); "*My family's experience isn't fodder / for artwork*, says Nature in btwn make outs" (44), "*Fuck you too*, says Nature" (53), and so on. Indeed, pages later he doubles down stating that he "wd give a wedgie to a sacred mountain" (50). Yet, just as in IRL Pico slapped himself to keep his wits in line with his educational goal, in Nature Poem, the slapping should prevent himself—and the readers—from falling into the trope-trap.

Nearing the end of the book, Pico offers one of the most quoted lines in the poem: "You can't be an NDN person in today's world / and write a nature poem" (67). He then

maintains that "I hate nature—hate its *guts* / I say to my audience" (67), adding that "There is something smaller I say to myself: / *I don't hate nature at all*" (67). According to Sarah Dowling, this confession signals a change "in the poem's language, a swerve away from its normative, speech-based syntax" (2021, 126). Indeed, Pico does craft some relaxing metaphors—"Places have thoughts—hills have backs that love / being stroked by our eyes" (67)—and more anthropomorphizing—"The river gobbles down its tract as a metaphor / but also abt its day" (67), which presents the lyric voice as part of "an environment replete with entities that act, emote, and interact with him" (Dowling 2021, 126). However, Dowling omits the line that concludes the bucolic image, which impedes a satisfactory resolution: "the jellybean moon sugars at me. She flies and beams / and I breathe. / Fuck that. I recant. I slap myself" (67). Thus, by producing tranquil images of nature only to immediately renounce them, Pico denies the reader the enjoyment of a comfortable relationship with nature he himself cannot have.

The constant self-ironic wondering whether he should or should not write a nature poem produces a perfectly timed tension as the reader herself can intuit that a pun or a plot twist awaits. For sure, the nature poem is being written as one tries to catch on to Teebs's ramblings. The reader gets it. The tension comes from the unexpected resolution of the pun, which can be incongruously funny, wordy, smart, or filled with guilt, when it catches the reader "unprepared for the truths about genocide, Indigenous erasure, and homophobia" (Scudeler 2021, 163). Hannah Burdette understands this "repeated refusal reflects the pain of loss and detachment" (2019, 131). However, I align with Bladow, who claims the goal of the explicit ambiguity "is to carry out the indeterminacy of the work, and to maintain the mutability Teebs first claims in *IRL* against the reductive tendencies" (2020, 9), which run through the whole series. Only five pages to the end of *Nature Poem*, there is another chance for redemption:

> What if I really do feel connected to the land?
> What if the mountains around the valley where I was born
> What if I see them like faces when I close my eyes
> What if I said hi to them in the mornings and now all their calls go to voicemail
> [...]
> What if I said sorry under my breath when I sat on moss on the rock at the crick behind myself
> I would look like a freaking moron basket case
> I get so disappointed by stupid NDNs writing their dumb nature poems like grow up faggots (70)

This passage is a test crafted by the teacher and holy fool, and if readers expected a clear resolution, failing the test is on them. Just as with Dowling's lines quoted earlier, Pico toys here with the reader's preconceptions of what a "good NDN poet" should write. His poetry is remarkable for its pace, all-reaching scope, and wit; but also, for being doubt-

ridden, sometimes vacuous, insecure, honest, and outspoken. His commitment to irresolution warrants the possibility of creation and change.

Standing Rock Sioux Vine DeLoria's claim that "One of the best ways to understand a people is to know what makes them laugh" (2000, 39) can be read in two ways. Indeed, when laughing at jokes like Pico's, the readers "enter into a comic community based on shared values rather than shared skin color" (Trousdale 2021, 20). But failure to do so is just as significant. Cultural exchanges are prone to produce conflict when artificially held identities do the work. Not "getting" a joke implies some form of cultural ignorance and, hence, an opportunity to learn. Thus, Pico's random tomfoolery works as a bait-and-switch joke which conceals a moral lesson of sorts. There is no hesitation in the denouncement of homophobia, racism, or colonialism, but this sanction comes with an invitation to self-doubt which might open a fissure in the monolith of the normative worldview. Raymond J. Endres's suggestion that a "person who is subjected to the wit of another is strangely stripped of his humanity" (1966, 248) is partially neutralized when wit is also aimed at the laugher. After sharing some painful memories of abuse as a queer child, Pico calls them "Shavings of my will / to live lol" only to immediately add "maybe that's all / childhoods" (2016, 40). Of course, before it gets too serious, he concludes that "Ketchup must've / been a Eureka! Moment, like / the discovery of vaccines, / but the opposite" (40).

In a double interview with Kali Fajardo-Anstine, Pico wishes that "Maybe in the gulf between us and our books as facilitated by social media, as indigenous writers or marginalized writers or whatever, we can be read for craft and not autobiography. Maybe that's me being an idealist" (2019b). In this paper, I have tried to show how Pico tackles homophobia, racism, cultural erasure, and discursive violence through the strategic deployment of a particular kind of incongruous self-deprecating humor that invites all sorts of readers to deconstruct themselves and their own groups in the hopes to build communities that reach beyond one's own circles, offering relatability to some, reflection to others, and tons of joy and freedom for everyone. Against all odds, he just manages to put all that together. LOL.

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MISCELLANEA

Losing Your Identity: The Repression of Liberties in 21st Century America in Marvel's *Civil War* Series

Laura Rodríguez Arnaiz

Abstract

The early 21st century witnessed the beginning of a turbulent period in the United States as the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001 resulted in the passing of a series of restrictive legislative measures as the only way to guarantee Americans' protection from possible future attacks. These new policies, however, allowed authorities to violate people's rights and liberties in the name of national security. Soon after the attacks, these matters reached the pages of literary works—including comic books—as spaces in which to actively engage in a critique of the new US Prominent among these works is Marvel's *Civil War* (2006–2007) by Mark Millar and Steve McNiven, in which an event mirroring the 9/11 attacks prompts the government to pass an act that cuts the superheroes' liberties to guarantee the nation's security. The series presents a world mirroring the present American reality by way of portraying US superheroes as an oppressed minority in order to call Americans to question the course their country is taking after 9/11.

Keywords: Millar, McNiven, Marvel, Patriot Act, civil rights, comics.

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1. Introduction

Ever since comic books began to occupy the shelves of stores and homes throughout the United States in the early 20th century, they have provided a space for entertainment as well as for social reflection. The impact of social matters on superhero tales is unquestionable as the first Timely Comics—now Marvel Comics—began to publish the stories of Captain America fighting Nazis and punching Hitler, even before real American soldiers fought Nazism in Europe (Thomson 2013, 108). At the time, comic books featuring Captain America were also used as a form of war propaganda to "fight the Nazis and stand for the American cause" (107) and, later, to promote national support of the US intervention in World War II. However, the end of the world conflict as well as the growing association of comics—such as Fredric Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954)—with "negative influences such as juvenile delinquency" (Dittmer 2005, 627) presaged a halt in comic books' popularity that lasted nearly two decades.

Indeed, it wasn't until the 1960s that the renamed Marvel Comics brought superheroes back to the front of popular culture thanks to the creations of writer Stan Lee and co-writers/artists Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko, the three figures who revolutionized the superhero world. Their stories, although less propagandistic than those from the 1940s, were also greatly influenced by social matters of the time, as Stan Lee himself declared that "everything that is happening at the time a story is written has an effect on that story, whether an obvious effect or a subliminal one" (personal correspondence quoted in Dittmer 2005, 626). It certainly proved impossible for these authors to ignore the preoccupations and anxieties present in Cold War America in their creations, or even the "rising influence of a military industry that shaped the economic, political, and even 'spiritual' landscape of the United States" (Chambliss 2013, 163)—which gave way, for instance, to one of the most iconic Marvel heroes: Iron Man. In this way, superhero comics—mainly directed at children and young readers—provided an age-appropriate portrayal of the current historical and social context while also becoming "a more socially conscious forum for young people to learn adult ideas" (Cord 2011, 200), while remaining mostly apolitical.

For the next two decades, authors continued to portray this promoted nationalism only to become increasingly critical in the 1970s and during the Gulf War (1990–91). Indeed, it wasn't until the 1970s that writers, artists, and editors began to include their critical views on historical and social matters of the time in their heroes' stories, like Tony Stark's—the man behind Iron Man's mask—bout with alcoholism that made him lose his arms-producing company to a foreign industrial competitor reflected a "rising mindset striving to re-engage in Cold War problems" (Chambliss 2013, 172), or the "Streets of Poison" storyline featuring President Reagan's War on Drugs through Captain America's accidental encounter with a fictional drug (Thomson 2013, 110). In this context, Marvel Comics provided its authors with a space in which to freely develop their works, encouraging them to include real events in their heroes' stories (Pardy 2016, 49), just as Captain America's tales had during WWII. This shift towards more critical and historically based stories was reinforced by changes in their readership (Cord 2011, 263). Some of the children who had come into contact with superhero tales back in the 1960s and 70s had kept reading them as adults, which prompted artists to create stories that were both interesting enough for their adult readers and still adequate reading material for the youth. In other words, comics were no longer "children's media, but one that can reach all ages" (Pardy 2016, 2).

It is in this context that the doors to the 21st century opened with one of the most consequential events in the recent history of the United States: the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Viewed as a "moment of historical rupture" (Smith and Goodrum 2011, 487), 9/11 became a turning point for Americans who had, prior to the attacks, perceived their nation—in its relative isolation and geographical protection—as exceptional

and invulnerable—an illusion that disappeared in a matter of minutes on that fateful September morning. Indeed, as Simon Dalby describes in his work on post-9/11 geopolitics and security, the attacks were perceived as a novelty in that it was the first time the US had so violently suffered the consequences of its political actions in the Middle East within American soil. That is, as:

> Insecurity connects to risk and to disasters, threats are not here a matter of traditional military action, the boundaries between civil defense, emergency preparedness and military action were blurred in a manner that suggests that things have changed, at least in so far as the conventional distinctions between civil and military, war and disaster, risk and security no longer operate in the circumstances of 11 September. (Dalby 2003, 67)

As Dalby explores here, though the 9/11 terrorist attacks had not been the first terrorist attack to occur within US continental soil—consider the 1993 WTC bombing also of Islamic connections, and the Oklahoma City bombing carried out by a national perpetrator—, the event became a singularity in that it broke the apparently unbreakable boundaries between the US civil and military worlds. Consequently, the national shock caused by the events of 9/11 soon became writers' focus of attention, including those in charge of superhero stories, both through the inclusion of the attacks within their now colored pages as well as acknowledging the "the ruptures made visible by 9/11" (Smith and Goodrum 2011, 492) by challenging the day's official narrative promoted by authorities and mass media. The first way in which Marvel Comics—a corporation that is based in New York City—approached 9/11 was through a series of issues starring some of its most famous heroes, such as Captain America or Spider-Man, most of which were published to raise money for 9/11 victims and their families. These series also mirrored the 1940s' patriotism, widely present in post-9/11 literature, especially in the event's portrayal as a "national tragedy" (Costello 2011, 32).

Comic books, however, soon became one of the first spaces of fiction to withdraw from the support of 9/11's "official narrative" to become the place in which to challenge and criticize the policies promoted by the Bush administration as part of the War on Terror, capturing within their pages some of the debates on civil rights and liberties that arose after 9/11 (Packard 2011, 44). In this context, Marvel's most representative series was Mark Millar and Steve McNiven's *Civil War*, the highly celebrated crossover storyline published between 2006 and 2007 as a seven-issue series plus several tie-in issues within Marvel's regular series.

A clear allegory of the post-9/11 US, *Civil War* brings to light matters of privacy and freedom, central to some of the most controversial policies promoted by the Bush administration—such as the PATRIOT Act or the newly founded Department of Homeland Security. These legislative moves expanded the government's powers, especially in relation to matters of national security, allowing the implementation of new protocols that expanded security controls in public spaces such as airports and bus or train stations,

border control, and the addition of new circumstances under which surveillance could be carried out, also removing the previously needed court approval to conduct these practices. The new measures were developed and approved in the weeks after the attacks and passed "with almost no opposition and virtually no debate" even though they "gave law enforcement unprecedented powers to spy on all citizens" (Cord 2011, 255).

Mirroring this scenario, *Civil War* takes place in a fictitious post-9/11 America where a group of untrained young heroes—the New Warriors—are held responsible after a confrontation with a group of supervillains while filming an episode of their reality show leaves hundreds of people—many of them children from a nearby school—dead and an entire neighborhood in Stamford, Connecticut, completely decimated. In response to the catastrophe, the government passes the Superhuman Registration Act (SRA), which forces heroes to register their real identities and abilities on a list administered by the US government. The passing of the SRA causes a division in the superhero community when the act's true demands and consequences start to emerge, resulting in a violent conflict between the heroes who support the new law and those who disagree with most of its premises, displaying friends and families fighting over the same ideas present in the post-9/11, War on Terror America.

2. Stamford, 9/11, and the Illusion of American Invulnerability

The terrorist attacks on New York and Washington DC shattered Americans' sense of security and invulnerability, as they were the first attack of such magnitude to occur within the US continental soil. The relative isolation of the US, protected by two large masses of water and the good geopolitical relations with the neighboring nations, had led to the false belief that violence from the outside world would "never reach its shores" (Nadel 2015, 129). In addition, the cultural and military expansion promoted by the different administrations throughout the 20th century also helped to promote this sense of inviolability within the US society, whose populace perceived the military and other security agencies as resilient, but also separated from US civil life. Coming from the Cold War era, this apparent separation of US military and civil lives had also made Americans conceive their military as a first line of defense that would protect them from "'global' threats" (Dalby 2003, 68) coming from the outside. Similarly, superheroes in the so-called Marvel Universe, can be seen as the fictitious US's first line of defense, being the ones in charge of keeping evil and international threats from altering Americans' lives. However, just like the events of 9/11 broke Americans from their illusion and made them question whether their national security structures had been adequately prepared to fight the war against terror, as "ballistic missile defences seemed absurdly inappropriate when box-cutters and martyrdom would do to inflict huge damage" on the country (67), the catastrophic consequences of the New Warriors' confrontation with a much more powerful and experienced supervillain—just to get more viewers for their reality show—brings up

questions about heroes' abilities to get the job done as part of that national's line of defense, and so of Americans' reliance on superheroes for their nation's safety. This is precisely what Tony Stark states in the following passage:

> Then I started to see a shift, not in us as heroes or Avengers. But in the way, people reacted to us. They started taking us for granted. They started seeing us as familiar. They started relying on us to help them instead of hoping we would. They didn't know they were doing it, but they were… they were taking it all for granted. (Bendis and Maleev 2007a: #1, 8)

Just as the "assumption that America itself was relatively immune to terrorism" (Dalby 2003, 67) had permeated throughout the US society after decades of military and economic dominance in the global landscape, the long-standing presence of superheroes as defenders of the US people and their interests had pushed them to assume they would never fail in their protective roles. However, Stamford probes them wrong, just as 9/11 woke Americans to the reality of living in a globalized world.

In this sense, Stamford becomes another "Ground Zero," not only in terms of destruction and casualties but also in terms of the event's ideological impact and political response:

> IRON MAN: In everyone's life, Peter, there's an 'it'… your wife leaves you, or you get cancer, there's your life before 'it' and your life after 'it'. 9/11 was an 'it' of national magnitude. And Stamford… is going to be another one. (Straczynski and Garney 2007: #532, 4)

Indeed, the catastrophic consequences of both Stamford and 9/11 helped to conceive these events as an "it"—a singularity or a turning point—in the nation's history, that sent both the real and fictitious Americans into a new, unknown, world. This 'singularity' narrative surrounding both the real and fictional events responded, however, more to "a discursive attempt to restore the tarnished structures of American security that had been so dramatically ruptured" and to the "political necessity to reassure the populace retaliation would be forthcoming" (Dalby 2003, 63) than to an actual break in the national history continuum. This way, Stamford finally pushes the US government to pass the Superhuman Registration Act, just as 9/11 prompted the relatively rapid elaboration and passing of strict policies such as the PATRIOT Act. In both cases, the general feeling was that the events "had to be revenged … instead of focusing on the causes behind the attack" (Miettinen 2012, 157). Indeed, just like the US government—as announced in President Bush's well-known 'us vs. them' address—put the focus, in their search for justice, not only on the perpetrators, but also on those regimes and organizations supposedly supporting the terrorists in the post-9/11 context, the authorities in *Civil War* all but ignore the villain who caused the explosion to go after the heroes: "Everyone seems to forget the New Warriors didn't create that explosion. A mass murderer named Nitro did, a fugitive they were trying to stop" (Gage and Haun 2007, 13).

Both the post-9/11 policies and Marvel's Superhuman Registration Act seem to be measures "of opportunity rather than necessity" (Cord 2011, 231). Although the tensions

between the US and Iraq existed long before the terrorist attacks of 2001, and these had been officially considered to be the main reason behind the invasion of the Arab nation, many still believe the reasons for the violent intervention were rather personal:

> Many thought President George W. Bush was motivated by revenge against Saddam's assassination plot against his father, former President George H. W. Bush. They are also generally believed that helping American oil companies by taking direct control of Iraq's oil was an unstated reason for the invasion. (249)

Whether personal or corporate interests were the real reason behind the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, the truth is no weapons of mass destruction were found in Iraq, and Osama bin Laden is believed to had been hiding in Pakistan for nearly all the duration of the War on Terror. Similarly, while the public's demand to restrict superhumans' liberties is provided as the excuse to bring the SRA back on the table, it is S.H.I.E.L.D.'s particular interests of bringing heroes under the agency's control as federal employees that seem to be the real reason behind the act's passing.

The first clue about authorities' real intentions behind the passing of the SRA comes in the form of a conversation between the director of S.H.I.E.L.D.[1], Maria Hill, and Tony Stark before Stamford even occurs. While society's fixation with heroes' accountability seems to be born out of the unfortunate incident—even though the damage had been caused by one of their enemies, not a hero—, Hill's—and S.H.I.E.L.D.'s—mistrust in superhuman's actions and their beneficial impact is not new:

[1] Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division or S.H.I.E.L.D. is a fictitious intelligence agency within Marvel Universe's United States of America.

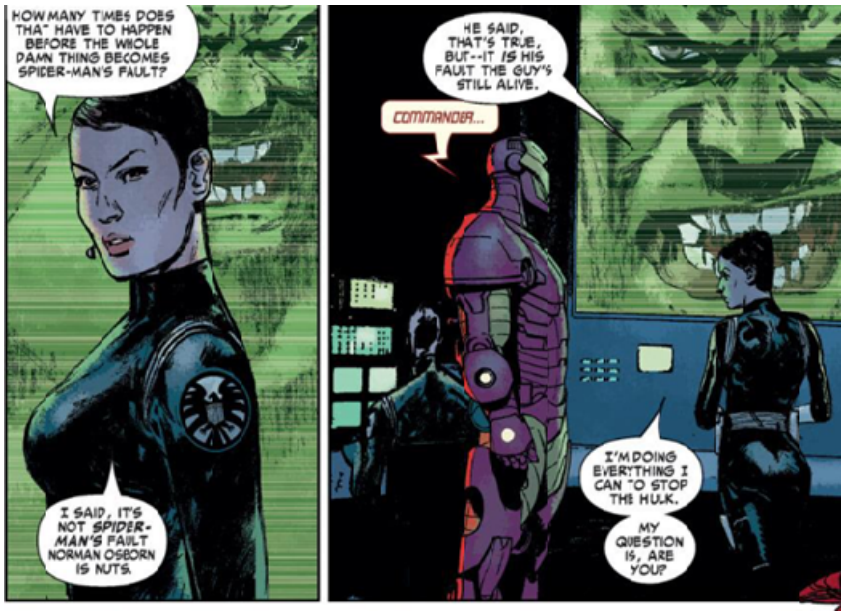

Fig 1. *The Road to Civil War*, "New Avengers: Illuminati" © Marvel Comics.

Here, the generally praised performance of the hero is problematized as the "fundamental correctness of the inner-directed morality of the hero" is called into question (Costello 2011, 38). If the hero's morality pushes him/her to break the law in order to uphold it, why not go even further and eliminate the threat permanently? The answer is simple: the hero's morality, although based on the systematic violation of the law, is directly linked to the respect for the due process of it (Cord 2011, 247) and the respect for the rights of all citizens, including criminals. The individual's moral authority, whether endowed with extraordinary powers or not, must prevail over the—delegated—authority of the state. Thus, according to Captain America, who becomes the leader of the anti-registration heroes, superheroes as well as all citizens "have the capacity and responsibility to make their own moral judgments" and "no actions of the nation-state should be allowed to interfere with the individual's moral judgment" as, indeed, "no moral authority can stand in judgment over the individual's conscience" (Scott 2015, 98) Hill's ideas, however, are soon publicly adopted by Tony Stark, as leader of the opposing side, in his defense of the SRA fearing the heroes' "too great a potential to disrupt society, creating chaos and destruction even when they do not intend to do so" so as to:

> be allowed to determine right or wrong on their own therefore, they should only be allowed to function under the authority and supervision of the nation-state and in service of an international economic structure that can best function when individual nation-states are politically stable. (98)

Thus, whether superheroes' moral responsibility towards society is unquestionable, it is the limitations—or lack of thereof—to their actions as the country's first line of defense that the events in *Civil War* call to examine—and, with it, how these may affect their

individual civil rights. Thus, whereas ordinary Americans' wish is for heroes to remove their masks and be public so they can "feel safe when we're around" (Millar and McNiven 2007: #3, 13), Hill's words take on a new meaning, as the bureaucrats at Washington D.C. and S.H.I.E.L.D. seem to have deeper interests beyond superhuman's unmasking:

> A ban on superheroes? Well, in a world with thousands of super-villains that's obviously impossible, Larry. But training them up and making them carry badges? Yes, I'd say that sounds like a reasonable response. (#1, 13)

As a key part of the country's first line of defense, authorities know heroes' actions cannot be fully restricted, but they can, nevertheless, be officially controlled. With heroes becoming federal employees under S.H.I.E.L.D.'s supervision, their seemingly flawed morality is removed, as commands will be put above the individual's ethics. This way, while 9/11 meant the "end of innocence for the United States" (Pardy 2016, 18), Stamford marks the end of superhumans' impunity.

3. Lost Mask, Lost Individuality in the Name of National Security

Authorities yearning to be in control of heroes' actions is not new, as previously hinted by Maria Hill's words, but it can also be traced back to the origins of the superhero genre and, in particular, to the origins of one of the most famous superhumans: Captain America. As Marvel's first Avenger, he is both "a product and victim of trauma" (Miettinen 2012, 152) born in the WWII context as the fictitious US ultimate defender. As Steve Rogers, he had tried to enlist in the army, but was repeatedly rejected due to his weak physical complexity and health. However, urged by a personal wish to serve his country in such uncertain times, he finally volunteers to get the superhuman serum that would eventually transform him into Captain America. Dressed in the US flag colors—red, white, and blue—and carrying no weapon but a shield, he is portrayed from the very beginning as America's first superhuman Defensor (Dittmer 2005, 630), a role that had been, nevertheless, granted by the country's military and political authorities and that put him under their command. Born in the WWII's uncertain and threatening context, Rogers is willing to sacrifice his will to obey the authorities that created him also because he does not see the difference between the actions of a good American individual like himself and those of the nation he serves (Scott 2015, 98). This way of thinking follows him to the superheroes' conflict after the Stamford incident and it is what will ultimately make him become the leader of the resistance heroes.

The adoption of the US defender role, however, entails more than the mere following of authorities' commands. After the superhuman serum experiment, his "public identity as Captain America increasingly dominates his private identity as Steve Rogers" (Miettinen 2012, 152) which eventually forces him to, practically, renounce to the latter as he admits during *Civil War*:

> People in my life have been targets, some have been killed, just for knowing me. I couldn't live in a normal apartment, because it was too dangerous for my neighbors. I accept these things, not gladly, but I accept them, because Captain America is who I am… and I understand what comes with that. But not everyone is like me. Not everyone is willing to risk what I have. Should they be denied the right to make that choice? (Brubaker and Perkins 2007: #22, 13)

Understanding that the life of a hero is one of personal sacrifices, Rogers acknowledges not every superhuman is willing to lose the chance to have an ordinary one. For him, all of them should have the possibility to choose whether they want to be public or not. This life he has chosen, however, seems to break with Erving Goffman's understanding of societies as divided in three separate states, which is usually the case of what he defines as "total institutions":

> a basic social arrangement in modern society is that the individual tends to sleep, play, and work in different places, with different co-participants, under different authorities, and without an over-all rational plan. The central feature of total institutions can be described as a breakdown of the barriers ordinarily separating these three spheres of life. (Goffman 1968, 5–6)

According to him, the differences between modern society where the individual can move between these three spheres—which remain separated and without interfering in the others—, and the total institutions is that, in the latter, the barriers are put up to limit the individual's free movement, usually by taking them out of the open modern society. While these total institutions are usually assigned to specific spaces, they can also be part of specific areas of an individual's life—that is, any of Goffman's three spheres—which may put in danger the social arrangement of the modern society—and so, people's liberties. This is precisely the issue observed in *Civil War*, where the problem lies not so much in the heroes' registration, but in the obligation for gifted individuals to do so, whether they personally decide to conform with the law's requirements or not. Thus, the story revolves around their resistance to renounce to their rights as human beings as well as American citizens in the modern US society.

The passing of the PATRIOT Act after 9/11, though in the name of national security, also threatened to break down the boundaries of the modern society that protected and promoted people's liberties, as the new law extended the premises under which surveillance was allowed to be conducted and erased most of the limitations for its demand. Surveillance, as Goffman examined in his *Asylums*, is adopted in total institutions to instill a sense of discipline in the individual, to ensure "everyone does what he has been clearly told" (7). In *Civil War*, however, surveillance is not the way authorities have to guarantee heroes' compliance with the law:

> At midnight, the Superhuman Registration Act becomes law. All heroes, including the Avengers will be required to sign in. We'll all work for the United States government. And the Avengers will be a fully sanctioned legal team with pay benefits… Will you sign on? … I need

> to know, Luke, because if at midnight, if you don't... you and Jessica are effectively criminals again. (Bendis, Chaykin, et al. 2007: #22, 1–2)

Here, Stark tries to convince two superhumans, Luke Cage and Jessica Jones, to sign the register and for Cage to become an avenger—with all the benefits it would entail. Stark's bribe reflects another key fact about Goffman's description of total institutions as a "bureaucratic institution" in charge of handling "many human needs (...) of whole blocks of people—whether or not this is a necessary or effective means of social organization in the circumstances" (Goffman 1968: 10). Thus, in the post-Stamford, SRA era, superheroes are invited to collaborate with authorities and register, but in truth they are forcibly "co-opted into the system, either as obedient employees or vanquished prisoners" (Prince 2015, 186).

> JESSICA JONES: What about me, Mr. Stark? Yeah, I have powers too, and you know what? I don't want to use them, and have no plans to use them. And I don't want to work for the United States of Corporate sellouts. What about someone like me? (Bendis, Chaykin, et al. 2007: #22, 2)

The problem Jones sees here is that, once a superhuman registers, they will be, most likely, forced to be what they might not want to be, a superhero defending the US and its people from evil and dangerous threats. The boundaries of the modern society would be erased as the individual is not able to establish "distance between the mortifying situation and himself" (Goffman 1968, 36) by being "full-time placed at the convenience of staff" where their "sense of self and sense of possession" are eradicated (10).

In *Asylums*, Goffman emphasizes that, when individuals enter a total institution, they go through a process of "personal defacement" through which they are stripped of anything that identifies them as a unique individual—be it tied to appearance, equipment or services (20). In this sense, the mandatory recruitment of superhumans to be at the service of bureaucrats and corporations not only brings down the hero's boundaries between their social spheres, but also obliterates their singular identities in two significant ways: by asking them to unmask, and by taking away the altruistic character of the hero, as seen in the following passages:

> SENATOR WHITMORE: Police officers, prosecutors, judges, even elected officials and their families face similar threats every day, Mr. Parker. What keeps our democracy honest is that we don't operate behind masks.
>
> PETER PARKER: I know but all those people aspired to those jobs, most superheroes never asked for these powers, never wanted them. But once they had them, they knew that they had to do what was right in a system that would never allow them to operate openly. They're trying to help, Senator. (Straczynski, Garney and Kirkham 2007: #530, 10–11)

The problematic of the masks is exposed here by the senator who, in his will to equalize superheroes to other members of law enforcement, ignores how these organizations function like a total institution in as much as their members are stripped of their

individualization, for instance, through the wearing of identical uniforms or hairstyle. Masks, in this sense, work both as a means of protection by concealing one's identity, but also as shapers of said identity:

> individuals are only socialized and only achieve selfhood through the semi-voluntary adoption of various masks that cease to be masks (…) making ourselves visible to others ideally under controlled circumstances—what Goffman refers to as a "performance." (Leib 2017, 198)

In this sense, though initially "semi-voluntary" adopted, these masks become individuals' way to display their true selves to others, as exemplified, for instance, by Steve Rogers' adoption of his superhero identity—Captain America—as he states how "Captain America is who I am" (Brubaker and Perkins 2007: #22, 13), thus voluntarily renouncing to his 'human' one. This will become especially symbolic when, at the end of the series, Rogers surrenders and takes off his Captain America's mask before being arrested, showing how a compliance with the law is forcing heroes to renounce to their identities in the name of national security.

Spider-man is another hero whose adoption of masks is problematized in *Civil War*. Though Peter Parker had been wearing a mask and fighting crime since he was a teenager when, after being bitten by a radioactive spider and developed special abilities, a bad decision led him to lose his uncle, his secret—human—identity had been one of the most protected in the entire Marvel Universe. Mainly motivated by the fear of losing the little family he has left (Millar and McNiven 2006: #1, 20), Parker chose to wear a mask and conceal his identity even to other superheroes. This is one of the reasons why his unmasking during *Civil War*—a decision he makes to show his support to the SRA—is one of the most powerful moments of the whole series, which becomes even more symbolic when, soon after, Peter leaves the Avengers to join Captain America's group of renegades. His unmasking, however, has its roots way before the conflict has even started.

Some time before the outbreak of *Civil War*, Peter suffers a metamorphosis that leaves him in an unconscious state for several days. From then on, Tony Stark—anticipating what is coming and as a way to guarantee Peter's allegiance when that happens—becomes the Parkers' protector, offering Peter a job at Stark Industries aside from his position as a member of the Avengers, and giving him a new ultra-tech suit (Scott 2015, 145). This voluntary-but-forced change of mask resembles what Goffman refers to as "trimming" or "programming," carried out in total institutions during the process of entrance by which individuals are "shaped and coded into an object that can be fed into the administrative machinery of the establishment" (Goffman 1968, 16). Indeed, by adopting Stark's suit, Spider-man is "visibly marked as property of the institution" (Leib 2017, 204) as he stops wearing his traditional Spider-man suit—designed and made by him—to start wearing a highly advanced design that is the product of Stark Industries. In addition to this change of mask, Peter is forced to honor his vow to Stark and reveals his secret identity to the world.

Fig 2. *Civil War*, #2 © Marvel Comics

The scene is highly symbolic as the revelation takes place with Peter wearing his old, personally designed suits, rather than the new Stark Industries one. This way, by letting Stark to decide for him to unmask and to do it in his old suit—which he had already renounced to in favor of Stark's ultra-tech one—Peter is finally completely "rid of his personal preserve in such a way that he has no control or say in the matter, and he must be supplied with a new reserve that is not properly his own, but an extension of the institution" (204). The takeover by the institution is completed when, after the revelation and the killing of Goliath[2] during one of the conflict's battles, Peter starts questioning his decision to support the SRA:

> And he thinks, "for the first time, I'm accepted. I'm on the side of the law, and the law's on my side. May is proud of me. MJ is proud of me. I'm on the right side of everything. So how come something so right just feels so wrong?" (Straczynski and Garney 2007: #534, 4)

Peter's sense of responsibility—that which drives him to be a superhero in defense of the law—clashes with the belief that heroes' real identities should be protected at all costs, especially when being compliant with the law means accepting the use of lethal force against his fellow heroes. In addition, Spider-man understands being a hero comes from the individual's sense of responsibility, which should be, first and foremost, a personal choice. Gifted individuals feel entitled to use their abilities to help those who cannot help themselves, to protect others from the dangers in the world and out of it:

> SPIDER-MAN: Guys like me get involved in things sometimes because nobody else will... because it's not in the rule book, or it's politically inconvenient, or it's too weird, or... or simply because nobody cares. (#531, 13)

Heroes' actions and sacrifices, thus, respond, not only to a personal responsibility coming from the opportunities their abilities offer but to the limitations that other professionals face in their daily activities. What Spider-Man emphasizes here is that heroes cannot be like any other law enforcement officer because, in their attempt to contribute to the national defense, their actions will take part within the blank spaces beyond the

[2] One of the heroes belonging to Captain America's resistance that perishes during one of the *Civil War* battles.

limitations of the law. This is precisely why Steve Rogers was given the superhuman serum, or why Tony Stark was once offered the Secretary of Defense despite being a superhero. Their abilities and altruistic actions are a fundamental part of the US national security.

In this context, sensing Peter's doubts guided by his moral sense of responsibility and the events he witnesses, Stark decides to isolate him in the Avengers complex, which—in addition to adopting both the costume and role imposed by the institution—finally concludes Peter's "breaking of the self" by which he is "stripped both physically and socially" and which makes him "utterly visible and dispossessed" (Leib 2017, 204). Stark's intentions to keep him away from Captain America are, however, unsuccessful as Spider-man escapes the tower after a confrontation with him and joins the resistance, now free to fight for what he truly believes and wearing his old suit.

4. The Modern Society Becomes the Carceral Society.

While *Civil War*'s events push heroes to "question themselves about why, and for what they fight," it also brings to the Americans' attention what is hardly a secret: that power corrupts (Cord 2011, 254). Surely, the fictitious American administration acts in such a totalitarian manner that it recalls some of the policies from Nazi Germany back in the 1940s, but also some of the controversial decisions the real American government took at the time. The violation of civil rights had been widely present during the first half of the 20th century, not only in European countries but also in Roosevelt's America where many Japanese were relocated into concentration camps in US soil. Indeed, the implementation of totalitarian measures both in the real and fictitious US seems to follow the same progression as that of other regimes in similar circumstances:

> The civil liberation's narrative about how democracies are lost is basically as follows. First, the government, in the name of national security or some other such cause, trims some rights, which raises little alarm at the time (e.g., the massive detention of Japanese Americans during World War II). Then a few other rights are curtailed (e.g., the FBI spies on civil rights groups and peace activists during the 1960s). Soon, more rights are lost and gradually the entire institutional structure on which democracy rests tumbles down the slope with nobody able to stop it. (Etzioni 2004, 11)

The evolution Etzioni exposes—followed by democracies adopting more oppressive measures—had also been present in the Marvel Universe way before the superheroes' conflict takes place, mainly affecting the X-Men and the mutant community[3]. After the M-

[3] The X-Men are a superhero team conformed by mutants—individuals born with a mutation in their gene pool, granting them with special superhuman abilities—who fight for the right of all citizens, but also in defense of their fellow mutants' rights to be considered equals to the rest of human beings.

Day[4], the few mutants left are forced to live in the Xavier Institute, a place that had always been a kind of sanctuary for these people. However, the following panel shows a different picture:

Fig 3. Civil War, #3 © Marvel Comics.

Forced to live in a secluded space guarded by gigantic robots called Sentinels, mutants' confinement mirrors the Japanese-American detention camps during World War II as well as the legal seclusion of Native Americans in reservations all over the country, posing as the first step towards the restriction of superhuman liberties. In this sense, both the confinement of mutants into their 'sanctuary' and the forced registration of heroes in the after math of Stamford becomes another example of what Goffman defined as "total institution" (1968, 4) or of Michael Foucault's "carceral society" (Hassler-Forest 2011, 157).

For both authors, the "central institutions that have come to define Western modernity" such as schools, hospitals or government bureaucracies have been based on the model of the prison or the total institution (Hassler-Forest 2011, 159). The passing of the real post-9/11 coercive policies and the fictitious SRA as methods of control and supervision has prompted individuals to internalize a "sense of discipline" (160) in their everyday activities that clearly obliterate the boundaries between their social and personal lives. Consequently, this extreme sense of discipline applied in democratic regimes conditions people's behavior, to the extreme of stripping them of their individual identities and agency, in clear violation of their civil rights. This is the case of superhumans in the

[4] A pre-*Civil War* event during which 90% of the world's mutant population lost their powers.

US, as they are forced to renounce to both their masks and their personal morality to become federal employees at the service of the nation-state's interests. Most of the heroes supporting the SRA, thus, do so in response to this internalized 'sense of discipline', which forces them to abide by the law even while disagreeing with it. Discipline, thus, is nothing but another of authorities' "modality of the exercise of power" (Leib 2017, 192)

The authorities' increase in surveillance practices is but another way in which the carceral element is placed as "central to the identity of American exceptionalism" (Pardy 2016, 21). This also has to do with the growing militarization of American society in the wake of 9/11. One of the most significant features of the growing militarization of US society is the appeal to civilians to participate in the fight against terrorism within the limits of the nation:

> As military values, ideology, and a hyper-masculine aesthetic begin to spread it into other aspects of American culture, citizens are recruited as foot soldiers in the war on terrorism, urged to spy on their neighbors' behaviors, watch for suspicious-looking people, and supply data to government sources in the war on terrorism. (Giroux 2006, 127)

Just as the ordinary Americans became 'foot soldiers' in the post-9/11 War on Terror, registered superheroes are pressed to reveal the identities of those who refuse to register, among them many friends and family in the *Civil War* context (see fig. 4).

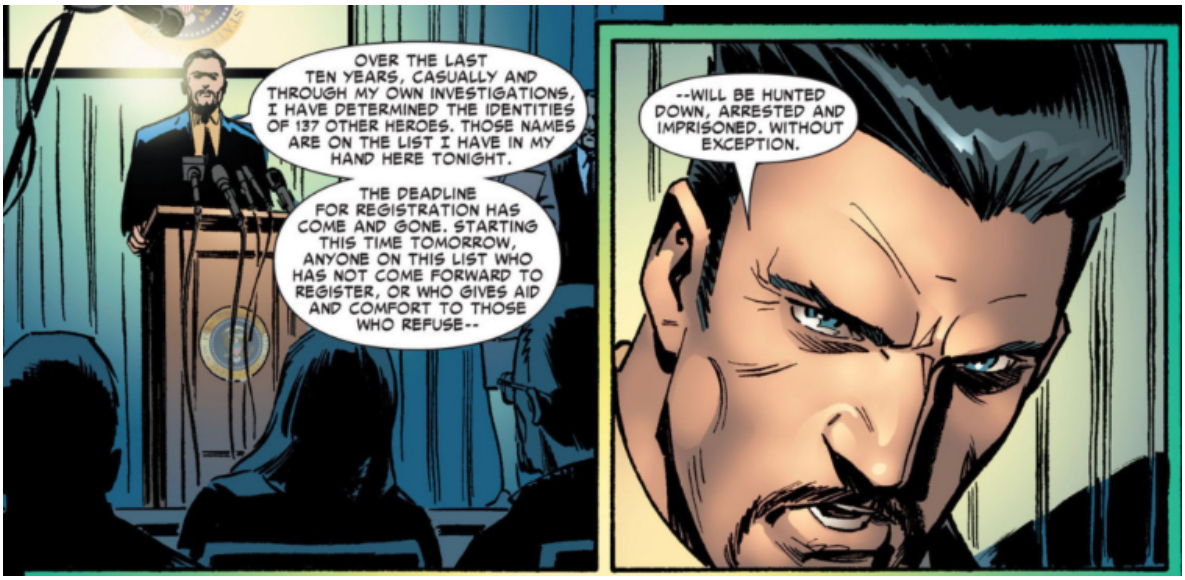

Fig 4. *Civil War: The Amazing Spider-Man*, #533 © Marvel Comics.

Evoking the dark era of McCarthyism, superhumans are required to betray and expose their friends to then track them down for their detention. This is a significant feature of the 'carceral society' or total institutions, where individuals are subjected to constant observation and control, and whose monitoring can be conducted by anyone, thus "under

conditions where one person's infraction is likely to stand out in relief against the visible constantly examined compliance of the others" (Goffman 1968, 7).

The conflict, thus, revolves around the notion of abiding or not by a law that most individuals affected by it consider undue because it threatens their liberties and their singular position, both as unique individuals and members of the national defense. Heroes' refusal to comply with the new SRA evokes Thoreau's "On Civil Disobedience", where he recognized all men's right "of revolution; that is, the right to refuse allegiance to, and to resist, the government when its tyranny or its inefficiency are great and unendurable" (Thoreau 1849, 9). For Thoreau, as for many Americans before him, governments do err on the side of greed as authorities gain more and more power while citizens lose theirs little by little:

> Can there not be a government in which majorities do not virtually decide right and wrong, but conscience? … Must the citizen ever for a moment, or in the least degree, resign his conscience to the legislation? Why has every man a conscience, then? I think that we should be men first, and subjects afterward. (6)

In other words, for Thoreau, the government's law is to be respected, but when disagreement exists, individuals have the right to refuse to observe it. This is precisely what Captain America defends in his stance against the Superhuman Registration Act:

> AGENT 13[5]: … because it's against the law. And the rule of law is what this country is founded on.
>
> CAPTAIN AMERICA: No… it was founded on breaking the law. Because the law was wrong. (Brubaker and Perkins 2007: #22, 14)

Born as the nation's first defender who upholds like no other American values, Captain America—as Thoreau did in the past—defends the right of the American people, including superheroes, to dissent from the government's mandates when they believe it is abusing its power. As the ultimate patriot, he is the "rugged individualist" who cares for his nation and its people, "willing to stand up for what he believes" but "ultimately defensive of the status quo" (Dittmer 2005, 633):

> Doesn't matter what the press says. Doesn't matter what the politicians or the mobs say. Doesn't matter if the whole country decides that something wrong is something right. This nation was founded on one principle above all else: the requirement that we stand up for what we believe, no matter the odds or the consequences. When the mob and the press and the whole world tell you to move, your job is to plant yourself like a tree beside the river of truth, and tell the whole world "no, you move." (Straczynski and Garney 2007: #537, 13)

As the ultimate guard of the values of the US nation-state, Rogers vindicates heroes' right of dissent when they do not agree with the government's decisions as "the freedom of

[5] Within S.H.I.E.L.D. agents are addressed by their agent number—corresponding to their rank within the organization—instead of their real name. Agent 13 is Sharon Carter, Captain America's love interest.

choice supersedes even the even the final goal—a better world" and he believes that, when faced with adversity and "given the right to choose, the good man or woman will choose to serve and sacrifice" even their own liberty to defend others' (Scott 2015, 101). This is, for him, what his red, blue, and white stars and stripes uniform he wears represents and what the United States was founded on. However, what Rogers fails to see is that the nation-state that he so ardently defends no longer exists in the minds of his fellow Americans, having been substituted by an international economic structure and community that gave way to heroes like Iron Man and which Tony Stark will, eventually, lead (105).

The realization hits Rogers in the middle of one of the largest confrontations of the conflict, after a group of ordinary citizens attempt to tackle and stop him from probably defeating Iron Man. He surrenders, not because he does not believe in what he defended—the right of all American citizens to decide what is best for their country—but because their actions had caused precisely what they wanted to prove the authorities wrong.

Fig 5. *Civil War*, #7 © Marvel Comics.

Thus, preceded by an image of a destroyed New York City that evokes the remains of Stamford at the beginning of the story, and after taking off his Captain America mask, Steve Rogers finally admits defeat and is arrested by a police officer.

5. Conclusion

Although *Civil War* presents itself as a conflict in which only one side can win, the confrontation ends with neither side claiming a clear victory. While Captain America surrenders while winning the physical fight during the final battle, Iron Man seems to win the ideological one only for him to become the new director of S.H.I.E.L.D. and promote the public amnesty of all heroes. This way, from the beginning to the end of the conflict, neither side is displayed as fully right or fully wrong, as both the pro- and anti-registration heroes win and lose at the same time.

The publication of Marvel's *Civil War* brought to light matters regarding the protection of civil rights in the US at a moment in which some people had started to question the post-9/11 restriction of individual liberties. While initially supportive of the Bush administration's new policies, such as the PATRIOT Act which caused an increase in surveillance practices and the consequent violation of people's privacy, a few Americans decided to take a step forward and challenge the climate of oppression that the post-9/11 legislation had elicited. By having the powerful superhumans at the mercy of the politicians in Washington D.C., Millar and McNiven deal with the growing racism and political discrimination some groups suffered in the wake of 9/11 and its legal consequences while asking people to critically examine whether they agree, or not, with the new policies, leaving the door open for either choice to be the correct one. In addition, *Civil War*'s unresolved conflict points to the importance of fighting for what one believes to be right, whether it is the defense of people's human rights or their limitations to provide for the collective's security in the new climate of terror, bringing to light something that has disappeared from the American landscape: that ultimately the power rests on the ordinary people and not on the authorities elected by them.

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Deus-Rex Ex Astra: A Re-Examination of Superman Through Jesus and the Archangel Michael

Kwasu Tembo

Abstract

Jesus of Nazareth, Saint/Archangel Michael and Superman all share a common feature: an uncommon physical resemblance to human beings. Through these anthropic bodies, numerous issues and debates concerning identity, power, leadership, judgement, and service are constantly renegotiated. By performing a close comparative reading of symbolism and iconography used in the depiction of these three figures. This chapter seeks to study the paradoxical depiction of Superman in several comics as a type of triune character/concept in practice: Servant, Saviour, and Sovereign. To achieve this, this chapter will conduct a close comparative analysis reading and comparison of the symbolism and iconography used in the depictions of various classical paintings of Christ and Michael with depictions of Superman from various key moments in both the narrative lives of Christ and Superman.

Keywords: morality, religion, superhero, superman, identity.

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> … right from the beginning. And that's where we're going.
> Right back to the beginning. Not the Bang, not the Word … You still don't get it.
> It's not about Right. Not about Wrong … It's about power.
> (Whedon, *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer*, season 7, episode 1 "Lessons," my emphasis)

1. Introduction: Gods, Kings, and Aliens

DC Comics' flagship character Superman is a modern archetype of anthropic power. This is true of the character himself, but also as a symptom of a more recent manifestation of a far older archetype. This archetype concerns the ways power coalesces and decoheres, in and through an anthropic figure whose power typically must be expended either to serve, save, or subjugate those subject to power. Before looking at how this is made manifest in Superman through a comparative aesthetic analysis of various Superman comics, paintings of Jesus Christ, and the Archangel Michael, a brief comment on a contextually older example of the aforementioned archetype will help edify this association. The story of Superman/Clark/Kal-El is as archetypal in 20th and 21st century global pop and visual culture as the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is to the heroic narratives of the god-kings of historical

myth. Grant Morriosn sums the former's familiar origin story in just 8 words in the introduction to his seminal *All Star Superman* (2005): "DOOMED PLANET. DESPERATE SCIENTISTS. LAST HOPE. KINDLY COUPLE" (Morrison 2005, p. 1). Like Gilgamesh before him, Superman is an embodiment of various ontological and existential conflicts of self and Other/Other in self. While Gilgamesh doubly renounces his godhood in his refusal to follow the path set out by his father and rebuffing Ishtar's amorous overtures, his status as consort and champion of the Goddess is substituted by rejection and ultimately humanity. As a result, Gilgamesh's quest to regain his immortality is simultaneously an effort to regain his godhood and, as such, to reclaim his former status as a God-King. *The Epic* is ultimately concerned with loss, reclamation, and rediscovery of self Othered from self, and Other in self. It is a narrative that mediates on the ontological nature of the self as an essential bifurcation; that is, being itself oscillating between binaries states such as immortal/mortal, preternatural/natural, invulnerable/vulnerable, to name a few obvious ones. These also include the existential issues and debates that that self—Superman's physical similarities and uncanny differences in relation to human beings—must necessarily endure and navigate in a terrestrial milieu.

While Kal-El is not the progeny of royalty in the most conventional takes of the character's history within the DC Comics' multiverses, the House of El is often described as a noble house in the annals of Krypton, his home world, before it was destroyed. However, the recurrent themes of Superman's *angoisse* that are recursively linked to his status as an interstellar orphan and protector of his adoptive species are typically not concerned with the (re)acquisition of power and nobility. In this way, Superman's narrative is antipodal to that of Gilgamesh for two primary reasons. Superman is, firstly, three selves in one—Clark, Kal, and Superman, all of which serve and renege the powers and abilities contained within the ontology of his body, which, while ostensibly appearing familiarly human, is capable of obviously god-like feats. This fundamental onto-existential tension—appearing human but in every way *being super*human—is the base upon which and through which all three of the character's respective selves emerge, disappear, or express themselves in both quotidian and supernatural ways. Secondly, Superman is far more concerned with, on the one hand, constantly negotiating the direct and indirect application of his own power—as a spectacularly powerful alien tool of a human moral ethos and human ideology that determines a specific remit or set of behaviors, interventions, prohibitions and goals the character understands collectively as 'justice'. On the other hand, this recursive re-negotiation of alien power and human ideology is also constantly manifest in Superman's more quotidian participation in humanity in and through his Clark persona, which in many ways is a performance of powerlessness.

Superman and Gilgamesh do share a broad reclamatory ethos, however. While Gilgamesh seeks his lost godhood or status as God-King, Superman seeks his lost childhood, his lost 'Krptonianness', which is reduced to an incomplete memory when Krypton itself

explodes. Ultimately, an underlying narrative directive aligning both figures inheres in the negotiation of the ontological and existential aspects of their super/post-humanness.[1]

With that said, this paper seeks to study the paradoxical depiction of Superman in several comics as a type of triune character/concept in practice: Servant, Saviour, and Sovereign. To achieve this, this paper will conduct a comparative close reading of various classical paintings of Christ and Michael and depictions of Superman from various key moments in both the narrative lives of Christ and Superman.

A note on terminology. When speaking about the character, it is important to note that "Superman" refers to three different albeit intersecting, interacting, and oftentimes cross-cancelling identity positions. These are "Superman", the heroic arch-defender of the peoples of the DC Comics Multiverses. "Clark Kent", the terrestrial identity of a Kansan man who works as a journalist for the Metropolis news agency *The Daily Planet*. "Clark Kent" also functions as a form of socio-anthropological camouflage for the alien being, allowing it to adopt the guise of a typical human man in the DC Comics Multiverses. "Kal-El" refers to the Kryptonian alien orphan sent from a destroyed planet, Krypton, by its parents, Jor-El and Lara Lor-Van. In many stories detailing the character's origins, Kal-El is among the last of the Krytonian race in the DC Comics Multiverses.

A brief note on aesthetic referents is also necessary. The specimen texts that depict the aesthetic parallels between Christ and Superman considered in this paper are taken from various comic book iterations of the latter, as well as numerous depictions of the former. The range and diversity of references have been chosen so as to assess, as holistically as the remit of this paper allows, the consistency or, at least repetition, of this visual association. This paper asserts that the analysis unfolded here—alongside numerous others—is important and timely for critiques of how forms of anthropic power can coalesce and decohere around popular figures, and political, economic, cultural, and ecological consequences thereof. The hope of this analysis is to offer some lines of flight

[1] For further discussion of Superman from a psycho-analytical perspective, consider the following: Tembo, K. (2020). "Why Superman Will Not Save the World: Theorizing the Relationship Between Suffering and DC Comics Superman". Galactica Media: Journal of Media Studies, 2(3), 119-137. I have also written about this topic from a xenological perspective in the following text: Tembo, Kwasu. (2018). Among Them but Not One of Them: A Xenological Exploration of the Otherness and Power of DC Comics' Superman. Caietele Echinox. 34. 181-199. 10.24193/cechinox.2018.34.14. Lastly, I have approached the topic from a purely theoretical, deconstructionist perspective in the following: Tembo, K.D.. (2017). Re-theorizing the problem of identity and the onto-existentialism of DC comics' superman. Word and Text. 7. 151-167. I have also approached the topic through mixed-race studies in the following: "Examining Otherness and the Marginal Man in DC's Superman through Mixed-Race Studies" in *Mixed-Race Superheroes* edited by Sika Dagbovie-Mullins and Eric Berlatsky (2021). I have also written about this topic in relation to onto-existential issues and debates related to power and Otherness in the following: "Pax in Terra: Superman & the Problem of Power in Superman Returns & Man of Steel." Postscriptum: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Literary Studies: Bengal, Sarat Centenary College, July 2017.

when considering specifically *morally*-inflected ways in which power coalescing and decohering around popular anthropic figures, fictional or not, is made to, expected to, and fails to either serve, save, or subjugate.

2. The Shepherd, the Messiah, and the Son of Man: The Depiction of the Christ in Western Art History

For all that the Bible describes of the majesty, personality, and acts of Christ, the scriptures offer comparatively scant descriptions of his appearance. This may partially be due to the inherent issue of blasphemy and sacrilege encompassed in the Old Testament prohibition against the production of idolatrous graven images. Creating and re-creating facsimiles or likenesses of such a figure would, in a Benjaminian sense, dissipate the aura of mystique, power, and sacredness attached to the otherworldly, alien, yet uncannily common face of the Son of Man. This opens up the potential for aesthetic and interpretive openness in representing such a figure, his power, purpose, and passion. Indeed, this aesthetic malleability—a type of indefinite uncanniness—has allowed for a very interesting sense of reverence at the imaged likeness of Christ, but also artistic latitude for representational experimentation, figurative bricolage, thematic and symbolic melange, and stylistic syncretism from various traditions. Swartwood House (2020) notes that "the earliest images of Jesus Christ emerged in the first through third centuries A.D., amidst concerns about idolatry. They were less about capturing the actual appearance of Christ than about clarifying his role as a ruler or as a savior" (Swartwood House, 2020). This observation necessarily raises the question of purpose contra precision, function contra form. In short, what role does any rendering of the imagined likeness of Christ serve in itself, in the artist that created it, and its affectivity in the viewer?

Syncretism and symbolism are two key constituent categories in analyzing and historicising the evolution of the likeness of Christ throughout the history of Western art. There are, in effect, a range of genealogically linked aesthetic 'Christ-types': archetypal presentations of the messiah that, in certain instances, borrow from other notable cultures and aesthetic traditions. For example, if asked what image and characterization comes to mind when imagining Jesus, the figure of the Good Shepherd conjured in John 10:11 would be a recursive touchstone for many: a beardless, youthfully robust figure based, as Swartwood House notes, "on pagan representation of Orpheus, Hermes and Apollo" (Swartwood House 2020). This is counterposed to the figure of Christ-in-Judgement, the Divine Sovereign, Adjudicator of Souls, and/or God-King symbolized in depictions of Christ in which the messiah is shown wearing a toga, typically red, blue, or layered with both, which would also frequently paper the imaginations of many. Here, Christ can take on both the pose, vestments, and symbols of the office of emperor. In this representation, a more mature, bearded, long-haired Christ syncretizes characteristics of Zeus with Old Testament heroes like Samson and Elijah (Burns et al. 2017).

The most obvious point of resemblance between comic book superheroes and Christ is precisely on this point of a mercurial and shifting identity. Despite the consistency of aesthetic features and iconographic lodestars that mark both Christ and Superman—the recurrence of the colors red and blue, the characterization of each figure as both judge and shepherd, as both dispenser of supreme justice and uncanny commonness to regular folk—the ontological and existential instability of both Christ and Superman's respective identities allows each figure to be (re)interpreted in multitudinous ways. With each subject, artists superimpose, syncretize, bricolage, insert, and/or censor a variety of concepts and concerns that they feel (im)proper to such iconic figures.

This mercurial undercurrent linking the aesthetic representations of Christ and Superman has been well documented and analyzed by various scholars. For Soriano (2021), Superman is very much indebted to his mythopoetic and global literary and cultural influences.

The myths themselves no matter how old they are and whichever culture they originated have been evidential to the existence of a parallel archetypal narrative (Mordern 2016). This phenomenon can be seen in the mythos of Superman that appeared in the pages of comics amid the *Great American Depression*—a historic event that led to the birth of the Superhero which prompted the beginning of an explosion that would color popular culture for decades to come (Maslon and Kantor 2013). He was the first character to fully embody the definition of the Superhero and prompted the repetition necessary for the emergence of a genre (Darowski 2014). Eventually, his narrative was revealed through television and continuously being reinvented in the cinema as society's dynamic nature causes changes to our cultural values and beliefs (Soriano 2021, 263–64).

For critics such as Kozlovic (2002), the comparative relationality between Superman and Christ is as much linguistic as it is narratological. Kozlovic cites Engle[2] in noting how "Kal-El'' in Hebrew means 'all that God is'" while for Soriano the Christ-like connotations embodied by Superman are evoked primarily through their shared narratological arcs (Kozlvic 2002). Soriano notes that the association coalesces around

> a conglomeration of Hebraic features [which] can be synthesized pointing to the *messianic archetype*. In literary studies, the *messianic archetype* is described as someone who endures great sacrifices including death to save his people from an impending apocalypse. Superman exemplifies this description. He is an extra-terrestrial immigrant from the planet Krypton who is sent by his father *Jor-el* to Earth. He grew up in Smallville, Kansas, and is raised by his adoptive parents. Later on, he then left Smallville and traveled to the North Pole where the *Fortress of Solitude* is located. He then realized his purpose and finally returned to *Metropolis* (and eventually the world) to fulfill his destiny as its savior and champion. In comparison, Jesus' first home is in Nazareth and eventually left home to meditate in the wilderness (*King*

[2] See: Engle, G. (1992). What makes Superman so darned American? *Popular culture: An introductory text*, 314–43.

> *James Bible*, 1769/2017, Mark 1:12-13). After this stage of his life, he started his work of salvation at the age of thirty (*King James Bible*, 1769/2017, Luke 3:22). Eventually, he will return as the son of man with his father's glory (*King James Bible*, 1769/2017, Mathew 23:31- 32). Thus, both characters echo the characteristics of the *Judeo-Christian messiah*. They are both from a faraway land sent by their heavenly fathers to the world of ordinary men. (Soriano 2021, 268)

Quoting Jensen (2013) in his editorial piece for *Journal for Religion, Film and Media* (2020), Yazbek draws a similar narratological conclusion, noting how

> Superman's father, while sending his son to Earth in the movie Man Of Steel (Zack Snyder, US 2013), says to his wife, who is worried about what will happen to her son once there, "He'll be a god to them", assuming that his capacities and powers will be the symbols of his superiority over humans. Christopher Nolan, producer of the movie, confirmed in an interview: "He is the ultimate superhero; he has the most extraordinary powers. He has the most extraordinary ideals to live up to. He's very God-like in a lot of ways and it's been difficult to imagine that in a contemporary setting." (Yazbek 8, 2020).

Other scholars and theologians have noted the parallels that exist between what I refer to as Superman's 'tridentity' (being at once Clark, Kal, and Superman) and the triunity of God. In *Revisioning Christology* (2011), Crisp observes that the intricacies of Calvin's Christology pursuant to the role, name, and duties of each of the three facets of the holy trinity can be cogently parsed by making direct reference to Superman's tridentity. According to Crisp, "we can speak of Kal-El in his capacity as Kent and Kal-El in his capacity as Superman. There is nothing remiss in doing so, and there are numerous everyday situations in which this is common practice" (Crisp 2011, 36). In this way, just as in Christianity Christ (a savior), God (a protector, avenger, and judge), and The Holy Spirit (a powerful mystery) coalesce and decohere as intersecting isomorphisms, so too are Superman, Kal, and Clark interrelated and inter-referential.

Numerous scholars have both endorsed and critiqued this association. In terms of the reductive association of Christ and Superman having identical moral codes, Ken Koltun-Fromm rebukes the notion that either Christ or Superman are ubiquitous in their moral dispensations, nor anodyne moral figures as a result (Koltun-Fromm 2020, p. 101) Similarly, Saunders (2011) explicitly emphasizes this point, stating that it is "reductive to try to explicate Superman in terms of a single belief system such as Judaism or Christianity" (Saunders 2011, 33). Others like Lewis (2010) identify inherent inconsistencies in the comparison of Jesus and Superman. So much so that while it could be argued that "Superman is a savior," the character is such "in a manner decoupled from Christology" (Lewis 2010). In view of the often lazy approximations between Superman and Christ, critics like Babka (2008) contend that there are philosophical and narratological resonances and nuances *if* the two are compared. For Babka, while Christ is, ontologically, fully human *and* God in orthodox Christology, Superman is *part* alien, *part* man, and only ever fully a self-interrupting approximation of both (Babka 2008, 122).

From early Christian art through to Art Deco and beyond, the evolution of Western art history is inextricable from the aesthetic depiction of Jesus Christ. Beginning with early Christian Art, Josh Coyne (2021) notes that a conspicuous feature of this period of art is the scarcity of likenesses of Christ. This is primarily due to the fact that early Christians in Europe necessarily operated as clandestine cults on account of early Christian fear of Roman persecution. It behooved early converts of that period "to limit the amount of tangible evidence linking them to the faith. There were also doctrinal reasons for the lack of early Christian Art. The old Testament's prohibition of graven images meant that early Christians were hesitant to create artwork depicting Jesus" (Coyne 2021). Exemplary pieces like *Jesus and his Twelve Apostles* (c. 1st—5th century) are most commonly found in Roman catacombs once belonging to wealthy Roman Christians.

In the emergence of Byzantine art following the fall of the Western Roman Empire in the 5th century, the no longer secretive cult flourished and along with it Christian art, particularly in the Eastern Empire after Constantine the Great chose Christianity as the official religion of the state. The image of Christ in a surviving mosaic from the Hagia Sophia, *Christ Pantocrator* (1261), indicates a lack of fidelity to realism in favor of stylization and symbolism in the aesthetic rendering of the Redeemer. This trend would continue into the Medieval period, only to see another radical shift during the Renaissance in which Christ would again—ironically—be depicted more realistically. With the Renaissance in Europe emerged a concerted interest in the reassessment of classical knowledge, literature, art and culture. While much art surviving from this period is concerned with religious, and specifically Christian themes and imagery, one of the most iconic pieces of art from this period concerns Christ in Leonardo Da Vinci's *The Last Supper* (1495). Da Vinci's excellent use of light and shadow and the emphasis he places on figurative naturalism in the piece reflects similar Baroque sensibilities to follow. For example, Peter Paul Rubens' *Descent from the Cross* (1612-14) not only engages with a pivotal moment in the life of Christ as did Da Vinci (betrayal and death, respectively), the dramatic chiaroscuro, the theatrical expressiveness in the figures' faces, the sense of humanity in the depiction of loss, suffering, and grief all display what we could call 'dramatic naturalism', a distinctive feature of art of the period.

The artwork of the Rococo period that followed shared many features of its immediate aesthetic forebear. However, as Coyne succinctly notes,

> while Baroque artists generally used darker colors, dramatic lighting, and depicted somber scenes, Rococo utilized brighter colors, soft lighting, and focussed on images of happiness and love. This distinction is easily recognisable when comparing Sebastiano Ricci's *The Resurrection* and Peter Paul Rubens's *Descent from the Cross*, as the two paintings give very different impressions from one another. (Coyne 2021, n.p.)

The tonal disparities are important and, if placed in historiographical comparison with Superman's publication history, such a comparative analysis would reveal that similar

tonal changes in the depiction of Christ are reflected in the depiction of Superman from the late 30s to the late 90s.[3] While the Christ mise-en-scene in Rubens is distinctly somber, private, intimate, and personal, Ricci's is marked by a potent sense of bombast, spectacle, bright light, heavenly presences, and an overarching emphasis on the glorific.

The Enlightenment precipitated another return to classical European cultural ideals that placed a premium on morality and virtue. As a result, the spectacular excesses and aristocratic indulgences that likened Christ to an exuberant king in Rococo art were abandoned in favor of Neoclassical art's minimal use of color in depicting themes of virtue and morality. In this period, the likeness of Christ becomes a keener vehicle for moral didacticism and ideological dissemination. This sensibility is notable in Jacques-Louis David's *Christ on the Cross* (1782), which, as Coyne notes, "exemplifies Neoclassical art with its muted colors, simplicity, and emphasis on the moral virtue of Christ by focusing on when he died on the cross for other's sins" (Coyne, 2021). The affective turns (with special interest in feeling and its intensities) of the late 18th and early 19th centuries spearheaded by Romanticism was a riposte against the overemphasis on rationalism during the Enlightenment. Feeling came to replace reason and logic as the primary lodestars of artistic enterprise. Not only were secular inspirations from classical Greco-Roman myth abandoned in favor of Medieval influences, Romantic groups such as the Nazarene Movement in Germany elected to represent Christ in the likeness of a Medieval pilgrim. This is exemplified in Joseph von Fuhrich, *Der Gang nach Emmaus (The Walk to Emmaus*) (1837).

Modern art's engagement with the likeness of Jesus can be summed up in a single image: Warner Sallman's *Head of Christ* (1940). The former commercial artist had standing partnerships with Protestant and Catholic Christian publishing companies. As a result, Sallman's rendering of the likeness of Chrst became internationally recognizable, featuring in eccumenical products ranging from prayer cards, hymnals, Bibles, stained glass, posters, painting reproductions and other prints, calendars, lava lamps, to candles. One of the most iconic renderings of the likeness of Jesus comes from the Modern period art. Paul Landowski, Hector da Silva, Albert Caquot, and Gheorghe Leonida's *Christ the Redeemer* (1931) from the early 20th century is not only one of the most iconic artworks depicting Jesus in terms of sheer scale, it is also exemplary of Art Deco's minimal precision, boldness of line and geometrical symmetry. This sensibility—that combines scale and spirituality—can also be noted 30 years after *The Redeemer* in the form of Millard Sheets's 1964 mural *The Word of Life* (1964) featured on the side of the Hesburgh Library at University of Notre Dame.

[3] For a detailed exploration of the evolution of Superman in comics (from the late 1930s to the late 1990s), please see the following: "Power, Masculinity, and War: Superman, a Case Study" in *Manifestations of Male Image in the World's Cultures* (2021) edited by Renata Iwicka.

What, however, do these and other depictions of Christ evoke concerning themes, issues and debates about goodhood, manhood, kingship, and the presiding tension between the remarkable and the banal? We could consider the common scenes and setting in which Christ—from infancy to heavenly ascension and final judgment—is depicted. They include the following: The Annunciation, Visitation, Nativity, Adoration of the Magi, Presentation, Baptism of Christ, Temptation, Raising of Lazarus, Entry into Jerusalem, Last Supper, Agony in the Garden, Kiss of Judas, Christ Before Pilate, Crucifixion, Descent from the Cross, The Mary's at the Tomb, Resurrection, *Noli Mi Tangere*, Ascension, Pentecost, and Last Judgment.

There are several notable examples of each, of which I will provide a cursory sketch: Ambrogio Lorenzetti's *Presentation at the Temple* (1342), which presents Christ as a future king swaddled in rich cloths of blue and red, is counterposed by *Adoration of the Magi* (1470–1480) whose common material (cartapesta) aids in the portrayal of Christ as a commonor's boy; Duccio's, *The Nativity* featuring the Prophets Isaiah and Ezekial (1308-11) depicts Christ as a king, but not so much in terms of subject matter and rendering, but through the aesthetic and pecuniary richness of the amount of gold leaf employed. The preponderance of the color blue is also noteworthy; *Baptism of Christ* from the Psalter of Eleanor of Aquitaine (1185) depicts Christ in a warrior-like pose, with a physique and countenance to match. In this early image, Christ is at once stern, muscular, and focussed; Christ-as-conqueror imagery can be noted in Duccio's *The Temptation of Christ on the Mountain* (1308-11). The theme inheres in the exaggerated size of the figures of Christ and Satan, portraying these two arch rivals as literal and figurative titanic forces overhanging the world of human beings, battling for their souls in a larger-than-life spiritual war. Here, Christ is champion and overseer both, and he embodies both ideas robed, once again, in the regal and authoritative colors of red and blue; *The Healing of the Blind Man and the Raising of Lazarus*, (1120-40), a fresco from early Christian art, again depicts Christ robed in red and blue. The tone of the piece is personal, featuring physical contact between a benevolent messiah and a needful mortal. One noteworthy feature of the figures in this piece is the exaggerated size of the eyes of each figure save those of the blind man whom Christ is healing. While one might initially assume that this feature was included as a means of emphasizing the difference between divine and mortal sight, the fact that all the figures pictured save the blind man feature these exaggerated eyes ultimately, undifferentiates the figures of the divine and surrounding mortals, as each share the same lineaments, same gaze, same proportions, and the same symbols of divinity in the form of halos. In contrast to Duccio, the Castile fresco depicts Christ not only in a personal way, but interestingly as uncommonly common. Again, he is shown donning red and blue robes; Giotto's *Entry into Jerusalem* (1305–06) has the strange and somewhat paradoxical feature of ostensible grandiosity, a sense of pomp and circumstance even though Christ is shown entering the city on a mule. In this way, the elission of a

similar sense of humility and pomp can be noted in Andrea Mantegna's *Christ the Redeemer* (1488-1500). Here, Giotto and Mantegna diverge in their respective depiction of humility noted in the Christ as Good Shepherd iconography exemplified by the 3rd century fresco *Jesus in the Catacombs of Rome*; Ugolino da Siena's *The Last Supper* (1325-30), like Enrique Simonet's *Head of Jesus* (1890) again takes up the themes and aesthetics of stoic commonality, simplicity, humility, intimacy, and loyalty. Such a sentiment portrays Christ as steadfast and ascetic; *The Agony in the Garden* (1460) offers the opposite to humility in that Christ here appears to be, in every way, the anointed, the uncommon—an effect achieved not only in the proportions and placement of the figures, but also in the finery and richness of Christ's blue and red robes. Giotto's *Kiss of Judas* (1305-06) similarly portrays Christ as the main character in an epic; In contrast, Ludwig Schongauer's *Christ before Pilate* (1475), or more exaggeratedly in Giovanni Bellini's *The Resurrection* (1477), centralizes Christ, but again as a humble hero in a dramatic production in a way similar in tone, but radically different in technique and style, to El Greco's *Christ Carrying the Cross* (1580); the spectacular Christ again re-emerges in the unknown Master of the Codex of Saint George's *The Crucifixion* (1330-35) in which Christ both is and is at the epicenter of an opulent gilt spectacle. A similar tone is struck in Carracci's *Transfiguration of Jesus* (1594), while something of the superheroic is manifest in the tone of Noel Coypel's *Resurrection* (1700) depicting a hovering Christ; The redemptiveness of Christ's martyrdom is apparent in The Book of Hours' *The Deposition* (1440-50). The sense of theatricality in this piece is similar in tone to the even brighter, more theatrically glorious and staged *The Baptism of Jesus Christ* by Piero della Francesca (1448-1450). The sense of theater and pageantry darkens somewhat in the shades, hues, and tones of Pietro Perugino's *Stabat Mater* (1482), while a sense of high drama in terms of colour and composition is maintained in Titian's 1558 *The Crucifixion*, Matthias Grunewald's 1515 *The Crucifixion*, and Diego Valazequez's 1632 *Christ Crucified*, which in many respects is similar in style and tone to a comic book cover for the concluding issue of an epic run; The sense of triumph and heroism can be noted clearly in *The Resurrection* (c. 14th century) which depicts Christ as a death-conquering, banner-welding, triumphal hero whose red robe is worn in a style not dissimilar to a comic book superhero's cape, as it is in Ludwig of Ulm's *Noli Me Tangere* (1450-70); Lastly, Christ as supreme master is unmistakable in Hieronymus Bosch's iconic *The Last Judgment* (1500) in which Christ is portrayed as god-king and judge of men, acting thereby as a potent example of Christ in Majesty iconography also known as 'Christ Pantocrator' or 'Almighty/All-powerful."

3. The Champion and The Protector: The Depiction of the Archangel Michael in Western Art History

Abrahamic religious literature recursively relates between the Archangel Michael with important symbolic, narrative, and ideological functions; namely, the Archangel Michael

is an embodiment of *both* divine or otherworldly power and justice. This can be summarized in the following passage from Darrell Hannah's (1999) *Michael and Christ: Michael Traditions and Angel Christology in Early Christianity*:

> Michael [...] held a significant position in the minds of those who wrote and read Jewish apocalypses. The traditions about him as the protector, both in a military and judicial sense, of the holy people, and as the commander-in-chief of the heavenly armies are quite widespread. He was also popularly seen as a transporter of the souls of the righteous to heaven and, less often, as Keeper of the gates of paradise. He was regarded as high priest in the heavenly sanctuary by at least one apocalypse [...] By the mid-first century CE, Michael was coming to be considered as the chief of all angels, a trend which continued and grew in strength in the following centuries [...] The Qumran sect adopted the tradition of Michael of Michael as protector of (the righteous in) Israel, highest archangel and military leader of the heavenly hosts. The Rabbis spoke of Michael as the priest in the heavenly sanctuary and the greatest of the angels. Christians adopted nearly all of the Jewish apocalyptic Michael traditions [which provide grounds for] the influence of Jewish speculations about principal angels on the development of early Christology. (Hannah 1999, 54)

Richard Freeman Johnson (2005) notes that the Archangel Michael has his own set of typical iconographic features and traits. He is typically either shown alone, chorused with saints and other angels of his order such as Gabriel, or as an agent of God's justice either in the expulsion of the rebel angels and/or the Last Judgment (Johnson 2005, 141–47). Because of his angelic role of protection and judgment, Michael is often depicted as a robust warrior helmed and cuirassed, armed with a spear, sword, and/or shield as tools/symbols of his ministry and office. The style of this martial symbolism is indebted to Byzantine traditions as Michael is depicted often as a Byzantine officer. However, in medieval periods, he was also depicted as a knight in full plate armor (Holweck 1911). While a pair of large majestic wings is a chief symbol of archangels, several key symbols and compositional traditions recursively draw attention to what Michael *means* within Christian doctrine. Those symbols and compositional features are the fact that Machiael is often standing in triumph and dominion over a serpent or dragon—which he is sometimes shown running through with a lance—or the defeated figure of his once equal Lucifer (Holweck 1911). The image of Michael as an active, bellicose warrior-saint is counterposed with the less common depiction of the Archangel as an adjudicator of divine justice. This can be noted in the depictions of Michael in which he is shown holding a pair of scales as well as the sacred Book of Life which he uses to aid the Trinity judge the righteousness of mortal and immortal souls (Holweck 1911).

4. Servant-Saviour-Sovereign: A Close Comparative Analysis of Jesus, Michael, and Superman

In the minds of many, Superman's ostensible resemblances to Christ are both interesting and problematic.[4] As a result, the character has, in various ways, been exhaustively associated with a Christ-from-another-planet subtext in every medium or mode in which the character has ever appeared. In certain instances, this is made thematically explicit. For example, in an interview in *Wizard* No. 143 (2003), Grant Morrison refers to Superman as the "American Christ" (2003). In addition, Morrison states in the semi-autobiographical *Supergods* (2011) that "Superman [is] Christ, an unkillable champion sent down by his father (Jor-El) to redeem us by example and teach us how to solve our problems without killing one another" (Morrison 2011, 16). Similarly, in *Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow?* (2010), Alan Moore refers to Superman as "a perfect man who came from the sky and did only good" (Moore 2010). This Superman-as-*imago-dei* subtext is carried over and expressed in other Superman comics, including but not limited to *JSA Kingdom Come Special: The Kingdom* No.1 (January 2009); *Action Comics* Vol. 1, No. 900 (June, 2011), *Superman/Batman: Worship* (April, 2011), *Superman* Vol. 1, No. 666 (October 2007), and *Superman: Godfall* (June, 2005).

Other notable Christian allusions include the fact that Clark Kent's adoptive mother was originally called Mary, and the fact that Clark Kent's fellow reporters have a similar difficulty recognizing "him" as Superman as Jesus' fellow Nazarenes did in seeing him as the Savior of humankind and Redeemer of the world. The word *Krypton* is also Greek for *hidden*, which is how the New Testament describes the kingdom of heaven in Matthew 13: 44's Parable of the Hidden Treasure. Moreover, in Kryptonese *Kal-El* means 'Star-Child', which evokes comparisons to the Star of Bethlehem that signaled the birth of Christ (Eury 2006, 32; Ty 2012, 63–71).

There are also obvious narratological similarities between the two. Most notable among them is the fact that both suffered arduous torment in a battle against 'evil', died, and subsequently (and miraculously) resurrected. For Christ, this process of death and rebirth is detailed in the narrative of the Crucifixion in the Gospel of Mark 15: 34-37 and depicted visually in works such as *The Ascension of Christ a modello for a ceiling painting*" after Gaspare Diziani (1689–1767) and *Jesus Ascending Into Heaven* by William

[4] Numerous texts both tacitly and explicitly acknowledge, appreciate, and rebuke this association. These include but are not limited to John Wesley White's *The Man from Krypton: The Gospel According to Superman* (1978), Simcha Weinstein,'s *Up, Up, and Oy Vey: How Jewish History, Culture, and Values Shaped the Comic Book Superhero* (2006), Stephen Skelton's *The Gospel According to the World's Greatest Hero* (2006), Danny Fingeroth's *Disguised as Clark Kent: Jews, Comics, And The Creation Of The Superhero* (2009), Ben Saunders' *Do The Gods Wear Capes?: Spirituality, Fantasy, and Superheroes* (2011), and Larry Tye's *Superman: The High-Flying History of America's Most Enduring Hero* (2012), and Umberto Eco & Natalie Chilton's "The Myth of Superman" (1972) have all agreed and exhaustively illustrated how the influence of Abrahamic texts, ideology, iconography, and ethics on Superman is readily apparent. In the interest of space, this footnote is meant as an acknowledgement of this body of excellent critical inquiry which I shall not rehash or rehearse here.

Brassey Hole (1905). For Superman, this process is exemplified in the character's battle against Doomsday in *Superman* No. 75 (January, 1993) and the *Funeral for a Friend* arc (January-June, 1993). The visual treatment of both narratives dealing with the death and return of Christ and Superman employ comparable representational and symbolic methods. This can be noted in the aesthetic equivalence in composition of Vasily Vereshchagin and Dan Jurgens' respective visual interpretations of the death of Christ and Superman (see Fig. 1 and 2).

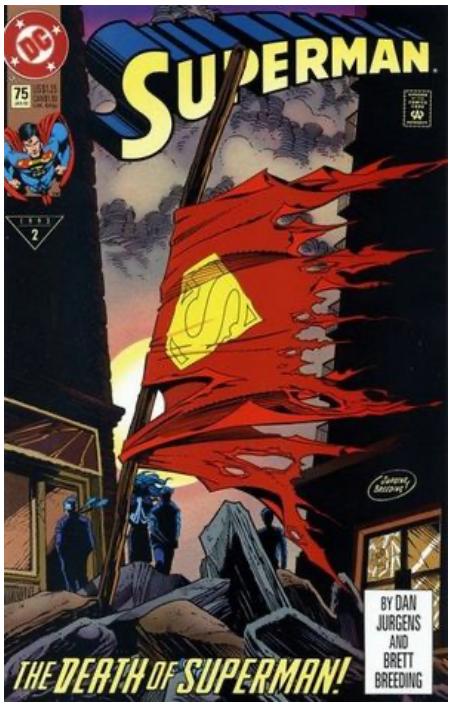

Fig 1 (left). *Night At Golgotha* by Vasily Vasilyevich Vereshchagin (1869). Fig 2 (right). Taken from *Superman* Vol.2, No. 75 (January, 1993), written and illustrated by Dan Jurgens.

Vereshchagin's piece centralizes the Cross in the middle-ground of the saturnine scene. Jesus himself remains unseen, though the image suggests that his body is being carried by the cadre seen in procession on the right. Similarly, Jurgens centralizes the torn symbol of Superman, namely the character's tattered cape. The cape is foregrounded, wrapped around a wooden stick, grounded in the rubble of the violent scene of the character's death. Jurgens could have availed himself of a number of Superman's associative symbols, a bloodied spit curl to resemble Christ's crown of thorns, for example. However, not only can his composition of the cape be described as a symbolic 'banner of sacrifice', but also as an effective symbol of *grounding* that denotes Superman's *fall*. Furthermore, Jurgen's use of Crucifixion symbolism is apparent in the fact that Superman and Doomsday's fight takes place in the heart of Metropolis, whose Deco-influenced cityscape is full of glass and steel. Jurgens employs a simple wooden 'crucifix' for Superman, one that

somehow remained miraculously intact throughout both Doomsday's rampage *and* brawl with Superman that left the very ground of the city torn open, emphasizing both the Biblical leitmotif and its gravitas in the depicted scene. Similarly, the group on the left (which one assumes are Superman's 'disciples' in the form of The Justice League) remove from the scene with bowed heads, employing nearly identical symbolism and composition as Vereshchagin's rendering of Christ's mourning disciples, albeit reversing their placement in the scene.

Fig 3 (left). *The Ascension Of Christ* by Rembrandt (1636). Fig 4 (right). *Superman* Vol.2, No. 77 (March, 1993), written and illustrated by Dan Jurgens.

The visual treatment of both narratives dealing with the respective *ascension* of Christ and Superman likewise employs comparable methods. As Fig. 3 and 4 above show, both Rembrandt's Baroque technique and Jurgens illustrative style employ apotheotic imagery in the depiction of both Christ and Superman's postmortem ascension. This can be noted in the use of the symbol of a bright skyward light to which the figure ascends and the parted clouds through which they make their ascension. Both the theme and symbolism can also be noted in Gustave Doré's Romantic engraving depicting Dante's ascension toward The Empyrean or holy abode of God detailed in Dante Alighieri's *Paradiso*, Canto XXXI (Fig. 5).

Fig 5 (left). *The Empyrean* by Gustave Doré (1867). Fig 6 (right). *Absolute All-Star Superman* (October 2011), written by Grant Morrison, illustrated by Frank Quitely.

Fig 7 (left). *Superman* Vol.1, No. 659 "Angel" (February 2007), cover by Alejandro Barrioneuvo. Fig 8 (right). *Archangel Michael saving souls from purgatory* by Jacopo Vignali (17th century).

Consider the cover for *Superman* No. 659 (Fig. 7 above). In the previous issue, *Superman* No. 658 (January, 2007) also written and illustrated by Kurt Busiek and Carlos Pacheco, Arion: Lord of Atlantis tells Superman that civilizations need to emerge and dissipate, rise and fall. He explains that Superman's intercession in human affairs delays the necessary and destructive process of the fall of a civilization, suggesting that the character's participation in terrestrial matters causes a blockage in the evolution of human being. If Superman continues, Arion cautions, the inevitable calamity will be catastrophic, perhaps even irrecoverably apocalyptic. In this sense, Arion suggests that in order for DC Comics' representation of humankind to not only survive, but evolve, Superman must *let* civilization be destroyed. In the following issue, Superman reflects on Arion's revelation in his Fortress of Solitude, attempting to assess his impact on human history, world view, culture, self-image, and being. Superman recalls a woman he saved named Barbara Johnson. The combination of her encounter with the character and her religious faith lead her to conclude that Superman is, in fact, an angel. Not only does the story's title and theme conflate Superman with the concept of the Christian protector in the form of an Archangel or Seraphim, but this theme is visually succinct as well. Barrioneuvo's red-winged Superman depicted in the action of descending from on high gestures to the Christian iconography and symbolism of the warrior-saint the Archangel Michael. Michael, adorned in red whose name translates to "who is like God?" in the Latin (a literal translation of the Hebrew), which is typically inscribed upon his shield in Christian sculpture, has been iconically depicted vanquishing Satan and exiling his rebel angels as noted earlier.

Fig 9 (left). *Superman* No. 675 (June 2008), cover by Alex Ross. Fig 10 (right Paul Dini and Alex Ross's *Superman: Peace on Earth* (2005).

The equivalence between the two is exemplified in Fig. 9 and 10. Aside from the obvious color coordination of Michael and Superman's garments—a coordination both share with the numerous depictions of Christ sketched out earlier—the composition of each image presents the central figure as descending or descended from the heavens to deliver redemption or salvation to those below. Whether saving purgatorial souls or acting as a hovering sentinel over a city, these examples present both Michael and Superman as magnanimous and capable savior figures.

This idea of Superman-as-redeemer is concretized in the above page from Paul Dini and Alex Ross' *Superman: Peace on Earth* (2005). In the story, Superman attempts to cure world hunger by delivering mass amounts of foodstuffs to the most impoverished and starving locations on earth within twenty-four hours. Ross's depiction of Superman aesthetically and thematically equates the character with Christ. While the *Christ, the Redeemer* statue in Rio renders Christ's power in terms of the awe and spectacle of colossal size, it is ultimately *static*. In contrast, Ross depicts Superman's power as *actively* redemptive, that is, actively delivering on the promise Christ made over two millennia ago by carrying ocean tankers laden with food to the desperate multitudes languishing in the favelas of Rio. Ross's illustration also evokes the notion of *succession*, as if the Last Son of Krypton is descending into the world as a redeemer, down into the squalor and pain of human being, both usurping and succeeding the Only Son of God while Christ remains static, abstracted in the rarefied air of the mountaintop. This image suggests that Superman is a modern replacement or substitute Christ-type, a Christ in lieu of Christ, or as John Lawrence suggests in *You Will Believe: The Cinematic Saga of Superman* (2006), Superman and other superheroes more generally can be seen as "secular counterparts of religious leaders" (Lawrence 2006). It should be noted that while the text invites such a reading, it also strongly proposes that Superman's mission is not to usurp Christ but to be a Christ-like inspiration to people, saying of world hunger that "it's not my place to dictate policy for humankind. But perhaps the sight of me fighting hunger on a global scale would inspire others to take action in their own way" (Dini 2005).

These messianic associations are intensified to the point of crisis in Mark Waid and Alex Ross' *Kingdom Come* (1996). The text's palpable religious fervor begins on the very first page, which is aesthetically and narratologically laden with apocalyptic imagery and symbolism. This can be noted in the text's opening caption, employing quotations from the Bible to comment on the opening page's striking painting depicting a bat warring with an eagle in an expressionistic and symbolic sky:

> THERE WERE VOICES...AND THUNDERINGS AND LIGHTNINGS...AND AN EARTHQUAKE...AND THERE FOLLOWED HAIL AND FIRE MINGLED WITH BLOOD. THERE FELL A GREAT STAR FROM HEAVEN BURNING AS IT WERE A LAMP...AND I BEHELD AND HEARD AN ANGEL...SAYING WITH A LOUD VOICE...WOE, WOE, WOE TO THE INHABITANTS OF THE EARTH. (Waid, 1996, 2–3)

Pages two and three show a portentous double-page splash in which an apocalyptic battle has or is taking place. Morrison describes Ross's evocative depictions of red lightning, green flame, a vast broken Grail, and half-visible, yet powerful images of hands grasping Zeus-like bolts of lightning as "elemental, doom laden, like a blind date with Saint John the Divine" (Morrison, 2011, p. 298). The text opens with a doomsday prophecy of the dying 1940s/1950s incarnation of Sandman in a story set twenty years in the future. In this future, Waid and Ross introduce the reader to the next-generation of metahumans. These violent and unprincipled descendants, who in many ways resemble the well-armed, hypertrophic, and morally gray heroes promoted by Image Comics and its imitators in the 1990s, fill the vacuum left by the so-called 'Golden Age' superheroes who have either mostly retired, or faded into clandestine action. In issue No. 1 "Strange Visitor" (May 1996), the inciting incident that coaxes Superman out of retirement concerns the destruction of the entire state of Kansas when Captain Atom detonates. The story's core premise is expressed on page nineteen by the text's narrator, Norman McCay, a troubled elderly minister. McCay affords the reader the perspective of an ordinary man bearing witness to the end of the age of superheroes and the transfiguration of a comic book representation of history, complete with the sense of holy dread and eschatological anxiety that the concept of the apocalypse evinces:

> ACCORDING TO THE WORD OF GOD, THE MEEK WOULD SOMEDAY INHERIT THE EARTH. SOMEDAY. BUT GOD NEVER ACCOUNTED FOR THE MIGHTY. THEY NUMBER IN THE NAMELESS THOUSANDS...PROGENY OF THE PAST, INSPIRED BY THE LEGENDS OF THOSE WHO CAME BEFORE...IF NOT THE MORALS. THEY NO LONGER FIGHT FOR THE RIGHT. THEY FIGHT SIMPLY TO FIGHT, THEIR ONLY FOES EACH OTHER. THE SUPER-HUMANS BOAST THAT THEY'VE ALL BUT ELIMINATED THE SUPER-VILLAINS OF YESTERYEAR. SMALL COMFORT. THEY MOVE FREELY THROUGH THE STREETS...THROUGH THE WORLD. THEY ARE CHALLENGED ...BUT UNOPPOSED. THEY ARE AFTER ALL...OUR PROTECTORS. (Waid 1996, 20)

In the story, Superman has retired because the character's no-killing creed is inimical with the world of the future in which murder and wanton destruction in the name of "good" is the norm. The irradiation of Kansas, however, brings Superman out of retirement for one final mission to bring that generation of young, unruly, and violent "superheroes" to heel. Superman's reactive decision to re-acquit himself in the role of superpowered global patriarchic/messiah elicits a strong counter-reaction. The superhero community is torn in two, with one side supporting Superman and the character's new Justice League's strict enforcement of law and order, while others side with Batman to resist what they construe as an attempt to impose a superhuman global police state (Morrison 2011, 298–99). Ross's photorealistic aesthetic lends gravitas and power to Waid's message which although appearing restorative, is primarily concerned with the *control* and *limitation* of power, and the disciplining and punishment of what Superman perceives as immoral bodies. In this sense, *Kingdom Come* is a powerful attempt to move

past the cynicism and violence of superhero comics of the late 1980s and early 1990s by reinvigorating Superman through a Biblically inspired epic of divine retribution at the hands of what Ross and Waid construe as the 'true gods' of the Golden Age' against the heretical, hyper-violent, and morally wayward heroes of the so-called 'Dark Age' of comics. To achieve this, Waid and Ross's story gestures to eschatonic concepts and ecclesiastical rhetoric from Revelations, specifically Revelations 16:18-20 (New King James Version), to put forward an intimation of the true power of these beings by associating it with punitive and corrective concepts and figures in Greco-Roman myth and Judeo Christian theology such as Nemesis, Michael, the Wrath of God, Armageddon, and The Immenentization of the Eschaton. With issue titles like "Impending Disaster," "Second Coming of Superman," "Pact," and "Armageddon," Ross and Waids' work on *Kingdom Come* is a response against the so-called 'Dark Age' in a way that thematically reproduces the retributive justice of early Superman adventures. The character's power and its desire to use it for the morally corrective goals of 'truth' and 'justice' not only portray Superman's power in overtly theistic terms, but makes it appear dangerous and even frightening once again. Like God's decree that vengeance is His alone (Romans 12: 17-21), *Kingdom Come* concludes that the administration of super-wrath requires Superman, "holy" and "perfect," to perform it.

Fig 11 (left). *The Archangel Michael defeating Satan* by Guido Reni (1635). Fig 12 (right). *Archangel Michael Hurls the Rebellious Angels into the Abyss* by Luca Giordano (1666).

As a concluding point of comparison, consider Fig. 11 and 12. Reni and Giordano both portray the Archangel Michael as the embodiment of divine or holy wrath. Michael is depicted *in medias res*, engaged in the act of defeating, expelling, and protecting the righteous from the profane. Both artists symbolize the efficacy of divine power through idealized terrestrial martial referents, such as swords (flaming or inert) and muscled cuirasses.

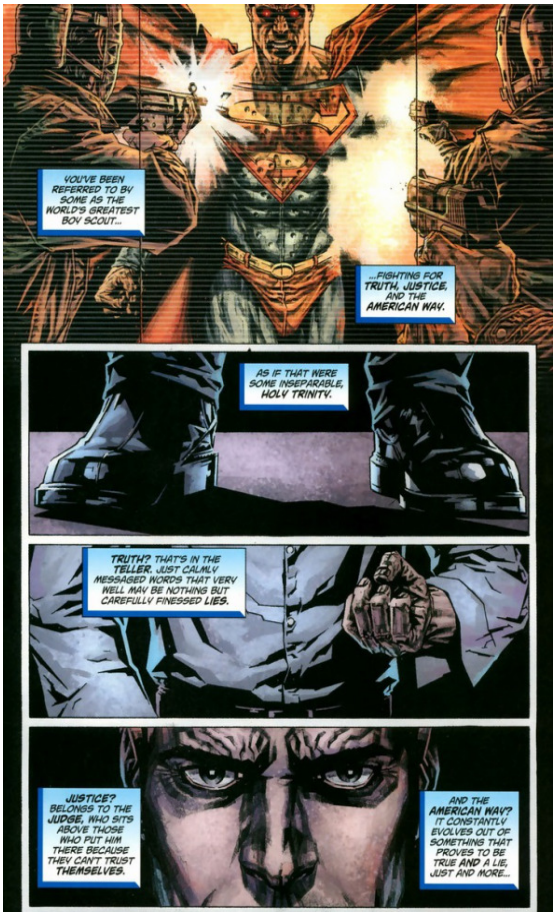

Fig 13 (left). *Lex Luthor: Man of Steel* Vol.1, No. 1 (May 2005), written by Brian Azzarello, illustrated by Bermejo. Fig. 14 (right). *Ibid.*

Now, consider the remaining figures. While classical approaches to the concept of divine wrath embodied by the Archangel Michael conflate divine wrath with concepts such as righteousness, chivalry, and protection through human martial symbols, the judicial wrath of Superman is often portrayed through the character's *Gaze* and, particularly, Superman's smoldering red eyes. As such, unlike God or His agents, Superman does not need to avail himself of weapons, armor, or soldiers in his pursuit of "truth" and "justice." Aesthetically, this makes Superman's wrath both more devastating and efficient than the wrath of God. Through Lex Luthor, Azzerello emphasizes the underlying elements of Superman that morality (represented in this case by Superman's credo of "truth, justice,

and the American way") cannot nullify or fully account for, namely, his disruptive power, body, and Otherness. Bermejo underscores the danger and power of this type of disruptivity by portraying Superman as violent, grimacing, and frightening in a way that shatters any resemblance between the beaming redeemer of *Fig. f.* and the ostensibly demonic being of monstrous fury and power in the first panels of *Fig. n* and *o.*

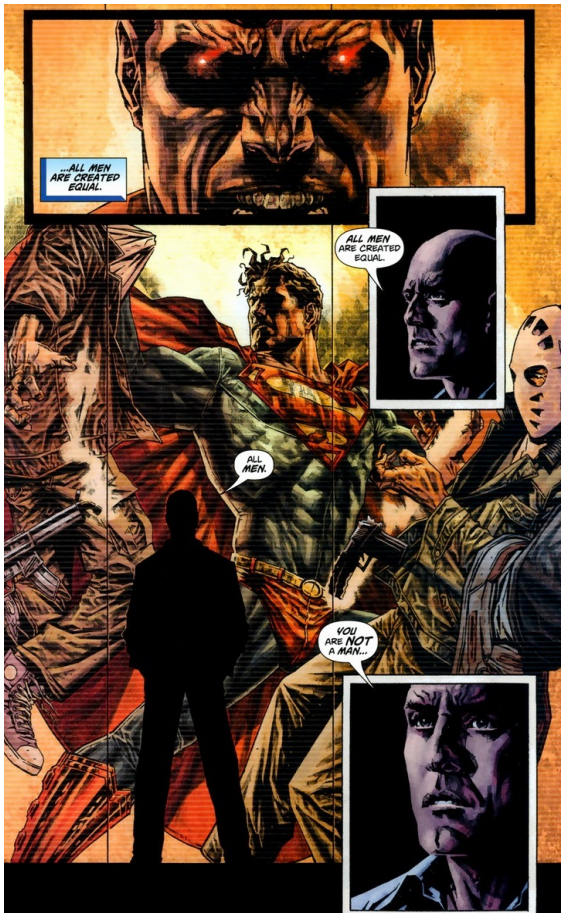

Fig 15 (left). *Lex Luthor: Man of Steel* Vol.1, No. 1 (May 2005), written by Brian Azzarello, illustrated by Bermejo. Fig 16 (right). *Kingdom Come* (2008), written by Mark Waid, illustrated by Alex Ross, 189.

The figures illustrate that, like the Christian conceptualization of God in the Old and New Testaments, there are seemingly two sides to Superman: one of beneficent redemption and one of apocalyptic wrath and power, which generate a type of resonant unease (see the figures in the background of Fig. 13) based on a confluence of fear, awe, envy, and resentment that morality cannot totally, perhaps even effectively, ameliorate.

5. Conclusion

It is a deceptively simple thing to note, but though the character's power originates in a completely different diegetic star-system, beyond the purview of Christian doctrine let

alone human history, Superman is continually regarded not only as a Christ figure, but also as an epitome of Christian moral values. This is why I argue that there is at the very heart of the modern concept of the comic book superhero a tension to which all other tensions tend and emerge from. While identarian tensions, paradoxes, and polyphonous play such as those expressed by the human and divine in Gilgamesh, or the alien, the servant, and the man in Superman, I argue that the comic book superbeing exemplifies the tension between the joyful expression and triumph of power, and the limitation and suppression of power under the aegis of Judeo-Christian morality.

Superman's moral inflexibility is generally perceived as a testament to moral integrity, a sign that the character is willing to do whatever he can to respect all the moral principles he interpellates on a diegetic earth simultaneously, rather than weigh one against the other. The term "interpellate" here refers to Lois Anthusser's theory of self in his essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" (1970) which describes the self as a product of ideology, not as an unmediated or free phenomena. Althusser's usage of the term denotes the idea that the nature of an individual's subjecthood and identity are not the result of cause and substance, nor regards individual subjects as powerful independent agents with self-produced identities, but as the product of social forces and their socio-political institutions through which the subject recognizes and identifies their self/selves. Similarly, I propose that after one considers theme, narrative, symbolism, and ideology presented both textually and visually, one can confidently conclude that Superman not only responds to this interpellative "hailing" by accepting the delineations of human ideology on their own terms, regardless of their numerous aporias, contradictions, and violences, but actively and ardently, even obsessively, upholds and reproduces them. Due to this moral inflexibility, Superman has, in the minds of many, despite various re-interpretations of the character, become, ultimately, a type of perfect, albeit petrified, moral ideal.

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"You Need Me to Save You": The Parallel Declines of Superman and the American Dream

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Abstract

The most iconic superhero to grace comic book shelves and the silver screen, Superman has long been held as an American icon. Created in 1938, Superman became a symbol of hope, justice, and a pioneer of the American way. In a world on the verge of war, Superman became an ideal to strive for, and always fought for good. However, in the decades that followed, new iterations of Superman began to gain popularity across all forms of media, and these iterations were not always as virtuous. New versions of a 'Superman' figure are often created in times of political and social anxiety, with the 'Superman' becoming a conduit to express fears and frustrations over a multitude of issues including threats of war, extreme capitalism and consumer culture, and even existential dread. This article prioritises three iterations of superman: Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster's original *Man of Steel*, Alan Moore's Dr Manhattan (*Watchmen*), and Garth Ennis' Homelander (*The Boys*). Through these, alongside the examination of ideas put forward by James Truslow Adams, Richard Hofstadter and others, this article identifies that Superman and his successors are indicators of public faith in American ideals, and that the current trend shows that this faith is dwindling.

Keywords: hope, American Dream, Superman, superhero, adaptation.

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In the 2013 movie adaptation of Superman, *Man of Steel*, Superman (Henry Cavill) is asked about the "S" emblazoned on his chest. He says "on [his] world, it means hope" (Snyder 2013). Hope is something that has been intrinsic to Superman from his very first iteration (Superman's first appearance in comic book form was in *Action Comics* no. 1 in 1938, written by Jerry Siegel and drawn by Joe Shuster). Superman seeks to preserve truth, promote justice, and, in later versions, protect the "American way."[1] The

[1] Superman first explicitly claims to promote the "American way" in 1942 during the 1940s Superman radio series, though the phrase was removed again after World War II ended, until it was revived again by the "Adventures of Superman" TV series in the 1950s. It has slipped in and out of Superman's vocabulary over the years but remains a well-known catchphrase of the Man of Steel. It is also worth noting that "American" in this case refers specifically to the USA, to the exclusion of the many other countries on the American continent—an example of American Exceptionalism that promotes a specifically US American set of values.

"American way" is an idea not defined in the comic itself but in the dominant ideology of the USA, which promotes the principles of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Superman is not just a hero, but a decidedly "American" hero, standing up for US American values against anyone who might threaten them. Despite being a member of an alien species, Superman became a symbol of everything US American, and everything good.

This article will explore how Superman ties in with the very concept of American Exceptionalism and the ideal of the American dream, both of which contribute to an overall sense of the "American way." American Exceptionalism is a belief in American superiority that is built into its very foundations, ever since John Winthrop gave his famous "City Upon a Hill" sermon to the Puritans traveling from England in 1630. The Puritans came to believe themselves to be "a people specifically chosen of God to create a City upon a Hill, a New Israel, a Redeemer Nation raised up for all humankind to behold and emulate" (Martin 1996, 2). This foundational belief in American Exceptionalism was bolstered by "spectacular success … in the twentieth century" in a period of economic prosperity only boosted by two world wars (Hodgson 2010, 1; 10). The "American dream" is a term coined later by James Truslow Adams:

> It has been a dream of being able to grow to fullest development as a man and woman, unhampered by the barriers which had slowly been erected in the older civilizations, unrepressed by social orders which had developed for the benefit of classes rather than for the simple human being of any and every class. (1938, 404)

The American dream in the United States is one of equal opportunity for all US Americans and carries with it a sense of freedom, peace and prosperity for all those committed to working hard and living an honest, virtuous life.

However, faith in the American dream has dwindled, and it is questionable whether it was ever truly achievable. As noted by Stephanie Coontz, "The actual complexity of [US] history–even of our own personal experience–gets buried under the weight of an idealized image" (1992, 1). Coontz believes US American history and the American dream are idealised to the point of impossibility, much like Superman himself, and citizens of the United States appear to be becoming more and more aware of that. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the iterations of Superman that have appeared in popular media, most notably in Dr Manhattan (*Watchmen*, 1986) and Homelander *(The Boys*, 2006). Much less a symbol of hope than of apathy, corruption and evil, the idea of a "superman" has evidently lost its appeal. Instead, he is increasingly replaced in the popular imagination by a monstrosity.

This article explores how different iterations of the "superman" figure (whether those who take on the concept of a superbeing beyond human comprehension to extreme levels, as we will see in Dr Manhattan, or through figures that directly satirise him, such as Homelander) in popular media show a decline in faith in the American dream. Approaching this idea through lenses of idealisation and American Exceptionalism, the

figure of the "superhero" is deconstructed as symbolic of the state of dwindling US American hope. It is Homelander (Antony Starr) who claims, in Season 3 of the television series of *The Boys*, that "[y]ou need me to save you" (Sgriccia 2022, 3.2). However, this article explores, through the correlation of the "superman" figure and socio-political decline, the idea that US Americans no longer believe they can be saved.

1. 1938—The Birth of a Hero in the Shadow of War

Superman, according to Michael J. Hayde, is "the consummate superhero; the most recognizable comic book character of all time and one of American literature's most famous creations" (2009, 12). Even today, Superman is a pop culture icon. First introduced to the public in 1938, just a year before the world fell into the grips of a World War for the second time, Superman represented all that was good in humanity. Siegel and Shuster write that "Early, Clark decided he must turn his titanic strength into channels that would benefit mankind," becoming a "Champion of the oppressed … the physical marvel who had sworn to devote his existence to helping those in need" (2016, 8). Though these quotes suggest Superman is devoted to all of humanity Superman would soon place special emphasis on his relationship to the United States. He began specifically fighting for the "American way" alongside truth and justice when the United States was embroiled in the second world war in 1942 (White 2013, 1).

While Superman was not the first US superhero to be introduced to the world, he soon became "the model for every superhero to follow" (White 2013, 1). For Mark D. White, Superman is "a distinctly American superhero" (ibid.). Although White goes on to deconstruct this notion of Superman as an "American" hero, it nonetheless remains true that for many, Superman is a symbol of US American hope, benevolence, and patriotism. This makes perfect sense when we consider the troubled times in which Superman rose to popularity. The United States was clawing its way out of "the most severe economic crisis … ever experienced" in the Great Depression when Superman first appeared, and it was soon to enter a global war on the greatest scale ever seen (Hanes et. al 2005, 1). Interestingly, mobilisation to join the war effort effectively ended the Great Depression and thrust the United States into a period of economic prosperity, though viewing this period through a purely economic lens fails to capture the fears and anxieties felt by the nation. These were not without cause: nearly half a million US Americans died during World War II, and many more suffered. Kai Bird describes the war as laying "bare for all to see the terrible inconsistencies of the great American promise of freedom and democracy" (1985, 23). He adds that "[m]any of our soldiers were so brutalised by their combat experiences that they engaged in exactly the kind of war crimes we associated with the enemy" (1985, 23). People of the United States had to grapple with the juxtaposition of their newfound economic prosperity and their horrific wartime experience.

Perhaps, then, a hero who unquestioningly always did the right thing was exactly what the United States needed. An injection of patriotism—Tom De Haven recalls "comic book covers that showed [Superman] hoisting the Stars and Stripes or balancing a bald eagle on his forearm" that were "*recruiting*-posterlike" —certainly helped (2010, 5). Superman was even able to stop a war entirely by simply suggesting two opposing leaders "shake hands and make up" (Siegel and Shuster 2016, 34). Perhaps this core sense of uncomplicated goodness and the ability to overcome all with ease are the reasons Superman emerged from World War Two as "a totem of national indomitability, enterprise, and victory" (De Haven 2010, 4–5). The opening of every early Superman comic reminds us that our hero is a "champion of the weak and helpless," and of every ordinary person who wishes their problems could be solved by a superpowered do-gooder who can fly through the sky to save them. Superman repeatedly shows off his powers in defence of the comparatively powerless, non-superhuman citizens of the United States, often promoting the cause of the everyday person against corrupt politicians, corporate leaders and more. As the governor says, "Thank heaven he's apparently on the side of law and order!" (Siegel and Shuster 2016, 8). Superman's moral integrity and status as a paragon of virtue has persisted over decades and is still foundational to his character today. He was an ideal for humanity to strive for and represents the belief that such an achievement is possible.

Though *Man of Steel* was released over seventy years after the original source material for Superman, it attempts to retain its core values. The film portrays a grittier depiction; reviewer Peter Bradshaw mourns the absence of

> the gentle, innocent pleasures of Superman's day-to-day crimefighting existence, depicted in normal sunlight and in primary colours: the bullets exploding harmlessly on the chest, the casually lifted automobile, the look of horror on the faces of low-level bad guys, the awestruck Rockwell kid's gratitude. (2013, n.p.)

However, even if it is not as colourful, Clark Kent/Kal-El/Superman's inherent and largely uncomplicated goodness remains front and centre to this narrative. When an infant Kal-El is sent to Earth to save him from the destruction of Krypton, his father, Jor-El (Russell Crowe) states "Our hopes and dreams travel with you" (Snyder 2013). Those hopes and dreams are realised by Kal-El, now known as Clark Kent on Earth, as his father explains: "You will give the people of Earth an ideal to strive for. They will race behind you, they will stumble, they will fall… but in time, they will join you in the sun, Kal. In time, you will help them accomplish wonders" (Snyder 2013). It is in these lofty exchanges that we see the preserved core of the Superman ideal: Superman is a hero, and he is also the embodiment of hope for humanity. This hope is not just that humanity can be saved, but they will one day reach the same heights as Superman in goodness and strength.

Throughout *Man of Steel*, viewers are reminded that Clark is inherently good. He is drawn to acts of heroism despite the risk of exposing himself, and there never seems to be any risk or even consideration that Clark's powers might corrupt him. He is put on a

pedestal as "a god," "providence," a "guardian angel" (Snyder 2013). More importantly, though, despite his alien roots, Clark Kent is, through and through, a typical "all-American"; a phrase often used to describe citizens of the United States that are considered, or consider themselves, as embodying the virtues and ideals of the nation, such as honesty, courage, industriousness and patriotism. We see him growing up in rural Kansas, and even his enemy, General Zod (Michael Shannon), uses Clark's background against him when he mocks him: "I was bred to be a warrior, Kal. Trained my entire life to master my senses. Where did you train? On a farm?" (Snyder 2013). However, Superman's humble beginnings are never an obstacle. In fact, they are his strength. When Faora-Ul (Antje Traue) is claiming Kryptonian superiority over Clark's human upbringing, she states that "The fact that you possess a sense of morality, and we do not, gives us an evolutionary advantage" (Snyder 2013). She is almost immediately proven wrong. Clark's humanity, which is directly tied to his US Americanness in his attachment to his family, values and upbringing, is ultimately what gives him the strength and drive to overcome his enemies. Despite his Kryptonian genetics, Clark has fully adopted humanity and US American values: he is brave, heroic, sincere, and protects those he cares about. Towards the end of the film, when he is treated with suspicion by an army general, Clark simply responds "I grew up in Kansas, general. I'm about as American as it gets" (Snyder 2013). This statement, though reductive and overly simplistic, explicitly tells audiences that Superman is not be thought of as an alien, but as a US American, and the perfect example of one at that.

All of this demonstrates that, even after decades of production, Superman has retained his core values and ideals as a US American superhero: he is strong, brave, patriotic, unfaltering, and a symbol for all that is good, all virtues associated with the "American way." Designed in a time when US America most needed a hero, Superman came through: he is everything a US American should strive towards. Superman is reinvented on screen and in comic books time and time again; as Hayde said, "Superman isn't going away anytime soon" (2009, 12). However, Superman was created in 1938, and his design and character do not translate into 2013 as well as one might initially think. *Man of Steel* preserves the core of Superman by avoiding any exploration of the modern socio-political climate. De Haven calls attention to the fact that Superman does, and perhaps always will, matter as a "lucrative property, an aggressively protected trademark, a dependable, familiar entertainment franchise" (2010, 12). As a source of entertainment, Superman remains a valued cultural icon, but *Man of Steel*'s focus on an external, obviously evil alien enemy allows it to steer clear of deeper questions of power imbalance, fear, and corruption. This is Superman's greatest flaw as a Superhero in the modern era; he is no longer politically or socially relevant as anything other than a shiny but ultimately hollow pop culture image. De Haven brings forth the idea that Superman has become little more than "a relic, sole survivor not only of Krypton, but of a USA where truth, justice and the

American way were unambiguous concepts, not in the least ironic or slippery" (2010, 8). He is good, he is all-American, and he is devoid of any real meaning in the modern era.

2. 1986—Disillusionment in the Face of Nuclear Threat

"Don't you see the futility of asking me to save a world that I no longer have any stake in?" Dr Manhattan asks a desperate Laurie, standing no longer on Earth, but on Mars (Moore and Gibbons 2019, IX 8). The demi-god created through a nuclear accident is super, that is for certain, but he is barely a hero anymore. In fact, to Dr Manhattan, "human life is brief and mundane" (Moore and Gibbons 2019, IX 17).

Featuring in Alan Moore and Dave Gibbon's *Watchmen*, which "[a]t its core is an ensemble of diverse characters that explores fundamental issues for American national identity during the second half of the twentieth century," Dr Manhattan is much like Superman: he is invulnerable, strong, has powers beyond human comprehension (Prince 2011, 815). Unlike Superman, however, he is utterly indifferent to human endeavour and, more importantly, human suffering. He seems to find human endeavour facile and meaningless, asking "All those generations of *struggle*, what *purpose* did they ever achieve?" (Moore and Gibbons 2019, IX 10). Humans, to Dr Manhattan, are simply a lower lifeform barely worth his time. Though not a direct iteration of Superman, Dr Manhattan is a noteworthy addition to the superhero genre who was created during the Cold War. While he is inspired by Captain Atom rather than Superman, his all-powerful status and the people of the United States' initial reverence of him makes him a significant point of comparison for the Man of Steel. One reporter even misquotes Milton Glass and publicises the idea that "the superman exists and he's American" when talking about Dr Manhattan, making a direct comparison to the original Superman and showing their shared archetypal roots, though they end up diverging significantly (Shuster and Moore and Gibbons 2019, "Dr Manhattan: Super-Powers and the Superpowers" 2).

The Cold War, which stretched between 1947 and 1991, had a huge impact on American life. K.A. Cuordileone claims that in the early Cold War there was an emergence of "an exaggerated cult of masculine toughness and virility," best symbolised by Moore and Gibbons' Comedian character in *Watchmen* (2000, 516). The Comedian is brash, rough, violent, cigar-smoking and womanising, "deliberately amoral", often committing acts of physical or sexual assault, but nonetheless being considered a national hero (Moore and Gibbons 2019, IV 19). Though this is not a particularly favourable image it is one that was popular in 1950s and 1960s US America as a symbol of US American power, perhaps as a response to the US's failure in Vietnam, and in fact still reemerges today: Kirstin Kobes Du Mez notes an "embrace of militant masculinity, an ideology that enshrines patriarchal authority and condones the callous display of power, at home and abroad" in modern US American politics (2020, 3). A problematic identity, but an identity nonetheless; it is therefore telling that *Watchmen* opens with the Comedian's death.

The focus then shifts to Dr Manhattan, a man who, after a nuclear accident, has gained godlike powers that make him far beyond anything human. Dr Manhattan, compared to any of the other heroes and certainly the Comedian, is essentially flat; he has little personality or identity outside of his extreme powers, simply because the trivialities of humanity are beneath him. He is "exempt from the law" as the whole of the "country's defense rests in [his] hands" (Moore and Gibbons 2019, IV 23). Yet, Dr Manhattan is no saviour. In the insert within chapter IV, Milton Glass discusses "Mutually Assured Destruction" (Moore and Gibbons, IV 3). He argues that the presence of Dr Manhattan, though Prince calls him "an ostensive personification of America's strategic nuclear deterrent" (2011, 819), has actually caused a "sharp increase in both Russian and American nuclear stockpiles," and reminds us that "Infinite destruction divided by two or ten or twenty is still infinite destruction" (Moore and Gibbons 2019, IV 3). Furthermore, he believes that regardless of this threat, the Soviets would still "pursue this unquestionably suicidal course" (Moore and Gibbons 2019, IV 3).

This insert, though fictional, is a good representation of US American anxieties in the Cold War. For the first time in modern US American history, there was a threat to the US and to the entire world that US American gung-ho machismo and military power could not overcome. The threat of nuclear destruction had become a real possibility, disintegrating the illusion of US American power and freedom. Even a superbeing like Dr Manhattan could not possibly save humanity from itself. What's more, why would he want to? As stated by Prince, "[h]is fatalistic perception of the universe has left him almost incapable of meaningful human interaction," so Dr Manhattan sees little purpose in humanity as a whole (2011, 821). Moore and Gibbons' *Watchmen* presents us not only with the dire outlook of nuclear threat, but disillusionment with US American values, exposure of humanity's fatal flaws, and the presence of a god-like superbeing that simply does not care about humanity.

Watchmen (Snyder 2009) provides a perspective on the Superhero phenomenon that is culturally relevant, though still bound to its 1980s beginnings. This is understandable; the original *Watchmen* comics were unescapably politically linked to very real 1980s politics and, as noted by Daniel Wood, "the events of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have largely outdated the political concerns of the original text" in such a manner that transposing the events directly into the 21st century would be impossible (2010, 105). Unlike *Man of Steel*, *Watchmen* is set in the same era it was published. The overarching threat is the same as it was in the graphic novel, and the same as it was to real life US Americans in the 1980s: "Destruction by nuclear war" (Snyder 2009).

The *Watchmen* movie is loyal to its source graphic novel, often with dialogue and scenes almost perfectly transposed from page to screen. The focus of both, too, is the same: the threat of nuclear war, and the terrifying prospect of a being so powerful he could wipe out all of humanity, an unfathomably powerful superbeing who is not bound

by the same moral code that the original Superman is. Dr Manhattan's powers are summed up by Milton Glass, who, after clarifying his initial quote that "the superman exists, and he is American" was a misquote, amends it to "*god* exists, and he's American" (Snyder 2009). Prince explains this further: "Manhattan is the guarantor for American security and global prestige" (2011, 820). Both statements could be equally applied to Superman himself, who has likewise been likened to a God, but this time, there is far more uncertainty.

Characters repeatedly speak or refer to Dr Manhattan (Billy Crudup) with comments on his apparent apathy towards humanity. Laurie (Malin Akerman), Dr Manhattan's ex-lover, tells Daniel (Patrick Wilson) that "It's like this world, this real world, to him it's like, walking through a mist and people are just shadows" (Snyder 2009). The Comedian (Jeffrey Dean Morgan) notes that Dr Manhattan failed to intervene to save someone, accusing "You really don't give a damn about human beings. You're drifting out of touch, Doc. God help us all" (Snyder 2009). Rorschach (Jackie Earle Haley) queries "Does Manhattan even have a heart to break?" (Snyder 2009). None of these characters can be blamed for their suspicions; Dr Manhattan himself admits that to him "life is a highly overrated phenomenon," and doesn't distinguish between a living human and a dead one, as "Structurally, there's no difference" (Snyder 2009). Dr Manhattan, for most of the movie, sees humankind as little more than a nuisance, if they even have that much power over him. Graham J. Murphy summarises:

> Dr Manhattan becomes increasingly distant from humanity, symbolized by his gradual shedding of clothing and culminating in complete nudity 24/7, all the while engaging in morally questionable actions, including violent interventions into Vietnam, his service to the American military, and, by the end of the story, his complicity in the violent resolution to the American-Soviet nuclear escalation. (2017, 74)

He is not, as people hoped, a saviour akin to Superman. He is a superbeing who simply does not seem to care what happens to the humans he shares the planet with. If Superman is the being every human should aspire to be, Dr Manhattan is the apathetic creation of a humanity that no longer believes it can reach those heights.

This is not a belief borne out of nothing, but one that is explained by a simple exchange between Night Owl and the Comedian when they are dispersing a riot:

> Night Owl: What happened to the American dream?
> The Comedian: What happened to the American dream? It came true! You're looking at it! (Snyder 2009)

The scene before us is one of darkness and desolation, needless violence, littered streets and smouldering fires. Here, we have a stark reminder that Moore and Gibbons' vision is "a condemnation of corporate America and the capitalist exploitation of global conflict for profit" (Murphy 2017, 82). The American dream has collapsed, revealing that it was never attainable to begin with; it was a false promise laid out by capitalist magnates with

no intention of ever backing it up. Even in this fictional alternative history where the US won the Vietnam war and should be in a more prosperous and peaceful world, all that has greeted them is more fear and more distrust. Likewise, all the real horrors and bloodshed of the 20th century, all the victories and losses, did not result in a wiser and more peaceful world, but a deeply scarred and traumatised one. Both Dr Manhattan and this broken vision of US America lend to the same realisation: the American dream is dead, and along with it, our ideals as humans. The apathetic Dr Manhattan is a significant step in the decline of the "superman" as a symbol of virtue, parallel to the decline in faith in the American dream.

However, *Watchmen*, in both its movie and graphic novel form, does offer a reprieve. Eventually, Dr Manhattan is convinced of the value of life. He even begrudgingly accepts the questionable methods of Adrian Veidt (Matthew Goode) to unite the world (in the graphic novel, the world is united against a fabricated alien threat. In the movie, the threat is instead Dr Manhattan himself). Ultimately, "peace is achieved in both versions of *Watchmen*, even if it is peace founded upon a lie" (Murphy 2017, 75–76). This, apparently, was the only way to make human beings unite and to avoid global conflict: sacrificing a few million people to save the rest. To Dr Manhattan (and to Veidt), the falsehood does not matter; the ends justify the means. Now seen as a villain, Dr Manhattan retires from Earth, though he wishes to "create some" life of his own wherever he travels to (Snyder 2009). Despite a lengthy criticism of humanity and particularly of the American dream, *Watchmen* ends on a hopeful note: humanity *can* be saved, but not by some benevolent superbeing. Moore and Gibbons tell readers that putting all our faith into such a being is its own failure; after all, no such being can ever exist. Even if the power existed, there is no guarantee that power would be on the side of humanity. It is more likely it would, like Dr Manhattan, treat human beings, a lesser creature, with complete apathy. Instead, Moore and Gibbons suggest that our only hope lies in humanity as it is, working together not towards impossible utopias, but in doing the best possible in the world that currently exists.

Watchmen, then, is a more realistic rewriting of the Superman phenomenon for a 1980s era, though the message remained relevant enough to be believable in a 21st century movie. The unfaltering ideal of Superman may have lost its shine and faith in the American dream may have dwindled, but Moore and Gibbons encourage readers to look beyond that to see value within humanity now to see real progress. Though *Watchmen* and Dr Manhattan may seem like a negative counterpoint to the figure of Superman in their nuanced depiction of power, moral quandary and war over simple good vs evil, I argue that it is a realistic vision that offers a much more reachable goal. Moore and Gibbons ask viewers to abandon ostentatious idealism and accept the reality of humanity, both its virtues and its flaws, rather than clinging to fantasies of superbeings who can solve the world's problems with ease.

3. 2006—Terror, at Home and Abroad

If Dr Manhattan seems like a provocative dose of reality when it comes to the idea of Superman, then *The Boys*' Homelander can only be seen as utterly terrifying. Homelander is a darkly satirical pastiche of Superman; an all-powerful superhuman who, rather than prioritising protecting others, is selfish, childish, and given to fits of extreme violence when things do not go his way. Where Superman strives to save people and Dr Manhattan settles on apathy, Homelander is the most corrupt and depraved version of a "hero" one can imagine.

Homelander was created in the wake of the War on Terror, which began after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre in 2001. Homelander first appeared in *The Boys* in 2006. He is tall, muscular, blond-haired and blue-eyed, wearing a cape reminiscent of the US American flag, and almost the first thing he does is force new recruit Starlight to give him oral sex (Ennis 2008, "The Name of the Game: Cherry Part 1" n.p). Starlight, once enamoured with Homelander and the Seven, and the idea of superhuman benevolence, immediately has her world shattered when it becomes clear that her heroes are anything but. They are more concerned with their sexual desires, public image, excesses and profit margins than they are in saving the world, and are often vulgar, violent, or both. In *The Boys*, the idea of "superhero" is so tainted that it becomes almost synonymous with "supervillain." Superheroes are a danger to everyone and everything around them, saved only by media coverups and shiny campaigns.

The Boys was created in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, which were "widely described as a moment of historical rupture, an epochal event that drew a clear line through world history" (Holloway 2008, 1). Not only was 9/11 a pivotal global event, but it also shook something deep in the US American psyche: security that had so recently been won after the Cold War was once again at risk. Not only that, but distrust in the government, those supposedly placed in power to protect citizens of the US, was on the rise. Threats were not just perceived outside of the US, but within its very borders, and people felt powerless to stop it. Perceiving threats on all sides and even within, the US became a paranoid nation.

Though first published in the mid twentieth century, Richard Hofstadter's *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* still provides valuable insight into the anxieties of the United States today. "What distinguishes the paranoid style is not the absence of verifiable facts (though it is occasionally true that in his extravagant passion for facts the paranoid occasionally manufactures them)," Hofstadter tells us, "but rather the curious leap in imagination that is always made at some critical point in the recital of events" (2008, 37). The US, its government and its media became rife with conflicting stories, verifiable and unverifiable truths, questionable motivations and socio-political uncertainties that

made the paranoid fantasy all too easy to be drawn into. The government's shiny façade was crumbling, and people were beginning to question it more and more.

It is interesting, then, that Hofstadter also tells us that the "enemy seems to be on many occasions a projection of the self: both the ideal and the unacceptable aspects of the self are attributed to him" (2008, 32). This is a perfect description of Homelander. Homelander is, on the surface, the definition of a US American hero, the attainment of perfection with all-American values. He is the ideal self. That is, until we see his dark side. There, he becomes the ultimate example of the enemy, and that enemy is every US American ideal warped and corrupted into a monster.

Interestingly, compared to *Man of Steel* and *Watchmen*, *The Boys* TV series diverges the most from its source material. While it maintains the central ideas of Homelander, superheroes in the 21st century, and late-stage capitalism/consumerism that forms a shining veneer over a deeply broken society, the TV series circumnavigates side plots and strengthens core characters to keep the focus squarely on Homelander (Anthony Starr) as the biggest evil imaginable, and William 'Billy' Butcher (Karl Urban) as the anti-hero set on stopping him. Butcher sums up the entire problem in the *The Boys* universe to Hughie (Jack Quaid):

> Butcher: Movie tickets, merchandising, theme parks, video games. A multi-billion-dollar global industry supported by corporate lobbyists and politicians on both sides. But the main reason that you won't hear about it is because the public don't want to know about it. See, people love that cosy feeling that Supes give them. Some golden cunt to swoop out of the sky and save the day so you don't got to do it yourself. But if you knew half the shit they get up to… fucking diabolical. (Trachtenberg 2019)

Immediately, we become aware that these superheroes are anything but heroes. Instead, they are mascots pretending at morality and benevolence while they engage in all kinds of excessive, cruel, and violent behaviour behind closed doors. Dr Manhattan is an apathetic interpretation of a superhero who just doesn't care about humanity, but Homelander and many of his peers are explicitly corrupt, addicted to the money, power and fame being a celebrated by human society brings. For them, humans are little more than playthings that can be used for any number of depraved games, then simply discarded when they are broken.

Homelander is the best example of this because he is the most powerful. He has been told for his entire life that he is essentially a god, and that "Gods are pure and they're perfect and they're above it all" (Shakman 2019). This, to Homelander, doesn't translate into him taking a role as protector and guardian. Instead, he uses this as a reason to claim "I can do whatever the fuck I want" (Shakman 2019). Homelander begins to repeatedly refer to himself as godlike, and goes as far as to say that the human part of him needs to be cut out "like a cancer" so he can be "pure" and "clean" (Cragg 2022). He also claims to be "the master race," that people "should be worshipping" him, that they should

"tremble at his feet" (Sgriccia 2022, 3.1). Though at first he goes to great lengths to hide his superiority complex from the public, when he is finally exposed, he only seems to gain more devout followers. In a televised broadcast, Homelander states "I don't make mistakes. I'm not 'just like the rest of you.' I'm stronger. I'm smarter. I'm better … I'm not some weak-kneed fucking crybaby that goes around fucking apologizing all the time. And why the fuck would you want me to be?" (Sgriccia 2022, 3.2). The response is, at first, silence. Then, Homelander becomes even more of a US American hero than ever before.

This links to ideas of overblown American Exceptionalism, the problematic nature of which Godfrey Hodgson concisely summarises: "If [US] Americans are brought up in their education, and encouraged by their leaders, to believe that they are a unique and special people, that will affect the way they behave toward the rest of the world, over which they now have so much influence and so much power" (2010, 156). However, in the twenty-first century, American Exceptionalism has been "soured and exacerbated by the shock and atrocities of September 2001 and their consequences" (Hodgson 2008, 10). American Exceptionalism now carries connotations of excessive force and an unfounded belief in US American superiority that is at best questionable and at worst actively dangerous. American Exceptionalism demands the promotion of US American values above all else, no matter who might get hurt in the process. To a believer in American Exceptionalism, any damage is simply collateral, to be expected and accepted, because "exceptionalists have proclaimed that the United States has a destiny and a duty to expand its power and the influence of its institutions and its beliefs until they dominate the world" (Hodgson 2008, 10).

It is therefore interesting that Homelander is not just a satire of Superman in his abilities, but in his patriotism. Homelander repeatedly references being a US American and having US American values throughout the series and is applauded for doing so. He claims "I answer to a higher law. Wasn't I chosen to save you? Is it not my god given purpose to protect the United States of America?" then that "I will save you. I'll do it for you, for America" (Schwartz 2019; Sgriccia 2020, 2.1). Faced with a terrorist threat, Homelander promises that he will "find the filthy bastards that masterminded this, whatever cave they're in, and introduce them to a little thing called God's judgement … sounds like the American thing to do, sounds like the right thing to do" (Schwartz 2019). However, he has no patience for the US American people or what they really want. When he is labelled a war criminal he complains "Don't these fucking ingrates realise I killed that asshole for them? What do they think saving America fucking means anyway?" (Silva 2020). This is evidence of the fact that, to Homelander, patriotism is just another façade.

This falseness in Homelander's values links directly to the corrupted version of American Exceptionalism that benefits a chosen few while everyone else suffers. Homelander is all the bad aspects of US America condensed into a single superbeing, and he is extreme American Exceptionalism personified. After all, the quote from Hodgson can

easily be modified: "[Homelander has] proclaimed that [he] has a destiny and a duty to expand [his] power and the influence of [his] institutions and [his] beliefs until they dominate the world" (2008, 10). With only the subject changed this is still a valid observation because the subject hasn't really changed at all. Homelander is the United States, in its darkest, most corrupt form. Similarly, there is a growing concern among US American Citizens that the US could be just like Homelander: a powerful force with self-serving, malignant interests hiding beneath a façade of heroism.

Ultimately, *The Boys*' iteration of Superman is at complete odds with its inspiration. In an uncomfortably disillusioning portrayal, Homelander is a provocative symbol of modern US American anxieties that the US has not only failed to achieve its own ideals, but has become corrupt and self-serving in the process. Homelander can say and do the right thing when the cameras are rolling—after all, image is everything—but the moment the eyes of the public are turned away, a monster is let loose. Further, unlike *Watchmen*, there is no reprieve this time. Homelander, like US America, perhaps like humanity itself, is utterly irredeemable.

4. Conclusion

In *Our Hero: Superman on Earth* , De Haven has an answer to the question of whether or not Superman is still relevant: "as long as we value kindness for its own sake, fair play, ingenuity, versatility, tolerance, altruism, and honesty, Superman's pride of place in the pantheon of American mythic heroes is fully guaranteed" (2010, 8). He follows this by saying when he gave this answer to interviewers, he would "hang up the phone feeling not only like an unpaid shill for Warner Brothers but like the world's most clueless cornball. And a total bullshitter" (2010, 8).

However, De Haven's initial statement might ring true to some extent. The only problem is that it hinges on a rather large *if*. Superman, to remain relevant in his original form and purpose, requires an unshakeable faith in the goodness of humanity even in the direst of circumstances, and the conviction that goodness can overcome anything. *That* is where time, socio-political mistrust, and disillusionment have worked their way in to make Superman seem less like an achievable US American ideal and more like a satire of what US America could have been. This is evidenced by the 'Supermen' who have succeeded him: *Watchmen*'s Dr Manhattan's apathy shows the beginning of a decline, and *The Boy*'s Homelander shows rock bottom.

The figure of "Superman"—be it the original or one of his many iterations—therefore remains a valuable cultural icon not only in their individual commentary on US American values and ideals at any particular snapshot of time, but also as part of a pattern that demonstrates the changing cultural landscape in the US over the decades since Superman's inception. The "Superman" becomes a mirror held up to the modern US, not only highlighting its wants and aspirations, but also exposing its deepest, darkest flaws.

In the seventy years between Superman and Homelander, we see a slow but steady disillusionment with the American dream, increasing mistrust of power and authority, and creeping uncertainties about the essential goodness of humanity. However if, to paraphrase Hayde, Superman isn't going anywhere anytime soon, his character—and his commentary on US American values and the state of humanity—will only develop further. Though Superman may have lost some of his relevance as a US American hero, he and his successors retain their value as an embodiment of the social, political and cultural climate of the US.

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BOOK REVIEWS

The Comfort Women Hoax: A Fake Memoir, North Korean Spies, and Hit Squads in the Academic Swamp

By J. Mark Ramseyer and Jason M. Morgan (2024)

Sheng-mei Ma (Michigan State University)

Ramseyer, J. Mark and Jason M. Morgan. 2024. *The Comfort Women Hoax: A Fake Memoir, North Korean Spies, and Hit Squads in the Academic Swamp.* Encounter. Pp. 388. US$ $32.99 paper.

Keywords: US Conservatism, Comfort woman, Sex slavery during World War II.

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Ramseyer and Morgan's hoax of *The Comfort Women Hoax* rams into the black hole of comfort women, sex slaves of the Japanese military during World War II. It contains eight chapters chronicling the coauthors' personal experiences of having been, allegedly, the target of attack from the left in the academe of the US for their conservative views over comfort women. The chapters shuttle between anecdotes of personal grievance and rebuttals of existing scholarship. The book concludes with a gesture toward academic freedom which they vow to have been violated by what they describe as academic "hit squads." By calling comfort women a "hoax," however, Ramseyer and Morgan plunge like two blindfolded (blind?) men into the open wounds of history, declaring, without any shred of evidence of the so-called contracts between equal parties, that these comfort women were willing partners "under contract" to the Japanese military. For instance, in a public forum organized by Heterodox Academy on June 13, 2024, Ramseyer objects to the term "rape," insisting on "sex for money."

Mitsubishi Professor of Japanese Legal Studies at Harvard, J. Mark Ramseyer, gives a dubious name to his elitist "triple crown" of a Japanese corporation, of law, and of higher education. During World War II, Mitsubishi manufactured the Zero fighter aircrafts that were famed for their Kamikaze attacks. Law has long been written by the powers that be to maintain privilege and to justify injustice. Harvard has recently lost its first female Black president for speaking too "lawyerly," too bureaucratically, among other sins, in a hearing, cornered by the Harvard-educated New York Congresswoman. Both the Wikipedia website and Ramseyer's Harvard law colleague in *The New Yorker* referred

to his Mennonite missionary background, a peace-loving, self-sacrificing community, now spoiled by one overripe, ultraright apple, a denier and a revisionist passing himself off as a truth-telling, hence victimized, legal scholar. In *The Comfort Women Hoax*, Ramseyer further dips into his background by likening scholars' "cancellation" of his ultraconservative argument to "an Amish *meidung*, a shunning" (3). Meidung is alluded to repeatedly, and so is Ramseyer's alma mater, Goshen College, a small, well-regarded Mennonite College in northern Indiana (211, 264–65). The fact that the Amish split from the Mennonite suggests that schism is inevitable in the evolution of any group. Such is the nature of things as we engage and even militate against one another discursively. The academe can be a contact sport where combatants should pick on someone their own size rather than poor, aging, largely non-English-speaking victims of rapes, all nonagenarians plagued by physical and psychological pain, haunted by memory, many long dead and unable to talk back from beyond the grave.

Ramseyer's scandalous 2020 article, "Contracting for Sex in the Pacific War," opens with a deadly pun: the alleged business contracts between the so-called "comfort women" and the wartime brothels servicing Japanese soldiers, on the one hand, and, on the other, the Japanese policy to ensure its military would not repeat the disaster of "its Siberian expedition in 1918" debilitated by venereal disease (1). Beyond business contracts and contracting venereal disease, Ramseyer's word choice suggests, unwittingly, a triple entendre in that his rhetoric becomes the virus contaminating public discourse and historical memory. That bug apparently has an amazing capacity for cloning (plagiarizing?) itself. Much of the body in "Contracting for Sex" is a carbon-copy of Ramseyer's 2019 "Comfort Women and the Professors." Large swath of materials are once again duplicated in *The Comfort Women Hoax*, contrary to the scholarly standards of originality. Against such standards, Ramseyer's professorial regurgitation piles on rhetorical one-upmanship to advance Japan's right-wing agenda. By dismissing what he mocks as the politically correct "trifecta" against sexism, racism, and imperialism, by laying the blame on Korean recruiters and communists, the South Korean left, and Western Humanities scholars in general, Ramseyer is not only beholden to Japanese interests, but he also advances personal and professional designs that flatten the complexity of humanity into business transactions among, reputedly, equal partners of inviolable self-agency.

The coauthors' dedications to each other and their supporters in this controversy is signed with their initials JMR and JMM, nearly identical, binding two comrades in arms. Indeed, the Big Ram rams into the representational black hole, and the Junior follows suit to morph, the image of comfort woman. Lest I be charged with name-calling, to dub them Big Ram and Junior Morph only pales in comparison to their turning sex slaves into the Japanese military's "(sub)contractors." Accordingly, this review simply responds in kind. Should my nicknames offend, the authors may finally begin to grasp rape victims'—and their victims'—rage. A belated mea culpa all but impossible, their initials begin a

pathetic, self-pitying circling of the wagon to defend against what they perceive to be an onslaught of "left-wing" wokeism perpetuating "the communist hoax" of comfort women. Yet this controversy is entirely of the twins' own making. Being a law professor, Ramseyer is surely familiar with the law of force and counterforce in a court of law: whoever throws the first punch in any squabble initiates the row. Ramseyer's 2020 salvo "Contracting for Sex" launches an attack against the postwar scholarship that all but guarantees a pushback. Likewise, neither my "Ramming," short for Ramseyer, nor my subsequent "Morphing," short for Morgan, inaugurates a debate that has already gotten increasingly personal.

Ramseyer and Morgan had managed to do exactly that when they chose to open their book by personal grievances in Chapter 1, "The Anatomy of a Canceling," and in Chapter 2 with a nod to Morgan's maternal grandfather from New Orleans during the Great Depression. On the basis of that grandfather, readers are exhorted to "Imagine, if you can, that Morgan's grandfather had been born a daughter … in a small farming village on the Korean peninsula" (75). To compare an indigent farm boy to a wartime sex slave is to compare apples and oranges. Such wild leaps from personal experiences and family history to sex slavery bespeak willful blindness, ideological fixation. The coauthors' personal voice has long started with Chapter 1, a tiring, self-indulgent, and often strident beefing about grievances against them. Such personal tiffs and professional gripes punctuate any academic career, or any career for that matter. To air them in public in the name of scholarly dispute over a presumed hoax amounts to self-inflating egotism, completely losing sight of comfort women that is the heart of the debate.

At the heart of the debate is the representational black hole of comfort woman, put most blatantly, most literally by mixed-race Korean American Nora Okja Keller in *Comfort Woman* (1997): "Under Emperor's orders, the holes of our bodies were used to bury their excrement" (193). Do not blame Keller for the obscenity of her metaphor. Anyone who is treated as a sex toy would feel shamed, sullied, dehumanized. Hyunah Yang in "Revisiting the Issue of Korean 'Military Comfort Women'" concurs: "The body of the comfort women could consequently be considered merely as a site, a 'sanitary toilet,' for the disposition of Japanese sexual needs" (65). Keller's literary conceit filling the black hole of unspeakable pain is perverted by Ram and Morph when they jumped species from a grandfather to a sex slave by way of an invitation to "imagine, if you can," only the imagination veers from Keller's scatological horror to their normalizing horror, from novel to, supposedly, scholarship. Ramseyer and Morgan's hoax comprises flattening and familiarizing historical atrocities as a quotidian non-event anytime anywhere. They continue that failure of imagination, death of empathy, and callous indifference in Chapter 2: "Suppose a stranger comes to the village one day … " (76). The jumping only intensifies to a level so absurd that it signals a swimmer's flailing, or throwing whatever against the black hole of sex slavery to see what sticks: Vietnamese sex trafficking (78), soldiers

frequenting comfort stations while earning the "king's shilling" (79), and more to draw parallels and to normalize sex slavery.

What if the sex slaves' experiences were unimaginable, repressed, and resistant to recall and articulation in the vein of Holocaust survivors Elie Wiesel and Primo Levi's lifelong struggles to approximate the death camp, or Claude Lanzmann's outright interdiction against filming Auschwitz's gas chambers in *Shoah* (1985)? Theorized by Sigmund Freud, Cathy Caruth, Ann Kaplan, Dominick LaCapra, and others, trauma studies help explain comfort women's reluctance and shifting memory. Trauma in Freudian psychoanalysis betokens a shock too overwhelming for the psychological and emotional system to absorb, hence repressed. Rather than Freud's subjects of traffic accident survivors and shell-shocked soldiers in World War I in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), comfort women had sustained repeated assaults and dehumanization not of their own choosing. The postwar comfort women debate is a collective return of the repressed, the body politic in Japan, Korea, Taiwan, China, and elsewhere haunted by the uncomfortable truth of sex slavery. Each public debate triggers a reopening of the wound in the comfort woman's heart. Yet even physical pain of others, as Susan Sontag notes, undergoes distortion when put into words. None of us, needless to say, survived the hell of comfort stations, a.k.a., Japanese soldiers' outhouses. In denial of the unspeakable, unfathomable historical trauma, Ramseyer and Morgan elect to represent comfort women as a hoax, reducing it to an analogue with a New Orleans grandfather, to contractual prostitution, despite the fact that contracts are non-existent. Ramseyer admits to the fact that contracts are nowhere to be found (76). Absent the evidence of contracts, Ramseyer erects his argument on the "hypothetical," sucking up to the Japanese right-wing denial of Japan's crimes and guilt (78).

In contrast to Keller and other novelists' relative sidestepping of the lived experiences of comfort women, Ramseyer and Morgan choose to plunge right into it. Indeed, much ink has been spilled by the coauthors to debunk the Japanese communist Yoshida Seiji's 1983 "fake memoir" on his forcing of Korean women on the island of Jeju at bayonet-point to serve as comfort women. Inaugurated by that forgery of a provenance, the authors cherry-pick materials to perpetuate Japan's conservative agenda in denial of wartime atrocities, consolidating collective amnesia. Ultimately, this stems from a psychic move to deny responsibility and the gnawing sense of guilt. The more urgent the cleansing of a particular sin, the stronger the repression of one's own implication. Although patriarchal control can take various forms of persuasion, deception, even brute force, Ramseyer and Morgan obsess over the phallic symbol of the bayonet, inadvertently baring their own revisionist thrust into the body of, or the body of work on, comfort women.

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