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SPECIAL DOSSIER | LGBTIQ+ Representations and Media in US Popular Culture: Exploring New Directions, Challenges and Queer Heritage

BOOK REVIEWS |

Introduction

J. Javier Torres-Fernández

In November 2024, we published the first number of the special issue "LGBTIQ+ Representations and Media in US Popular Culture: Exploring New Directions, Challenges and Queer Heritage" including five original articles dealing with the ways in which queer lives and identities are represented, celebrated, commodified, or silenced in contemporary examples of popular culture while examining how these portrayals can speak to the legacies of queer history. In this issue, which includes six new contributions to the field, we broaden the scope of the special edition to cover LGBTIQ+ representation in comics, videogames, queer fiction, digital fandom narratives in Tumblr, and trans narratives.

Everyone involved in this two-part special edition need to be commended for helping in building a queer and feminist world that, according to Sara Ahmed, are those which "are built through the effort to support those who are not supported because of who they are, what they want, what they do" (2017, 48). At a time when rights already achieved can be deemed expendable or can be found trembling in the face of the possibility of taking several steps back in time, critical thinking, such as the one that the six contributions to this issue provoke, needs to be recognized and the authors given a voice. Following Judith Butler's latest *Who's Afraid of Gender?* (2024), "critique engages with problems and texts that matter to us in order to understand how and why they work, to let them live in thought and practice in new constellations, to question what we have taken for granted as a fixed presupposition of reality in order to affirm dynamic and living sense of our world" (21). This way, each and every contribution not only published in this special issue but also elsewhere proposes a clash against the rising waves of hate, oppression and violence that continue to spread worldwide. Drawing back from the introduction piece of the previous issue, when the system fails to represent its diversity, those who have no chance to represent themselves are inevitably found at a higher risk of being regarded as less human or not regarded at all (Butler 2004, 147). Ultimately, this representation conveys resistance, which emerges from being seen and acknowledged (2016, 14).

Nao Tomabechi opens the special issue with the article "Queer Antiheroism of DC Comics' Secret Six" examining the largely overlooked yet richly subversive representation of queerness in the *Secret Six* comic series (2006-2011), written by Gail Simone. Framing the analysis within ongoing discussions of LGBTIQ+ visibility in superhero comics,

the study critiques the prevailing focus on normative portrayals, especially those that align with homonormative ideals, and argues for the recognition of *Secret Six* as a significant departure from such trends situating the series within a landscape of queer and superhero scholarship engaging with theorists like Lisa Duggan, Eve Sedgwick, and David Halperin to argue that the team's queer antiheroism disrupts embedded binaries of hero-villain and heterosexual-homosexual.

Oscar von Seth follows with a timely contribution to both academia and the popular TV series adaptation of *The Last of Us*. In his article, "A Bad Gay Waiting for Vengeance: Ellie in *The Last of Us Part II,*" von Seth offers a rigorous and provocative analysis of Ellie, the lesbian protagonist of the videogame and positioning her as a morally ambiguous figure whose queer identity intersects with themes of violence, grief, and vengeance. Drawing from queer studies, game studies, and philosophy, the author challenges the dominant idealizing tendencies of queer representation in media, advocating instead for a deidealization approach that embraces complexity, imperfection, and antagonism in queer characters. Central to the argument is the phenomenology of waiting, drawn from Heidegger's distinction between waiting for and waiting upon, as a structuring force in both the game's narrative and gameplay.

Turning to queer fiction, Audrey Heffers presents a nuanced, intersectional analysis of how contemporary queer fiction, particularly by and about women, reconfigures the domestic space as a simultaneous site of sanctuary and threat. In her article, "Dualities of Safety and Terror in Queer Fiction," draws on theory from queer studies, feminist theory, and gothic criticism, Heffers argues that homes in these narratives reflect the broader sociopolitical structures of heteronormativity, patriarchy, white supremacy, and state violence foregrounding how female and queer characters are often forced to create alternative sanctuaries because the normative systems and domestic spaces meant to protect them instead become sources of terror and repression. The author turns to speculative and gothic faction as generative spaces where these oppressive norms can be subverted to argue that safety is not as given within traditional structures, but as a radical, self-made, and often monstruous act of survival.

Lucía Bausela Buccianti, in "Demisexuality in Ali Hazelwood's STEMinist Series: *The Love Hypothesis* (2021) and *Love, Theoretically* (2023)," explores the representation of demisexuality within contemporary romance fiction, focusing on two bestselling novels by Ali Hazelwood. Grounded in queer and asexuality studies, Bausela Buccianti examines how the protagonists embody demisexual traits, and the ways in which these narratives challenge and simultaneously uphold genre conventions, particularly within the framework of contemporary romance. Outlining the definitions and development of demisexuality and situating it within the broader asexual spectrum, the author highlights how demisexual individuals experience sexual attraction only after forming strong emotional bonds, differentiating this from other identities. Although increasingly

recognized within online space and fan fiction communities, demisexuality remains underrepresented in mainstream publishing, often sidelined by prevailing erotonormative and amatonormative ideals. Against this backdrop, Hazelwood's novels emerge as rare, albeit complex, contributions to the visibility of demisexuality in mass-market fiction.

From the cognitive lens, Alba Roldán-García offers an exploration of the phenomenon of *Goncharov*, a fictional 1973 mafia film allegedly directed by Martin Scorsese, created collaboratively by Tumblr users in late 2022. In her article, "Goncharov: A Self-Aware Queer Mirror on Tumblr," Roldán-García presents *Goncharov* as a complex cognitive and cultural construct emerging from the interplay of fan labor, queer identity, and platform affordances rather than treating the event as a digital prank or isolated meme. The study is grounded in Text World Theory and cognitive linguistics, examining how meaning is contextually constructed through frames, structured sets of knowledge that shape understanding. Roldán-García employs this framework to address two core questions: which cognitive frames Tumblr users activated to articulate the text worlds of *Goncharov*, and how these reflect the evolution of LGBTIQ+ media from the 1970s to the present day. For this, the author draws from a curated corpus of 150 Tumblr posts and identifies two principal texts worlds, that of *Goncharov* as a cultural artifact and Goncharov as a fictional character.

Closing the issue, Andres Ayala-Patlan addressed Imogen Binnie's *Nevada* (2013) as a foundational work in contemporary trans literature. In his article, "The Strategic Use of Shifting Point-of-View Narrations in Imogen Binnie's *Nevada,*" Ayala-Patlan focuses on Binnie's experimental use of shifting narrative perspectives to portray trans subjectivity. Rather than following a conventional coming-of-age arc that culminates in personal transformation or resolution, *Nevada* employs a fragmented narrative structure to reflect the instability and social mediation of trans identity. The author argues that this literary strategy challenges normative expectations of both genre and gender by illustrating the entangled relationship between interior self-understanding and external social recognition. Ultimately, Ayala-Patlan contends that *Nevada* reconfigures narrative voice not merely as a stylistic device but as a tool for exploring the phenomenology of trans existence, where the self is continually constituted through social misrecognition and mediated embodiment.

All in all, the contributions introduced cover a range of cultural products, from fiction to videogames, comics and digital platforms, to further contribute to the task of analyzing how LGBTIQ+ representation can serve as a space for recognition, reconfiguration and reclamation of compromise and existence. Combined, the authors not only embark on the exploration of ongoing challenges when representing LGBTIQ+ lives and experiences but also celebrate the possibilities of broadening the scope of queer and trans visibility in academia.

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QUEER ANTIHEROISM OF DC COMICS' *SECRET SIX*

Nao Tomabechi

ABSTRACT

Following the increase of LGBTQ+ characters and growing demands for authentic diversity in the superhero genre, the concern for queer representation in superhero comics scholarship has risen in the past few years, which is undoubtedly a significant advancement. One character that frequently appears in discussions of queer representation is Marvel's Northstar, who is the first major superhero to have come out as gay in 1992. Similarly, Batwoman with her much-acclaimed solo series in DC, and the very popular superhero team Young Avengers from Marvel, where most of the members are sexual minorities, have also gained attention. While these characters and series have been rightfully highlighted by scholars, there is one series (and team) that barely appears in past or present superhero scholarship despite its remarkable and distinct depiction of queerness: DC Comics' Secret Six (2006-2007; 2008-2011). This paper thus sheds light on the Secret Six, their antiheroism, and their unique queerness. I argue that the fact that the Secret Six are antiheroes, rather than superheroes, who are traditionally expected to maintain the status quo even in terms of gender display, or supervillains, who are traditionally Othered in extreme ways for their "gender transgression," is what allows the Secret Six a freedom to operate in queer ways neither party does nor can. Through their narratives, they repeatedly challenge heteronormative ideals, openly disrupting gender norms that have been essentially upheld by superheroism, and confront the privileges superheroes have been given in their societies.

Keywords: antihero; gender; sexuality; US American (super)heroes; queer identity.

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1. INTRODUCING THE SECRET SIX

The concern for queer representation in superhero comics scholarship has risen drastically in the past few years. This is both an understandable and significant advancement since the number of LGBTQ+ characters has increased in the superhero genre, following the growing demands for diversity and authentic depictions of minorities. Such scholarship varies in approaches, providing numerous perspectives on queer representation. For example, Jessica Plummer provides a chronological analysis, pinpointing key moments in superhero history (2023), while Daniel Stein (2018) and Ramzi Fawaz (2016) identify an inherent queer nature in superhero storytelling, and scholars such as Olivia Hicks (2020)

select individual characters or series to demonstrate how they and/or their stories contribute to queer representation.

One character that frequently appears in deliberations of queer representation in superhero comics is Marvel's Northstar, who is the first major superhero to have opened up about his homosexuality in *Alpha Flight* #106 (Mar. 1992). Others include Batwoman, with her much-acclaimed solo series from DC Comics, and the very popular superhero team Young Avengers from Marvel, where the majority of the members are sexual minorities. In recent depictions, both Superman's son Jon Kent, who is first known as Superboy but eventually becomes Superman, and Tim Drake, the third Robin and current Red Robin, are openly bisexual, and have garnered compelling discussions.

All of such characters, series, and individual issues have been rightfully brought up by scholars in their studies on queer representation. However, there is one series (and team) that barely appears in past or present superhero scholarship despite its remarkable and distinct depiction of queerness: DC Comics' *Secret Six* (2006–2007; 2008–2011). The Secret Six was originally a team that appeared in DC Comics in the 1960s, later re-introduced in the 1980s with new characters. It was once more renewed in the comic event *Infinite Crisis*' (2005–2006) tie-in miniseries *Villains United* (2005–2006) by Gail Simone. She had recreated here an entirely new version of the team, which led to the limited solo series *Secret Six* (2006–2007) and another in the same name but with a much longer run consisting of thirty-six issues, lasting from 2008 to 2011. Members of the team change frequently throughout Simone's series, but the central characters remain the same: Scandal Savage, Deadshot, Catman (not to be mistaken with Catwoman); and Ragdoll. Additional members who become just as crucial include Jeannette, Knockout, and Bane among others; as well as Cheshire, who is an original member appearing in *Villains United* but betrays the Six. While this team and series are rarely ever mentioned in superhero studies that focus on gender, sexuality, or otherwise, they portray an incredibly intricate array of queerness that subverts heteronormative understandings of gender that appear even in works featuring sexual minorities.

This may perhaps be due to the fact that the Secret Six is a team of not superheroes but rather antiheroes. Generally, as many scholars have pointed out, one of the primary and traditional functions of the superhero is to prevent threatening forces from upsetting social order, or in other words, to maintain the status quo (Reynolds 1992, 50; Bahlmann 2016, 75). "Status quo" here does not only refer to social order of lawfulness but also the upholding of hegemonic beliefs. While this may certainly involve beliefs about morality and goodness, it also involves assumptions towards gender and sexuality. More often than not, superheroism has traditionally entailed heteronormativity as a requisite (see King 2021), endorsing it as part of the status quo. The Secret Six, who are not superheroes but antiheroes, or characters who, though they "typically encourag[e] sympathy" from

the audience (Vaage 2015, xvi), are morally ambiguous and at times corrupt, have no obligation to stay within these regulations.

Unlike the superhero's display of "upstanding" heteronormativity, supervillains have commonly exhibited gender transgressive or queer behavior. Representation of sexual minorities has undoubtedly advanced significantly but, traditionally, supervillainy has been where those who parade sexually deviant behavior end up. Though discriminatory stereotypes have been challenged and positive representation has been promoted through superheroes over the years, the usage of abject gender, or gender deviance, in constructing villainy among supervillains remains, on the large, unquestioned. This, then, implies that superheroes' morality and display of gender and sexuality are linked in that their world-saving also involves the retaining of the heteronormative status quo from the sexual deviants. In comparison, though antiheroes may be "mocked for [their] insufficiencies, vices, and foibles" which can easily refer to queerness, they are "never delimited by them" (Torrance 1978, 5). Consequently, especially when the antiheroes appear as protagonists, who are in a more likely position to invite sympathy from readers, the trope where (exaggerated) sexual Otherness is directly linked to immorality as commonly seen in supervillains is more easily averted. Therefore, that the Secret Six are not supervillains, whose role is to bring abjection to the readers through exaggerated depictions of gender transgressive Otherness, is a key factor too.

Compared to these two extremes of superheroism and supervillainy, where one must uphold the hegemonic values while the other represents evil deviance, the antihero in the superhero genre floats in a very vague in-between. Therefore, in this paper, I argue that the fact that the Secret Six are antiheroes, rather than superheroes, who are expected to be the upholders of majority values and the status quo, or supervillains, who are Othered in extreme ways, is what allows the Secret Six a freedom to operate in queer ways neither party does nor can. Not only that, the Six's expressions of sexualities and gender are, as I will demonstrate in sections below, unlimited, a factor that leads to them acting in ways that disrupt gender norms and heteronormativity. But as protagonists, their disruptive queerness is not portrayed as a negative force. And through their narratives, they openly question heteronormative ideals that have been essentially upheld and challenge the privileged statuses superheroes have been given in their societies by hegemony and the status quo. Never really has been there a superteam where almost everyone exhibits a "queer" queerness that defects from gender and sexual expectations that are inflicted upon not only the majority/superhero but the minority/supervillain as well. That there is no scholarship on this series overlooks the significance of how the Secret Six offers new and unique forms of queer expression.

2. The Queer Super-Antihero

An antihero commonly refers to a "flawed protagonist" (Lotz 2014), who "lack[] the qualities of nobility and magnanimity expected of traditional heroes and heroines" (Baldick 1996). Especially in the superhero genre, many antiheroes willingly commit morally questionable and excessive violence that may lead to deaths of their opponents. Yet, they are not simplistically evil; antiheroes are complex in that the characters are usually depicted as "struggling with their responses to circumstances not entirely of their making" (Baldick 1996) or fighting in a world that would rather "cast [them] into the shadows" (Barksdale 1996, 8) for their unwillingness to comply to societal standards. For this, they garner sympathy and from the audience, who root for the antiheroes' (unlikely) victory.

However, these characters are, especially in popular media, not without problems as gender norms are highly active in antiheroism (see Mitchell 2015). In addition to how antihero protagonists are most likely male, Susan Hopkins (2020) finds these men are driven into antiheroism because they experienced "male anxiety, shame, paranoia or humiliation [that] can only be effectively dealt with or avenged through violent actions" too excessive and perhaps self-centric to be considered heroic (n.p.). Many antiheroic narratives, then, are about men who endeavor to take back control of their lost masculinity by becoming an "avenging masculine" (n.p.). Hopkins reads the antiheroic men's stereotypically masculine aggression and violence as a reclaiming and enforcing of patriarchy. As such, antiheroism and masculinity, or rather, toxic masculinity, considering the men's aggressiveness and violence, is central to an antiheroic man. While recent popular series and works with antiheroic women have been on the rise, such as with characters like Harley Quinn, there remains a "distinct lack of female characters who invite us to embrace their troubling morality" (Mitchell 2015). On this, Jason Mitchell (2015) observes that traditional "cultural norms [are] at play" (Ch. 4). There still seems to be societal insistence that masculine display of "ruthlessness, self-promotion, and the pursuit of success at any cost" call for "respect[] and admir[ance]" (Ch. 4). This is in heavy contrast to women who continue to be understood as figures to be acted upon rather than taking action which displace them from the more forceful antiheroism.

However, while in general, antiheroes do tend to fall into traditional patterns of gender, antiheroic characters can also show "unexpected resilience and fortitude" against hegemonic norms (Brombert 1999, 2). This especially may be the case in the superhero genre. As many scholars have pointed out and as I have noted in the introduction, one of the traditional and fundamental responsibilities of the superhero is sustaining the status quo (Wolf-Meyer 2003, 501). On the contrary, antiheroes of the superhero genre "do not reaffirm the status quo's values; instead, they challenge them. They bring a fracture with a negative reality" (Favaro 2019, 5). In superhero comics, then, the antiheroes' disruptions of society have the power to reveal to the superheroes of their fictional

worlds as well as their readers the imperfection and unfairness of the society, which may very well include gender norms.

The antiheroes are able to do this because they proactively go up against what they deem as the enemy. One notable characteristic and trope of the superhero that many scholars have pointed out is that superheroes must remain responsive, rather than active (Reynolds 1992, 51). In other words, superheroes must be passive in that they must wait until a crime has been committed by a supervillain, and only then can they engage in battles. This is so that the superhero, who possesses superabilities, does not become too threatening to society, and this genre convention asserts to both readers and the civilians of the fictional universe that the superheroes will not use their powers for their personal gains. Yet, this also means that while evil continues to persist in the world, superheroes cannot do anything about it until supervillains move forward with their evil plots. Without restrictions by the genre or expectations to act superheroically passive, antiheroes have no need to "wait for an external threat, but attacks evil already present within society" like the superheroes (Favaro 2019, 5). As a result, not only do antiheroes have more freedom to take action against what *they* consider as threats and enemies instead of what the law, hegemony, or society does, but they can do so *when* they see fit.

Unfortunately, the antiheroes are seldom effective in bringing justice to the world as they see it inside and outside the superhero genre. This, in the case of superhero comics, is, of course, partially due to the genre convention that ultimate victory is promised to the superhero.[1] But what also contributes to their impending failure is that as antiheroes, they are usually "alienated from his culture and society" (Barksdale 1996, 6). Superheroes are often claimed to be outsiders of society and law because of their super status (Curtis 2016, 107), but they are central to their societies in that they are there to preserve them and in that their heroism is harmonious with the society's hegemonic values. Antiheroes, on the other hand, are marked by "alienation and estrangement" because of their inability to conform to acceptable morale and norms (Barksdale 1996, 6). Therefore, however just their intentions may be to them and their audience, their "actions . . . are ultimately useless" (Favaro 2019, 5) in that in the superhero genre, the hegemonic status quo will always be put back into place by the superheroes. Still, though it is true that antiheroes such as the Secret Six do not (cannot) conclude their adventures with a victorious happily ever after, they and their series certainly provide opportunities for subversive narratives that challenge matters that have been thought normative and hence remained unquestioned throughout the years of publication.

[1] It also may be on account of the fact that overly changing social order in accordance with their personal beliefs can be considered too tyrannical to the democratic America. Hence, that is a line antiheroes cannot cross without truly becoming villains.

Because the antihero is not villainous enough to be a supervillain, sometimes acting heroic, but is too untamed to be a superhero, "the anti-hero finds himself in a grey area where good and evil are not easily recognizable" (Favaro 2019, 5). Accordingly, the Secret Six resides in this vague in-between of villainy and heroism. Though the original members were all initially labelled supervillains, throughout the Six's adventures, certain types of villainy such as abuse, slavery, and pointless murder are condemned and punished by the Six. While their punishment, which involves excessive violence and sometimes deaths, is far from superheroic and "fail[s] to be blessed" with a superhero's "moral and physical high ground" (Ho 2020, 101) their retribution inflicted against undeniable evil can arguably be seen as just.

Such actions of antiheroism blur the lines between the good and the bad. Binarism is thus ineffective, but this antiheroes' rejection of clearcut categories interestingly resonates well with queerness as queerness, too, refuses to be confined within binary recognition. Queer is described by Eve Sedgwick as an "open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning" (1993, 8). The term "queer" is thus exceptionally fluid, encompassing and advocating for many forms of identities and expressions of sexuality and gender rather than creating a definitive applicable label. In queerness, binaries are problematized, and this includes not only that of male/female but also those such as heterosexual/homosexual. In this sense, while queer can refer to, for example, lesbian and gay identities, it is not exactly identical to them. David M. Halperin thus correspondingly writes that queer is "whatever [that] is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant" (1995, 65). Queer, then, suggests an escape from clear-cut identities and boundaries that regulate them, both of which are, more often than not, insisted on by the majority.

However, despite endless possibilities of queerness, "queer representation" in superhero comics tends to be one-dimensional, or rather, homonormative. According to Lisa Duggan, homonormativity "is a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized . . . gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption" (2002, 179). As homonormativity "does not challenge heterosexist institutions and values, but rather upholds, sustains, and seeks inclusion within them" (Duggan 2004, Ch. 3), securing places for the non-gender conforming members of the LGBTQ+ holds little to no interest. "Heterosexist institutions and values" here include, for example, monogamy, marriage, and building families, and sexual minorities who comply with them are considered respectable and appropriate. Any demonstration of sexuality otherwise such as polyamory or promiscuity, which is seen as the antithesis to nuclear families, are condemned as antisocial behavior. Ultimately, homonormativity is "aimed at securing privilege for gender-normative gays and lesbians based on adherence to dominant cultural constructions of gender" (Stryker 2008, 147–48). Even if one is seemingly being accepting

of the LGBTQ+ community, the upholding of homonormativity suggests the persisting enforcement of assimilation to hegemonic gender and sexual norms and the ongoing institutional power of heteronormative standards within society.

As Jeffrey Brown will agree, superhero comics are a prevalent arena of homonormativity (2021, 93–94). Brown argues that "common romantic elements of momentous kisses, proposals, wedding, all of which have been employed in superhero stories as a traditional means to celebrate heterosexuality . . . are now also used to help normalize same-sex relationships" (2021, 93–94). Accordingly, in superhero comics, one finds numerous instances where normative romantic displays of (monogamous) same-sex couples are drawn as dramatic moments, taking up the majority of the page's space as a celebration of their "queer" but normative love. The aforementioned Northstar and his wedding, or a traditional heteronormative ceremony of couples, being treated as an important event by Marvel with special variant covers, is one such example. Brown describes such presentations as "heteronormative rituals" (2021, 94). Though it is without a doubt encouraging to see non-heterosexual romance in mainstream comics depicted positively, when "queerness" appears in superhero comics, the majority of them tends to be between two cisgender people who are likely to be the same gender, and depictions of them stay within rather conventional romantic and sexual relationships. Variations of relationships and behaviors that fall outside traditional romance have been limited or outright ignored. Hence, even non-heterosexual superheroes are prone to be confined within rather limiting rules of heteronormativity to maintain their superheroism.

3. The Secret Six and the Fight for Queerness

Though in *Secret Six*, there are certainly monogamous couples, the majority of the team upsets hetero- and/or homonormativity and gender norms as well as binaries. First, as it has already been mentioned, most of the teammates are sexual minorities. Scandal Savage, an out lesbian, and Knockout are a couple, while Catman and Jeannette, who is suggested to have been in a relationship with Scandal prior to the series, are bisexual.[2] Ragdoll, too, is pansexual, with the creator, Simone, claiming on X (formerly Twitter) that he is nonbinary.[3] But more important than their sexuality is that the queerness displayed by these characters, whether it be romantic/sexual relationships or individual gender

[2] King Shark, who briefly becomes a member of the Six is also bisexual, and that King Shark is a walking and talking bisexual shark may arguably contribute to the Six's unconventional queerness.

[3] In the comics, there have been scenes where Ragdoll is fluid with his gender presentation. For example, we see him happily donning costumes of both male and female superheroes, such as Wonder Woman and Robin. When Ragdoll dresses up as Robin, he calls himself "He/She Wonder" and "Boy/Girl Wonder" (*Secret Six* #9). Yet, while Simone has stated Ragdoll is nonbinary with the comics supporting this, in the text, the character is referred to with he/him pronouns, and I use that in my paper as well.

performance, barely ever fit what may be considered homo-/heteronormative, exhibiting "queer" queerness. Scandal and Knockout, for example, who were initially monogamous, later become a threesome when Knockout returns from the dead. When Knockout was revived, Scandal had already found a new girlfriend, Liana, and Scandal, unable to choose between the two, proposes for the three of them to be romantically involved together to which all parties (happily) agree.[4] Though depictions of polyamory have appeared since then in superhero comics, such as in *Guardians of the Galaxy* #9 (Feb. 2021), polyamory remains a topic yet to be fully explored.

Visually, too, these characters of the Six do not conform to heteronormative expectations of the genre. For instance, the superhero genre is notorious for catering to heterosexual male readers by depicting women in hypersexualized costumes and poses (see Cocca 2016). However, though there certainly are moments where female characters are posing unnaturally sexually (especially in issues not drawn by Nicola Scott, the main artist for the *Secret Six* series), the women of the Six are rarely hypersexualized. These women thus refuse to conform to the heteronormative visual tropes of the genre, and if anything, the character who shows the most skin is Catman, as he seems to be more comfortable without his shirt after spending years in the wild, and hence appears shirtless on numerous occasions. In addition, even heterosexual characters such as Bane physically and visually suggest queerness. I have argued elsewhere (see Tomabechi 2025) that excessive displays of masculinity which includes grotesquely exaggerated muscular bodies such as Bane's can be interpreted as queer as it is a sign of a distorted and deviant form of masculinity. Bane's body, then, massive even by the already above-average muscle mass in the superhero genre and is easily twice the size of Catman's and Deadshot, removes him from heternormativity despite his heterosexuality.

Among them all, however, Ragdoll, alone, perhaps disrupts numerous heteronormative notions through his identity, sexuality, and displays of gender the most. For one, especially when in costume, Ragdoll is sans visible markers of gender (see Figure 1). A rare case in the superhero genre, he is all skin and bones, and has none of the muscles to typically indicate strength and masculinity (nor curves as signs of femininity). Instead, his body is but sharp edges and joints. Additionally, his mask fully covers not just his face but his head as well, obscuring his (gender) identity entirely. But even without it, his facial features are ambiguous in terms of gender with his large, almost childish eyes, protruding bones, and bald head that sprouts a few strands of hair.

[4] Knockout had already been suggested to be polyamorous (or, coming from the planet Apokolips, has a different understanding or culture of sexual relations) in the limited *Secret Six* series.

Fig 1. Ragdoll © DC Comics.

But more importantly, consider how he has had multiple surgeries throughout his body to replace all his joints with those that can rotate 360 degrees. In the process, he decided his penis was in the way of his acrobatic arts of contortion and had it surgically removed. Therefore, Ragdoll can be argued to already have been symbolically castrated since he is both queer (nonbinary and pansexual) and disabled (body distortion, since he needs regular medication for his joints), but he is also literally and physically self-castrated. Whereas the heteronormative society will deem castration (both literal and figurative) as depowering as psychoanalysts such as Sigmund Freud would famously agree,[5] and perhaps even treat Ragdoll as monstrous for the self-mutilation, Ragdoll is proud of it and is, in fact, even empowered by it. This is because not only is he seen on numerous occasions mocking his enemy who had kicked his crotch, saying he has "had all that bother surgically removed" (*Villains United* #5), but the removal of the penis allows him to twist his body without physical disruptions, an advantage that he uses as an effective weapon. The literal castration, then, is what has allowed him to wholly access his *super*ability of

[5] See works such as Sigmund Freud's "The Uncanny," translated by Alix Strachey, *MIT* (1919), https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/freud1.pdf

contortion. Therefore, the phallus, which is normally seen as a symbol of masculinity and societal superiority—the empowering factor that allows one access to various privileges—is, by the nonbinary Ragdoll, seen as a nuisance. Only with the removal of it was he able to reach his full capacity.

Even Deadshot, who is another of the very few heterosexual members alongside Bane, is nonconforming in terms of gender and sexual relationships and wavers the borders of heterosexuality. In the second run of *Secret Six*, Deadshot becomes romantically involved with Jeannette. It is noticeable that in most of the scenes of their trysts, Jeannette is usually seen to be taking initiative in their physical or sexual relations. This can be found in rather steamy moments when they are both lying naked, or more casual moments, such as Jeannette dipping Deadshot for a kiss. Their heterosexual relationship (though the woman is bisexual), then, effortlessly flips gender expectations in romance, where customarily, the man is expected to be the more active participant, while the woman is passively acted upon, and expressions of sexuality from a woman can be seen as unruly behavior.

Additionally, what should also be mentioned about Deadshot is that *Villains United* issue two (2005), which comes prior to Jeannette's joining, features a notably homoerotic encounter between Deadshot and Catman. The two men here find each other in the dark kitchen in the middle of the night. Still having doubts about the team and its members, both are prepared and ready to strike the moment the light turns on. However, their confrontation is as deadly as it is almost flirtatious, for not only are they standing in very close proximity (with Catman shirtless), slightly smirking, they also each have a gun and knife, both phallic objects, aimed at the other. This is soon followed by a curiously domestic scene where Catman cooks eggs for the both of them while Deadshot lounges about. Throughout the miniseries, this is the only time where readers see two specific characters bonding with one another this deeply, and with their scene taking up more than five pages, the significance of their bond is highlighted. The only time another pair comes close is when Catman sleeps with Cheshire, but that only consists of three pages. This scene which concludes issue four (2005). is, in any case, immediately followed by issue five's (2005) cover where Deadshot and Catman are in the midst of a brawl. Yet again, the homoerotic nature of the art is undeniable as Catman is drawn straddling and directly on top of Deadshot, with his crotch placed almost in the middle of the cover (see Figure 2). Ultimately, Catman's relationship with Cheshire is broken off with her betrayal, and the miniseries ends with the two men walking away together. Though the miniseries has Catman involved in a heterosexual affair, he is soon brought back into his relationship with Deadshot.

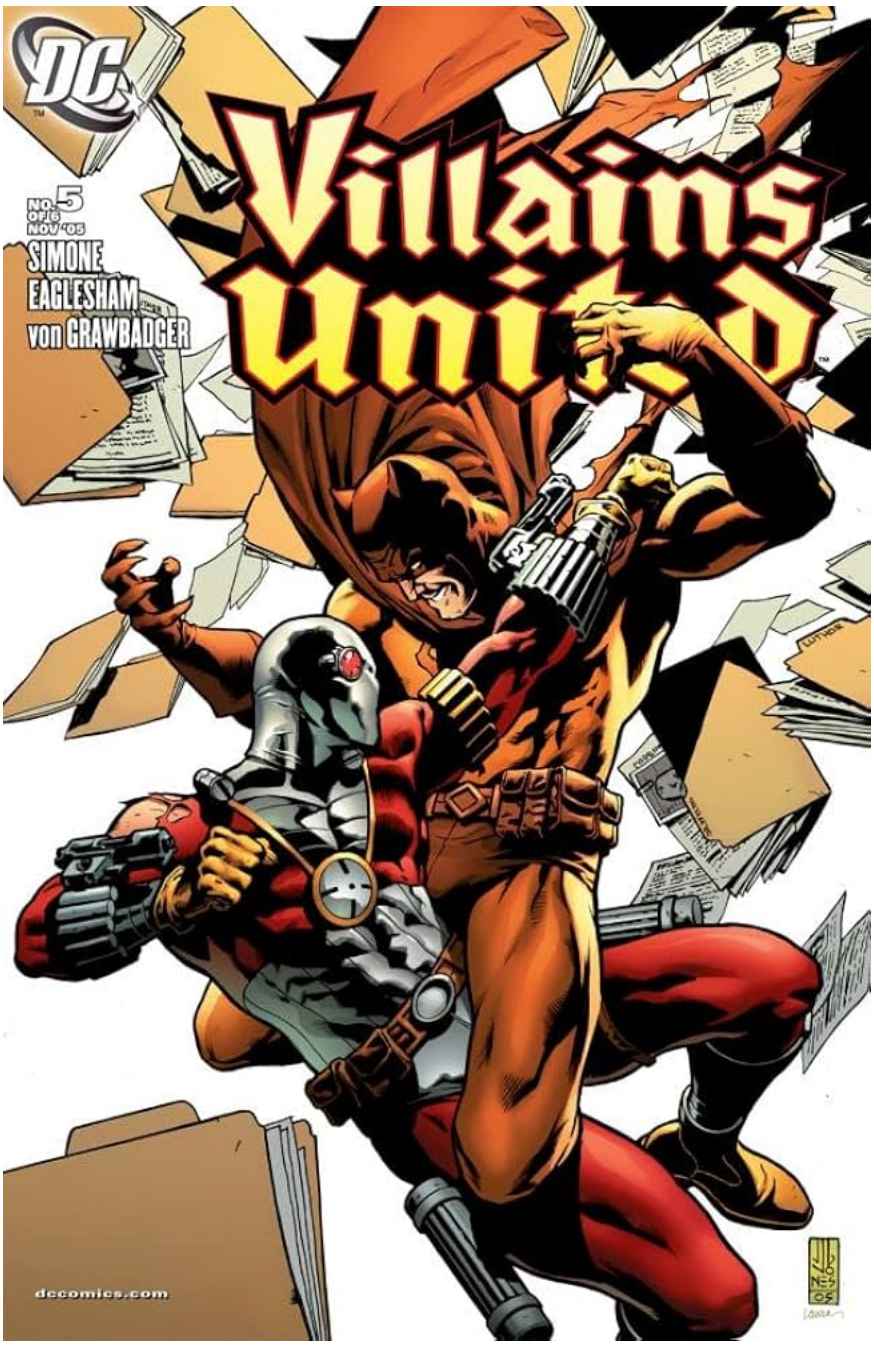

Fig 2. "Villains United" cover © DC Comics.

Deadshot and Catman's ambiguous relationship does not end with *Villains United* but continues into the *Secret Six* series, their flirty banter appearing frequently. Such scenes are all in addition to the fact that Deadshot and Catman are time and again captured in the same frame, which is at times, small and close-knit. Not only the narratives, then, but also the comic pages, too, place them physically tight against one another. Their flirtatiousness remains even after Deadshot becomes romantically involved with Jeannette, opening up a possibility for another polyamorous relationship, which unsettles Deadshot's presumed heterosexuality. Furthermore, Deadshot's homoerotic relationship with

Catman did not go unnoticed by one of the creators of the comics, the artist Nicola Scott, as she has drawn the two men post-coitus. Ergo, even Deadshot himself, one of the few heterosexual members of the team, is not so strictly heterosexual.

But this is not surprising as heteronormativity, in general, do not seem to bode well for the members of the Secret Six. Take, for instance, the fact that one of the conflicts central to both *Villains United* and that of the first solo series involve the bearing of a child, an act traditionally considered as the preeminent goal of a heteronormative relationship. In *Villains United*, situations become incredibly complicated as Cheshire desires to have a child with Catman, as she considers him to have good genes. Once there is the possibility of her pregnancy (or so she says), she is not hesitant to use their child as a hostage to escape the Six after her betrayal. Readers discover in the second series that she was indeed pregnant, as the Six are once again caught in trouble because of the child's existence.

But more important is Scandal Savage's struggle with her father, supervillain Vandal Savage, in the first *Secret Six* series. In these issues, Vandal attempts to get rid of the entire team, as he hopes to retrieve his daughter so that she will once again be a part of his organization. Yet, what is most significant to Vandal is murdering Scandal's lover, Knockout. This is because he strongly wishes for Scandal to produce an heir, his grandchild who will eventually inherit and carry on their Savage legacy. Demanding the lesbian Scandal to sleep with a man (preferably Catman because according to Vandal, too, he has excellent genes—Catman's genes seem to be surprisingly popular among supervillains), Vandal endeavors to force heteronormative relations with violence, and Scandal, with her queer teammates, must fight against this. Supervillainy generally has the tendency to entail a monstrous queerness, where gender transgression is denounced as disruptive and undecipherable. The monstrosity of the villains' uncanny queerness is especially emphasized as they go against heteronormative (or homonormative) superheroes, for this clash effectively highlights the "goodness" of superheroes' normative gender performance. However, in the case of *Secret Six*, a series featuring queer antiheroes, it is toxic heteronormativity that does not allow for alternative gender or sexual identity and performances and is portrayed as a villainous evil that the characters must antiheroically combat.

The Secret Six themselves seem to be frustrated by such impositions of heteronormativity by not only those around them but also from society, and how their noncompliance with societal norms and the status quo leads them to their isolation from society. They also seem to be aware of how those who uphold hegemonic/heteronormative power are given privilege, something the Six are constantly denied access to. This appears most in issue nine of the second series (2009), which is a tie-in with the miniseries *Battle for the Cowl* (2009). *Battle* focuses on Gotham City which had fallen into chaos after Batman's disappearance, and other heroes attempt to fill in the absent superhero's shoes.

Among those are the Six, or some of the Six to be exact. As Bane and Catman have had close ties with both Batman and Gotham, with the help of Ragdoll, they attempt to bring order to Gotham by infiltrating a scheme of kidnapping children though their crime-fighting is, at times, rather too violent to be called heroic. In the midst of their mission, however, right when they were rescuing in time a baby from getting snatched from his family, the superhero Nightwing intervenes. He demands Bane step away from the kidnapper he was most likely about to kill and takes away the baby from Ragdoll. Ragdoll tries to explain himself, but Nightwing cuts him off, claiming he "know[s] what [they] were trying to do." Handing over the baby to the mother, Nightwing is the one who is thanked for saving her child, and not the Six.

Until then, the Six, though problematic in their violence, had been portrayed as doing good. Yet, despite them delivering, though small and temporary, justice to the chaos-ridden Gotham, Nightwing, who is one of the "real" heroes, unlike the Six "who don't believe in 'good' and 'evil'" binaries (*Secret Six* #2, Aug. 2006), treats them like he would any other scum villain. To Nightwing, who sees a definite division between heroism and villainy, the Six, who stand in an ambiguous in-between, can only be "bad" if they do not side clearly with the good.

Still, Nightwing understands that Catman, Bane, and Ragdoll *did* prevent the kidnapping and decides to pretend he never saw them. But what Nightwing probably sees as generosity in his eyes, his willingness to let them scamper off, is condescending. Acting not only as if he has full authority here, Nightwing also immediately assumes and acts as if he is the superior man. This, as well as Nightwing's "sanctimony," infuriates Catman. He says with downcast eyes: "We were trying to rescue kids. And [the superheroes] look at us as if we're not fit to live. As if the world is too damn small for us to have a corner of it. No one gave them that power. They just took it. They always just take it." Indeed, no one in particular gave these (heteronormative) superheroes powers and privileges of being automatically seen as synonymous with virtue as well as functioning as a yardstick of various societal values. But as the upholders of the status quo, superheroes are gifted these privileges by their society. The superheroes not only happily endowed themselves with such privileges, but they also had eventually acquired the power and authority to judge what is good/heroic. Everything that falls out of their judgment has the danger of being classified as bad/villainy.

Therefore, Catman's words most certainly refer to how regardless of his or the Six's wishes for heroism, to the "morally perfect" superheroes, who are unable to see that the lines between good and evil are ambiguous at best, the Six can only be criminal, and hence his resentment towards the very exclusive superheroism. However, simultaneously, his words can also interestingly be seen as, especially taking into account how traditionally "appropriate" display of sexuality have been closely linked to superheroism/good, a cry of anger from a queer man about how those who do not meet the status

quo of heteronormativity and hegemonic gender norms are easily shunned, how they cannot be but "a sufferer, an outsider, an initiate, never confirmed in his institution" (Barksdale 1996, 6). Catman's yearning to be considered a hero thus may not only be about being part of the good and just but also about receiving the privileges that come with being a hero and the right to live in society without instant condemnation for being who he is, to be respected like any other, all of which he has been denied for years. This aligns much with the undeniable fact the queerness has been and is both villainized and marginalized for its difference, Otherness, and inability to conform to societal norms in fictional universes and otherwise (Dubowski 2016, 226; King 2020). Appropriately, Favaro writes that "the anti-hero of the comic finds himself always in a negative, tragic, corrupt reality" (Favaro 2019, 5), like the queer man who is caught by the inescapable heteronormativity. Furthermore, it is also noteworthy that it is Nightwing who rebukes the Six. This is because Nightwing is not only a model superhero, but also known to have been in famous relationships with multiple superhero women including but not limited to Batgirl, Starfire, and Huntress and had been considered the "lady's man" of the superhero genre.[6] From Catman's point of view, then, Nightwing may as well be the epitome of the heterosexual superhero. Even in recent years, where support for sexual minorities has grown exceptionally, hetero- and homonormativity remain prevalent in queer representation (Brown 2021, 13-14), and actions that heavily depart from traditional values of gender and sexuality are still seen as devious. Hence, the Six, who are not only queer antiheroes but also constantly defy heteronormativity and in extension homonormativity, are "trapped inside an essentially negative reality without the possibility of escape" (Favaro 2019, 5) and are constantly struggling to find a place in a world that is dominated by heteronormative superheroes.

Such discontent towards the society that shuns them is what leads to the finale of the second series where the Secret Six decides to overthrow the superheroes of Gotham (*Secret Six* #36, 2011). The Six ultimately find themselves with only two options: fight or be regulated, or in other words, resistance or assimilation to the status quo. While Catman is adamant that he does not "want to live in a world where those people

[6] Dick Grayson is an interesting character in terms of queerness. Since the publication of Frederic Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954) that read the nature of his relationship with Bruce Wayne to be homoerotic and was followed by the campy sixties live action Batman series that frequently featured the short-shorts donning Robin in need of rescuing by Batman, queerness has been a part of his character. Additionally, *Secret Six* #36 is known for Nightwing's back shot of his buttocks, which most likely contributed to the fan trope that he has an impressive and attractive butt. This has led to artists actively drawing him facing backwards, and he has become a character frequently and deliberately sexualized, sometimes in ways similar to female characters in recent years. Furthermore, while not comics canon, he seems to be bisexual in the game *Gotham Knights* (2022). However, his sexual capital and bisexuality all come after the *Secret Six* series.

[superheroes] make the rules" and is determined to fight, he, as well as the entire team, seems to be aware of their doom, that they "always never win" (*Secret Six* #36, 2011). With the superheroes set in place as the eminent victors of their society, the Six will forever be "haunted by his own invisibility" (Barksdale 1996, 6) But the Secret Six, antiheroes "born out of rebellious desire to subvert what the author considers the standard conventions of fiction" (Simmons 2008, 3) in Ragdoll's words, "don't know how to surrender" (*Secret Six* #9, 2009). Whether it be for diverse queer representation in a heteronormative genre, or for the complex sense of morality in antiheroism that allows for narrative freedom, or both, the Six will fight for their voice and their legitimacy until the end. Until the very end, the Secret Six, both the series and the team, is pessimistic about and fights against the superheroes, their values, and their unquestioned authority.

Conclusively, these queer antiheroes are such a menace to their (fictional) world and its status quo that it is not only the Gotham superheroes the Six end up fighting. Instead, the entire DC Universe shows up. It is interesting to note that Batman and Superman, who may be considered the authoritative and patriarchal figures of superheroism, are here with their respective Bat- and Superfamilies, while Wonder Woman, a bisexual woman originating from a matriarchal, all-female, and hence queer, society is absent from the melee. The only superhero among them who sees their struggle is Huntress, a superhero who began as an antihero and have been shamed in the past by fellow superheroes for her promiscuous, or non-monogamous, behavior. While Huntress is discomforted by this fight, now a part of the heroes, knows that the Six must be put down.

The *Secret Six* concludes ambiguously, or perhaps queerly, which is fitting for the characters. It is most likely that the Six, in spite of defeat, are not dead, since superheroes typically do not take lives, though the Six's use of Venom, the toxic drug that enhances strength which Bane used to use and was addicted to, may possibly have done serious damage alongside the injuries given to them by the superheroes. The Six, not given a proper closure with death, will likely be incarcerated after this battle, and what the future awaits remains unclear. Yet, happy endings as well as closure or "predetermined outcome[s]" have been argued to allude to heteronormativity since they usually result in "traditional heterosexual reproduction, family forms, or gender norms" (Fawaz 2016, 22). That the Six are not given one is thus very apropos. Denial of closure, the removal of the Six from a traditional heterosexual and heteronormative life, is perhaps the most fitting ending for the Six.

The Secret Six "had no chance. Not a prayer" (*Secret Six* #36, 2011) from the start, since they are ill-fated with "unheroic defeat" (Barksdale 1996, 6). Nevertheless, they certainly served well as a "response to the uncertainties of people about traditional values" (Neimneh 2013, 76) creating a fissure to the superheroism that continues to favor the status quo of heteronormativity in the DC Universe. From the superheroes' perspective, the Secret Six are but villains who disrupt societal order, but to the members of the Six and

maybe the readers, *Secret Six* provides space for queerness to thrive and refuse simplistic binaries and norms that so easily exclude many forms of identities.

4. Conclusion

Sure enough, the series is not perfect in terms of representation of sexual minorities. Neither Catman's bisexuality nor Ragdoll's pansexuality are barely ever mentioned. In fact, Catman's sexuality was only revealed through Simone and never within the series itself. Furthermore, Scandal's polyamorous relationship is suggested as tragic, as Liana is left alone as her fiancés go off into battle, likely to never return again. And finally, while queerness and the challenging of heteronormative romantic and sexual relationships are depicted through the characters' actions, these challenges rarely appear verbally, and straightforward terms or discussions about sexuality hardly ever appear.

Things change drastically and for the better when the Secret Six is rebooted in 2015. The *New 52* Secret Six is comprised of entirely new members save Catman. Though those who were members of the Six such as Scandal, Jeannette, and Ragdoll appear, it is only midway through the series and as recurring characters, not central ones. The previous *Secret Six* run seems to now be obliviated from the DC Universe since there appears to be no history among the characters. Yet that *Secret Six* serves as a safe space for queerness remains the same. Or rather, the representation becomes less held back. For instance, Scandal, whose engagement ended tragically with her defeat, is now seen in a healthy, polyamorous relationship with Knockout and Liana. Catman and Ragdoll are both openly interested people of all genders. Not to mention, the Six has added to its membership the genderfluid Porcelain who discusses gender identities in the comics pages. Compared to the previous *Secret Six* runs, this series seems more aware of the implications as well as the impact of properly depicting queer characters and aims for positive representation. Additionally, a new *Secret Six* series started its run in March 2025. Though Simone is not the writer, what innovative representation it will bring in terms of gender and sexuality, the readers shall see.

Still, the fact remains that *Secret Six,* running during the mid-2000s, making their first appearance before the now acclaimed and popular lesbian superhero Batwoman had made her debut and before Marvel's *Young Avengers,* which was praised for their positive portrayal of the teenage gay couple, deserves recognition, something superhero scholarship, as of yet, has failed to do. As many other scholars such as Carolyn Cocca have pointed out (2016), the majority of superhero comics have been and continue to be heteronormative, and as Brown argues (2021, 13–14), that applies even among LGBTQ+ representation. Therefore, how the Secret Six disrupts heteronormative order should be acknowledged academically, as it has achieved during the 2000s what not many series and issues have yet to manage even in the current 2020s.

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A Bad Gay Waiting for Vengeance: Ellie in *The Last of Us Part II*

Oscar von Seth

Abstract

This article examines *The Last of Us Part II* (2020), a videogame with explicit queer representation that forefronts a queer main playable character—Ellie—that behaves in morally ambiguous, even villainous, ways. The aim of the article is to examine Ellie's behavior and concretize what sort of queer representation she brings to popular culture, particularly because she is "bad." The main question posed is if the game's expressions of waiting—primarily Ellie's intense waiting for vengeance after one of her loved ones is murdered—makes her antagonistic traits pronounced? Theoretically, the article draws on "deidealization" (Amin 2017), a concept that helps scholars to accept rather than redeem or critique imperfect, messy, and complex queer objects of study (historical and current), as well as theories of waiting (Heidegger 1959). The article concludes that although Ellie's anger is relatable, her methods in the game (mainly her propensity for violence) are questionable. Still, studying Ellie constitutes an important lesson: if we allow ourselves to be blinded by hate for people we see as our enemies, we might, inadvertently, turn into villains.

Keywords: queer theory; game studies; deidealization; waiting; *The Last of Us*.

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1. Introduction

This article is focused on *The Last of Us*, a pop cultural franchise made up of two videogames and a TV series (HBO, 2023–) set in a postapocalyptic United States where a mutant Cordyceps fungus outbreak has turned humans into violent zombie-like creatures. Beyond that, the world of *The Last of Us* involves nuanced queer representation (lesbian, gay, and trans characters) and tends to be far from subtle when it comes to portraying queer themes. For example, in *The Last of Us Part I* (Naughty Dog, 2013/2022, henceforth *TLOU1*), there are hints that the character Bill (W. Earl Jones) is gay, which is fleshed out significantly in "Long, Long Time" (Peter Hoar, 2023), one of the most memorable episodes of the TV series. In *The Last of Us Part II* (Naughty Dog, 2020, henceforth *TLOU2*)—which is at the center of my analysis below—the romance between protagonist Ellie (Ashley Johnson) and Dina (Shannon Woodward) is unambiguously depicted. The game, "a landmark in diversity and representation because of its lesbian main playable character"

(Dennin and Burton 2023), forefronts queerness in more ways than that, however. There are rainbow flags and a trans flag hanging from overgrown buildings in Seattle, and in an old bookstore, Ellie and Dina (who were born after the world fell apart) find remains of an extensive but lost queer culture that they will never experience (e.g., titles like *The Big Book of Gay*). Also, early in the game there is a didactic scene in which a bigoted character is forced to apologize for making homophobic remarks, which signals to the player that in the world of *The Last of Us* (and beyond) it is wrong to discriminate against people who are sexually different.

Although *TLOU2* involves progressive queer representation, its characters often embody exaggerated and stereotypical masculinity (Fielding-Redpath 2024), everything from fist bumps to a masculine-looking female character (Abby, more on her soon) who says things like "ladies first" to her male friend, and a male character referring to Ellie as "man." Also, the game's queerness can be seen as "pinkwashing," that is, the way that nations and institutions forefront queer-affirming inclusivity to divert attention from their problematic policies.[1] Even though the queer representation in *TLOU2* can be seen as admirable, it has been pointed out that instead of constituting a mirror for queer players (i.e., a story in which queers can see themselves represented authentically), the didactic elements in the game are there for the purpose of normalizing queerness for non-queer players (Dennin and Burton 2023). While that is a valid point, queer representation is not only more nuanced in the world of *The Last of Us* than in most other franchises, but also, what I find interesting is that Ellie, the most prominent queer character, behaves in morally ambiguous, even villainous, ways in the second game.

Generally, for queer characters, villainous behavior brings about a set of troubling associations, mostly that behaving in an antagonistic manner is a consequence of being queer. It is true, of course, that because of experiences of marginalization, stigma, loneliness, and shame, queer forms of antagonism can be violent, which concepts like "queer rage" and "trans rage" demonstrate (see, e.g., Halberstam 1993; Stryker 1994; Stanley 2021). Those concepts recognize that queerness is sometimes intimately entangled with

[1] The concept of pinkwashing arose as a reaction to "Israel's promotion of a LGTBQ-friendly image to reframe the occupation of Palestine in terms of civilizational narratives measured by (sexual) modernity" (Puar 2013, 337). The director of *TLOU2*, who grew up in Israel, has cited the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as an inspiration for the game (https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/video-games/news/the-last-of-us-part-2-ellie-evolution/, accessed February 13, 2025). Because of current events in the Middle East, I feel it is important to acknowledge that my choice to interpret a cultural product with an obvious link to Israel does not mean that I condone Israel's genocide in Palestine. For further reading on the Israeli-Palestinian symbolism at the center of *TLOU2*, see Emanuel Maiberg's (2020) insightful analysis in *Vice*. In the game, Maiberg sees a "firmly Israeli way of seeing and explaining the conflict which tries to appear evenhanded and even enlightened, but in practice marginalizes Palestinian experience in a manner that perpetuates a horrific status quo" (https://www.vice.com/en/article/the-not-so-hidden-israeli-politics-of-the-last-of-us-part-ii/, accessed February 13, 2025).

rage and thus, by extension, with forms of antagonism. It should be noted, though, that anger itself is often vilified and because of the negatively coded affective characteristics of it (see, e.g., Nussbaum 2016), many humans (if not most of us) suppress it. When we are angry, we are prompted to calm down and because of the many taboos associated with *acting* on one's anger, anger and rage tend to be ascribed to others, those who we perceive to be behaving antagonistically. Although queer people have a lot to be angry about, queerness is not to be understood as the utmost reason why queer people might behave badly. Yes, we are angry, but not because we are queer. Usually, we are angry because normative culture stigmatizes our queerness. So even though there are expressions in popular culture (and beyond) of queers who behave antagonistically because they themselves are treated badly, queer pop cultural representation has, in recent years, involved a growing interest in portrayals of antagonistic queers whose motives for being bad are more complex.[2] Also, increasing interest in historical and current antagonistic queers with complex motives is demonstrated in the podcast *Bad Gays* (2019–), hosted by Huw Lemmey and Ben Miller. The podcast—and the book *Bad Gays: A Homosexual History* (2022)—examines the lives of queer history's truly complex and outright evil figures (like Ernst Röhm, Roy Cohn, and Aileen Wournos). *Bad Gays* emphasizes that complex queers are not a new phenomenon, neither among real-life queers, nor in popular culture. Film history, for instance, is filled with villains who have served as canvasses for all sorts of queer qualities, from truly complex to stereotypical.

The aim of this article is to examine Ellie's morally ambiguous, even villainous, behavior and concretize what sort of queer representation she brings to popular culture, particularly in light of her not behaving in an exemplary manner. I ask: Is it that *TLOU2* involves various forms of *waiting*—primarily that Ellie experiences an intense waiting for vengeance (more on why in a moment)—that makes her antagonistic traits pronounced and turns her into a bad gay? As I have conveyed elsewhere, queer characters (both good and bad) often endure various forms of waiting, a phenomenon that is universal (everyone must wait for one thing or another) but constitutes an intrinsic feature in queer-themed narratives.[3]

[2] Notable examples include Bret Easton Ellis's coming-of-age novel *The Shards* (2023); the film *Saltburn* (Emerald Fennell, 2023); and the TV series *Mary & George* (DC Moore, 2024).

[3] For further reading on *queer waiting*, see von Seth (2025). Waiting, I argue, is a queer cultural phenomenon. The concept of queer waiting refers to "waiting that is entwined with what makes people queer, like gender nonconformity, norm-challenging sexualities, and forms of kinship that challenge heteronormative relationality" (von Seth, Oscar. 2025. "Queer Waiting in Michael Cunningham's *The Hours*," *Lambda Nordica* [online first]: 1–24. https://doi.org/10.34041/ln.v.1006, 4–5).

2. Background

Whereas *TLOU1* has been called "a story about love," *TLOU2* is "a story about hate" (stated by Neil Druckmann).[4] In the first game, the main playable character is Joel (Troy Baker), a middle-aged man who makes his living as a smuggler twenty years after the original Cordyceps outbreak. Joel, who lost his daughter during the outbreak, must bring fourteen-year-old Ellie, who is immune to the fungal strain, across the bleak remains of the country to the Fireflies. They are a paramilitary group whose doctors might be able to create a vaccine using Ellie. She carries a mutated form of the infection inside her but unlike others who are bitten she does not turn into a zombie-like creature (called "infected"). After finding the Fireflies at a hospital in Salt Lake City, Joel understands that the vaccine-making process will claim Ellie's life, which he refuses to accept. Over the course of their one-year quest, Joel and Ellie have grown close. So, without hesitation, Joel kills the Fireflies at the hospital and saves Ellie. Afterwards, he lies to her about what happened, saying that there are others like her who can aid in making a vaccine. Overall, the first game relies on a balance between violent encounters (with humans and infected) and beauty, as conveyed in Joel and Ellie's evolving parent-child relationship.

The second game takes place four years after the ending of the first. Ellie is now nineteen, and she and Joel live in a settlement in Wyoming. They are estranged but it is unclear why. At the start, the player is led to believe that Joel is still the main playable character. However, shortly after the story commences, he is tortured and killed by Abby (Laura Bailey), who has come from Seattle with a group of friends to seek vengeance on him. At this point, the player does not know why Abby kills Joel but over the course of the game, it becomes clear that one of the Fireflies Joel killed at the end of the first game (one of humankind's last doctors and the only one able to develop a vaccine) was Abby's father. Following Joel's brutal death, Ellie, who is traumatized by having witnessed it, embarks on a violent quest for vengeance on Abby and her group. The narrative alternates between Ellie's and Abby's perspectives, and explores themes like hate, loss, and the "cycle of violence." Overall, *TLOU2* juxtaposes brutal fighting scenes with Ellie's and Abby's respective grief over losing a father (or father figure).

I want to acknowledge here that *The Last of Us* games and the TV series are contemporary cultural products, which means that previous research on them is limited. There are, for example, studies about queer representation (Dennin and Burton 2023; Peppers-Bates and Bernard 2024), gameplay experiences (Erb et. al. 2021; Hayot 2021), the games' use of narrative (Spence 2024), as well as masculinity in *TLOU2* (Fielding-Redpath 2024). Beyond that, there is a growing field of philosophical approaches to the world of *The Last of Us*. For instance, analyses of morality and ethics (see, e.g., Horn 2024a; Anderson 2022), as well as *The Last of Us and Philosophy: Look for the Light* (Horn 2024b), a

[4] https://kotaku.com/the-last-of-us-2-will-be-a-game-about-hate-1789662506, accessed February 13, 2025.

collection that brings philosophy scholars and fans of *The Last of Us* together to explore the philosophical diversity of the games and the TV series (e.g., feminism, forgiveness, villainy, and violence).

3. "Deidealization"

A question worth pondering is why I, a queer scholar, want to spend time examining outlines and intricacies of a morally ambiguous, even villainous, character like Ellie? Why not emphasize another cultural product than *TLOU2*, one involving "positive" and "respectable" queer representation? Here I align myself with Kadji Amin (2017), who argues that, in its approach to objects of study, Queer Studies is characterized by an idealizing tendency that has led to an unwillingness to engage with some of the truly complex qualities of queer history's "undesirable objects." Rather than acknowledging complexities among queer people, queer cultural products, and queer practices (like antagonism in queer characters) scholars tend to engage with objects that are politically fruitful or "respectable"—for instance, "out-and-proud gay and lesbian activists fighting to destigmatize and diversify sexual practices and intimate forms" (Amin 2017, 8). Considering this tendency, how should queer scholars approach objects that are difficult to romanticize and celebrate, like truly flawed queer people who behave in heinous ways? To manage that, Queer Studies requires "deidealization," an approach that does not mean annihilation of previous ideals, but involves, Amin underscores, that we learn to live with rather than redeem or critique imperfect, messy, and complex objects from queer history. An overarching objective of this article (beyond its stated aim) is to deidealize Ellie. My goal is to look beyond her most obvious contribution to queer pop cultural representation (i.e., that she is a lesbian main playable character in a hugely successful videogame). Although Ellie, by being openly queer, brings queer visibility to an otherwise heterosexist and male-dominated form of media (see, e.g., Ivory 2006; Ruberg and Shaw 2017; Cross et. al. 2024), her antagonism is equally (if not more) interesting to examine.

I should clarify here that in the following, I refer to Ellie as a character who embodies "antagonism" or possesses "antagonistic traits." She is not, however, a straight-up antagonist in the Aristotelian sense, that is, an opponent or enemy of the story's main character. Ellie is one of *two* primary characters in *TLOU2*; Abby is the second one. Both embody antagonistic traits and can be said to serve a similar purpose as in Aristotle's definition of an antagonist, that is, to provoke conflict and thereby facilitate a compelling and engaging plot.

Before commencing the analysis, let us agree that we should not think of or view Ellie as free from guilt for her bad deeds. But at the same time, let us try to hold at least two contradicting thoughts in our heads, namely that despite the badness of Ellie, there are surely things we can learn from studying her. Such a mindset has nothing to do with a desire to excuse her behavior but should be seen as an ambition to recognize her

complexities. That ambition is important for many reasons, one of them (mentioned by Ben Miller in the *Bad Gays* podcast) is that if we are only able to identify antagonism in cartoonish characters (the obviously bad ones) and fail to see the complexities of all types of people, we will be unable to distinguish true evil when we witness it.[5] Also, in my assessment, an exclusively "positive" representation of queer people in media involves a risk, namely that unreasonable standards are set for queers in real life. My motive for studying a morally ambiguous character like Ellie is neither that I want to solely critique her, nor "solve a problem" or redeem her, but to recognize complexities and challenge certainties in the field of Queer Studies about what it means to be queer and bad.

4. Forms of Waiting in the Game

As I demonstrate below, waiting is, in *TLOU2*, a phenomenon that permeates the narrative and, subsequently, affects Ellie's antagonistic traits. Let me acknowledge right away that there are many philosophies of waiting, too many to summarize here. In my reflections on Ellie's waiting—for vengeance and other things—I draw specifically on notions formulated by Martin Heidegger in *Discourse on Thinking* (1959). To begin with, Heidegger states that if one is to have an authentic and meaningful relationship with the world the concept of "releasement" (in German *Gelassenheit*) is crucial. In short, someone who possesses releasement is "calm" or "composed," and the concept is often explained as a sort of "letting-it-be attitude." Also, in Heidegger's reflections on the entwinement of releasement and waiting, he distinguishes between waiting "for" and waiting "upon." Waiting "for" implies waiting for something specific. It is a form of waiting that involves expectations of a certain outcome at the end of one's wait. In contrast, waiting "upon" is an existential form of waiting that does not involve a specific goal: "In waiting [upon] we leave open what we are waiting for," Heidegger writes (1966/1959, 68). Thus, waiting "upon" can be understood as waiting "in good faith," that is, with an openness that waiting will lead somewhere (or not).

In *TLOU2*, Joel's death makes Ellie's waiting "for" vengeance (a tangible sort of waiting, i.e., for something specific) the main expression of waiting in the story. Throughout the game, Ellie's waiting is oriented toward that goal, and it never waivers. However, other examples can be identified as well, and they emphasize an overarching significance of waiting in *TLOU2*. For instance, when Ellie's quest for vengeance brings her and Dina to Seattle—a city turned into a quarantine zone surrounded by walls—the gameplay is characterized by time moving slowly. For Ellie and Dina, getting into the city is a tedious, methodical process (they must find ways to open gates, search through abandoned buildings, and so on), and Ellie is clearly impatient. "Where are these fuckers?" she asks,

[5] Huw Lemmey and Ben Miller, hosts, "James Levine." Bad Gays (podcast), March 12, 2024, accessed February 13, 2025, https://badgayspod.podbean.com/e/james-levine/.

which mirrors my impatience as a player. Like Ellie, I am eager to punish those responsible for Joel's death. But during the process of getting into Seattle, the game relies on waiting for something to happen (like encounters with infected or cutscenes moving the story forward) which makes Ellie's need for retribution a motive that stands out. "Haven't found any of 'em yet," Ellie says. "Hey, it's a big city," Dina replies, adding: "We barely started looking." As I see it, Ellie's impatience here signifies a lack of releasement, that is, she is neither calm nor composed, and, overall, she demonstrates an inability to let go of her desire for vengeance. In fact, it consumes her to a self-annihilating degree (more on that later).

After entering Seattle (where Ellie and Dina spend three days), Ellie pursues Abby and her group while Dina must wait in an abandoned movie theater for Ellie to return after her daily campaigns. The reason Dina stays put in the theater is that she is pregnant, which is also a form of waiting. Additionally, references to tangible waiting occur in handwritten notes found throughout the game, like: "Can't wait to sleep in the same bed with you again," or: "I'll be holding my breath, waiting for a sign that you're okay," and: "Can't wait to see you again." At one point, Ellie finds a note written by someone named Paige who is worried about her husband who has gone out scavenging for medicine: "It's been... I don't even know how many hours since you left," Paige writes. Sometime later, Ellie comes across a note written by Paige's husband, who has been ambushed and is about to die. His note reads: "My wife Paige is waiting for me back in the old conference center at Pike and Convention ... Please take her this medicine, she's pregnant and could die without it." Not only do the notes convey people's waiting to be reunited with their loved ones—which reminds Ellie of having suffered a tremendous loss and fuels her need for vengeance—but they also highlight that waiting is a key phenomenon in end-of-the-world narratives overall, since humans, in these types of stories, are forced to rely on pre-technological forms of communication.

Overall, Heidegger's definition of waiting "for" can be said to characterize the gameplay experience, despite one not knowing exactly *what* one waits for. The player is aware that something bad is bound to happen at some point (it is a videogame after all). To make it exciting, the game relies on suspense and build-up in tension while waiting for "jump scares," for instance. In the beginning of the story, the player can hear growls from infected inside an abandoned grocery store before entering it, not knowing how many they are, or where they lurk, but that they most definitely are in there. In general, to create suspense, the game includes scenes in which Ellie or Abby (and, by extension, the player) await infected (or human enemies) jumping out of the shadows and attacking them. But the foremost expression of waiting "for" something bad to happen occurs when Abby encounters Joel in the beginning of the story. The player knows that Abby is looking

for someone but is not aware that it is Joel she seeks.[6] However, as soon as she encounters Joel and his brother Tommy (Jeffrey Pierce), the atmosphere gets tense, and the events that unfold are infused with a sort of dreadful anticipation that something terrible awaits. Abby and her friends overpower them, and when Joel is shot in the leg (his kneecap is disintegrated) it is abundantly clear that it is not going to end well. He says to Abby: "Why don't you say whatever speech you've got rehearsed and get this over with." Abby notices a bag of golf clubs standing in the corner of the room, grabs ahold of one, and lets Joel know: "You don't get to rush this" which signals to him—and to me—that the ensuing torture must be suffered. In a sense, to move forward in the story, the player must endure waiting for the murder to transpire. The same is true for Ellie who enters the house where Joel is tortured, awaiting the worst. She hears Joel's screams from behind a closed door and as she opens the door and peeks inside, she sees him beaten and bloody on the floor. At this point, there really is no doubt whether or not Joel will die. I am simply waiting for it to happen. Neither Joel, nor Ellie or the player can be said to wait "upon" an uncertain outcome here. Ellie is struck down, held to the ground by Abby's friends, and forced to witness the violence. In my interpretation, the brutality of the sequence, in conjunction with its temporality being portrayed as suspended—in essence, time comes across as drawn-out and tense, and it is characterized by dread—affects Ellie's antagonistic behavior in the rest of the game. Essentially, the trauma of witnessing Joel's murder intensifies Ellie's desire to avenge him. Also, the narrative is built around waiting to find out *why* Joel is killed. So, Ellie's waiting for vengeance is entwined with waiting for answers.

Beyond expressions of waiting "for" various things (vengeance, loved ones to return, bad things happening, answers), an undercurrent in the narrative is that Ellie waits "upon" absolution (i.e., an existential form of waiting). In a series of flashbacks, the truth about Joel's actions at the hospital in Salt Lake City becomes known, and the player understands why Ellie and he are estranged. Ellie resents Joel for saving her because he did it for his own reasons, thereby denying her the chance to sacrifice herself and making her life "mean something." Their unresolved conflict makes Ellie's grief over losing Joel all-the-more profound, because she knows that she will never have the chance to repair their relationship. In a sense, she allows her grief over losing him (before being able to fully forgive him) to be conflated with the pursuit of vengeance. In a way, Ellie believes that

[6] In the opening scenes of *TLOU2*, the player is supposed to be unaware of the fact that Abby seeks Joel specifically. However, before the game's release, several scenes involving major plot points leaked online, spoiling Joel's death for players. Initially, it was believed that a former disgruntled employee at Naughty Dog (the game's developer) was responsible for the leak. Later on, it came to light that a young fan in the Netherlands hacked Naughty Dog's servers and leaked the scenes to expedite the release of the highly anticipated game (see, e.g., https://gamerant.com/the-last-of-us-2-leaker-naughty-dog-found-reason-why/, accessed February 13, 2025).

she is waiting "for" retribution, but actually, she is waiting "upon" an absolution that likely can never occur.

The final form of waiting in the game worth emphasizing is that Ellie—who is immune to the Cordyceps fungal strain—awaits being "outed" as such. Her secret comes to light at various points in the games (to a select few people) and constitutes yet another way that the narrative relies on the phenomenon of waiting to create suspense. Also, Ellie's waiting to be outed as immune connotes queerness in the sense that it mirrors having one's sexual orientation outed. However, Ellie does not fear being outed as a lesbian (she is out), and the game thus conveys that being outed as *immune* would have larger implications. In a way, portraying waiting to be outed as immune as a greater reveal than being lesbian works to normalize queerness in the game. Moreover, Ellie being bitten as a fourteen-year-old means that she waits to turn into an infected herself, even though she never does. At the end of the first game, she tells Joel: "I'm still waiting for my turn," a form of waiting that characterizes her entire life. Not having turned *yet* means that Ellie is still waiting for it to happen. The uncertainty involved (i.e., whether it will occur or not) can be understood as waiting "upon." Ellie is unaware of what exactly awaits her. The fact that she cannot be open with people about all aspects of herself makes her inherently lonely (despite the relationship with Dina). In my perception, Ellie deals with her loneliness by becoming completely consumed by the desire to confront and kill Abby.

5. Violence and Villainy

Throughout *The Last of Us* games' timeline, violence is a primary theme. *TLOU2* has even been referred to as an "orgy of violence" (Jones 2024, 45). Also, particularly in the second game, violence is intimately entwined with villainy. In its opening scene, Joel tells Tommy about what went down when he saved Ellie from the Fireflies in Salt Lake City four years prior. Images of dead people who have been slaughtered by Joel—including flashbacks of the doctor he shoots to save Ellie's life (Abby's father)—are juxtaposed with the brothers' conversation. The juxtaposition of images serves the purpose of raising the question whether the murder of the doctor was justified or not. Whereas Joel has a gun pointed at the doctor, the doctor has only a knife to his defense. In one of the flashbacks, the player must relive Joel executing the doctor, an action one is forced to participate in, which has been critiqued in previous scholarship (see Hayot 2021). Hence, almost immediately, the player is confronted with the notion that Joel's actions at the end of *TLOU1* might have been both exaggerated and unjustified. Even more so, it insinuates that Joel might have been the real villain in the first game (Horn 2024a). Overall, for me, the opening scene of *TLOU2* renders the feeling that I was left with at the end of the first game—essentially, that I was *relieved* to have saved Ellie from certain death—ambiguous.

Throughout the game, distinctions between heroic and villainous characteristics are consistently blurred, which differs from most other videogames. As stated by Alberto

Oya (2024), the most common form of narrative in games is "a heroic narrative [that] facilitates immersion in the gaming experience because it provides an ethical justification for the violence of the playable video game character. Thanks to the in-game heroic narrative, engaging in violent gaming mechanics does not require players to suspend their own ethical judgment" (37). *TLOU2* does not rely on such a narrative. Rather, one of its key aims (if not the most important) is to raise questions about what villainy is. On a tangible level, Ellie finds superhero collector's cards over the course of her quest, categorized either as heroes or villains. Those collector's cards can be seen as insignificant items, but they prepare the player for a "perspective change" halfway through the game that has been regarded as controversial (more on that shortly). After playing the first half of the story as Ellie, Abby becomes the main playable character at the halfway point. At that time, Ellie and Abby have finally met again, and a violent altercation awaits. But the altercation does not happen. Instead, the scene ends with a cliffhanger and the game jumps back three days in time. For me, being forced to assume the perspective of Abby is awful at first. Also, the game becomes characterized by a new intense form of waiting, that is, waiting to return to Ellie's perspective and "finish the job" (i.e., kill Abby). I am not alone in finding it awful to play as Abby. Following the game's release, many fans found the perspective change extremely provocative, which resulted in "review bombing," an internet phenomenon described as when "a large number of users post negative reviews online to lower the average score of the product—either as a collectively organized attempt to diminish its reputation or simply as a spontaneous way to express their discontent with the product" (Oya 2024, 41). However, when Abby meets and helps two siblings who have escaped a cult in Seattle—one of them is Lev (Ian Alexander), a trans boy—my opinion of her begins to change. Playing as Abby, a character that is portrayed as an outright villain at first, and gradually coming to understand her motives and actions (remember, her father is also murdered), is one of the game's most didactic and innovative aspects. Oya notes it as well: "it's not its gaming mechanics (violence, shooting etc.) that makes *The Last of Us Part II* an innovative video game," he writes, "but rather its ability to challenge the narrative common to the action video game genre" (2024, 37), primarily by posing ethical questions like if Ellie's quest for vengeance is even justified.

In *TLOU2*, Ellie consistently conflates justice with revenge, two concepts that are far from equivalent. Whereas revenge is commonly understood as a personal desire to punish someone responsible for crimes committed against you or your loved ones, justice is *not* based on personal desire to exercise judgment. Justice, rather, is defined as a moral process in which conflicts are assessed and resolved pragmatically. Ellie does not come across as particularly interested in the latter. When entering a courthouse in Seattle, Dina tells her that she would find it fun to be on a jury: "Sit down. Look at evidence. Try to tell if somebody's lying." In response, Ellie scoffs and says: "Just give me five minutes and

my knife. I'd tell you if they were lying or not," a statement conveying a disregard for justice and a preference for taking matters into her own hands. In fact, for Ellie, it is not enough that those responsible for Joel's death die. When she and Dina find a dead soldier from the WLF (the Washington Liberation Front, a military group to which Abby belongs), Ellie says, worriedly: "If those fuckers who killed Joel got taken out by some random infected…" thereby implying that *she* should be the one who kills them. Dina, the voice of reason in the game, notes: "Then they'd still be dead, Ellie" whereby Ellie replies: "I'm not sure that's justice," again conflating justice with her desire for vengeance. Later, after finding one of Abby's friends dead, Dina says: "Well… she's dead. How do you feel?" Ellie answers: "I'm pissed we couldn't talk to her," whereby Dina tries to reason with her: "Yeah. But she didn't hurt Joel. It would have been pretty fucked up to make her talk." Ellie's stance remains firm: "She travelled hundreds of miles to torture him. I don't care whether she held the club or not." Ellie clearly has become blinded by hatred and desire for retribution. Gradually, her anger completely consumes her, and it does not fade over time, rather the opposite. Throughout the game, Ellie embodies the thesis that acting on one's anger only fuels it (see Bushman 2002). In the final scenes, when Ellie has pursued Abby to Santa Barbara, her anger and antagonism reach their peak. Ellie murmurs that infected better not have killed Abby before she can do it herself, and when she realizes that Abby has been captured by a motorcycle gang, Ellie tells herself: "I better find her before these idiots kill her," not to save her, however, but to make sure that she is the one who executes Abby.

Considering the examples above, there is no doubt that Ellie embodies villainous characteristics. But her moral ambiguity is part of what makes her an intriguing character, as I see it, which is not an uncommon perception among audiences of popular culture. As Richard Keen et. al (2012) state, there are many "seemingly normal, well-adjusted people" (129) who are drawn to and root for fictional bad guys, characters that break society's rules or challenge its conventions. A possible explanation why people root for very violent bad guys (both Ellie and Abby are apt examples) is our innate aggressive drive as humans. Following Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theories about the "id" (a feature of the personality that works to satisfy our basic needs, desires, and urges, and is oftentimes unconcerned with the consequences thereof), Keen et. al suggest that experiences of violence in narrative media "may serve as an outlet for our aggressive tendencies" (2012, 137). Essentially, in a cathartic way with a villain as a proxy, we can live out our own immoral urges. Moreover, Keen et. al explain, the more we know about the underlying reasons for someone being a villain, the likelier we are to be empathetic with them (in *TLOU2*, empathy with Abby, for instance, is fostered after the perspective change, mainly because I come to identify with her).

Over the course of *TLOU2*, identifying with (or even rooting for) Ellie becomes all-the-trickier. Killing Abby's friends—picking them off one by one like an outright serial

killer—makes Ellie's villainous characteristics more noticeable than Abby's. Essentially, Ellie's propensity for violence—accentuated by her disregard of the concept of justice in favor of a personal desire for revenge—eclipses Abby's actions. As Charles Joshua Horn (2024c) points out, not only is Ellie unable to recognize that Abby's reasons for killing Joel are valid (from Abby's perspective, the murder of Joel is justice), but also, until the very end, Ellie is unable to see that their motives are almost identical (115–116). Throughout the game, Ellie unequivocally condemns Abby's actions, thereby demonstrating an inability to assess her own behavior critically. Horn argues that Ellie exemplifies profound self-deception that, in my understanding, is necessary for her to be able to engage in—and stomach—the brutal acts she perpetuates. For example, to extract information, Ellie beats an already dying person to death with a lead pipe. Also, she kills the love of Abby's life, and she even shoots and kills a pregnant woman. While Ellie is disgusted afterwards (in her defense, she did not know the woman was pregnant), the murder constitutes an ultimate low point that renders her a monster. As the events of *TLOU2* play out and Ellie becomes all-the-more perceivable as a villain, I come to realize that Joel might have been a villain too, which, subsequently, shakes the entire project of seeking revenge on those who killed him. Nevertheless, it has been argued that Joel is *not* a villain. Horn (2024a) emphasizes Joel's paternal feelings toward Ellie as crucial when discussing whether he is a villain or not and concludes that Joel's actions at the end of *TLOU1* are "morally defensible given that he interprets his moral obligation to protect Ellie as more important than his moral obligations to the rest of humanity" (1755). I want to underline that Horn's reasoning does not work as well on Ellie's actions in *TLOU2*. In contrast to Joel instinctively protecting "his child," Ellie *chooses* a path of violence and villainy. Because she endures waiting (mainly for vengeance), her antagonistic traits (e.g., her propensity for violence) become all-the-more prevalent throughout my gameplay experience. Although I, a queer scholar, truly appreciate that *TLOU2* includes unambiguous queer representation, the sum of Ellie's actions confirms that she definitely is a *bad* gay.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this article has been to examine Ellie's morally ambiguous, even villainous, behavior and concretize what sort of queer representation she brings to popular culture. In my opinion, the fact that Ellie, a main playable character in a hugely successful videogame, is a lesbian—thereby bringing queer visibility to a historically "un-queer" form of media—while simultaneously behaving in a far from exemplary manner, constitutes an important lesson. Not only does Ellie teach us that queer people, like all others, can be flawed to the point of being outright reprehensible, but also, she prompts us to look beneath the surface of her moral ambiguity. Why is Ellie bad? Is it because she is blinded by the need for revenge? What does her antagonism teach us? To think twice before acting on our violent impulses maybe?

Ellie's antagonistic traits help us acknowledge that queer objects of study—historical and current—need not be "respectable" to be worth engaging with. As emphasized by Kadji Amin (2017): "the alternative and the nonnormative—those terms most valued within Queer Studies—*need not be politically desirable or affectively pleasurable*; at times they might be experienced as barely tolerable, or more likely, as nauseating in the ways in which they twist the valued terms of the present to an unrecognizable state" (31). Remember, to deidealize is to recognize and accept *everything* Ellie represents; to dare to look beyond the most obvious fact that yes, she brings queer visibility to a major pop culture franchise (which is a good thing for sure), while also being honest about her flaws and complexities. On the one hand, Ellie's anger is relatable. Initially, I want to punish Abby too. On the other hand, Ellie's methods are questionable. Over the course of the game, I come to realize that *wanting* to punish Abby does not necessarily mean that I am *entitled* to.

As noted earlier, villainous behavior in queer characters tends to bring about a set of often-troubling associations, primarily that behaving badly is a consequence of being queer. It should be emphasized, therefore, that Ellie's queerness and villainous characteristics are unrelated. Queerness and badness are merely two aspects of her. It goes without saying that Ellie's function in *TLOU2* is not to teach players how to be queer. Rather, her journey teaches us something far more valuable, namely that if we allow ourselves to become blinded by hate for people we see as our enemies, we might, whether we are queer or not, inadvertently, turn into villains.

The main question in this article has been if Ellie's intense waiting for vengeance makes her antagonistic traits pronounced and turns her into a bad gay? Overall, the trauma of Joel's death fosters a burning desire in Ellie to avenge him, and because she is forced to wait for vengeance (and other things), the violence she perpetuates is increased and intensified. In the end—during a final confrontation between Ellie and Abby, who both are visibly beaten by the endless cycle of violence—I have arrived at a feeling of near pointlessness. Playing the game has made me sick of its nihilism and violence. At this point in the narrative, I am simply waiting for it to be over, which I believe is its intention. It is abundantly clear that an end to the *violence* is the only "happy ending" possible. Ellie's anger has consumed her to a self-annihilating degree. She has forsaken everything except her need for retribution, including a blissful family life with Dina and the newborn baby in a secluded farmhouse. When Ellie resumes her search for Abby, Dina refuses to sit around and wait: "So, what? I'm just supposed to sit here and wait for you, for god knows how long, just thinking you're fucking dead the entire time?" she says before Ellie leaves. Catering exclusively to her own needs and disregarding Dina's plea to stay is the definitive expression of Ellie not possessing releasement. She cannot leave her desire for vengeance behind, even if it means losing Dina, which, subsequently, signifies that the cycle of violence never stops until someone chooses to stop it. Ellie's lack of releasement

can be said to accentuate her antagonistic behavior. It is interesting, also, to emphasize that in the beginning of the game, Abby does *not* kill Ellie when she has the chance. Ellie and Tommy are spared because Joel is the one Abby wants to punish. In a way, the cycle of violence could have ended there, had Ellie possessed releasement. Arguably, Abby possesses releasement to a greater extent. She can leave her hatred behind when she has finally brought Joel to justice (as she sees it). Ellie and Tommy, however, cannot deal with their hatred. In the scene right before the perspective change, Abby says to them: "We let you both live and you wasted it!"—thereby drawing attention to the fact that Ellie, of her own volition, has chosen violence and villainy.

Before concluding, I want to emphasize two final things: First, during the confrontation at the end, Ellie witnesses the parental love Abby has for Lev which triggers her own memories of Joel's parental love and care for her. This makes Ellie finally forsake her quest for vengeance and release the self-annihilating rage within. Throughout the game, Ellie has committed monstrous acts of violence, but she does break the cycle in the end. Second, although Ellie's waiting for vengeance is a drawn-out affair, Abby's waiting is an even longer ordeal. When the player first encounters her (shortly before Joel is murdered), Abby has been waiting to avenge her father for *four* years. After the perspective change, I gradually come to the realization that Abby's desire for retribution has made her unable to form intimate connections with other people. Much like Ellie, Abby forsakes everything but her need for revenge, including the man she loves. By the end, I am left with the feeling that the two protagonists in the game are not all that different. Under other circumstances Ellie and Abby might even have been able to unite across their differences. Such alliances are certainly worth striving for, which, as I choose to see it, constitutes the game's ultimate message.

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Dualities of Safety and Terror in Queer Fiction

Audrey Heffers

Abstract

In American culture, the home is one of the core spaces of 'family values' that theoretically rejects queerness and nonconformity. However, queer fiction offers a counterpoint to this framework. By reclaiming Gothic and speculative elements for queer narratives, writers are able to reimagine the home, including the home-as-symbol. In particular, this article will examine the home and how female characters experience it as a site of both potential safety and potential terror. In part, this is born of a conflation of the feminine and monstrosity. These characters "maintain a discomfort with the scripts of heteronormative existence" (Sara Ahmed, *Queer Feelings,* 151). Here, I will look at the way that women conjure monsters for their protection (*Starling House,* Alix E. Harrow), are themselves objectified and made monstrous ("The Husband Stitch," Carmen Maria Machado), are haunted by generational traumas (*The Haunting of Alejandra,* V. Castro), and are monitored and demonized by an authoritarian government (*I Keep My Exoskeletons to Myself,* Marisa Crane). While the physical space of the home *can* operate as a space of privacy and safety, social expectations of heteronormativity and gender do not stop at the threshold of the home, and so gender expression/sexuality can still clash with social expectations in this space.

Keywords: queer representation; family; female Gothic; domesticity; female heroine, gothic fiction.

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1. Family Values

In American culture, the home is a core space of 'family values,' a space that theoretically rejects queerness and nonconformity. From the mainstream view, the family has been culturally coded as a white, nuclear unit consisting of one (straight, cisgender, masculine) father and one (straight, cisgender, feminine) mother and two-point-five children, ideally in a house in the suburbs. The pressure to conform to this model of home and family—one centered around both literal and metaphoric reproduction of cisgender and heteronormative existence—has been critiqued by queer scholars for decades, including (but certainly not limited to) the likes of Judith Butler (2000), Lee Edelman (2004), José Esteban Muñoz (2009), and Alison Kafer (2013).

Lisa Duggan coined the term "homonormativity" in 2002, defining it as "a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay

constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption" (2002, 179). Homonormativity operates under the idea that gay politics shouldn't seek to dismantle the systems-as-they-are, but rather should seek inclusion in these systems. The nuclear family serves as the ideal to be strived toward and, with queer citizens, homonormativity only promises this ideal at the expense of any additional civil rights or more radical change in the world. But the family—and perhaps especially the *idea* of the family—is couched not only in ideas of cisgender heterosexuality; it is also contextualized in particular sociocultural systems and politics, such as capitalism. Kafer, among others, takes her critiques a step further into the intersectional, writing in *Feminist, Crip, Queer* about American culture's "profound anxieties about reproducing the family as a normative unit, with all of its members able-bodied/able-minded and heterosexual" (2013, 69). The family is, in some ways, the status quo's first line of defense in a society, and so it becomes imbued with all of the ideals of what the 'norm' should be, and what all those whom are othered should aspire toward, no matter how impossible the norm is to actually achieve.

By implementing Gothic and speculative elements in queer female narratives, writers are able to reimagine the home, including the home-as-symbol, while grappling with the "extreme states" that Tom J. Hillard identifies in "'Deep Into That Darkness Peering': An Essay on Gothic Nature": "The literary Gothic mode is typically concerned with extreme states, such as violence and pain, fear and anxiety, sexual aggression and perversion, all of which have led many readers over the years to dismiss such texts as sensational and indulgent" (2009, 690). While queerness may be traditionally relegated to sexual perversion, queer fiction (and queer culture more broadly) certainly engages with these other listed themes of violence, pain, fear, and anxiety. (Among the many examples of queer literature with these themes are *The Well of Loneliness* by Radclyffe Hall (1928), *Orlando* by Virginia Woolf (1928), *Giovanni's Room* by James Baldwin (1956), *Maurice* by E.M. Forester (1971).) When writers critically consider the home as-it-was, the home as-it-is, and the home as-it-might-otherwise-be in popular culture, they engage in speculation that is more expansive and more inclusive instead of attempting to force reality into more narrowly-defined norms.

In Alix E. Harrow's *Starling House,* the way in which the Starlings talk about the titular house highlights its dualities, as a place of both danger and safety: one of the previous Starlings calls the house "their 'sanctuary'" (190). The house's wardens are not selected through blood or patrilineal legacy, but rather by the house magically calling out to "someone lost or lonely, someone whose home was stolen or sold or who never had a home in the first place… and they are never homeless again" (190). Through the years, Starling House was a refuge for the persecuted—first for Eleanor, as a penniless outsider and young girl who was left vulnerable, then for someone (quite literally) demonized for

their skin condition, Indigenous sisters at a so-called "boarding school,"[1] the child of sharecroppers, escapees from a U.S. Japanese concentration camp, queer women, etc. Opal describes it as a lighthouse, "except lighthouses are supposed to warn you away, rather than draw you closer" (10). Arthur, however, calls the house "a grave" (190). The occupants of this house do not have peaceful lives or deaths. Starling House is not one or the other, but rather both; it's a double-edged sword, handing out purpose and home alongside premature death all in one package.

Female characters inherit the home as a site of potential safety as well as a site of potential terror. In part, this is born of the culturally-imposed connections between women and domestic spaces. As such, the home can be safe because domestic spheres are (allegedly) designed to be safe for women, enticing them toward traditional gender roles, and/or violently enforcing those traditional gender roles when necessary. Ultimately, safety is a myth sold to women; as fiction writer Jane Mitchell writes in in "Reclaiming the Monster: Abjection and Subversion in the Marital Gothic Novel," "married life has promised much, including personal safety" (2018, 59). The myth is broken not only by a physical or mortal sort of threat, but also (perhaps especially) in situations where the woman has no one willing or able to protect them.[2]

Stories are weaponized as another means of terrorizing a woman in a society that "uses and abuses a woman's body" (Mitchell 2018, 67). These female characters often "maintain a discomfort with the scripts of heteronormative existence" (Ahmed 2014, 151). Women who refuse or are otherwise unable to fit gender norms within these "scripts of heteronormative existence" are often painted as figures that are not only wrong, but in some way twisted and grotesque. From this combination of elements, an association of the home with terror can emerge.

One form this association may take is the conflation of women and the monstrous—women who conjure monsters for their protection (*Starling House,* Alix E. Harrow) and women who are themselves objectified and become unhuman ("The Husband Stitch," Carmen Maria Machado). In particular, the monstrous is connected to women when they fall outside of the acceptable bounds of womanhood, whether their gender could be considered queer(ed) or not. Culture may impose itself on the home in other ways as well, breaking any hope of the safety of boundaries: the home may become a site of hauntings and inter-generational trauma (*The Haunting of Alejandra,* V. Castro), where the

[1] Note: these "schools" were created when "Indian children were forcibly abducted by government agents, sent to schools hundreds of miles away, and beaten, starved, or otherwise abused when they spoke their Native languages" ("US Indian Boarding School History").

[2] In *Starling House,* this happens with Eleanor and the Gravelys. In "The Husband Stitch," this happens with the narrator and her husband. These are the men whom they are supposed to trust—they are, after all, family in some way or another.

historical and cultural context imposes terror, or the home may become a site of state-imposed surveillance and demonization (*I Keep My Exoskeletons to Myself,* Mac Crane), where an imagined futurity and cultural context are responsible for imposing the atmosphere of terror. Women who have queer desires—such as the bisexual protagonists of *The Haunting of Alejandra* and "The Husband Stitch" and the gay protagonist of *I Keep My Exoskeletons to Myself*[3] —further threaten the heteropatriarchal home with their desire because they may, in fact, may not require a man's presence to make a home at all.[4]

2. Good Girls and Monsters

In *Starling House* by Alix E. Harrow*,* 19th century Eleanor dreams the monsters into existence with the help of an underground mystical river in order to protect herself from the men in her life in a way that no one else would. She then builds the Starling House to keep herself (and her monster-protectors) safe from the outside world. Centuries later, protagonist Opal, who lives in the run-down former coal town, is trying to take care of her younger brother since their mother's sudden death years earlier. Opal gets a job cleaning the local haunted house—the Starling House—and gets to know the house's mysterious owner, Arthur. This novel centers around things which are supposed to frighten—social outcasts such as Opal, as well as strange Starling House warden Arthur, and even the house itself.

In a novel-within-the-novel, written by Starling House's mysterious architect E. Starling (aka Eleanor), she writes of The Beasts of the Underland (i.e. her summoned monsters). Eleanor describes the beasts as dangerous, but she tempers this portrayal by describing her self-insert, Nora Lee's, relationship with the beasts: "A good girl ought to be frightened of them. She ought to run away. But Nora Lee, who was not a good girl and never would be, did not run away. She whispered her story to the Beasts of the Underland, and they rushed past her into the night, baying for blood" (2023, 135).

As it turns out, these beasts are real. The house's warden is tasked with preventing these beasts from killing people in the town. Opal eventually learns that the wardens of the house all eventually succumb to the monsters while trying to protect the town. Back in the 19th century, Eleanor Starling's father and uncles had stolen all her mother's money to start a coal business, and after her mother's death, these brothers—the Graveley

[3] It is possible to potentially read Eleanor Starling in *Starling House* as asexual and/or aromantic. It is not clarified in the text if she is straight but merely refuses abuse at the hands of men she's related to, or if she experiences romantic/sexual desire outside of the heteronormative expectations beyond this. Arthur Starling, however, is explicitly queer (namely bisexual).

[4] Such a notion may be presented as terrorizing to the idea of phallocentrism, where "the male, or male sexual feelings or activity, [is positioned] as the main subject of interest" (*Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary & Thesaurus*).

brothers—abuse Eleanor herself when she falls into their custody. After her father dies, Eleanor inherits everything, so one of her uncles forces Eleanor to marry him to get control of the family finances again. As Eleanor puts it,

> I kept waiting for someone to object, but the most I got was a pitying glance from the neighbors' maid, an awkward grimace from my uncle Robert. Everyone else drew away from me, like hands from a hot coal. They averted their eyes from evil and, in so doing, became complicit in it. I watched my uncles' sin spread over the town like night falling, and finally understood that no one was going to save me. (275)

Eleanor explains to Opal that the Beasts "were my own creations, born of my own desperate nightmares" (279). No one in town is willing to save Eleanor because the town's economy relies on the Graveley brothers and their coal business. Additionally, holding the town hostage by its economy grants the Graveleys the power to terrorize enslaved people. It is one of these previously enslaved men who helps Eleanor figure out how to use the magic of the river to defeat her uncles. Eleanor's story is primarily set in/after 1869, in the formerly confederate state of Kentucky; slavery only became illegal in Kentucky four years prior, with the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1865. In this cultural context, this previously enslaved Black man would likely not have been considered human by most people in town, nonetheless a respectable man, and yet he was the one who gave Eleanor the tools to protect herself. Harrow often plays with the irony of the respectable (which should, in actuality, be acknowledged as reprehensible) and the unrespectable (that should, in actuality, be acknowledge as heroic or righteous).

Eleanor Starling (who uses Nora Lee as a self-insert) writes and illustrates a children's book based on her fantastical lived experiences. Eleanor describes "the creatures from my nightmares, animals made of teeth and claws, fury and justice. They looked at me as if they'd been waiting for me. I wept with joy, with terror, with awful love. I told them about my uncle and showed them the ring on my finger, and they ran into the darkness. When they returned, their muzzles were wet and red" (276). Monsters with bloodied muzzles are the things nightmares are made of, but there is a twist here: the monsters are the protectors, the men are the true predators. Because Eleanor's uncles and father were deemed respectable by the town, simply by virtue of being white men with power and money, the Gravelys are not seen as the agents of terror which they, in reality, are.

The nicest of the three Gravely brothers (by relative standards) tries to come for Eleanor's land, wherein, "he told me all the things he could do to me, with nothing but a friendly drink and a firm handshake with the right person" (278). Among the potential accusations he lists against Eleanor are familicide, witchcraft, and madness. Eleanor realizes "They would all believe him. Can you imagine it? A world that bent to your every whim, where any story you chose to tell became the truth, simply because you said it?" (278) There is power here in reality—the beasts are a real tangible threat, for example—but there is just as much power in stories and belief. If the town believes the Gravelys to

be upstanding citizens, then they will make that the reality, even if it requires them to ignore inconvenient truths. If the town believes the stories that Eleanor Starling is evil or wrong in some dangerous capacity, then her entire life is changed by little more than their perception. Even within the traditionally tamed domestic space—the Starling House—Eleanor can be painted as an agent of terror. To be fair to the townspeople, this is not merely perception; after all, Eleanor has to become what she is perceived as—dangerous—in order to save herself through a kind of vengeful terrorization. She is an agent of terror insofar as her imagination is what birthed the monsters that still pose a threat to the town two centuries later.

In "The Husband Stitch" by Carmen Maria Machado, the central character is one who can be read as monstrous even as she tries to follow the rules of being a "good girl" like Eleanor does. Instead of creating monsters, the narrator is herself inhuman; in fact, all of the women in the story are, as symbolized/literalized by the presence of a ribbon on each of them. Machado retells a story about the girl with the ribbon around her neck; the perspective character in this iteration is not the boy who loves her, but the girl herself. It is the magical ribbon that keeps the girl's head attached that implies a kind of other-than-humanness about this character. Machado's narrator frequently switches between her own story and folktales that involve women in danger.

"The Husband Stitch" is even more confined to the domestic space, mentally and physically. After the narrator marries, the house is the setting of most of the remainder of the story. The narrator sets a stage where the story can be interpreted as a performance, both in terms of its play-like cues[5] and the oral storytelling cues[6]. The narration of her own life is interspersed with stories that the narrator has heard; some of these stories are familiar urban legends/folk tales, such as the hook-handed man. The folk tales and ghost stories are sources of gendered terror—a woman asks for something sexual and is committed to a sanitorium; a girl goes to a graveyard after dark and dies of fear; a girl dies because her secondhand wedding dress came from a dead woman; a woman cuts out her own liver to feed to her demanding husband. Men are often a source of terror in these tales, even when they are not necessarily evil in intention—the man has his partner committed because she transgresses propriety; getting married indirectly kills the girl in the dead woman's dress; the woman sacrifices her own body (her liver) to avoid her husband's wrath.

[5] The story opens with a list of characters and how their voices should sound.

[6] For example, the instruction "(If you read this story out loud, the sounds of the clearing can be best reproduced by taking a deep breath and holding it for a long moment. Then release the air all at once, permitting your chest to collapse like a block tower knocked to the ground. Do this again, and again, shortening the time between the held breath and the release.)" (7).

Even the moments where the narrator finds pleasure become recentered on her husband's pleasure. The narrator begins taking an art class to find self-fulfillment. (This art class is one of the few times the story leaves the house while the narrator is a married woman.) When the narrator feels attraction to a female model she meets through the class, this has the potential to be a transformative realization about her identity. However, her husband merely uses this moment for his own sexual fantasy: "He is so glad of this development that he begins to mutter a long and exhaustive fantasy as he removes his pants and enters me, and I cannot hear all of it, though I imagine that within its parameters she and I are together, or perhaps both of us are with him" (2017, 23).

In one of the embedded narratives, a woman in a folktale might survive by living with wolves, as she is later reported as being seen hunting and "suckling two wolf cubs" with whom "she felt a kind of sanctuary, peace she would have found nowhere else. She must have been better among them than she would have been otherwise. Of that, I am certain" (13). Once again, a character uses the word "sanctuary." Inherently, sanctuary implies the dualities of safety and of terror, even in cases where the sanctuary itself is not violated. A sanctuary, after all, is a place of safety. However, implied in that safety is the unsafe, that which the person must be kept safe from, the reason for the boundary that has been erected. Terror, then, waits beyond the borders of sanctuary. For Eleanor and the other Starlings, the house is the place of safety set against the terror caused by the people in town; for the wolf-mother in "The Husband Stitch" (and, it is implied, for the narrator herself), being among wolves is perversely safe, whereas being around people (in a patriarchal society that, these folktales tell us again and again, hurts women) is the place to be afraid.

In "Reclaiming the Monster: Abjection and Subversion in the Marital Gothic Novel," Jane Mitchell writes,

> The gothic uses and abuses a woman's body; in this genre, she is 'moved, threatened, discarded, and lost'. Any woman who defies normal[7] expectations of marriage—home and motherhood—or demonstrates an awareness of her own sexuality or interest in sex, is vilified and forced into abject space. Even within marriage, the wife who enjoys sex ends up either dead or incarcerated. (2018, 67)

The home is supposed to be a place of safety. However, the narrative prophecy that Mitchell lays out still comes to pass in "The Husband Stitch": Machado's narrator *does* enjoy sex and *does* end up dead; no matter how much of herself/her body she gives, her husband will not be satisfied until he consumes all of her. She narrates at the end of her life "He's not a bad man, and that, I realize suddenly, is the root of my hurt. He is not a bad man at all. To describe him as evil or wicked or corrupted would do a deep disservice to him. And yet—" (30) And yet he still hurts her; and yet he still kills her; and yet he still

[7] See also: cisgender, straight, and femme.

never lets her have any place of true safety and sanctuary and peace, not even within her own mind, not even within her own body. He does not know what the outcome will be (curiosity kills the wife), but he *does* know that untying the ribbon causes his wife distress; her feelings (and, notably, her lack of enthusiastic consent) are not enough of a deterrent for his own desires-turned-demands.

3. The Curse of White Colonizers

In *The Haunting of Alejandra* by V. Castro, Alejandra's status as a queer woman of color without a wealthy background makes her feels lucky to have even been noticed by someone like her husband (who is white, straight, handsome, relatively wealthy, and able-bodied). As a result, Alejandra shrinks herself to fit what her husband wants her to be. At the opening of the novel, she is living the heteronormative dream: her husband as bread-winner, her as homemaker, and three children in a big house. Mitchell writes that

> For the gothic wife, married life has promised much, including personal safety. Once she has committed to the institution of marriage, however, the institution becomes knowable and, at the same time, *unheimlich*: strange, unwelcoming and even menacing. There is, therefore, an opportunity within the marital gothic to explore how women… increasingly felt terrorised by the restrictive roles of wife and mother, through the concept of the uncanny. (59)

In *The Haunting of Alejandra* by V. Castro, Alejandra has been "promised… personal safety" by her marriage to a financially stable white man. But her home—and "the institution of marriage" it symbolizes—still cause Alejandra to be "terroised by the restrictive roles of wife and mother." She is haunted by the creature that has plagued the women of her family for generations through a curse on mothers.

This haunting creature takes on the guise of La Llorona to maintain power, keeping a foothold in the world through the terror that such an idea inspires. The literal woman who originates the La Llorona lore—Rosa, a mother out of options and without support—is separated from the demonic creature in the text. Like in *Starling House* and "The Husband Stitch," stories have power, and society tries to wield that power to keep the status quo intact.

In response to widow Rosa's suicide, and her simultaneous attempt to drown her daughters in the river with her, the townspeople say "*she will most definitely be punished for her deed. Yes, wander the Earth looking for them. Never able to rest. La Llorona crying for her children*" (Castro, 2023, 254, italics original). The creature "heard the story of this woman who attempted to take the lives of her children and herself. What a wonderful disguise to frighten them. How they conjured nightmares out of thin air. So potent were these images and tales. They thrived on the fear. Killed themselves with it. It would come and go as this La Llorona" (254). The creature knows the power of stories, and the way in which humans lend their belief to ideas that can then become reality. The creature

is merely taking advantage of such facts of human nature in order to perpetuate its own power—because stories, after all, have that power to lend.

The creature begins haunting this family line during colonization. One of Alejandra's far-back ancestors, Atzi, stays behind to give her family (including her daughter) a chance to escape the colonizers and find safety elsewhere. After being raped repeatedly by a white colonizer and becoming pregnant, Atzi thinks about how "Death was the only escape from the curse of being a branded and conquered woman, as Atzi was. She was a thing they used and ridiculed. They called her brown skin *inferior* and *savage.* Yet they lusted after it, and her" (35). As Atzi is dying, the creature comes to her and promises Atzi's daughter "will live a long, healthy life, ensuring [Atzi's] bloodline continues" (37). Atzi proposes that the creature take the souls of the colonizer's children growing inside of her: "When I die, take the souls of these demon seeds that were forced upon me. Kill the man who did this to me… Take his family and save my daughter" (37).

After this, the creature terrorizes first-born daughters in this bloodline, trying to get them to die by suicide. The creature's primary tactic after a woman has a daughter is to convince that woman that she is a terrible mother and worthless; sometimes, the creature even works to get these women to hurt their children. For Alejandra, this haunting often takes place in the home itself—the bathroom during a shower, a child's bedroom. The creature feeds on "*Unhealed pain and rage growing riper generation after generation*" (87, italics original). Atzi herself reflects on how, after colonization, "generations upon generations would suffer. She thought of their stories. Their voices. Their histories, all up in flames. All of it, unwanted. It was after their defeat at the hands of the conquistadors that the real nightmare had begun for her people, especially for the women and girls who had to submit to these strange men" (35). Atzi is referring to colonization by white men, but this sentiment is also true of the demon that becomes attached to their family.

The creature haunting Alejandra is not working alone. American cultural systems, and those who benefit from them, are co-conspirators in the attempts to get Alejandra to die by suicide. The generational curse is as much tied to patriarchy, white supremacy, and heteronormativity as it is to the literal supernatural creature in question. For starters, Alejandra was adopted by a white Christian family that was abusive in ways subtle and obvious. She remembers, at one point in the narrative, her adoptive father beating her physically; in that moment, a young Alejandra fears that there may have been a sexual desire from him mixed up in that. But there are also less obvious abuses throughout her childhood, including disconnecting her from her culture, as well as subjecting her to parentification[8] by forcing Alejandra to assume caretaking responsibilities for their other adopted children.

[8] "Parentification occurs when youth are forced to assume developmentally inappropriate parent- or adult-like roles and responsibilities" (Dariotis et. al.)

And ,whether he realizes it or not, Alejandra's husband[9] contributes to the interior circumstances that make space for Alejandra's suicidal ideation. The lasting effects of colonization work in concert with the lingering creature to terrorize Alejandra. As she plays with her children, Alejandra thinks about "the decisions she'd made in life. She had always just stacked the blocks without knowing what she was building. Her soul languished within the rusty scaffolding of the tower she'd built" (29). Her name is not listed on any of the family's assets (like the deed to the house), and her domestic role is imposed, both of which make her feel invisible and less valuable. Her husband alternates between dismissing her concerns (like her desire for more financial freedom) and lashing out at her (such as when he mocks the altar she puts up with items of cultural significance to her). No matter how much Alejandra attempts to be "the respectable person" who "is chaste, modest, does not express lustful desires, passion, spontaneity, or exuberance, is frugal, clean, gently spoken, and well mannered" (Taylor 2010, 145), she will never be enough, nor will she be fulfilled by the requirements of this kind of marital partner and mother.

As in "The Husband Stitch," it is revealed that the home—this space that should be one of safety—is easily made into one of terror, no matter how much others (especially the men in their lives) tell these women otherwise. As Alejandra thinks about her husband early in the narrative, "Lately his presence felt like a plastic bag over her head… she instinctively grabbed her neck with one hand, as if there really were a bag around it, before inhaling deeply through her nose. What if she removed his hands and removed the bag? She didn't want to think about the fuss it would cause. They'd call her selfish, unloving" (Castro 2023, 23). In refusing phallocentrism and the heteronormative family unit, Alejandra is the one who would be cast as the villain of the story, no matter her feelings or her husband's part in causing them. Feminism scholar Dianna Taylor writes in "Monstrous Women" that

> Given the presentation of a particular cultural perspective simply as normal, women, people of color, working-class people, and gays and lesbians will continue to fall short of professional standards and, hence, to be viewed as inferior… these groups are marked as Other, and are therefore always in a position of having to prove themselves in ways that white bourgeois men are not required to do. (2010, 146)

Alejandra has to work to figure out what gives her a sense of safety—her therapist, her children, her birth mother, the women she dreams of (i.e. ancestors), and, eventually, the

[9] It is worth noting that her husband is not just perpetuating patriarchal systems; as a white, straight, cisgender, relatively wealthy man who lacks critical self-reflection, he is perpetuating white supremacy, heteronormativity, and oppressive class dynamics in addition to—and in combination with—patriarchal ideals.

choice to work as a curandera. Safety, for Alejandra, comes from a place of support networks, independence, and feeling fulfilled in her life's work.

4. For Your Own Good: Violating Boundaries of Home

State-imposed surveillance can be responsible for imposing the atmosphere of terror, especially if such surveillance violates the boundaries of home, inflicting fear under the guise of heightened safety. Mac Crane's *I Keep My Exoskeletons to Myself* is set in a speculative dystopia, one where extra shadows are literally added to violators of the law. It is positioned by the president as more humane than prisons, but this fantastical style of law and justice are still distributed with all the prejudices and inequities that make the current American justice system problematic. The president paints the shadows as the ultimate solution to a justice system rife with inequities, skirting altogether the systemic injustices that are truly at the root of prison abolition movements.

Protagonist Kris has two shadows because she hurt her wife, Beau, by accident. Her daughter is also born with two shadows because Beau dies in childbirth, and so the extra shadow is added automatically because their child (on the most technical of levels) 'killed' her. Kris considers Shadesters like herself to be made of "Two parts fearmongering, one part delusion, three parts manipulation. Season heavily with deceit labeled as *promise.* Stir consistently on low heat, so low hardly anyone notices it's on" (2023, 20-21). Taylor writes that the State's

> regulation and protection intersects with the disciplining of individual bodies within the context of modern societies, Foucault argues, and the norm is the mechanism along which this intersection occurs. It circulates between the disciplinary and the regulatory… While the norm still founds and legitimizes power, it now does so specifically by linking disciplinary power and biopower and thus facilitating the flow of power through and across all facets of modern societies. (2010, 128)

By the beginning of the novel, the government also has cameras in every room of people's homes. As they're told by the government official who takes part in the installation, "*This is for the good of everyone, you'll see. People behave better when they know they're being watched*" (Crane, 2023, 40, italics original). The boundary of home, then, does not provide any protection from state surveillance by the central timeline of the novel. Taylor specifies how "unlike natural monsters, moral monsters are not readily discernible, [so] techniques such as control, surveillance, and examination are required in order to distinguish them from normal individuals" (2010, 132). The state terrorizes anyone who is othered—queer people, people of color, past 'offenders' of various kinds, etc. Performance artist and scholar Pavithra Prasad writes "In a Minor Key: Queer Kinship in Times of Grief" that "The violence visited on queer and trans people is often felt as violence against us all" (2020, 115).

When Kris' baby falls out of her hands, the state sends an agent who then tries to take the baby away even though she's fine. Kris, desperate to keep her child, has to threaten to out this agent to the government—as gay and as an enjoyer of kink—to get him to leave. This moment, devoid of context, may seem monstrous—threatening to out somebody for their sexuality or how they engage in consensual sex acts is certainly not a great or noble choice. However, Kris does what she feels is necessary in that moment to protect herself and, most especially, to protect her child. She has mixed feelings about this threat after, but it does keep her child in her custody. This agent, it should be noted, still terrorizes their family through the years, often anonymously from the shadows. This agent kills their Shadester friend/roommate, and attempts to turn other children against Kris' child at school.

Prasad writes that "Queer identity binds us in various configurations of kinship because this kind of family helps us survive daily microaggressions, dismissals, or invalidation by hegemonic institutions… However, cis-white-heteronormativity perpetuates irrational fears around professional and personal queer kinship systems" (2020, 116). Kris finds what safety she can with her child, her father, her friends, and her new girlfriend. Eventually, they use her girlfriend's connections as a former state employee to block the cameras at Beau's mother's home; they decide they'll all move out there. Kris' new girlfriend says "It's safer for us… She lives on ten acres of land. We can explore and be free" (2023, 333). The answer of where to find safety is still home, both in terms of people and place. However, like Alejandra's choice to divorce her husband and be free, the living arrangements need to change for safety to be instated. For Kris and her family, the search for sanctuary means that they must escape the surveillance that is an intentional and constant source of terrorization for them, instead building a new home where they can thrive.

5. Conclusions

Creative Writing Studies scholar Danielle L. Iamarino writes in "Codifying the Creative Self: Conflicts of Theory and Content in Creative Writing" that

> recent accord between creative writing and social movement is not itself a new development, but is a natural (if traditionally neglected) element of a craft that has always prioritized an awareness both of the human condition and the social climate of the era. The practice of translating thoughts to writing is unmistakably collective, absorbing the features of its environments, contracting and expanding around points of interest or concern. (2015, 1124)

Kris, Alejandra, and Eleanor all need to create their own sanctuary rather than work within existing arrangements and systems and hope that safety will be provided to them. The status quo is not set up for their safety, especially once they begin to veer outside of their assigned gender roles (which are very much based in cisnormative, heteronormative, patriarchal traditions). If these women remain, they may end up dead like

Machado's narrator. The oppressor offers only terror—in the form of the state for Kris, and in the form of traditional heteronormative marriage for Alejandra, Eleanor, and Machado's narrator. It is the oppressed women who must become creative—even monstrous—in order to survive a world built to destroy them.

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DEMISEXUALITY IN ALI HAZELWOOD'S STEMINIST SERIES: *THE LOVE HYPOTHESIS* (2021) AND *LOVE, THEORETICALLY* (2023)

Lucía Bausela Buccianti

ABSTRACT

This article examines the representation of demisexuality in Ali Hazelwood's *STEMinist series*, particularly in *The Love Hypothesis* (2021) and *Love, Theoretically* (2023). The main focus of the analysis is on how these two novels' demisexual protagonists navigate self-discovery, romantic relationships to determine whether there is a subversion genre expectations in contemporary romance. While demisexuality remains an underrepresented identity in literature, Hazelwood's works offer valuable insight into the challenges demisexual people face, including negotiating their emotional and sexual boundaries. The analysis explores how Hazelwood's protagonists—Olive Smith and Elsie Hannaway—embody different aspects of the asexual spectrum, particularly in their conditional approach to sexual attraction and emotional bonding. The paper first addresses Olive Smith in *The Love Hypothesis*, highlighting how her emotional connection with her romantic partner gradually evolves into sexual attraction, aligning with the demisexual experience. Olive's journey illustrates her internal struggle between social expectations of romantic and sexual relationships and her personal pace of developing attraction. The analysis then shifts to Elsie Hannaway in *Love, Theoretically*, focusing on themes of unwilling consent, compulsory sexuality, and the tension between social norms and demisexuality. Elsie's complex relationship with intimacy and her orientation reflects broader issues of erotonormativity and challenges the traditional narrative of physical desire in romance. The conclusion synthesizes these findings, questioning whether Hazelwood's portrayal effectively normalizes demisexuality or whether it is constrained by the romance genre's conventions, particularly regarding erotonormativity. Ultimately, this study contributes to discussions on asexual representation in popular fiction and the evolving depiction of lesser-known identities within mainstream genres.

Keywords: demisexuality; asexuality; queer literature; contemporary romance; asexual spectrum.

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1. DEMISEXUALITY IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE: AN INTRODUCTION

According to the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), a major online resource and forum for the 'ace' community, an asexual individual is a person "who does not experience sexual attraction or an intrinsic desire to have sexual relationships" (2024). Currently, this definition is perhaps the most accepted one, as it leaves room for 'gray areas', unlike Anthony F. Bogaert's, who defines asexuality as "a complete lack of sexual attraction and/or sexual desire" (2012, 5), thus failing to acknowledge the

experience of people whose sexual attraction might be conditional. Unlike other sexual orientations, the focus of attraction for a demisexual person lies on the conditions under which it occurs, rather than the frequency or intensity of sexual desire, being therefore neither absent nor constant. Whereas people have identified as asexual for decades—even bonding over this spectrum in the 1970s in self-published works and zines such as *Lavender Woman*, or the *riot grrrl* zines in the 1990s (Kliegman 2019, n.p.)—the term 'demisexual' was first coined in 2006 by AVEN. The concept of demisexuality, however, had already been gaining visibility in online communities in the early 2000s, particularly through social media, as people felt identified with a label that helped them define their experiences outside more well-known sexual orientations. As LGBTQIA+ movements gained visibility in the 2010s, terms like 'demisexuality' were included in discussions about 'allosexuality', 'asexuality' and 'graysexuality'. Over the past decade, demisexuality has gained increasing recognition in both media and academic discussions, and nowadays, demisexuality is considered part of the range of identities within the asexual spectrum[1], and it is defined as a person "who can only experience sexual attraction or desire after an emotional bond has been formed . . . [which] is different from the choice to abstain from sex until certain criteria are met" (AVEN 2024). In other words, demisexuality refers to a specific orientation within the asexual spectrum.

However, like many nuanced sexual identities, its understanding and acceptance tends to vary. Many demisexuals still have to explain what this orientation is and defend its validity, on top of dealing with confusions and misconceptions, such as the idea that demisexuality is 'normal' because everyone desires emotional connection before intimacy: for demisexuals, emotional connection is a necessary condition for sexual attraction, not a preference. In a study carried out by Hille et al., the number of people who claimed that an emotional connection was extremely important to them was a vast majority in the pool of participants who identified as demisexual (69.3%), and significantly low in that of self-identified asexual people (29.6%) (2020, 821). Even though demisexuality is recognized as part of the asexual spectrum, the challenges it poses to conventional ideas about sexual attraction and relationships usually generates resistance and prejudice. Therefore, its visibility has been and is extremely important for those who identify this way.

In literature, the representation of demisexuality is still evolving: although there are no comprehensive studies of explicitly demisexual characters yet, it is possible to highlight a few authors who have explored the concept in the last decade. Particularly,

[1] Even though nowadays the label 'asexual' defines an orientation, the term 'asexual spectrum' encompasses the different orientations of people who experience little to no sexual attraction. This spectrum is defined by opposition to the 'allosexual spectrum', which includes orientations such as straight, gay, bisexual, pansexual, and so on.

the young adult (YA) genre has been key in the exploration of diverse sexual identities, including demisexuality, since such works often focus on characters coming to terms with their identities. Amanda K. Allen provides an insightful overview of the studies on the YA genre from the 1980s to the present, arguing that contemporary YA literature is witnessing a proliferation of romance plots that contest the primacy of heterosexual and cis-gendered couples, and that the scholarship of these works tends to favour these publications as "helpful" to the LGBTQIA+ community (2020, 182–3). However, whereas there have been several studies on queer literature, Allen argues that the platform or medium which represents a wider variety of gender identities, expressions, and sexual orientations is fanfiction (2020, 183) as they do not stick to marketing strategies and can be as explicit as their author wishes. This connects with Allen's problematization of the label 'Young-Adult', which even nowadays carries a connotation of what is appropriate material for teenagers, and her consideration of the label 'New Adult' for romance novels which include issues connected with sexual exploration and sexual intercourse (2020, 185).

One of the most well-known YA novels that features a protagonist in the asexual spectrum is Alice Oseman's *Loveless* (2020), a coming-of-age story in which Georgia, the protagonist, comes to terms with the fact that she does not feel sexual and romantic attraction to other people. Other noteworthy examples are Kathryn Ormsbee's *Tash Hearts Tolstoy* (2017), whose main character , Natasha, is an 'Internet-famous' romantic asexual who struggles to communicate her orientation to a potential partner, and Claire Kann's *Let's Talk About Love* (2018), in which Alice, a black biromantic asexual girl, has to navigate the disappointment of being broken-up with because of her orientation and the fear of being accepted as asexual by a new love interest. Beyond the conventions of either YA or 'New Adult' literature, the inclusion of an asexual character seems to entail at least a subplot concerning a search of identity and a fear of rejection, and the speculative fiction genres are fertile ground for such themes since they delve into exploring the nature of social norms and identities. In *The Raven Cycle* series (2012-2018) by Maggie Stiefvater, Ronan Lynch is not explicitly labeled as demisexual, but fans of the series have interpreted him as demisexual based on his lack of interest in physical attraction and his deep emotional connection with another character, Adam Parrish. Kameron Hurley's *The Stars Are Legion* (2017) presents a world in which asexual reproduction is possible, and thus sex is a purely recreational activity or completely unnecessary. Finally, in romance novels, where physical and romantic attraction are essential for the development of the plot, asexual characters bring a refreshing set of possibilities on the nature and shape of romantic relationships. The protagonist in *Perfect Rhythm* (2017) by Jae, Holly, is an asexual woman hesitant to embrace intimacy who falls in love with a pop star nonetheless, and the novel emphasizes how physical desire and romantic interest are completely different matters.

Literature featuring demisexual characters often highlights themes of emotional connection, the nuance of attraction, and the complexity of relationships, normalizing and bringing visibility to this lesser-known identity. And yet, the most significant source of asexual visibility in fiction is not the editorial market. Online platforms like *Archive of Our Own* (*AO3*) and *Wattpad* host a large sum of fanfiction works featuring explicitly demisexual characters and their particular, realistic concerns. As Cerankowski states, "[t]he wider community in this era of new media does not simply decentralize a political movement, but reveals its diversities, its possibilities, and its willful and productive obscurities" (2014, 140). A quick search on *AO3* reveals how popular stories representing asexuality are: under the tag of 'asexual character', 36,902 works are listed, and the number is even larger for those tagged with the label 'asexuality', which amount up to 42,839 at the moment of writing these lines. These figures, of course, would pale in comparison to the ones indicating the amount of users who have read each of these works, which entails that there is an avid readership of characters who express asexual traits. Fanfiction authors explicitly name, label and explore asexuality in ways that traditional publishers have not yet embraced. Therefore, it does not seem illogical that Ali Hazelwood's debut novel, *The Love Hypothesis* (2021), stems from a *Star Wars, Episode VII: The Force Awakens* (2015) fanfiction piece that the author originally posted on *AO3*. This work, which features a demisexual protagonist, paved the way for a series of works by Hazelwood that shares themes, plot structure, and demisexual representation. *The Love Hypothesis* soon became a *New York Times* bestseller, earning positive reviews from *Entertainment Weekly* and *Publishers Weekly*, as well as being nominated for 'Best Romance' in the Goodreads Choice Awards. The novel sold around 750,000 copies worldwide, and a film adaptation was announced to be in the works in 2022.

Ali Hazelwood's *STEMinist* series focuses on romances featuring women in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields. These novels and novellas blend humor, a passion for science, the struggle of making a living in academia, and romantic relationships, highlighting the challenges and triumphs of young women navigating their early careers and personal lives. In *The Love Hypothesis*, Olive Smith is a biology PhD candidate who fakes a relationship with a young professor, Adam Carlsen, to convince her best friend that she's moved on from a previous crush, only to later realize that her feelings for him may not be as fake as she thought. The second novel in the series, *Love on the Brain* (2022) introduces Bee Königswasser, a neuroscientist who is forced to collaborate with her nemesis, Levi Ward, on a NASA project. Similarly, *Love, Theoretically* (2023), the third title, tells the story of Elsie Hannaway, a theoretical physicist who despises Jack Smith-Turner, an experimental physicist, until their interactions blossom into a romance. A collection of three novellas ("Under One Roof," "Stuck with You," and "Below Zero") titled *Loathe to Love You* (2023) follows three female scientists—Mara, Sadie, and Hannah—who also work in different STEM fields and navigate complicated

romantic situations with men they initially clash with but eventually fall for. In general, all the works in the series explore the challenges of young women who are trying to make a place for themselves in male-dominated fields, and as a consequence, they must deal with different forms of sexism at the workplace. Combining light-hearted romance with themes of gender dynamics in STEM, and featuring relatable characters, witty dialogue, and strong female protagonists, Hazelwood's novels have become bestsellers. And yet, despite their popularity, the fact that most of their protagonists are demisexual is seldom mentioned.

Therefore, this article seeks to examine how the main characters in Hazelwood's works portray different aspects of the asexual spectrum with a clear emphasis on demisexuality in order to explore how they subvert expectations for the contemporary romance genre and, in a broader sense, how demisexuality challenges the traditional notions of physical desire and romantic relationships. The first section focuses on *The Love Hypothesis* and the conventions of the contemporary romance genre, analyzing Olive's emotional bonding to her romantic interest, her process of self-discovery, and her decision to either communicate her orientation or keep that to herself. The second section follows this up with an analysis of *Love, Theoretically* with a specific focus on the concepts of unwilling consent, compulsory sexuality, and amatonormativity. Finally, the conclusion brings all these points together to argue whether these works provide an effective general picture of demisexuality or whether demisexuality is an excuse to preserve genre conventions and erotonormativity.

2. Finding 'The One': Demisexuality and Romance

The plot of *The Love Hypothesis* (*TLH*) by Ali Hazelwood is decidedly that of a contemporary romance novel, as it follows Olive Smith, a third-year PhD candidate at Stanford University, who impulsively kisses Adam Carlsen, a young and intimidating professor, in order to convince her best friend that she has moved on from her ex so that she can date him guilt-free. Even though Adam is known for his brusque demeanor and anti-social preferences, he agrees to a fake-dating ruse with Olive, since it can help him with his academic funding situation. As the fake relationship continues, Olive and Adam develop a routine of spending time together in public, which leads to Olive seeing a more supportive, kind, and thoughtful side of him. Therefore, while Olive plans to remain emotionally detached, small moments of vulnerability, witty banter, and undeniable chemistry lead her to rethink her considerations of Adam, especially as she realizes that he has feelings for her as well. Since Olive does not have too much experience with relationships, at first she is hesitant to acknowledge her own feelings, and then she has trouble understanding Adam's romantic advances for what they are. However, once she comes to terms with her attraction towards him, their relationship moves forward as they become physically intimate. After solving a conflict involving a senior male professor who

tries to take advantage of her vulnerability, Olive faces her fear of rejection and confesses her romantic feelings for Adam. For these reasons, *TLH* stands as a heartwarming and witty romance in which Hazelwood brings together female empowerment, the particular struggles of women in STEM, and the challenges of juniors in academia.

Apart from its evident romantic content, the marketing strategy for *TLH* has been focused on the novel's key tropes to present it as such, targeting young female audiences, and creating social media buzz fit to its strategic branding on platforms such as 'BookTok' and 'Bookstagram'—*TikTok*'s and *Instagram*'s book communities, respectively. By sharing video reviews, text posts, photos, snippets, and different types of edited images about the book, users have generated content which served as word-of-mouth marketing focused on the witty dialogue banter, the chemistry between the characters, and the novel's swoon-worthy moments, which led to a rapid sales growth. Consequently, *TLH* has mostly capitalized on tropes such as 'fake dating', 'grumpy/sunshine' dynamics, and 'slow-burn romance', all of which are highly popular in online readership due to the humorous and heartwarming situations they entail, but also because of the fact that they are extremely popular fanfiction tags that readers are already familiarized with. Moreover, the 'STEMinist' subgenre, featuring strong, relatable female protagonists has provided a fresh take in a genre where the contemporary concerns of young women are put on the spotlight, generating a sense of identity and a strong feeling of community. The STEM element adds intellectual depth and attracts a niche audience—namely, women in academia and/or STEM fields—who have been traditionally underappreciated or underrepresented in romance fiction. By focusing on Olive's experiences as a woman in science, the marketing strategy for *TLH* appeals to readers interested in feminist narratives that emphasize gender equality and empowerment. Finally, the illustrated cover of *TLH*—showing a realistic yet simplified, comics depiction of Olive and Adam kissing—fits the aesthetic that dominates the contemporary romance genre today. In correspondence with the lighthearted plot, this artistic style attracts a readership drawn to modern romance while announcing very explicitly the sort of story that this is.

Despite its huge sales success and online popularity, there are little to no instances of this novel being referred to as 'queer literature', and certainly, the fact that Olive is a demisexual woman is almost never mentioned or acknowledged.[2] As opposed to more classic female protagonists who initially swear off from falling in love ever again due to heartbreak and disappointments, Olive's initial hypothesis—"the farther away I stay from

[2] For practical purposes, it is necessary to clarify that this article employs the term 'queer' to refer to gender identities and sexual orientations that are not 'straight' and 'cis-gender'. As the article problematizes, many readers may not fully interpret Olive and/or Elsie as queer heroines, given that they are cis women and their romantic interests are cis men. However, Hazelwood explicitly describes them as demisexual and their exploration of their attraction is key to the novels' plots. Therefore, I understand them as queer characters who are the protagonists of queer novels.

love, the better off I will be" (Hazelwood 2021, n.p.)—stems from honest disinterest and a lack of understanding of the social dynamics connected with flirting, dating, and sexual attraction. For instance, since Olive does not experience immediate physical attraction to Adam, she expresses her incredulity towards the idea that someone could find a teacher-student affair an interesting piece of gossip (41). The five dates that Olive has been to in her life "ranged from moderately boring to anxiety inducing to horrifying," and her negative experiences have left her wondering "What do people who are dating do?" and whether she is "unlovable" even though she "would have loved to have someone in her life" (47-8). For this reason, her initial reasons for kissing Adam are purely practical, and she faces her fake relationship as a research project with a clear plan of action and a strict set of rules, which explicitly state that Olive and Adam shall not have sex (55), and that there will be no dates with other people (57). The fact that Olive has to will herself to even say the words "no sex" (55) proves her discomfort with physical interactions, and she even reflects that "if for some inexplicable reason Adam wanted to have sex with her, she wasn't going to be able to go through with it" (56). Certainly, Olive is not only dumbfounded by the idea that Adam would find her sexually attractive—as she has not come to terms with the implications of such a feeling herself—but she also avoids situations in which she may be perceived in such a way, arguing that "there's better things to use [her] time for" in a rather defensive tone (57).

Despite the fact that these traits fit the experiences of most asexuals, who are not at all motivated by sexual attraction, particularly in the selection of a partner (Decker 2014, n.p.), Olive eventually feels sexually attracted to Adam. However, this takes place after a complex process of emotional bonding and self-discovery. At first, even Olive's understanding of 'love' does not seem to fully grasp a distinction between romantic bonds and other meaningful connections, since she describes becoming friends with Anh, her best friend, as "love at first sight" (Hazelwood 2021, 24). The fact that Olive feels that she is "alone in the world" (24) does not pair with a nostalgia for a romantic partner so much as the general loneliness of a person who does not have a meaningful connection with friends or family, and she wonders whether "spending so many years alone had warped her in some fundamental way and that [is] why she [is] unable to develop a true romantic connection, or even the type of attraction she often [hears] others talk about" (47-8). Although common, this hypothetical pathologization of asexuality in any of its forms has been discarded, as "[b]ad experiences do not make people stop being sexually attracted to others, nor does 'giving up' on finding a partner" (Decker 2014, n.p.). After Olive has spent a good amount of time and formed an emotional connection with Adam, she begins to feel attracted to him due to her new appreciation of his character, his kindness, and how he supports her in her academic struggles. Once Olive becomes familiar with "his expressions, his size, his distinctive way of being in the same space as her" (Hazelwood 2021, 106), she opens the door to physical desire. Although she has found Adam

handsome from the beginning, noticing, for instance, that "his clothes fit him well" (69), or that a new haircut makes him look better than usual (79), these initial realizations sank into her as something strange and unsettling, mostly due to the lack of an emotional bond. Even as they share a first kiss, Olive describes sexual arousal as something which is "not unpleasant, but confusing and a bit scary nonetheless" (109).

Even though "for years [Olive had] wondered whether she was asexual and she had realized only recently that she might be able to experience sexual attraction, but only with people she trusted deeply" (56), a systemic part of the plot is connected with her process of self-discovery as a demisexual woman, even if she does never explicitly label herself in such a way. In *The Invisible Orientation* (2014), Julie Sondra Decker includes several bullet point list meant to help questioning people which delve into experiences concerning or close to identity, relationships, sex and physical contact in general, but ultimately emphasizes that "as enlightening as finding a label can be, it isn't absolutely necessary" (n.p.). Olive spends much of the book reflecting on her lack of understanding on how physical attraction seems to come easily to others, and she finds difficulty in processing such attraction when it comes to herself:

> For a long time she'd thought Adam handsome and attractive. She'd touched him, sat on his lap, considered the vague possibility of being intimate with him. She'd thought about him, about sex, about him and sex, but it had always been abstract. Hazy and undefined. Like line art in black and white: just the base for a drawing that was suddenly coloring on the inside. (Hazelwood 2021, 258)

In fact, Olive is embarrassed by the amount of time it takes her to realize that what she is feeling is sexual attraction (Hazelwood 2021, 259), which contributes to a self-deprecating idea of herself in which she perceives herself as "weird," "wrong" and abnormal (267-8). Olive's self-discovery as a demisexual person is intrinsically tangled with the progression of the plot, as she pieces together her romantic feelings, her first sexual fantasies, and Adam's advances and intentions (268), a conflict that is finally solved when she realizes that physical intimacy in any of its form should disgust her, and yet it does not (280).

As it is the case in many queer narratives, the 'coming-out' scene is directly connected with the climax of the narrative, and in spite of the fact that Olive does not use the term 'demisexual' as a label, she perfectly describes her orientation as such. As she explains to Adam, it is not that she wants to not have sex: she just does not particularly want to have it: "I don't feel any sexual attraction unless I actually get to trust and like a person, which for some reason never happens. Or, almost never. It hadn't, not in a long time, but now—I really like you, and I really trust you, and for the first time in a million years I want to" (267–68). This resonates with the thoughts which are common to other

people within the asexual community, such as Angela Chen,[3] who defines herself as asexual due to the fact that she never thinks about sex involuntarily and could be easily celibate, among other traits (2020, n.p.).

Still, whereas this scene serves to lay the foundations of a respectful relationship between Olive and Adam, she does not come out to her friends, who confess to be happy that she is "finally getting laid" (Hazelwood 2021, 136). Even though there is some ambiguity as to whether her friends know whether Olive is in the asexual spectrum or they think she is merely introverted, there is a clear equation of being sexually active and having a sense of fulfillment. This is why one of the most common struggles for asexual people is dealing with the pressure of having sex even if they do not want to, "because they're told over and over again that something worthwhile and fulfilling and beautiful is waiting in coitus, and they're told they 'just can't know' until they do it" (Decker 2014, n.p.). However, even though academics and members of the asexual community have been making efforts to dismantle this myth, it does seem to work out for Olive, as the climatic sex scene of this contemporary romance rewrites all of her negative considerations and changes her indifference towards sex.

According to Jodi McAlister (2014), "the sex scene in the modern romance is often crucial to driving the plot, and can often serve as a microcosmic representation of the hero and heroine's relationship, highlighting the problems that are preventing them from immediately attaining their happy ending" (301). On the one hand, Olive's sexual orientation challenges the idea that the heroine of a romance novel must be irresistibly attracted to the romantic interest, allowing for a deeper exploration of what it means to connect with someone, but on the other, it pays equal importance to sexual intercourse as a decisive ritual and a turning point in a woman's life as other contemporary romance novels do. However, as opposed to these other works, the subject of Olive's attraction is explicitly defined as Adam, which prevents her as a heroine from falling into clichéd misunderstandings and dilemmas that stem from an indecision of choosing the right person. For instance, she observes that Tom, a fellow scientist and Adam's best friend is "clearly fit," with "abs that were defined enough to be easily counted. And yet, for some reason, it did absolutely nothing for Olive" (Hazelwood 2021, 133).

Olive's journey of self-discovery offers a nuanced representation of demisexuality, as her experiences challenge conventional romantic and sexual dynamics, present the importance of emotional connection and trust, but also conclude in a genre-adequate

[3] Angela Chen is investigative journalist who has published essays in The New York Times, The Atlantic, The Guardian, National Geographic, and more. Her book *Ace: What Asexuality Reveals About Desire, Society, and the Meaning of Sex* (2020) began to be developed while she was working as a science reporter at The Verge, and it includes interviews with linguists, psychologists and biologists, as well as testimonials of people who identify as 'ace' (meaning, 'asexual').

resolution. The fact that Olive does not label herself as demisexual but still expresses the key features of this identity in her 'coming-out scene' reflects how her experiences diverge from normative understandings of attraction and relationships. This is further demonstrated in several studies, such as Castañon de Carvalho's, which concludes that self-identified demisexuals prioritize the experiences connected with love, intensity, truthfulness, conservatism, mental connection, or non-monogamy, while other aspects more traditionally tied to sexuality remain in the background, such as preferred gender (2021, 46).[4] Despite Olive's eventual sexual attraction to Adam, her discomfort with social expectations surrounding sex and romance is problematized throughout the novel, thus highlighting the pressure of conforming to heteronormative scripts of fulfillment through sexual activity that asexuals feel.

3. Keeping Up Appearances: Demisexuality and Social Acceptance

Following the genre, themes and tropes of *TLH*, *Love, Theoretically* (*LT*) by Ali Hazelwood is a contemporary romance that centers on Elsie Hannaway, a theoretical physicist who wishes to be a full-time researcher but works as an adjunct professor and barely manages to make ends meet. Because of her low income, Elsie works as a fake girlfriend, pretending to be the perfect partner for clients in need of a companion at events or family gatherings. Even though she has to deal with complicated clients every once in a while, she has developed the habit of adjusting her personality to the needs of the people around her, which proves extremely useful at a job which involves systematically lying about one's life and background. One of such fake dating jobs involves helping Greg, an asexual man in his twenties who is constantly assailed by his family due to the reasons why he is single, and consequently, he is reluctant to come-out to them. Elsie's fake identity then crumbles when she meets Gregs's brother, Jack Smith-Turner, who not only somewhat sees through her ruse but also turns out to be one of the members of the interviewing committee for Elsie's dream job as a researcher in MIT. Since Jack is a renowned experimental physicist with a reputation for being particularly skeptical of theorists, he acts cold, dismissive, and distrusting of Elsie. Despite the initial tension, Elsie eventually sees a different side of Jack—one that is kind, deeply intelligent, and passionate about physics. As a romantic connection develops, they work through their differences, mostly those connected with Elsie's compulsive lying, her maladaptive need to constantly please other people, and the rift between their professional fields in academia.

[4] In her Master's thesis, Joana Castañon de Carvalho analyses the role of discourse in the construction of a demisexual identity by interviewing nine Brazilian women who identify as demisexual. Castañon de Carvalho explores the role that gender and sexual attraction play on the lived experience of demisexuality, highlighting how these individuals seek to depart from heteronormativity and the particular impositions they face by being women.

Similarly to *TLH*, *LT* features all the genre elements of a contemporary romance, reinforced by the happy ending in which the two protagonists have found a way to establish a romantic bond. Besides this, the marketing strategy for *LT* followed the successful steps of Hazelwood's previous novels, focusing mostly on familiar romance tropes connected with fanfiction tags—such as the 'enemies-to-lovers' dynamic or 'workplace rivalry'—, the *STEMinist series* label, and the strategic use of social media and influencer support. The 'slow-burn' romance and the intellectual tension between Elsie and Jack provide chemistry-filled interactions and satisfying resolutions to fans of the genre, but perhaps most importantly, *LT*'s marketing as part of the *STEMinist* series not only attracted readers who were already fans of her previous books, but also drew in a new audience interested in feminist romances and the representation of women in science. By focusing on the challenges of women in academia, particularly those in STEM or in precarious positions, the book offers a relatable perspective on career and romantic struggles that resonates with readers. Hazelwood's brand continuity as a contemporary romance author, highlighted by the cohesive illustrated covers with bright colors and clear-line drawings, remains familiar and fresh by presenting new motifs, themes, and scientific fields and disciplines, which has kept her established readership excited while 'BookTok' and 'Bookstagram' also create anticipation and excitement for her books.

The fact that Elsie Hannaway is demisexual, however, is never part of the marketing strategy either, and a vast majority of the social media buzz also seems to look over this essential detail in the book. Not only does Elsie reflect on her orientation in very clear terms—even clearer than Olive in *TLH*—but many aspects of her character and her journey echo the experiences of people in the asexual spectrum. For instance, she thinks to herself how she is still trying to figure herself out within the spectrum (Hazelwood 2023, 149), how she is so unfamiliar with sexual arousal that she struggles to recognize it when she feels it (147), and even jokes that since sex does nothing for her, maybe her kink is being complimented by leading scholars in her field (36). Elsie's attraction for Jack does develop over time, once she has overcome her strong negative impressions of him and their professional relationship has finished. Even though Jack is a conventionally attractive person, Elsie does not immediately want or need any sort of physical connection: it is through their conversations, mutual respect for each other's passions, and emotional vulnerability that Elsie finally wishes to kiss or have sex with Jack. However, she does not come to terms with this fact after a process of self-discovery, which goes from wondering why Jack "brings out the blushing adolescent in [her]" (150) whenever sex is mentioned, to the literal confession "I think I may be attracted to you" (274).

Beyond Elsie's inability to initially understand sexual attraction because of her orientation, she also fails to contemplate that other people might find her sexually attractive. On the one hand, this stems from her insecurities, rooted in her obsession with projecting perfection at all times: Elsie's concept of the perfect girlfriend, daughter, sister

and friend does not allow for awkward situations or mistakes. For instance, she is hesitant to share a bed with Jack not because of the proximity, but because she cannot control what she does at night: "what if I move too much or snore or take up too much space? A cover hog is the Elsie no one wants" (2023, 195). However, not engaging in sexual activity also clashes with the traditional dynamics of romantic relationships, which is why her past romantic experiences were mostly focused on being the person her partner wanted her to be, and her engagement in sexual activities was completely void of personal enjoyment or interest. Much as an actress stepping into a role, Elsie 'performs' romance: she has had sex with her previous boyfriend because that is 'what a girlfriend is supposed to do.'

These interactions fit Nagoski's concept of 'unwilling consent', which is configured by fearing the consequences of saying 'no', thinking that saying 'no' will only lead to insistence, feeling an absence of desire and an absence of desire for desire, and the hope that saying 'yes' means not being bothered anymore (in Chen 2020, n.p.). Furthermore, in a study carried out by Houts in 2005, 28% of women said their first sexual experience was consensual but not exactly wanted (1092), a situation akin to Elsie's experiences. Elsie justifies her participation in a coercive relationship through her need to make other people like her, a desire which Chen (2020) also reflects on when she states that "[sex] gave [her] the feeling [she] had always wanted: not sexual pleasure, but the thrill of specialness" (n.p.). As Elsie explains to Jack, "Mostly, I wanted him to have a version of me he could enjoy" (2023, 248). For Elsie, having sex with a boyfriend is similar to a business transaction or a contract clause, as the idea of attachment by means of physical connections completely escapes her at first.

Therefore, conflict rises between the protagonists in connection with consent. When Jack pushes Elsie to tell him what she enjoys in terms of sex, she is at a loss for words—not because of her lack of experience, but because she has never reflected on what she enjoys. As "[p]eople who have never felt sexual attraction do not know what sexual attraction feels like, and knowing whether or not they have ever felt it can be difficult" (Hinderliter 2009, 620), Jack is rightfully worried about securing his partner's "enthusiastic consent," meaning that Elsie wants him, feels desire, and does not fear any sort of consequences (Chen 2020, n.p.). In a similar way to *TLH*, the sex scene in *LT* allows the female protagonist to realize the wonders of sexual intercourse with the right person, and even though she is neither a virgin nor scared about the physicality of sex, her orientation as a demisexual woman enables her to start a romantic relationship in which her attitude towards sex is never problematized again. As a woman who had never paid any mind to starting either casual or long-term relationships, the resolution of Elsie's character development steers away from asexuality-adjacent issues and focuses more on her fear of rejection. For instance, when her best friend, Cece, makes jokes about how infrequently Elsie has sex, she never confronts her about being unknowingly

inappropriate or hurtful, and the social tendency to pity or mock people who are not in romantic relationships thus prevails (Chen 2020, n.p.). In fact, Elsie does not really come out to anybody, and her identity as a demisexual woman is interwoven in her character development as a people-pleaser in recovery.

In this sense, *LT* can be read as a contemporary romance which highlights the experience of a young woman regardless of her sexual orientation insofar as she is attracted to a man. According to Hannah McCann and Catherine Roach, "[t]he sex-positive, feminist claim for representations of sex in romance is rooted in the fact that the genre is one of the few spaces in the culture that embraces the idea of women's authentic sexual pleasure and that delights in the depiction of female orgasm" (2020, 418), and certainly, the fact that Elsie eventually becomes able to enjoy sex is a key plot point, which she is only able to do because her lover is interested in exploring her sexual needs (2020, 419). Nevertheless, in Jack and Elsie's relationship consent is a major issue, and the discussion of intimacy boundaries is a key scene in this novel—as well as in *TLH*—, which is not often the case in allosexual romance fiction. As Ellen Carter (2020) explains, in ace-spectrum romance fiction, checking in and seeking a lover's explicit consent "becomes a conscious process where both parties check in with each other about how things are moving and adapt to their situation the attitudes and assumptions inculcated from allosexual norms. As a result, relationships are crafted to the specific needs of these individuals rather than borrowed from societal expectations" (13).

Perhaps more explicitly, Greg's subplot is built on the struggles with coming out to family and friends: the reason why he hires Elsie as a fake girlfriend at the beginning of the story is to avoid annoying questions on his lack of partners at family gatherings, and he eventually explains everything to his brother, Jack, which allows the latter to finally act on his feelings for her. As Greg is only featured in a few scenes in the novel, it is not possible to fully know the repercussions of his coming out with the rest of the family or how he engages with members of the queer community. However, it is possible to guess that Greg has struggled with coming out in general as "[i]n many cases, lack of sexual attraction is a problem regardless of whom that attraction might have been directed toward" (Chen 2020, n.p.), since compulsory sexuality is a problematic issue even within queer groups. In fact, Greg's first attempt to come out to Jack was dismissed: "He took me aside and said that he . . . couldn't imagine ever wanting to be in a romantic relationship. And I told him he shouldn't worry. That it was still early and he'd find someone. That it was normal to be nervous before becoming sexually active. That he should just keep an open mind" (Hazelwood 2023, 149). Since Greg is a secondary character, the resolution to his particular conflict takes place in the background, and eventually Jack reports the conversation that he had with his brother, how he apologized for not listening to him before, and assured him of his support from that moment on. The final step in this subplot is connected with the way Greg overcomes his family's queries, and instead of coming out

and explaining his orientation to them, he seems to merely tell them to leave him alone (380). Ultimately, while Elsie starts a romantic relationship with Jack, Greg remains single, which corresponds with the results found by Copulsky and Hammack: "asexual individuals were least likely and demisexual individuals most likely to currently be in a relationship" (2021, 227).

As it seems thus far, demisexuality—and asexuality—are ironically invisibilized in these novels despite being a core source of the protagonists' struggles and being mentioned as orientations in connection with Greg. In the case of Elsie, her chameleonic habits have even led her to speak and joke about sex with the standard normalcy of her society, invisibilizing her own orientation in an attempt to fit in. She establishes parallels between things that bring her joy and sexual terms as if she had a similar amount of experience to her peers, daydreaming about Jack face-planting on the floor as better than sex (Hazelwood 2023, 54), or having an orgasm after a colleague pointed out in public that his experiments were not producing good results (124). This is perhaps why Jack's initial confessions do not shy away from communicating that he finds Elsie sexually attractive (158), that he has fantasized about her (195), and that he has feelings for her (189). Something that Chen (2020) highlights in connection with amatonormativity is how it is woven in society, including legal rights (n.p.). This is precisely why Jack's love confession includes the idea that he wants to eventually marry Elsie just so that she can have access to his health insurance. "Romantic love within marriage confers privileges that other forms of devotion cannot . . . Spouses can share each other's health insurance, as well as military, social security, and disability benefits. They can make medical decisions for each other" (138).

For all the reasons mentioned above, *LT* addresses the complexities of self-defining one's identity and setting healthy boundaries in romantic relationships in connection with demisexuality. Elsie's relationship with Jack serves as a field to explore the tension between social expectations of romance and physical intimacy and the way people in the asexual spectrum experience them. In this sense, there is further evidence of how deeply rooted and widespread erotonormativity leads to asexual erasure: as the experience of sexual attraction is positioned as normative and expected, it captures "not only sexual energy but that more general energy engaged in constructive activity tending toward unity and synthesis: the kind of energy we see at work in narrative sense-making, for instance" (Hanson 2014, 345). Therefore, Elsie's peers might perceive her and her relationship with Jack as heteronormative, and consequently, their worries about her well-being are eased due to the social conception that romance brings fulfillment—an idea perpetuated by romance fiction.

4. Conclusions: Compulsory Demisexuality

In general, Hazelwood's novels provide a positive portrayal of demisexuality: the fact that this orientation does not explicitly lead to mental health issues, or that the characters are not directly discriminated against because of it provides a refreshing and heartwarming take on queer experiences. *The Love Hypothesis* and *Love, Theoretically* feature a journey of self-discovery and acceptance that echoes the narratives in the rest of literary works featuring asexual characters cited in the introduction. Olive's experiences with sexual attraction—her focus on an emotional connection, her delayed physical attraction, and her discomfort with casual relationships—are consistent with the most widely accepted definitions of demisexuality and central to the resolution of the romantic plot. Meanwhile, *Love, Theoretically* highlights the importance of being honest to oneself and to others to establish healthy emotional bonds, while also addressing the ongoing challenges of visibility and acceptance for individuals who do not fit conventional sexual paradigms. Therefore, Hazelwood's stories are a significant contribution to the romance genre, queer literature, and broader discussions on sexual identity, as they provide a positive outlook on the lives of people in the asexual spectrum, which refreshingly contrasts with a reality in which they are prone to mental health issues and even suicidality (Yule et al. 2013).

However, these novels also seem to fall into the social tendency observed by Przybylo, in which adults are expected to evolve into sexual beings, "that is, grow into being interested in sex and propelled by sexual desire" (2019, 93) and sexuality, though cleansed of some heteronormative issues, is still and end goal. It seems, then, as if demisexuality is an easy answer: it is very rarely problematised because the main characters feel mutual attraction on the same level and the erotonormative status quo can be maintained. Since *The Love Hypothesis* and *Love, Theoretically* reinforce certain traditional romance tropes, such as the significance of the sex scene as a pivotal moment, McAlister's concept of "compulsory demisexuality" serves to explain the convenient resolution of this contemporary romance, as it "is one of the most dominant cultural sexual scripts for women in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, especially when it comes to virginity loss" (2020, 11). Certainly, genre conventions are met because of the fact that Olive and Elsie are demisexual, which could not have been possible if they belonged to other areas of the asexual spectrum which steer toward sex-aversion. Even though these novels provide a positive–or, following Allen, 'helpful'–representation of asexuality and demisexuality with characters whose path to intimacy and love is shaped not by conventional passion but by the slow building of trust and emotional connection, demisexuality operates as an excuse to ultimately fit within genre conventions and include the currently popular sex scenes of the contemporary romance market.

As this article has focused on two novels of the *STEMinist series*, the exploration of tropes and dynamics in connection with demisexuality in Hazelwood's oeuvre still leaves

room for further discussion. As Allen observes, there has been an "explosion" of scholarship in the last ten years regarding romance novels, particularly from the YA and New Adult genres, with a focus on women's, gender, and fandom studies (2020, 184). This article is merely a start in questioning demisexuality representation, and there is a need to study literary asexual representations as a whole from a modern understanding of the term. In this regard, the questions raised by Carter (2020) beg for further research on characters within the asexual spectrum: How many ARF novels are published in each future year, and through which channels? How favourable is the literary market to ace-spectrum voices? Will novels continue to educate characters (and readers) about asexuality? Will ace characters increasingly find their 'happily ever after' in the largest romance subgenre of cisgender heteroromantic novels, making those who identify as ace-spectrum just another love-worthy minority? (15). As the *STEMinist series* proves, demisexuality, though underrepresented, is gaining visibility in literature and other media, particularly in genres that value emotional depth and self-exploration, such as contemporary romance. As more writers and readers embrace the full spectrum of sexual identities, demisexual characters are likely to become more common and diverse in both their portrayals and the marketing campaigns of queer literature.

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Goncharov: A Self-Aware Queer Mirror on Tumblr

Alba Roldán-García

Abstract

Packed with homoeroticism and symbolism, *Goncharov* is a mafia movie from 1973 about the rivalry between a Russian mob and the Italian mafia in Naples. However, *Goncharov* is unlike any other production by Scorsese, since it is a fabrication by Tumblr. In a community effort which began on November 18th, 2022, thousands of Tumblr users convincingly conceived the plot and the characters of *Goncharov*, adapting the conventions and stereotypes from its supposed genre. Nevertheless, *Goncharov* is also quintessentially Tumblr, which the presence of fandom and the queer readings of the movie give away. From the tenets of cognitive linguistics and the tools of Text World Theory, this paper attempts to unravel the cultural knowledge and assumptions underlying *Goncharov,* focusing particularly on its reflection of LGBTQ+ representation in films. A corpus of 150 Tumblr posts has been manually analyzed to identify the mental frames and cognitive blocks which the content of the said posts activates. The results reveal the coalescence of the past and the present of LGBTQ+ characters in TV shows and movies, perhaps influenced by the noticeable presence of the LGBTQ+ community on Tumblr.

Keywords: cognitive linguistics; frame theory; text world theory; Tumblr.

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1. Introduction

On the days after November 18th, 2022, Tumblr users from all across the platform conceived a brand new mafia movie: *Goncharov,* directed by Scorsese in 1973. In their posts they proposed and analyzed characters, themes, plot lines, and behind-the-scenes trivia from a film that did not exist at all, adding to the complexity and the plausibility of the fabrication. The discussions and responses around *Goncharov* were so similar to previous Tumblr fan reactions to TV shows and films (Turner 2023, 54) that Goncharov reached not users from other social media, who fell into the trap, but also its director, Scorsese, who jokingly confirmed his involvement in the production of the movie a few days later.

Goncharov followed Goncharov, its eponymous protagonist, and Katya, his wife, in Naples, where Goncharov was trying to spread the influence of his Russian gang while competing against the local mob. The initial consistency of some of its alleged features, such as the cast and the production team behind it, were all derived from a photo of a boot uploaded on Tumblr and by a subsequent movie poster designed by user beelzeebub

who was inspired by the said image (cf. Turner 2023, Codega 2022). Nevertheless, despite the contradictions in the plot and narrative of *Goncharov*, Tumblr users remarkably behaved like a collective whole and, without any prior agreement, managed to create not only a movie, but also the lore surrounding its production and reception, and its own fandom (Turner 2023, 9).

Goncharov is a Tumblr creation, as its queerness and predominance of fandom reveal. In spite of its unprecedented repercussions—for Scorsese himself played along, and several journals, such as *The New York Times*, rushed to discuss the phenomenon (Codega, 2022) –, *Goncharov* has not attracted much academic attention. The focus of scholarly work has solely been placed on the influence of Tumblr on *Goncharov*, which has been examined as a Tumblr game (Turner 2023). However, Tumblr users and, therefore, *Goncharov* do not live in isolation. They arise from the intersection of various social and cultural circumstances which leak into the phenomenon of *Goncharov*, furnishing it with a cognitive framework. Codega (2022) has also acknowledged the presence of other components, such as the place of the filmography of Scorsese in popular culture. Thus, besides Tumblr as a platform and community, it would be safe to assume that there are other cognitive pillars sustaining *Goncharov*, such as the filmography of Scorsese. Furthermore, the emphasis which Tumblr users placed on the romance between characters of the same gender in *Goncharov* points at another root of the phenomenon: LGBTQ+ fictional characters in the 1970s.

Considering this trinity of fields of knowledge and experience, this study aims at deepening the understanding of *Goncharov* as a phenomenon of not only Tumblr but also LGBTQ+ culture. To discern the mental processes and associations that led to the inception of *Goncharov*, this paper relies on cognitive linguistics and, more specifically, on Text World Theory (Werth 1994) to dissect its mental building bricks. Consequently, this work revolves around the next research questions: First, which frames do Tumblr users activate to articulate the different mental spaces of *Goncharov*? And secondly, how does *Goncharov* reflect the evolution of LGBTQ+ media from the 1970s to the present day?

The paper will be organized as follows: The first section will develop the theoretical approach and the historical and cultural context of the study. The second section will provide a summary of the data and the method followed for the analysis. The third section will present the quantitative and qualitative results of the study. The last section will conclude with some final remarks and suggestions for the future.

2. Theoretical background

2.2 Frames and text worlds

As has already been mentioned in the introduction, this paper takes a cognitive linguistic approach, according to which the bidirectional association between mind and language renders meaning experiential and cultural (Hart 2014, 109). Meaning does not reside in a

word but rather emerges from the cognitive processes resulting from the knowledge and experience linked to the said word (Langacker 2002, 61). Thus, meaning is contextual (Chilton 1996, 57).

Within meaning making, cognitive linguistics distinguishes various levels and units. Domains concern broad and "general areas of conceptualization" and offer the context in which speakers bestow sense upon words through a network of connected frames (Radden and Dirven 2007, 11). Frames furnish domains with structure, for they rise as the "relatively stable sets of facts about a domain" (Chilton 1996, 70) which shapes and organizes its cognitive structure (Chilton 1996, 58). Frames follow an analogical logic: In order to comprehend their reality, the speaker will apply similar frames to new situations resembling past circumstances (Chilton 1996, 33). This way, frames as constituents of, and keys to, the cognitive space of *Goncharov* are placed at the center of the proposed analysis.

From the concept of "domains" stems the idea of "worlds" (Werth 1994, 207), which are "conceptual domain[s] representing a state of affairs." There are three layers within worlds: discourse world, text worlds, and sub-worlds (Werth 1994, 182). This paper makes use of the medium level, leaving aside sub-worlds and briefly acknowledging the discourse world. The discourse world entails the context in which the text world is produced; the text world, on the other hand, contains a group of propositions that constitute an "overtly construct" with explicit deictic coordinates—time and place—and an array of related characters. In this work, the content of Tumblr posts stands as the explicit manifestation of the text worlds departing from *Goncharov,* which facilitates tracking which cognitive mechanisms sustain this phenomenon. All the layers within a world are equal in terms of the components they rely on—modality and "informational elements" (Werth 1994, 182), of which this paper focuses on the latter in the form of nouns and noun phrases, with the tag #Goncharov, a proper noun used as an entry point to the data of the corpus, as a prime example. Lastly, text worlds lie on a rich common ground—general knowledge established at an earlier stage in discourse (Werth 1994, 197)—which explains the involvement of many frames in *Goncharov*.

The latter processes will be addressed to decipher the multilayered organization of *Goncharov*, which presents Tumblr as the discourse world in which various text worlds arise from the referent "Goncharov" itself. Through the application of this theoretical framework, this paper attempts to uncover the cognitive mechanisms which facilitated that thousands of users "agreed" on the narrative and the details surrounding *Goncharov* "as a cohesive unit" which seems to surpass what one may expect of a game or a stroke of genius from Tumblr (Turner 2023, 9). These cognitive mechanisms have not been explored yet. With this purpose, this work will turn to frame and text world theory, inspired by other previous papers that relied on frame analysis to dive into Tumblr culture, such as Filardo-Llamas and Roldán-García (2024).

2.2 Tumblr: A queer relic

Tumblr is a microblogging site founded in 2007 by David Karp (Feraday 2016, 29). From their blog, users may follow other blogs, whose content will appear in a chronological order on their dashboard (Feraday 2016, 26). Users can create their own posts, or they can also reblog posts from other users—i.e., share the said posts on their blog to which they can add a comment at the end (Feraday 2016, 26). Users can also like, or reply to, a post. Replies, unlike comments, do not appear in the body of the post and only emerge if one checks the "notes" tab (Proferes and Morrissey 2020, 33).

Like other social media platforms, Tumblr relies on tags to categorize and retrieve posts (Bourlai 2018, 47). Tumblr tags can be long, as they may hold entire sentences and special characters, and infinite, as users may add as many tags as they consider to a post (Bourlai 2018, 47). When users reblog a post, the tags from the user who shared it first disappear, and the next user can introduce their own tags (Oakley 2016, 6). This peculiarity of the interface of Tumblr has consolidated what now is regarded as the main function of its tags: a space for "opinions," "reactions," and "asides" (Bourlai 2018, 48) which "indicate [...] audience, intent, and self-identity" (Dame 2017, 23).

In the words of Robard et al. (2020, 281), "there is something queer about Tumblr." From its inception, Tumblr has harbored a userbase which predominantly featured the LGBTQ+ community, thus becoming its online cornerstone (Feraday 2016, 30). The content ban of 2018 which mostly affected and targeted trans users marked the beginning of the drastic decline of Tumblr, as it drove many LGBTQ+ users away (Haimson et al. 2021, 346). While nowadays Tumblr is no longer seen as a LGBTQ+ network, it retains its appeal as a former queer hub, for Robard et al. (2020, 284) found that LGBTQ+ youth was five times more likely to have a Tumblr account than their heterosexual counterparts. Despite the frequent criticism of the pervasive Anglocentric perspective of the platform (Klink et al. 2020, 171), many scholars have turned to Tumblr to delve into various aspects of the LGBTQ+ community, such as the use of gender and sexuality labels—e.g., Feraday (2014), or Oakley (2016)—or the notion of community therein sustained—e.g., Byron et al. (2019), or Jacobsen et al. (2022).

The queer, counterpublic nature of Tumblr has proved to be fertile soil for other alternative groups, namely fandoms (Morimoto 2018). With its preference for GIFs and memes, the multimodality of Tumblr triggered a shift from the mostly textual forums in which fandoms had flourished in the 20th century and forever changed the constitution of fandom itself (Morimoto 2018). The impact of Tumblr on contemporary fandom culture cannot be overstated. For instance, the lexicon which is often associated with fandom slang can often be traced back to this platform (Romano and Minkel 2020, 65). Besides its supposedly progressive and transgressive streak, there are other reasons for which fandoms proliferate on Tumblr, such as the fast dissemination of posts through the reblog

function, and the anonymity of blogs, which do not require any personal data beyond an email address (Proferes and Morrissey 2020, 29).

Consequently, and as hinted by Codega (2022), two of the key elements of the identity of Tumblr—the significant presence of the LGBTQ+ community, and the predominance of fandoms—affected the development of the phenomenon of *Goncharov*. Therefore, these two factors will be included in the analysis.

2.3 LGBTQ+ representation in US media in the 1970s

Since its release year is 1973, *Goncharov* is a movie supposedly scripted, filmed, and produced in the early seventies. Among the most defining traits of *Goncharov*, many Tumblr users highlight the presence of either homoerotic subtext or explicit homosexuality—a clash which will be further developed in the analysis. However, what kind of media representation did the LGBTQ+ community in the US actually enjoy during this period?

The 1960s witnessed the relaxation of the strict moral code that banned the overt inclusion of homosexuality in Hollywood productions (Edwards 2020, 29). Consequently, in the 1970s appeared the first explicitly LGBTQ+ characters in US movies, who often embodied the stereotypes of "funny clowns, [...]; villainous criminals, mental patients, child molesters, and vampires; or victims of violence, HIV/AIDS, and gender/sexuality identity disorder" (Raley and Lucas 2006, 23). Moreover, their storylines did not benefit from much development nor complexity (McInroy and Craig 2016, 8) and often met a deadly end that ultimately led to the establishment of the self-explanatory "bury your gays" trope (Rodríguez 2019, 3).

Often tied to immorality (Rodríguez 2019, 2), LGBTQ+ characters were thus punished by the dominant heteronormative narrative of the 1970s in the US. During this decade, television offered a similar portrayal of the LGBTQ+ community. As Montgomery (1981, 56) explains, the plot always followed a heterosexual protagonist, and pushed to the background the LGBTQ+ character, who was stripped of any display of affection towards people of their same gender, nor of any connection to the community (Raley and Lucas 2006, 25). This sanitized and depoliticized LGBTQ+ representation usually focused on cisgender, white, gay men, a trend which is currently yet to disappear (Gutowitz 2017). Returning to *Goncharov*, the plot deepens into the efforts of Goncharov, a member of a Russian mob, to infiltrate the mafia circles of Naples, accompanied by his wife, Katya. In Italy, Goncharov and Katya will fall into homoerotic dynamics with Andrey and Sofia, respectively. All in all, this narrative seems to coincide with what one would expect from LGBTQ+ characters from a 1970s movie. However, a closer look to the data will test how true this first impression of *Goncharov* is.

Having briefly considered the historical context of LGBTQ+ characters in US media in the 1970s, it will be easier to discern the cognitive building blocks of *Goncharov*, which will be developed in the next sections.

3. Data and methodology

3.1 Corpus compilation

This study delves into *Goncharov* via an ad-hoc corpus of 150 Tumblr posts. Some preliminary criteria were established to ensure the relevance of the compiled material. First, the posts had to be uploaded between November and December 2022, which coincided with the most productive period of the tag #goncharov. Second, posts which gathered a chronology of the events around *Goncharov* so that new users could follow the trend were discarded, since they mostly offered links to other posts that were already part of the corpus. Using the tag #goncharov as an entry point to the raw material, the 150 most popular—according to Tumblr—posts were extracted in strict order of appearance. The lack of transparency of the algorithm of Tumblr has often been a topic of discussion, for it may trouble the accuracy of the obtained results (Proferes and Morrissey 2020, 34-35), influenced by the decade of use the author of this paper has made of the platform. However, the already mentioned constraints aimed at countering these hypothetical obstacles.

Due to the time gap between the beginning and development of *Goncharov* (November 18th—22nd 2022) (Codega 2022), and the compilation of this corpus (August 26th—29th 2024), this approach intends not to capture *Goncharov* as it happened, but to collect those posts that, in hindsight, most contributed to the constitution of the piece of media *Goncharov* as reflected in their high number of notes, which were mostly over 10000. Moreover, as an ad-hoc corpus, it does not attempt to achieve a completely representative portrayal of *Goncharov*, but rather a magnified look of a period of the phenomenon so as to answer to the specific needs of this research (Mautner 2016, 164).

The manual extraction of the posts followed the next steps. First, the post was registered in a dataset, where it was assigned a code ("GF" plus its position in the data set). For instance, the first post of the corpus receives the code "GF_001." The dataset also contains other relevant information about the post, such as the date of publication, the username of the poster, the number of notes, and the type of content therein ("text," "video," "images," "GIFs," and "music.") Next, the textual component of the post—i.e., the body and the tags (Bourlai 2018, 55)—were copied and pasted in a txt files. Then, the non-textual elements (if any) of the post were downloaded and organized in a separate folder. Lastly, the entire post was screenshotted to retain its original arrangement.

After the completion of the corpus came the analysis of the data, which the next subsection will briefly describe.

3.2 Data analysis

During the manual compilation of the corpus, it became apparent that, even though all the posts belonged to the #goncharov tag, Tumblr users were discussing *Goncharov* in

different terms. Nevertheless, the diverse topics conflated under #goncharov followed generalizable patterns that facilitated its categorization, as Turner (2023) also pointed out. Thus, the first step involved the classification of the content of the posts in three broad groups.

Some posts talked about *Goncharov* as a movie—i.e., they commented on scenes and plot lines, and they reminisced about the production surrounding it. Other posts talked about *Goncharov* as a phenomenon—i.e., they pointed at the mechanisms and the strategies which users employed to create such a convincing illusion of a movie, and the impact *Goncharov* had on reality outside Tumblr. Lastly, some other posts talked about *Goncharov* as a Tumblr phenomenon—i.e., they explained the experience of Tumblr via the example of *Goncharov*. Of interest to this paper is the first category, as they provide *Goncharov* of content.

The second and last step entailed the elaboration of a Word document which comprised all those posts whose topic was *Goncharov* as a movie. The textual and non-textual components of each post were transferred following its original structure. Then, after a close reading of each post came a list of possible frames that could emerge from their content. This list grew in size upon the analysis of the posts, as the in-depth, manual examination of their components allowed the retrieval of other frames that underlay those which had already been covered.

Considering Tumblr as the discourse world which encloses Goncharov as an entity, two related text worlds were identified: Goncharov as a person, and *Goncharov* as a (possible) cultural artifact. Various frames structured these cognitive spaces, which were signaled and categorized via the comment function of Word.

4. Analysis

4.1 Quantitative analysis

As illustrated in Figure 1, out of 150 Tumblr posts, 69 posts discussed *Goncharov* as a piece of media. Then, 47 posts talked about *Goncharov* as a phenomenon, diving into the intricacies of this social media fabrication. Lastly, 34 posts reflected on the particular case of Tumblr as a social network through the example of *Goncharov*. Hence, the subsequent qualitative analysis will be based on almost half of the corpus (46%), since the other two types of posts did not expand the narrative of *Goncharov* but rather examine it from the outside.

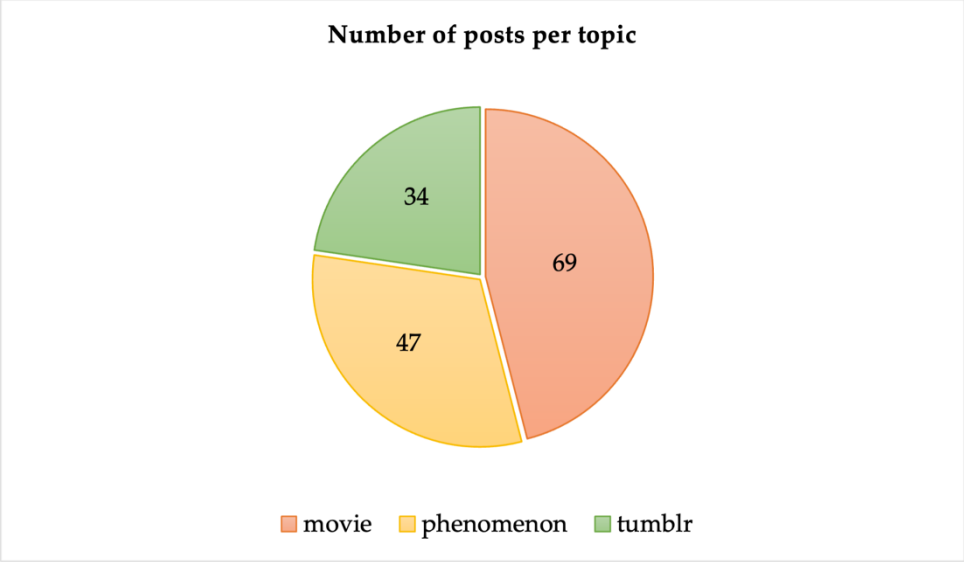

Fig 1. Total sum of posts according to their topic of discussion.

In a movie which does not exist in the conventional sense of the word—i.e., there is not a feature to which the audience can refer, *Goncharov* becomes the content of these posts. Some users, such as GF_054, even show awareness of this situation: "the way whatever is written or made about goncharov is technically goncharov itself because the source doesn't exist." This reflection hints at the multiple text worlds *Goncharov*, as an entity, contains since, in spite of their similarities, each post offered its own version of *Goncharov*. Furthermore, it also reinforces the position of Tumblr as the discourse world of *Goncharov*, as Turner (2023, 7) and Codega (2022) have both reiterated that *Goncharov* itself cannot be comprehended if extricated from Tumblr. Next, the qualitative analysis will develop the peculiarities of Tumblr as a discourse world, and the frame ramifications derived from the two text worlds *Goncharov* gathers.

4.2 Qualitative analysis: The text worlds of "Goncharov"

Rooted in several assumptions from US general cultural knowledge, *Goncharov* triggers two text worlds which, at the same time, set off a chain of frames and other schemas. All these mental processes unfold in the context of the discourse world Tumblr. Discourse worlds emerge in interaction, in certain demonstrative and extralinguistic elements (Werth 1994, 182). Tumblr, in this sense, is present in the very format of *Goncharov* as a movie, which is not a standard motion picture, but a recollection of GIFs, fan arts[1], edited images, and posts—the most remarkable Tumblr affordances and discursive strategies. However, the presence of fan arts and other artistic expressions conjures another relevant constituent in the discourse world of Tumblr: the participants– i.e., Tumblr users or, in

[1] Often found in the form of drawings and paintings, fan art refers to "artwork based on popular works of fiction (such as books, movies, etc.) that is created by fans" (Merrian-Webster n.d.).

the particular case of fan arts, fans. *Goncharov* emerges from the dialogue among fans, as users added new pieces of trivia to previous ideas. Turner (2023) has already delved into this process of collective creativity, which is further explored as a linguistic phenomenon in its various stages as a "meme" by Filardo-Llamas and Roldán-García (2025). The influence of Tumblr as a social media platform on *Goncharov* falls outside the scope of this paper, which uncovers the sociocultural and historical knowledge constituting its cognitive frames—i.e., its text worlds. This does not necessarily entail, however, that Tumblr will be fully excluded from the analysis, as *Goncharov* conglomerates the experiences and views of the world of all of the Tumblr users involved in the creation of *Goncharov*.

To any Tumblr outsider, "Goncharov" may, first and foremost, remind them of the name of a person. However, if they were informed that the term actually refers to the title of a movie, they are more likely to assume it is the name of a character, rather than that of a person from reality. Now, if they were also let on the fact that Goncharov is a character much loved by Tumblr, and if they were vaguely aware of the reputation of Tumblr as a social media platform, they would probably imagine Goncharov to be not only a fictional entity, but a LGBTQ+ fictional entity or, at least, a presumed LGBTQ+ fictional entity. However, if instead of fixating on the dimension of Goncharov as a character, they delved into the concept of *Goncharov* as a hypothetical cultural artifact, other ideas would spur their mind. If they discovered that Scorsese had directed *Goncharov* in 1973, certain expectations would rise around the aesthetic and the topic of the movie. If they were also in the know of the presence of LGBTQ+ characters, another set of notions would join the previous suppositions. The sequence of thoughts which the previous lines gather condenses the succession of frames, knowledge schemas, and assumptions which structure the two main text worlds constituting *Goncharov*: the cultural artifact, and the character. The following subsections will dissect the cognitive blocks found in these text worlds, and their manifestation in *Goncharov*.

4.2.1 GONCHAROV: THE CULTURAL ARTIFACT

Goncharov is said to be a mafia movie by Scorsese from 1973. With titles such as *Mean Streets* (1973), or *Taxi Driver* (1976), Scorsese is mostly known as a movie director and is associated with the genre of mafia movies (Film Affinity n.d.), which renders the association of notions underlying the conception of *Goncharov* unsurprising. Consequently, within the text world of *Goncharov* as a cultural artifact features the frames "mafia movie," "Scorsese filmography," and "movie industry."

When Tumblr users, as in (1), attempt to discuss the plot of *Goncharov*, they introduce elements—such as violence, crime, and murder—which one would expect from any mafia movie. *Goncharov* involves Andrei and Sofia, among various Italian characters. The US collective imaginary often stereotypically links this nation with the idea of mafia,

and Scorsese explores this intersection in movies such as *Mean Streets* (1973) with its Italo-American protagonists. However, the main characters of *Goncharov* are Goncharov himself and Katya, a Russian married couple. The filmography of Scorsese is yet to focus on the Russian mafia; thus, this piece of knowledge is rather derived from the stereotypes and assumptions of the broad mafia movie genre.

> 1) Set in Naples and involving a drug ring/mafia. The plot seems to involve Russian organized crime attempting to get a foothold in Italy. (GF_012)

Tragedy is another element of mafia movies which one finds in other productions by Scorsese too. As (2) explains, *Goncharov* concludes with the murder of its eponymous protagonist, and as (3) discusses, Katya at some point dies or fakes her death, which may hint at an open ending. All these plot lines are frequent narrative devices which the frame "mafia movie" evokes.

> 2) Goncharov dies a lonely, desolate man, having alienated everyone who cares for him (GF_144)
>
> 3) [S]ome posts claim katya dies, others claim she fakes her death and survives (GF_066)

Movies do not exist in isolation. Movies emerge, develop, and launch as part of an industry with its own idiosyncrasy, of which Scorsese is a successful example. Thus, the US cultural assumptions of the movie industry also appear in the text world of *Goncharov* as a cultural artifact. Scorsese usually works with a fixed set of performers, who repeatedly appear in different roles across his many productions (Codega 2022). Hence, the choice of Robert de Niro as Goncharov and Harvey Keitel as Andrey activates the knowledge of the long-lasting collaboration between these two actors and Scorsese. Other constituents of the movie industry frame involve the supposed marketing and publicity of *Goncharov*. The expected movie promotion, for example, inspire many users to create posters for *Goncharov*, as seen in Figure 2[2]. These posters gather many visual cues that also activate the frame of a mafia movie, such as weapons, bullet holes, or the burning vehicle.

Figure 2 also acknowledges the inner workings of the movie industry, referring not only to the performers, but also to the writers, producers, and director. Moreover, *Goncharov*, like any other movie from the 20th century, apparently had a premiere (GF_002), merchandising (GF_128), and a digital launch in DVD format (GF_075). *Goncharov* has endured the criticism of movie specialists (GF_137) and the general public in the form of Letterboxd reviews, which Figure 3 illustrates. Figure 3, once again, returns to the concept of a mafia movie and mentions some of its most remarkable features, like the episodes of violence ("shooting"), and the stilled dialogues ("boring conversations").

[2] The artists who appear in these subsections have been duly notified of the use and the purpose of their artwork in this paper and have informedly given their consent.

Fig 2. A Goncharov poster (GF_024) (artist: beelzeebub https://www.tumblr.com/beelzeebub/701284869475614720/goncharov-1973-dir-martin-scorsese-the?source=share).

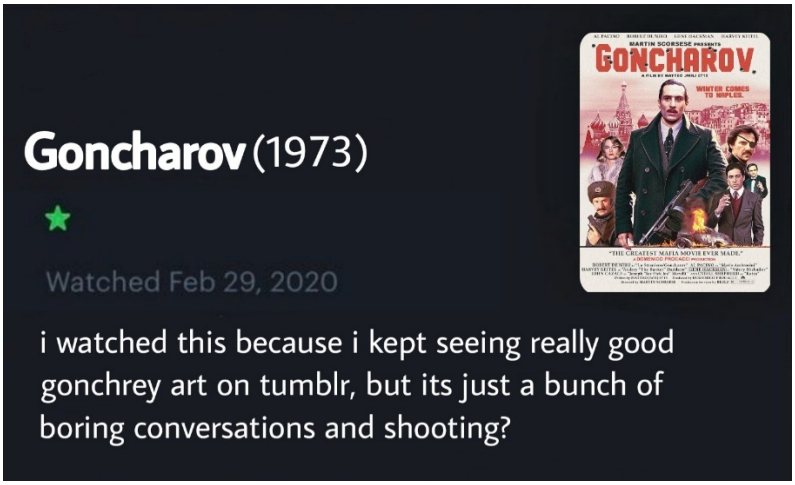

Fig 3. An edited image of a Letterboxd review (GF_055) (artist: celia monsterhospital https://www.tumblr.com/monsterhospital/701394032793960448/a-few-of-of-my-favorite-goncharov-reviews-on?source=share).

Lastly, within the "movie industry" frame, spread the notions around cult movies, which some films from Scorsese are considered to be (e.g., *Mean Streets*) (Burton 2024). In fact, "cult classic" (GF_044) is once used to describe *Goncharov*. The expected audience of this genre, another important player in the movie industry, also appears in some posts, as "film bros" (GF_070) or "film buffs" (GF_100). However, unlike most of the filmography of Scorsese, these users admit *Goncharov* does not reach this typical audience—"film buffs will hate you for liking this film" (GF_100). Hence, the uncharacteristic public of

Goncharov links back to the frame of "fandom" from the discourse world Tumblr, which also features in Figure 3. The portmanteau "Gonchrey" alludes to the hypothetical romantic relationship between Goncharov and Andrey and represents one of the most common practices among Tumblr fandom (Morimoto 2018): shipping[3]. This leads us to the other text world "Goncharov" elicits—a (fictional) person, who is said to belong to the LGBTQ+ community in the 1970s, this fact shaping most of his later development.

In brief, "Goncharov" as a cultural artifact relies on three main frames: "Scorsese's filmography," "mafia movie," and "movie industry." Within "Scorsese's filmography" one finds assumptions such as a fixed cast of actors, the production of cult classics, and the tragic nature of most Scorsese's films. The frame "mafia movie" presents other underlying presuppositions—for instance, the presence of violence and crime, and the locations of Italy and Russia. The last frame, "movie industry," encompasses other concepts like the process of production, marketing, and publicity of a film, and the reception from an audience in which critics, "film buffs", and "Tumblr fandom" co-exist. Most of these notions and expectations occupy a well-established place in US popular culture, eroding the idea of "Goncharov" as a phenomenon that came out of nowhere, and aligning with previous scholars who point at the remarkedly US-centric stance of Tumblr users (Klink et al. 2020, 171). Finally, these three main frames are interrelated, since they share some cognitive units—e.g., the presence of violence and death in mafia movies and thus in the productions of Scorsese—and, consequently, any of them may activate the other two.

Of all the elements of the plot of *Goncharov* the romantic relationships between the four main characters—Goncharov, Andrey, Katya, and Sofia—attracted most attention from Tumblr users. This meant that many posts revolved around this part of the plot, albeit limited by the already discussed mental structures so as not to shatter the illusion of coherence and plausibility. The fan approach to this inexistent film functions as the bridge between the text world of the cultural artifact and the second text world of the specifics of the character of Goncharov.

4.2.2 GONCHAROV: THE CHARACTER

Goncharov owes its title to its protagonist, who stirred up much passion from Tumblr fans. The sexuality of Goncharov and Katya, his wife, is often a topic of discussion on Tumblr. *Goncharov* is introduced as a production "overrun with homoeroticism" (GF_100), which features a "love square" (GF_129) between Goncharov and Andrey, and Katya and Sofia. Tumblr has gained a reputation in popular culture due to its transgressive and queer perspective on media (Romano and Minkel 2020, 63). Besides, Tumblr was the soil in which the current notion of fandom fructified (Morimoto 2018). Fandom is

[3] The fan support of, and desire for, two or more characters ending up in a romantic relationship (Romano 2016).

ingrained in Tumblr culture in the same manner Tumblr is ingrained in fandom culture. The analysis of the allegedly homoerotic subtext of *Goncharov* was often guided by the interest of those Tumblr users in the relationship between Goncharov and Andrey, and Katya and Sofia, who they wish would have ended up together. The support to these pairings materialized in the use of tags explicitly stating the couples they rooted for: "Katya x Sofia" and "Goncharov x Andrey" as seen in GF_032, GF_060, or GF_068, or in the publication of fanfiction[4] on Archive of Our Own (AO3) about these two romances, which posts GF_100, and GF_120 discuss and celebrate. In this fashion, "Goncharov" the cultural artifact met the fervor and intensity of Tumblr fandom culture (Romano and Minkel 2020, 67), and gained the momentum that would allow it to escape the confines of Tumblr, due to the amount of activity around it.

However, for the fabrication of *Goncharov* to succeed, the ideas Tumblr users invoked had to agree and partly converge with those already described in the first subsections of the analysis. Unsurprisingly, a quick glance at the filmography of Scorsese from the early days of his career would suffice to sentence that none of the titles present any LGBTQ+ characters nor plotlines. As already mentioned in previous sections, in the 1970s LGBTQ+ representation in the media was rare and stereotypical, and the audience was not particularly welcoming towards it. For a novice writer and director such as Scorsese in 1973, introducing a LGBTQ+ narrative in his work certainly constituted a risky choice which could compromise his future position in the industry. Had Scorsese truly conceived and directed Goncharov as Tumblr managed to convince the world, would he evoke all the frames within the "Goncharov: cultural artifact" text world? The answer seems to be "no, he would not," if the categorization of *Goncharov* as "lost media" (GF_126) serves of any indication. In this manner, Tumblr users acknowledged the pushback a production like *Goncharov* may have faced in its alleged time period and proposed an explanation for its decades-long disappearance. However, Tumblr fandom thrives in queer readings of media, which falter if one follows too closely the content of the expected script of a film from the 1970s. Consequently, the introduction of the notion of heteronormativity[5] accommodates these two initially irreconcilable dimensions. This concept fits alongside other assumptions and expectations from the frame "Scorsese's filmography," connecting the former and the frame "LGBTQ+ representation in the 1970s," and prompting the multiple interpretations of the dynamics in *Goncharov* which the corpus collected.

[4] Written texts by fans who explicitly employ and delve into a preexisting fictional work, such as a novel franchise, a TV show, or a movie (Romano 2016).

[5] The expectation that heterosexuality is the norm and that everybody assumes and is assumed to be heterosexual (European Institute for Gender Equality 2016).

Goncharov and Katya are in a "loveless marriage" (GF_066) which "slowly crumbles" as a result of "Goncharov's growing closeness with Andrey" (GF_105). This plot line follows the common cheating trope within LGBTQ+ media: The protagonist starts the narrative in a heterosexual relationship only to cheat on their partner with someone of their same gender (Monawarah 2022, 12). Furthermore, this situation reflects the real-life circumstances of many LGBTQ+ individuals in the 1970s, who entered heterosexual marriages to protect themselves from the rampant homophobia of the period (Monawarah 2022, 12). Thus, despite their alleged romantic interests, Katya and Goncharov play the expected role of a heterosexual couple in love, as illustrated in scenes of physical closeness such as Figure 4, featuring a *Muppets* rendition of *Goncharov* in which Katya (Miss Peggy) is talking to Goncharov (Kermit). It must be remarked, moreover, that in spite of their nationalities (Russian and Italian), both Katya and Sofia take the last name of their respective husbands—Katya Goncharov, and Sofia Daddano (GF_129)—revealing not only a heteronormative, but also Anglocentric view of marriage.

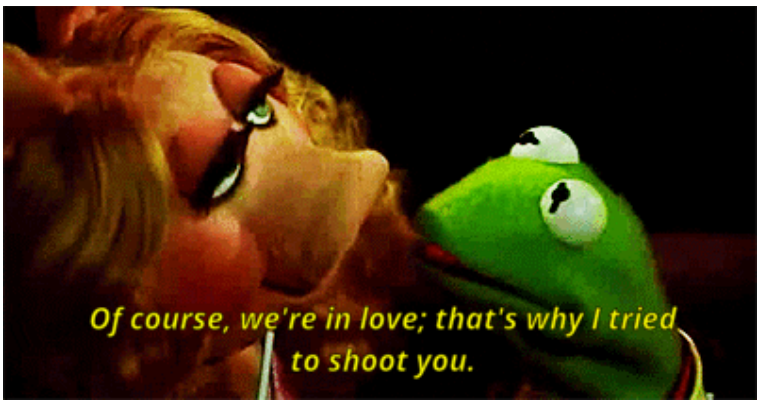

Fig 4. A Muppets adaptation of a Goncharov scene (GF_016). (artist: moths-in-hats https://www.tumblr.com/moths-in-hats/703555845465767936/the-muppets-as-goncharov-1973-the-only-goncharov?source=share).

The next knowledge schema within the "LGBTQ+ media in the 1970s" frame—"homoeroticism"—partly collides with the "mafia movie" frame, since the world of violence and immorality in which the *Goncharov* characters exist coincides with the usual depiction of LGBTQ+ individuals in the media from the 1970s. Furthermore, the tragic ending of Goncharov, the protagonist, matches not only the expectations for a mafia movie of Scorsese, but also for the unavoidable resolution of a LGBTQ+ character during this decade. Nevertheless, the death or disappearance of LGBTQ+ characters from popular media still remains to these days a frequent occurrence, with which many Tumblr fandoms are well-familiarized (Riese 2024). Consequently, as much as the murder of Goncharov and later (fake) death of Katya may be a result of the activation of the "LGBTQ+ media in the 1970s" frame and its corresponding assumptions, it might also be partly derived from another frame—"LGBTQ+ media in the 21st century"—which also shapes the knowledge of many Tumblr users. After all, even though it was not a novelty, the "Bury Your Gays" trope did

not rise to prominence in the popular imagery until a few years ago, when viewers actively started to protest against it (Maesar 2022).

As for the degree of homoeroticism of *Goncharov*, there was some disagreement among those users arguing that the romance between Goncharov and Andrey, and Katya and Sofia, belonged to the subtext of the movie, and those users depicting their relationship as an explicit part of the plot. The former group is suggesting the kind of LGBTQ+ presence one would expect from a movie in the 1970s, with terms and phrases such as "homoerotic undertones" (GF_070) or "wants Goncharov bad (subtext)" (GF_129). These posts also included many past hypotheticals, like "if Andrey and Goncharov confessed their feelings for each other" (GF_082), pointing at the different manners in which the narrative could have evolved had the homoeroticism been acknowledged.

The latter group is formulating assumptions from the perspective of an audience from the 21st century, and departing from the frames and structures contained in the mental space "LGBTQ+ representation from the 1970s." They often rely on artistic renditions of scenes from the movie. For example, (4) reproduces a description of a set of drawings from which Figure 5 was extracted. The user states the illustrations follow the script of a scene from *Goncharov*, adding another layer of plausibility to the phenomenon and briefly returning to the text world of "Goncharov" as a cultural artifact. In Figure 5, Katya alludes to the relationship between her husband and Andrey: "But the only reason he still loves *you* is because he hasn't found a way to use you." The romantic nature of this bond is clarified in the tags of the post, in which the user elaborates that "Andrei desperately wanting to be Goncharov's closest confidant (and lover)."

> 4) I'm obsessed with That Scene(tm) between Katya and Andrei in the California Director's Cut Rerelease of Goncharov, so I did a lighting study inspired by the film's Art Deco Posters! (GF_038)

Fig 5. Fanart of a Goncharov scene from involving Katya and Andrey (artist: Peyton Parker—secretmellowblog on Tumblr https://www.tumblr.com/secretmellowblog/701843091358892032/my-husband-is-a-man-who-collects-things-he-can?source=share).

Similarly, Figure 6 is introduced as "A study of the symbolism in Goncharov (1973)" (GF_077) thus transforming the illustrations into "actual" scenes from *Goncharov*. Figure 6 presents an intimate scene between Sofia and Katya, who appear to be kissing on a bed. This representation attempts against what one would expect from LGBTQ+ characters in the 1970s, a time in which they were relegated to symbolic subtext, and in which their sexuality could not be explicitly involved in the narrative (Montgomery 1981, 56). Furthermore, the complexity and agency Tumblr users grant Katya—for example, in Figure 4, she is the one delivering the threat to Goncharov, and in Figure 5 the conversation concludes with her advising Andrey to leave Naples—clashes with the usual representation of a fictional queer woman in the 1970s, who would have more likely been relegated to the background as a secondary character, or as a mere companion of her husband. Moreover, linked to the previous discussion of the trope "Bury Your Gays," some posts transformed the initially proposed death of Katya into a planned fake death (GF_012, GF_066), so that Katya survived and escaped the fate of many LGBTQ+ characters in the 1970s and the present time. This choice, however, contradicts the system of frames and structures of knowledge underlying "Goncharov," slightly fragmenting the illusion of a cohesive phenomenon.

Fig 6. Fanart from a Goncharov scene between Katya and Sofia (GF_077) (artist: Chelsea Goerzen—neverominiart on Tumblr https://www.tumblr.com/neverominiart/701598000919740416/a-study-of-the-symbolism-in-goncharov-1973?source=share)

This friction encapsulates the very essence of *Goncharov* as a phenomenon. Despite its origins from the 1970s, it was born in 2022 in an online space with a strong presence of the LGBTQ+ community. Consequently, "Goncharov" as an entity evokes two text worlds: the character Goncharov, and the movie *Goncharov*. As a movie, *Goncharov* relies on the frames of "mafia movie," "Scorsese filmography," and "movie industry," some of which further unfold into other knowledge structures. As a character, Goncharov evokes one particular dimension of human experience—sexuality—and induces notions related to

the frame of "LGBTQ+ characters in the 1970s"—"heteronormativity" and "homoerotic subtext" among others—as well as others related to that of "LGBTQ+ characters in the 21st century." The last one connects the phenomenon of *Goncharov* back to its discourse world, Tumblr.

5. Conclusions

Bearing in mind the text worlds and their respective frames and structures, Figure 7 summarizes the concepts and notions associated with the word "Goncharov" in the context of Tumblr.

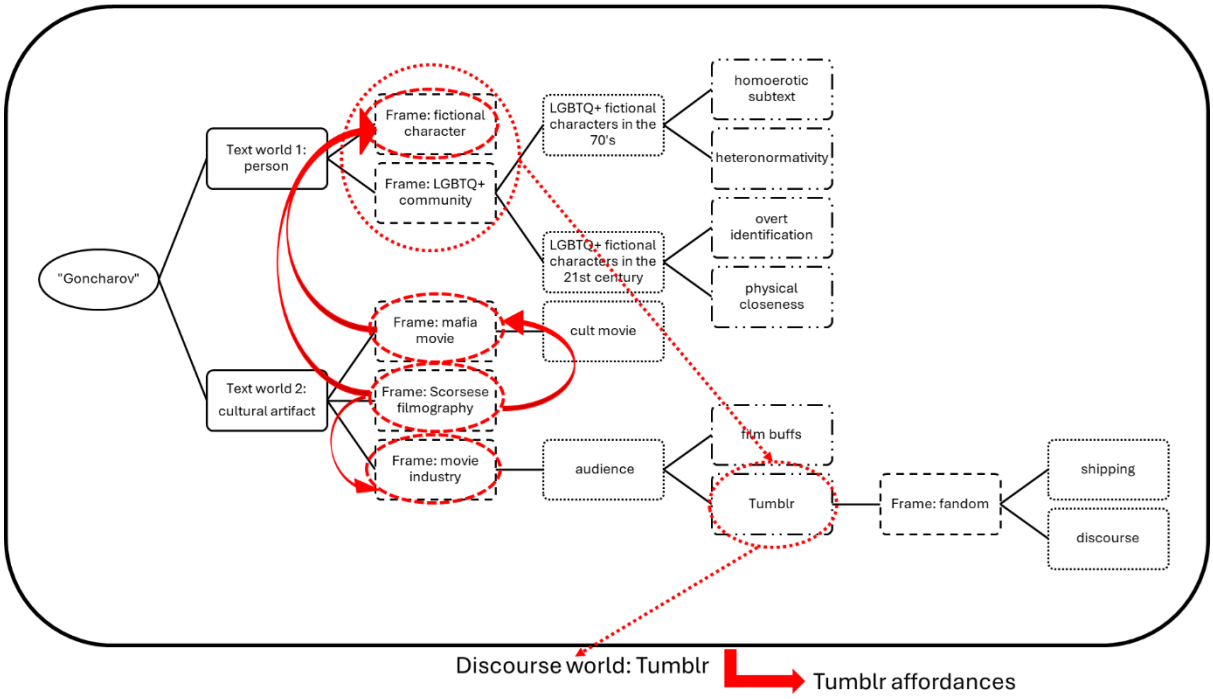

Fig 7. A summary of the cognitive structures triggered by the term "Goncharov" in the discourse world of Tumblr

As seen in Figure 7, "Goncharov" is the dynamic product of the frames "mafia movie," "Scorsese filmography," "movie industry," "fictional character," and "LGBTQ+ character." These frames do not exist in a bubble; hence, they interact and often overlap. For example, both mafia movies and productions by Scorsese contain fictional characters. In a similar vein, the filmography of Scorsese must be understood in the general context of the genre of mafia movies, and the industry to which Scorsese belongs. In a less direct sense, the combination of fictional characters and the LGBTQ+ community may evoke the notion of Tumblr which is, at the same time, part of the bigger frame of fandom. The concept of Tumblr—the assumptions one may hold about the platform—must not be confused with the actual social media network in which the phenomenon of *Goncharov* takes place, yet it refers back to it, and to its affordances.

Thus, while *Goncharov* was born and developed on Tumblr, rendering it an undoubtedly Tumblr event, *Goncharov* also owes much of its content to other frames and knowledge outside of Tumblr, such as the genre of mafia movies, the filmography of Scorsese, or the conflicting history of LGBTQ+ representation in movies and TV shows. Thus, *Goncharov* is an inexistent film whose narrative and content arise from the well-known cinematographic work of Scorsese, and the historical and cultural context in which *Goncharov* is said to have been produced—the United States in the 1970s.

Nevertheless, "Goncharov" introduces new knowledge in some well-established frames. For instance, the focus on the Russian mob in Naples and its appeal to a Tumblr audience separate *Goncharov* from the rest of the production of Scorsese. More remarkably, the past and the present of LGBTQ+ media crash in "Goncharov." "Goncharov" induces both the common presuppositions about LGBTQ+ characters in the 1970s—heteronormativity and homoerotic subtext, and the expectations of LGBTQ+ representation from Tumblr users as viewers from the 21st century. The occasional overt nature of the romance between Goncharov and Andrey, and Katya and Sofia, discards the expected implicit connotations frequent in LGBTQ+ characters from the 1970s, and foregrounds the presumptions and desires of a contemporary LGBTQ+ audience as well as their fears—e.g., the "Bury Your Gays" trope. Consequently, "Goncharov" reconciles both the experience and hopes of the LGBTQ+ community when it comes to media, triggering a consciously contrastive dialogue between old and present trends in LGBTQ+ representation.

Lastly, this study faces some limitations, such as its small ad-hoc corpus, or the unavoidable bias of the author. Despite the attempt at objectivity, the circumstances of the scholar as a member of the LGBTQ+ community and a Tumblr user for over a decade influence their view on the topic. Nevertheless, this same context has also guided and enriched the analysis, due to a first-person knowledge of the platform. Finally, this work leaves the door open for future venues of research of the cultural and cognitive ramifications of other Internet phenomena which may initially be dismissed as mere memes or jokes.

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The Strategic Use of Shifting Point-of-View Narrations in Imogen Binnie's *Nevada*

Andres Ayala-Patlan

Abstract

Imogen Binnie's *Nevada* has become a cornerstone for trans studies for nearly a decade. Since it was first published in 2013, it has become a staple in trans literature, challenging literary traditions and all-too-common coming-of-age stories that end in a predictable format of profound self-discovery, apotheosis, and personal transformation. Binnie's *Nevada* does not end with such a resolutive arc. It complicates and leaves open some of the complexities of the trans experience that cannot be captured by normative literary conventions. I will examine *Nevada*'s subversion of literary point of view conventions, specifically shifting and unstable point of view narrations—moving continuously between first-, second-, and particularly third-person limited and omniscient narrative structures—which complicate our understandings of the relationship between (a trans) self and larger sociality that the novel aims to reveal. In addition, I will argue that Cameron Awkward-Rich's concept of the "lyrical subject"—which posits subjectivity as a simultaneous experience of interiority and publicity—can be demonstrably portrayed and exemplified through the overall literary and shifting point of view structure in Binnie's *Nevada*. This showcases the ways publicity and sociality inform an interiority of withdrawal and uncertainty that Maria and James, the story's main protagonists, both endure. As such, I will analyze these shifting points of view in *Nevada* and read them as complicating traditional point of view narrations while discovering a deeper irony, instability, and complexity about the trans experience of subjectivity, illustrating why this novel should remain such a profound staple in trans literature for decades to come.

Keywords: lyrical subject; narrative structure; trans studies; trans subjectivity.

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> When she was twenty she figured out that she was such a mess not because she was trans, but because being trans is so stigmatized; if you could leave civilization for a year, like live in an abandoned shopping mall out in the desert giving yourself injections of estrogen, working on your voice, figuring out how to dress yourself all over again and meditating eight hours a day on gendered socialization, and then get bottom surgery as a reward, it would be pretty easy to transition.
>
> (Imogen Binnie, *Nevada*)

1. Introduction

Imogen Binnie's *Nevada* (2013) has become a cornerstone for transgender literature for over a decade, challenging literary traditions and all-too-common coming-of-age stories that end in a predictable format of profound self-discovery and personal transformation. Binnie's *Nevada* does not end with such a resolutive arc. It complicates and leaves open some of the complexities of the trans experience that cannot be captured by normative literary conventions. *Nevada* destabilizes literary conventions to articulate and highlight the nonlinear, socially mediated experience of trans subjectivity. Rather than adhering to the resolved arcs of traditional coming-of-age narratives or tragic queer tropes, the novel employs dynamic shifts in point of view—oscillating between first-, second-, and third-person limited/omniscient perspectives—to mirror the entangled relationship between trans interiority and the external world.

This narrative instability refuses cathartic transformation, instead foregrounding the process of selfhood as a contested site shaped by heteronormative social conditioning, media representation, and the ever-present dissonance between private experience and public perception. I will argue that by subverting point-of-view conventions Binnie not only rejects reductive literary formulas but also constructs a model of trans subjectivity that exists in simultaneity: a self both invented through sociality and withdrawn into uncertainty and precarity. I claim that this narrative strategy performs what Cameron Awkward-Rich terms the "lyrical subject," where selfhood emerges not as a fixed identity but as a dynamic negotiation between interiority and external cultural scripts. In so doing, *Nevada* cleverly implicates readers as co-constructors of meaning—one in which unwitting readers become the omniscient social fabric for the novel and its characters—reflecting the social pressures that police trans (in)visibility while prompting a critical engagement with the *very act of reading* and interpreting trans lives. Binnie's literary experimentation moreover becomes a powerful method for representing trans life not as a stable identity or category but as a constant negotiation—one that resists the closure demanded by (cisnormative) literary traditions. By denying fixed narrative perspectives, Binnie forces readers to occupy the unstable position of social interpreters, a reflection of the relentless scrutiny that trans subjectivity endures in public life. This strategic choice underscores how trans selfhood is not merely narrated but perpetually observed and reinstantiated, rendering the reader complicit in the very systems that the novel attempts to critique.

This innovative approach aligns *Nevada* with a broader movement in contemporary North American transgender literature, one that, as Stephanie Clare explores in "Contemporary North American Transgender Literature," "highlight[s] how bodies take shape in the intertwining of matter and meaning," suggesting that "attention to trans embodiment need not focus on questions of personal identity and truthful embodiment, but rather *on the social contexts that shape embodied experiences*" (Clare 2022,

118; emphasis added). "From Margins to Mainstream: The Evolution of Transgender Narratives in Media, Literature, and Digital Culture (1950-2024)" further contextualizes *Nevada*'s growing significance, observing that "[transgender] literature allows exploration of transgender interiority (thoughts, emotions, desires) in depth…[that] trans fiction challenges gender norms and invites readers to empathize with perspectives that might be unfamiliar." It goes on to say that "[b]y pluralizing transgender narratives in young adult literature and beyond, fiction opens imaginative space for thinking about gender beyond binaries. This evolving body of literature is expanding cultural perceptions of what transgender lives can look like" (GenderLibs 2025).

Similarly, canonical transgender novels like Torrey Peters's *Detransition, Baby* (2021), where the characters navigate a complex web of relationships, family, and identities, too, demonstrate this trend. *Detransition, Baby*'s groundbreaking depth and nuance adds to the trans experiences beyond the common tropes of transition narratives. Its importance engages with broader questions of social belonging, especially within nontraditional family structures, while breaking new ground for literary representation, offering complex views of transition, trans womanhood, and gendered expectations through the main characters of Reese and Ames. In a recent interview, Peters herself acknowledges that the work's chief concern is the same as anybody else's: What is our place in society and our sense of belonging? (Louisiana Channel). Indeed, as Mckenzie Wark illustrates, "Peters's book moves on from the 'sad trans girl' figure that *Nevada* consolidated and offers the trans reader more to think about in terms of ways to move forward through one's post-transition life" (Wark 2022). Casey Plett and her work *Little Fish* (2018) also exemplify this shift, portraying a trans protagonist grappling with faith, community, and personal history in ways that resist easy categorization and simplistic transition narratives.[1] This work resonates with Binnie's *Nevada* in its focus on the complexities of trans lives beyond just transition, portraying raw, realistic, and multifaceted experiences of community, resilience, and belonging in the face of systemic oppression and personal hardship.

These novels share a resistant thread against reductive narratives, offering instead an honest and detailed depiction of transgender existence that is reshaping the field.

[1]Casey Plett's work follows a similar model to Binnie's *Nevada*. Plett shares that "I've always felt very uninterested in, or even I would go as far as to say harmed by these bifurcated stories that you hear about. Really happy-go-lucky, I transitioned and now I'm happy and now I'm living my truth and everything's great, and on the other side, these really sad, mentally twisted people all die early deaths. I felt very conscious about being surrounded by those two kinds of stories that felt very detached from reality" (Plett 2020). This echoes Plett's intention to write more nuanced, realistic portrayals of trans experiences, moving away from simplistic narratives of either complete post-transition happiness or inevitable tragic outcomes, focusing on the complexities of everyday trans life beyond the common transition tropes.

While unable to cover the entirety of transgender literature in this essay, I will focus this analysis and reading of *Nevada* to unpack how it specifically portrays these theoretical and literary trends, providing close readings of and delving into the precise ways Binnie employs shifting points of view to represent trans subjectivity. Drawing upon the work of Harron Walker, Marty Fink, Cameron Awkward-Rich, Trish Salah, and Susan Stryker, I will demonstrate how *Nevada*'s narrative structure, particularly its strategic shifts in points of view, reflects the complex interplay between self and society that defines trans lives and the trans experience, adding to these growing literary trends within trans scholarship.

2. Literature Review: Subverting Narratives and Theorizing Trans Subjectivity

2.1 Breaking from Traditional Narratives

Scholarship on *Nevada* consistently highlights its rejection of linear, cathartic trans storytelling. For instance, Harron Walker (2022) traces its impact on the culture after a decade, pointing exactly to Binnie's recalcitrant and radical literary style. Walker attests, "Subverting conventions, *Nevada* doesn't hinge on a character's transition. It's about a trans woman who hasn't transitioned and a trans woman confronting the inevitable What now? that comes after having done so" (Walker 2022). Walker goes on to state that "[*Nevada*] challenges readers' assumptions, and it somehow manages to do that without being didactic, saccharine, or, worse, boring" (Walker 2022). Walker furthermore depicts how *Nevada* subverts literary conventions, which do not hinge on the finality and completion of trans characters' transformation. It defies readers' expectations that (post-)transition results in a typical *Bildungsroman* with a resolved dénouement, that self-discovery and personal transformation are traditional literary arcs that, too, can encapsulate the trans struggle. Rather, it leaves us with an instability, an irresolution, as Maria and James, the story's main protagonists, contemplate this difficult 'What now?' question that comes after, during, or even before transition.

In a similar vein to Walker, Marty Fink (2019) makes known the ways in which the novel evades these simple, normative, and redemptive self-actualizing plotlines.[2] Fink asserts, "*Nevada* ultimately offers no personal transformations or pithy insights about post-transition gender self-actualization; nor does the novel deliver on queer narrative expectations for downward spirals or tragic endings" (Fink 2019, 5). Fink thus also perceives the novel as confronting traditional literary structures of self-actualizations or

[2]Fink's work reads *Nevada* and insomnia as a radical site of resistance to hetero-, able bodied norms. It suggests that though this novel offers some promises of self-discovery, recovery, and trans epiphany/catharsis, it inevitably frustrates all possibilities for its heroine's self-growth, thus challenging fictions about using self-care to "overcome" disability and gender-based violence. *Nevada* ultimately disrupts traditional narrative techniques, leaving critical space open for alternate and subversive narrativizing practices.

tragic endings typically associated with queer narratives. It ends open-endedly with profound questions left unanswered, trying to paint a more authentic representation of what it is like to be trans. Moreover, this realistic take sets up Binnie's *Nevada* as an important site to better understand trans lives, which is why this novel has remained as salient to the field as when it was first published. Walker and Fink moreover both notice the literary complexity and irony of *Nevada*, identifying Binnie's narrative innovation as key to this literary subversion.

2.2 The Methodology of Cameron Awkward-Rich's Lyrical Subjectivity

Cameron Awkward-Rich's (2022) "Chapter Four: We's Company" poignantly clarifies and theoretically and methodologically buttresses Binnie's experimental point-of-view narrative style. Awkward-Rich's concept of the "lyrical subject," which I primarily draw on for this analysis, can also help us to understand and conceptually build upon the overall literary and shifting point-of-view structure of Binnie's *Nevada*. Awkward-Rich directs us to exactly this occurrence through his concept of the lyrical mode of the subject. He states:

> This form of representing subjectivity, which simultaneously captures both the self, formed in relation, and the withdrawn self, but which does not or cannot call them by the same name, is clearly identical to neither the immutable subject of the wrong-body model nor the willful subject of the gender freedom model nor the purely resistant subject of queer trans theory. We might call it a lyric subject, a subject defined—as lyric traditionally has been—by *a curious simultaneity of absolute interiority and publicity*. (Awkward-Rich 2022, 135-6; emphasis added)

Awkward-Rich therefore rejects the wrong-body, gender freedom, and queer trans models[3] in favor for a lyrical subject that understands trans subjectivity as both an 'absolute interiority and publicity.' Binnie's literary prose purposefully makes these shifts throughout the novel, specifically the ways in which Maria encapsulates both an interior withdrawal from her social world *and as* the social world or fabric for James in the second part of the book. Binnie's complex use of third-person limited and omniscient perspectives stresses how all subjects are constructed from a relational public social matrix, which is why the novel is primarily written from a third-person point of view. And through this third-person point of view, we can access, via limited and omniscient variations, the inner monologues and feelings of isolation that both Maria and James experience.

[3]The wrong-body model views trans individuals as born in the "wrong" body and emphasizes medical transition to align their physical body with their true gender identity, though it has been criticized for reinforcing binary gender norms. In contrast, the gender freedom model advocates for the right to express gender freely, rejecting binary constraints and medical gatekeeping and focusing on fluidity and self-identification. Lastly, the queer trans model challenges both binary gender and normativity, aligning trans identities with broader queer struggles and emphasizing fluidity and resistance to rigid gender structures.

This constant shift and juxtaposition from how Maria and James internally feel to the ways in which they are read by the outside world speak precisely to Awkward-Rich's lyrical mode of subjectivity. Through this first-person/third-person limited perspective, we—as the readers of the novel—can experience the withdrawal and internality of our main characters, of Maria and James from a relational sociality that emblematizes omniscient narrative perspectives. Binnie's complex and shifting point-of-view structure epitomizes Awkward-Rich's idea of the lyrical subject, as Binnie establishes and showcases a new literary depth to which transgendered people experience this messy and interconnected duality, especially the ways they are read by medical, legal, media, and social systems that shape the alienated interiority that they express throughout the work.

Awkward-Rich, however, makes sure to articulate the unique ways in which transpeople experience this duality. Transness itself may be defined by this misrecognition, an inherent feeling of withdrawal special to trans lives, suggests Awkward-Rich. The reason why the issue of publicity and interiority come up as a distinguishing issue in thinking about trans subjectivity is that, according to Awkward-Rich, trans identity is perhaps the *only* identity defined by such a mismatch between social interpellation and selfhood. He states, "Either the trans person misrecognizes their inner life as social reality or misrecognizes scripted social norms as their inner life; either way, transness is by definition a maladjusted relation to the 'the world'" (Awkward-Rich 2020, 119). Awkward-Rich furthermore acknowledges the special trouble for transpeople, a discrepancy between gender attribution and gender identity, as attributed, performed, and visible gender markers set the conditions for the recognition by others, helping to construct gender identity. Therefore, trans sociality, by definition, is fraught from the onset, since trans lives contest the interpretative primacy of the visible to challenge the overdeterminations from the outside world, and while all social categories entail forms of misrecognition, transness is perhaps a unique category *defined* by this very misrecognition (127).

While all social categories entail *some* misrecognition between interiority and sociality, something generally ascribed to all human subjectivity, trans subjectivity may be the only category that is itself demarcated by this misrecognition between the ways you read or identify yourself with(out) the lens of social norms, i.e., an inner life, and the dominant social, cultural, and visual overdeterminations that will read you through norms of gender attribution, i.e., the outside world. This results in a "grammatical awkwardness" toward bodily and identity integrity. In other words, transpeople do not experience the same bodily and identity integrity—a feeling that one is correctly gendered and attributed to a body and interiority that matches the norms of the social world—as non-transpeople or cisgendered people.

Awkward-Rich's lyrical subject also understands this affective and phenomenological awkwardness through the role of media, e.g., the cosmetics Maria uses to perform womanhood, TV and the internet's representations of transwomen, the films James uses

to help him identify his internalized gender and sexuality, etc., which shapes Maria's and James's feelings of unease. Awkward-Rich insists:

> Media, whether in the form of explicitly trans narratives or not, provide schemas for organizing inchoate feelings of unease; reading makes sense of experience, fleshes it out…reading provide[s] self-organizing schemes and schemas that might help one more substantively recognize others…In particular, this function of reading explains the compulsiveness of trans bibliographies, why trans projects of self-making are so often extensive research projects: continuous reading is a way of continually confirming and populating a world for oneself in books in the absence of the possibility of recognition outside of them. (132)

Awkward-Rich conveys the ways media, explicitly trans narratives or not, produces 'inchoate feelings of unease' in which reading attempts to make sense of an internal experience. He sees reading as a means of creating new self-organizing schemas by which we can better recognize others, pointing to the importance and purpose of creating trans literature and projects in the first place, so that one can continuously confirm and multiply (fictional) worlds for oneself in lieu of the misrecognition from the outside world.

In a similar line of thought, Trish Salah advocates that what makes *Nevada* so unique is precisely that this work is intended and primarily written *for* trans people for reasons noted above, but not exclusively so, making this an exceptional and inviting work in evolving trans literature (Page 2014). These theorizations pertain directly to *Nevada* for two reasons: firstly, it captures this inherent state of unease, misrecognition, and withdrawal as transpeople self-organize themselves due to the schemas available, schemas ascribed to them by the outside social world, and secondly, the novel itself offers us with one of these 'continuous readings' that 'continually confirm' a world for oneself in the absence of regulated social recognition, providing us with a meta-social commentary that gives transpeople a world that does *not* misrecognize them. In doing so, Awkward-Rich brilliantly notes the ways the trans interiority represents its own unique social category, depicting the depth and complexity of detachment that is not seen to the same degree in non-trans or cisgendered subjects.

I argue that Binnie's *Nevada* epitomizes this reading of Awkward-Rich's lyrical subject, a trans subjectivity that is based on and defined by this social misrecognition and misrepresentation, being constantly misread or misgendered by society or being homogeneously read by social norms and stereotypes via media that do not cohere with one's invented or fictionalized sense of self and interiority. This further instructs and reinforces this reciprocal relationship between selfhood and sociality, between inside and outside, something Binnie's *Nevada* and her shifting point-of-view narrations attempt to evoke.

2.3 Trans Subjectivity and Literature in Relational Context

Susan Stryker (2013), another hugely influential thinker in trans studies and trans subjectivity, also alludes to this "inside" and "outside" structuration shaped by one's social,

material, symbolic, and linguistic conditions. Stryker highlights the ways transgender rage[4] is situated by the inextricable relationship between language and materiality, providing a field of signification that informs the fictions of an inside (first-person point of view) and outside (third-person point of view). Stryker states:

> The rage itself is generated by the subject's situation in a field governed by the unstable but indissoluble relationship between language and materiality, a situation in which language organizes and brings into signification matter that simultaneously eludes definitive representation and demands its own perpetual rearticulation in symbolic terms. Within this dynamic field the subject must constantly police the boundary constructed by its own founding in order to maintain the fictions of "inside" and "outside" against a regime of signification/materialization whose *intrinsic instability* produces the rupture of subjective boundaries as one of its regular features. (Stryker 2013, 248-9; emphasis added)

This, then, helps us to unravel the ways we experience an internalized and bodily 'fiction.' While having to police the boundary between inside and outside experience, transpeople are subject to an 'intrinsic instability' by the significations of the outside world, e.g., being read as either woman, man, cis, trans, gay, straight, etc. More simply put, subjects are always in a field of signification that demands 'perpetual rearticulation,' one that reproduces the signifiers of what it means to be and perform a (gendered) category. Accordingly, this establishes the ways in which the fiction of the outside world, i.e., social, legal, media, medical, cultural systems, etc., ground the formation of a 'bodily ego' that signifies and transfers meaning in and to an internalized fiction, an interior first-person perspective.

This showcases why Maria and James feel withdrawn, confused, and alienated, conveying this 'intrinsic instability'—much like Awkward-Rich's trans misrecognition in the lyrical subject—that they both inherently feel due to not being able to be read in the ways they would like to by the larger normative significations of gender and sexuality represented in media and culture, by the larger cultural milieu and symbolic assemblage. They are inextricably part of the symbolic order and its relational context structured by cultural scripts that give them the very ability to discern or perceive a fiction of interiority (inside) and publicity (outside).

Stryker consequently helps us to unpack and makes more visible the ways in which gendering is a mainstay in this symbolizing field, one that inhabits the deep signifying structures of personhood, and one that we cannot easily or readily escape. Stryker continues, "A gendering violence is the founding condition of human subjectivity; having a gender is the tribal tattoo that makes one's personhood cognizable" (250). In this way,

[4]Although Stryker is depicting the transgender rage of monsters and monstrosity in trans text, an idea that lies outside the scope of this article, we can see a similar line of thought in the ways the public or outside world manufactures the significations, symbolic order that allow subjects to have a first-person perspective, experience, or sense of self at all.

gendering is a way of making people (re)cognizable, making known the implicit and explicit harm and violence of (mis)gendering them. As such, this relational interplay of reading the symbolic order of the world, a third-person point of view, to an interior experience, a first-person point of view, gives literary theorists and trans scholars a more dynamic, entangled, and authentic approach to the trans struggle.

2.4 Subverting Trans Tropes as Trans Justice

In speaking to this gendering violence, Fink elaborates upon and reminds us not to forget the real-world consequences that affect millions of transpeople's lives. Fink remarks that "*Nevada* plays with readers' narrative expectations, raising the question of what happens 'when you take away the mystification, misconceptions and mystery' created by media about trans women, and deal instead with representing the 'boring', 'exhausting' daily impact of gender-based violence" (Fink 2019, 5). Fink thus reads *Nevada* as challenging normative narrative expectations when you take a hard look at the ways trans women are read and constructed by broader cultural mediums and relational formations. It emphasizes and underlines the trans reality, considering the real gender-based violences that occur worldwide and how society and public representations facilitate these real-world harms and inequities. *Nevada* importantly attempts to make these injustices visible to its' readership through its unconventional narrative techniques that creatively implicate its readers in co-creating this larger symbolic order through the very act of reading literature and gender from a societally produced positionality. It tries to emphasize the open-endedness of the trans reality via the unresolved nature of the novel's ending. Fink reinforcingly reminds us that:

> Rather than finding her own story 'interesting' like the stories of 'trans women on television', Maria instead narrates trauma as that which keeps a person 'stuck in a state of perma-meta' and involves increasingly 'repressing and policing yourself'. Binnie thwarts the possibility for readers to enjoy a narrative progression from Maria as 'energetic little college kid' to self-actualized, post-transition trans adult. (7)

Fink further underscores the authentic reality of being a trans woman by being 'stuck in a state of perma-meta' that involves constantly policing oneself according to the publicity of the outside world. It contests one-dimensional and normative narrative readings that lead to self-actualization, catharsis, and apotheosis, that of a finalized, fixed, transformed, and resolved trans adult or subject. Moreover, Fink makes known the ways in which Binnie muddies our stabilizing narrative progressions in order to make strides toward trans justice and nonhegemonic representation.

Casey Plett, another fellow Canadian writer, also appreciates the honesty of this work in the broader culture of what trans women are allowed to be in the world, that the "Positive Narrative stuff," that of self-actualizing arcs, is starting to give way so that we can go deeper into the truer and uglier things that historically have had few platforms

(Page 2014). Binnie's perma-meta state and anti-'positive narrative stuff' speak to and include her lack of self-transformative resolutions. Unlike 'trans women on television,' Binnie's *Nevada* describes something deep and profound about the phenomenology and interiority of trans understanding juxtaposed to the real gender-based violences ingrained in our cultural norms, practices, and depictions. It reminds us that the trans experience exposes a permanent state of instability, uncertainty, oppression, and repression, something that shifting points of view help to elucidate, delineating a move toward (un)doing trans (in)justice via addressing the historical underrepresentation of the trans experience through the creation of new trans literary and cultural works and movements.

Having established the theoretical landscape and key critical perspectives on *Nevada*, the discussion now turns to a close examination of Binnie's narrative techniques. By exploring specific instances of shifting point-of-view narrations, the following analysis will demonstrate how *Nevada* enacts the complex interplay between self and society, internal experience and external publicity, ultimately rebuking traditional notions of trans identity and literary form.

3. Unstable Selves and Unstable Narrations: A Close Reading of Shifting Point-of-View Techniques in *Nevada*

Binnie's *Nevada* follows Maria, a trans woman, and her experiences and travels in New York as she suffers a tough break-up and loses her job, comprising the first half of the novel. She then steals her ex-girlfriend's car and buys an ample amount of heroin before heading west on a journey of self-discovery. In the second part of the novel, Maria sojourns to Nevada and meets James Hanson and immediately recognizes him as a not-yet realized trans woman. While contemplating and sharing their experiences, they travel together to Reno as James leaves her there after stealing her heroin, ending with no resolution or profound self-transformative sequence. It leaves us unsure of how to read this abrupt ending, with Maria's thoughts of gender, heteronormativity, and social conditioning left lingering.

Nevada uses an interesting, innovative, and ambivalent point-of-view structure for strategic literary purposes, however. This structure oscillates among first-person, second-person, and third-person limited/omniscient points of view in nontraditional ways. These shifts force us to ask several tough questions: are we supposed to read this work from an objective observer, a (pre-/post-) trans person, a cis heteronormative reader, etc.? This unconventional usage of point-of-view narrations, I suggest, serves as a profound challenge to common categorizations and fictional writing practices, especially in transgendered contexts. Yet, this nontraditional point-of-view construction allows literary theorists and trans studies scholars to acknowledge the deep intricacy and inextricable interconnection between interiority and withdrawal and the sociality and publicity that contextualize internal experiences, e.g., to see oneself as different, (in)visible, or

misgendered through a larger social and mediatized lens. These unstable points of view implore us to engage with the byzantine interplay between self and society; therefore, these unconventional literary uses of point of view in *Nevada* allow us to analyze the socio-cultural milieu in which the constructed or invented self and sociality interact in tangled, messy, and dynamic ways, obscuring a simplified, facile, and dichotomous reading of self and sociality that reproduce dominant, violent, and often hegemonic modes of (trans) representation.

Instead, *Nevada* primarily asks us what it mean to be trans: a withdrawn 'self' constructed by a violently gendered society? Is it solely this first-person experience of interiority? Or is it a form of publicity or performativity filtered by media and a wider socio-cultural matrix? "That's what it's like to be a trans woman: never being sure who knows you're trans or what that knowledge would even mean to them. Being on unsure, weird social footing," answers Maria (Binnie 2013, 8). Binnie illustrates early that this novel will probe the experiences of trans women, who often undergo uneasy feelings and awkward social interactions. In an early scene, Maria describes her initial experiences as a trans woman in a party setting that symbolizes sociality. Through inner monologue, she reflects:

> And it's not even like it matters if somebody knows you're trans. Who cares. You just don't want your hilarious, charming, complicated weirdo self to be erased by ideas people have in their heads that were made up, by, like, hack TV writers, or even hackier internet porn writers. (8)

Nevada quickly takes up questions of representation and the ways our senses of self get 'erased' by ideas people have in their heads produced by larger cultural representations and mass media. Media in our culture today, such as TV, social media, films, the internet, etc., normalize the social category and construction of trans women. And we see how Maria begins to interrogate her sense of the self and the ways she interacts and communicates with broader societal constructs that pugnaciously (mis)gender, obfuscate, and situate Maria's internal feelings of withdrawal, anxiety, and frustration. This gets to the heart of Binnie's purpose for writing this novel: to illuminate and reveal the reality of transpeople's lives via the mixture of our interior and internalized senses of self that intricately commingles with dominant societal narratives that frame the performative, mediatized, and publicized category of 'trans women.'

Nevada's shifting point-of-view structuration further explicates and makes visible this dynamic interaction between self and sociality. Binnie's unique and curious shifts of point of view deeply contest a facile split between first- and third- person and limited and omniscient perspectives, blurring the lines that give us a clear, fixed, and distinct point-of-view category, which reflects and symbolizes the trans experience. The overall structure from the first to the second part of the novel also helps us to comprehend the ways Binnie confuses the lines between a clear third-person limited and omniscient

perspective. Binnie deliberately uses a third-person perspective throughout the novel, using proper names and gendered pronouns such as "she" and "he," notably while detailing the main characters of Maria and James in the second half of the work. Yet, her third-person style is conveyed in ways that attempt to understand the subjective "I" *in terms of or through public spheres* given that we are sparsely privy to all the characters' thoughts and feelings—i.e., omniscient narration—throughout the novel.

A few key sections speak to this interchange, starting with Maria's contemplation of how to engage with bureaucratic, medical, and legal procedures as a trans woman: "I don't care, whatever, I'm trans…It comes from the fact that you have to prove that you're Really Trans in order to get any treatment at all. Meaning hormones. It is stupid and there are these hoops you have to jump through, boxes you need to check" (Binnie 2013, 45). Here, Binnie is speaking about Maria's first-person understanding of being trans through the personal pronoun "I", which she rarely uses, while juxtaposing it with the second-person collective pronoun "you". She uses "you" in this case to loosely speak about a collective trans experience, and she refers to how one must 'check boxes' to be recognized as trans by society at large. She thereby is writing from a subjective position while at the same time speaking for and to a wider trans category, muddling a simple reading that sees these shifting points of view as clear, separate, and distinct. Binnie notices the ways in which transgendered realities need to be verified by social and public networks, especially medical and legal apparatuses.

Maria later comments that "It's expensive to get your documents [driver's license] changed, plus you have to go to city hall and be like, I am trans, please put that on a record somewhere, which gets harder and harder with every minute that people aren't reading you as trans" (62). In this context, Maria uses her first-person perspective and experience to bring attention to the ways she must reconcile with bureaucratic, legal, and social spaces, again by identifying a collective trans experience and a contextualizing social field of which she is inseparably connected. This emphasizes the complexity of both being a subject of interiority whilst at the same time negotiating herself in a situated public world, experimenting with multiple and transitory shifts in points of view that help us to better understand her internality in and of a broader social order.

Binnie also uses Maria to bring to our attention to the frustration and pain that goes with being trans, creating a feeling of withdrawal precisely because the world either sees or does not see you as trans or as a clearly marked gender. For instance, describing a Christmas party Maria attended with her then-girlfriend Steph while using a third-person limited perspective, Binnie emphasizes,

> [b]eing trans, at that point of [pre-]transition, was characterized by this intense feeling of inferiority toward pretty much everyone…Maria felt like she didn't [know how to perform womanhood]. *She internalized this idea that trans women always take up too much space*, so she was trying hard to disappear. (Binnie 2013, 57; emphasis added)

This exemplifies Maria's 'intense feeling of inferiority' toward everyone, toward society itself. Maria herself observes that she has internalized the idea that trans women 'take up too much space,' highlighting the ways being in the social world makes her feel inferior, subjugated, and marked, further propelling her to withdraw into herself. Because of the ways this social world reads her, she desires to be left unseen, to be made invisible, indicating a two-way interaction between interiority and sociality. Interestingly, then, this third-person point of view take discloses Maria's in-depth and complex interiority, her inner state and feelings of inadequacy shaped by outside stereotypical notions of (trans) women that were prescribed to her by media and the cultural landscape she occupies.

In the second part of the book, *Nevada* generally shifts perspective from Maria to James, prompting us to see how Maria's character functions as the contextualizing social grid that then becomes the audience/reader for James and his interior and first-person experience. Maria, while occupying a third-person positionality and describing the ways in which she has been read by her social environment in the first half of the novel, becomes the reader and relational framework for James in the second half: "As soon as Maria Griffiths sees James Hanson in the Star City, Nevada, Wal-Mart, she's like that kid is trans and he doesn't even know it yet" (Binnie 2013, 172). Maria herself thus shifts and becomes the public for James in this section of the book, reading James as trans in ways that he himself might not yet be aware. This underlines the intricacy of an omniscient perspective, since the narrator uses the proper noun "Maria", not the personal pronoun "I" in this instance, denoting that we, the readers of the novel, objectify and read Maria's experience in a multilayered, metanarrative fashion. Binnie thus forces her readers to unwittingly become the omniscient readers or social fabric for Maria and James throughout the work.

To further analyze this point, Binnie positions Maria simultaneously from both a third-person limited and omniscient perspective. Maria occupies both positionalities in that we are primarily just given Maria's thoughts for huge segments of the novel (limited), but in a unique way that acknowledges and centers the omniscience of a public sphere, including us as readers, other characters in the story, the historical and material context outlined in the book itself, i.e., early 21st century, etc. More simply put, all subjects are constantly being read by others *at the same time* they read others. Maria is *read* by us as she instantaneously *reads* James, complicating a standard point-of-view structure. For example, when James finally asks Maria if she is trans in his apartment after they initially meet, Maria responds, "Yes James H., I'm trans. How did you know? Which, she realizes as she's saying it, is exactly the worst possible question she could have started with…Wait, she says. James H., are *you* trans?" (Binnie 2013, 202-3; emphasis in original). Here, we are clearly given a third-person limited reading of Maria's internal thoughts, which regrets answering James's question the way she did. Yet, moments later, James, who just asked and interpreted Maria as trans, replies, "I dunno. The way he looks over

at her after he says that though—scared, maybe a little bit aggressive, but mostly like, do you believe me—makes his answer clear" (203). This demonstrates a complex, imbricated move from a limited to an omniscient narrative construction. We are clearly given James's internalized thoughts and feeling of fear and anxiety by means of both first- and third-person pronouns, speaking to the frustrated sense of uncertainty conveyed by trans ambivalence, as James 'makes his answer clear' to Maria (and us) that he is, in fact, trans; Binnie interestingly uses a nonnormative omniscient structure to reveal the depth of his withdrawal. We are the readers of Maria at the same moment that Maria is the reader of James, and we are the readers of James at the same moment that James is the reader of Maria. This adds to the multifaceted, multilayered, and overlapping narrations at play, fluidly moving from a third-person limited point of view to an omniscient style in ways that capture the in-depth interiorities of Maria *and* James while attempting to make its readership aware of itself as a participating audience, signifying that this is not a straightforward limited/omniscient narrative formation. This unravels the point-of-view dynamism and strategy of describing the embodiment of the trans experience, which cannot be fully understood by strict and traditional point-of-view methodologies and fictional writing practices.

Likewise, Walker compellingly comments that Maria deliberately makes herself the public audience who reads James to help him transition. In speaking about James, Walker notes:

> *He's* [James's] intrigued by Maria's rock-star vibe; she becomes convinced that *he's* actually a trans woman in desperate need of saving from his dissociative male facade. 'I'm gonna go talk to that girl and tell her that *she's* a girl,' Maria decides shortly after they cross paths. 'We'll talk, and *she'll* cry, and I'll set her up a Livejournal so she can sort through all her feelings and then I'll leave and totally learn something about myself too.' Maria is not wrong to assume this about James…but you can't just tell someone *she's* trans before *she* comes to that conclusion *herself* or *she'll* steal your drugs and ditch you in a casino. (Walker 2022; emphasis added)

Moreover, Walker identifies how Maria is reading James as a 'dissociative male' who needs saving. Maria intriguingly already reads James as a "she" in stating that 'she's [James's] a girl,' who will cry and set up her own Livejournal account much in the same way Maria has done, reading James objectively through her own first-person, experiential, and developing categorical lens of and as a trans woman. Maria also claims that she will learn something about herself by helping James understand his own interiority, pointing to this reciprocal interaction between subjectivity and sociality. This epitomizes the finding that Maria does in fact read James in a way that makes him trans *without* his own authorial, first-person, or subjective input. Maria correctly assumes that James is trans, and as such, Maria is reading James and looking to be, perhaps ambitiously or overzealously, an important social figure, role model, and trans representative for him to

follow. In using the pronoun of "she" to describe James in that moment, Maria is *rereading* James from a nonnormative social standpoint, a new audience or cultural configuration that reads James as a trans woman, establishing Maria as this new social public for him in ways that he may not have had, reconceptualizing and reinventing a social script that he might otherwise never be exposed.

Instead of normative or dominant narratives that will forcefully and violently read James's gender as solely male, Binnie, through the concurrent lens of first-person perspectives, proper names, and gendered pronouns (a third-person perspective), provides another dynamic avenue that can read James in a way that helps us to capture James's composite, complex, and processual interiority along with his sense of withdrawal, uncertainty, and internal instability. This promotes and supports the idea that Binnie's *Nevada* subverts traditional literary styles and asks us to remain in this ambiguous space between subjectivity and the social public as engaged, active, and co-constitutive readers, addressing an inevitable interconnection between publicity of the outside world and the interiority of a personalized inside world.

4. Conclusion: Expanding Literary Strategies Through Trans Narrativity

The novel's strategic use of fluid point-of-view narrations—oscillating between first-, second-, and third-person limited/omniscient perspectives—does more than simply tell an intricate story; through this narrative form, it enacts the very phenomenology of trans identity formation. This literary technique, as I conceive it and argue, moreover makes several salient contributions to transgender literature. First, it disrupts the reductive binary of self and society by illustrating how trans subjectivity is constantly renegotiated between personalized senses of self and societal norms and expectations. Secondly, *Nevada* rejects linear narratives of transformation and traditional coming-of-age or transition stories. Instead, it presents trans experience as an ongoing process of "perma-meta" self-reflection and social navigation. By denying both triumphant self-actualization and tragic ending plotlines, Binnie forces readers to confront the mundane yet profound realities of trans life and the trans struggle. Thirdly, it expands the scope of literary representation as the novel's unconventional structure pushes beyond simple pronoun politics to engage with deeper questions of perspective, social recognition, and the construction of selfhood. Lastly, *Nevada* exceptionally illuminates Awkward-Rich's lyrical subject, showcasing how trans subjectivity exists in a state of simultaneous interiority and publicity.

Interestingly, in reflecting and thinking about how in some scholarly circles trans issues collapse into having to do more with the politics of pronoun choice, I believe there is something deeply insightful here in that pronoun choice is not the heart of the issue; point of view is. While point-of-view narration is a different form of attentiveness to pronouns and/or personhood, it certainly relates to them and invites us to attend to first-

person as well as third-person perspectives in challenging and novel ways. This shift could steer some of the conversations in trans scholarship today in new heuristic directions, since it engages with a different—and perhaps more penetrative—way of conceptualizing the dialectic of interiority of personhood and subjectivity that recognizes an uncertain and withdrawn sense of self, something pronoun choice in itself cannot capture, speak to, or expound upon.

This subversive approach to narration does more than just represent trans experiences; it expands our understanding of *how literature can function*, especially the role of point-of-view narrativizing. *Nevada* reveals that point of view is not just a formal or literary choice. It is a powerful tool for exploring the interwoven entanglements of identity formation, embodiment, and sociality while denouncing the injustices of an oppressive heteronormative society. By resisting easy categorization and refusing to offer crude, disingenuous resolutions, *Nevada*, notwithstanding some important critiques[5], opens up new possibilities for literary and cultural expression. It invites readers to consider how narrative structure itself can be a site of resistance against normative expectations, both in literature and in our culturally (techno-)mediatized lives. Binnie's *Nevada* moreover stands as a transformative work in transgender literature. By employing shifting points of view, Binnie crafts a new narrative form that mirrors the complex interplay between perceived interiority and overdetermined social perception that defines trans subjectivity, unpacking "how reality is shaped by myth and fantasy," that "[t]rans community, vitality, and survivability require new myths, new fantasies we can embody…because trans bodies are real" (Clare 2022, 129).

As such, the significance of *Nevada* extends far beyond its status as a transgender novel. It offers insights into the limitations of the traditional Western literary canon, the power of experimental narrations to confront social norms, the potential for fiction to articulate nuanced philosophical ideas about selfhood, society, and materiality, and the role of literature in shaping cultural understandings of gender and identity construction. In pushing the boundaries of narrative conventions, Binnie's work, I propose, invites us to reconsider not just how we read trans stories, but how we read and construct all stories about self, belonging, publicity, and the human experience, experimenting where, as Clare puts it, "narrative and materiality intertwine" (Clare 2022, 128). Because of this, *Nevada* remains not just an important work of trans literature and justice, but a significant

[5] *Nevada* is not without its limitations. While it breaks new ground in trans representation, it is important to note some of its lacunas. As Wark pointedly observes, the novel's sole focus on the *white* trans experience leaves unexplored how racialization intersects with gendered misrecognition. She asserts, "Most of all, [*Nevada*] doesn't help us think about how the ways we inhabit gender are always connected to the ways we inhabit race" (Wark 2022). This gap points to the need for more diverse voices in trans literature that can address the compounded effects of racial *and* gender-based marginalization, misrecognition, and violence.

contribution to contemporary fiction as a whole, pushing us to expand our literary conventions and embrace the complex and often contradictory nature of (trans) subjectivity.

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BOOK REVIEWS

(In)hospitable Encounters in Chicanx and Latinx Literature, Culture and Thought

Edited by Maria Antònia Oliver-Rotger and Pere Gifra-Adroher (2025)

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(In)hospitable Encounters in Chicanx and Latinx Literature, Culture and Thought, edited by Maria Antònia Oliver-Rotger and Pere Gifra-Adroher. 2025. New York: Routledge. US$ 144 hardback.

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(In)hospitable Encounters in Chicanx and Latinx Literature, Culture and Thought, edited by Maria Antònia Oliver-Rotger and Pere Gifra-Adroher, explores (in)hospitality across current Latinx cultural productions and epistemology. This comprehensive volume pivots on three sections ("Immigration, Hospitality and State Violence," "Narratives of (In)hospitality" and "Translation as Hospitality") that encompass ten chapters and a postscript.

In the introduction, Oliver-Rotger and Gifra-Adroher situate the volume in its sociopolitical and cultural context and show their rigorous study of Derrida's hos(ti)pitality and, more specifically, "US conditional hospitality" (2025, 5) and the limits of hospitality, to explain how the host country exerts control over the status, identity and social behavior of numerous individuals. The editors also conceptualize otherness, inclusion/exclusion and necropolitics, among other concepts. While these terms may be relevant to multiple other geographical contexts, they successfully frame them within the issues affecting the Latinx population of the US nowadays, who are "constantly reminded of their alterity" (2025, 18).

Professor María-Socorro Tabuenca Córdoba opens the first section by embarking readers on an etymological journey of the terms leading to 'host' and 'hospitality' nowadays. This situates and sets the ground for the artistic creations by Central American teenagers in a child detention camp in Tornillo, Texas, revealing how, through their creations, these individuals show their cultural heritage with pride and question inhospitable structural oppression.

In the second chapter, Esther Álvarez-Lopez analyzes Francisco Cantú's controversial *The Line Becomes a River* from an innovative perspective that highlights the author's ambivalent and often contradictory position shifting between the individual, that is, his own experience and that of migrants often portrayed as exceptional, and the collective, claiming the need to humanize the border. Evoking Mbembe, Álvarez-López contends that the border still evokes possibility "based on care and commitment to articulating a common humanity" (2025, 70).

Chapter 3 gathers Rocío Irene Mejía's fieldwork conducted at migrant court hearings in 2018. Mejía insists on the hostility of courts and spaces of the law in general, as migrants are "barely heard and cannot speak" during hearings (2025, 82). This well-researched paper reveals how violence and hostility are deeply present not only in legal processes and numbers, but also in the general social treatment of migrants.

In the following chapter, filmmaker Alex Rivera discusses *The Infiltrators*, his latest docu-thriller featuring migrant youth attempting to stop deportations. Within a context where undocumented migrants are increasingly racialized, criminalized and associated with illegality (Abrego et al 2017; Ayón 2017) and thus, encouraged to live further 'in the shadows,' *The Infiltrators* shows how attempts to gain visibility often have legal implications. However, Rivera insists on the importance of gaining visibility and recognition, as "there is no power without visibility" (2025, 106).

The next section, "Narratives of (in)Hospitality," begins with Norma E. Cantú's analysis of (in)hospitality in Reyna Grande, Margarita Canseco del Valle, Katie Gutierrez and Fernando Flores's works. As she explains, her exploration of hospitality is influenced by her family story and its difficult ties with the US and Spain as host countries. Cantú shapes her work and perspective by adopting the *sentipensante* approach to show how scholarship and writing are inevitably linked to lineage and feelings and are, indeed, "work that matters" (Anzaldúa 2015, as cited in Cantú 2025, 112). She also ends on a positive note by stressing how the *sentipensante* pedagogy may lead to more meaningful and hospitable human connection.

Throughout Chapter 6, Marta E. Sánchez makes a fresh reading of the well-known *The Diary of an Undocumented Immigrant* by Ramón "Tianguis" Pérez in which she highlights the representation of (in)hospitality both in his work and "Tianguis" Pérez's relationship with his editor. The parallelisms made by Sánchez elucidate how authorship, translation and edition are processes where hospitality, hostility and hostipitality (Derrida) are entangled.

Juan G. Etxeberría's analyzes *The Day Laborers* by Lane Bishop in Chapter 7, arguing that, while the movie's portrayal of undocumented day laborers may seem revolutionary, it fails to redefine hospitality and to question certain ideas such as the impossibility to achieve the American Dream. In addition, the author makes broader criticism

against the film industry for failing to feature certain lives and issues due to their lack of commercial interest.

In the closing chapter of the section, Francisco Lomelí makes an insightful reading of Salvador Plasencia's *The People of Paper* (2005), taking readers into a bidirectional journey; his analysis of Plasencia's story essentially elucidates how apparent acts of hospitality may turn into hostility and makes a close reading of the postmodern techniques of the text. Concomitantly, Lomelí crafts a text that hosts Plasencia's work and forces readers to host that same text. As he contends, Plasencia "succeeds in pushing the reader into new forms of reading" (2025, 188), and he does the same with his own reading of Plasencia's text, also making readers reflect upon (in)hospitality when encountering literary and academic texts.

As its title suggests, the last section of the book "Translation as Hospitality," delves into translation, an understudied discipline in Latinx scholarship. In Chapter 9, Alicia Gaspar de Alba describes the origins and development of the Codex Nepantla Project, created in 2011 by the author and a group of colleagues in order to translate Chicana scholarship into Spanish to broaden its readership and enhance the reverberations across Chicana and Mexican feminism(s). From its origins, as Gaspar de Alba contends, this project is entangled in complex definitions of identity and relationships that redefine and contextualize hospitality among Chicanas and Mexicanas, and it brings to the fore complicated relationships embedded in translation processes.

Along the same lines, Mattea Cussel describes her experience leading focus groups in Europe, the US and Colombia reading the Spanish translation of *A Cup of Water Under my Bed* by Daisy Hernández. Cussel builds on Ricoeur's linguistic hospitality to emphasize the complexity of translation and the difficulty of conveying certain cross-linguistic and cross-cultural variations in hospitable and respectful ways. Based on her own experience, the author insists on how translation is not a destination, as the multiple receptions of a book can complicate translation and problematize hospitality.

The volume closes with a postscript by Emeritus Professor Norma Alarcón's reflection on the US political climate as of early 2024, and the rise of Trumpism. Even if the contextualization made by Alarcón and the editors in the introduction has evolved, Alarcón already pointed at the constant "promotion of confusion and chaos" (2025, 243) nowadays. As of May 2025, migrants are in an even more precarious situation, with the dystopic invocation of the 18th-century Alien Enemies Act to deport over 200 Venezuelans to El Salvador, increasing deportations and incarcerations of individuals (including authorized ones and US citizens) without due process, attempts to end humanitarian parole, or even an advertisement on Mexican prime time television by the Secretary of National Security discouraging potential migrants with a clearly criminalizing and dehumanizing language: "we will hunt you down." This makes the present volume even more relevant.

To conclude, (*In)Hospitable Encounters* is a complex work that discusses (in)hospitality in the Latinx context from a polyhedric perspective that goes beyond literature and incorporates various types of research and writing. All authors contribute to a well-researched and solid discourse on hospitality, its limits and contradictions. This makes it a well-researched and valuable volume whose findings are relevant not only to Chicanx/Latinx Studies scholars, but also for those interested in the study of migration flows and hospitality across disciplines. As the editors note, all chapters attempt to process (in)hospitality and hostility from different disciplines, geographical contexts and ages and, to a great extent, from their lived experience.

While being highly critical of the social and political treatment of Latinxs by the US authorities, this book insists on the possibility of reexamining hospitality and creating new spaces for it, so that social injustices can lead us to reflect and act for Latinxs in the US, but also those surrounding us. Cristina Rivera Garza has pointed at the indolence prevailing in our society, arguing how "that which does not touch us—that which we do not know touches us—does not hurt us" (2020, 157). Borrowing her words, *(In)Hospitable Encounters* is an invitation to reflect upon what touches us, even when we do not know it does, and to act against global and local hostility and indolence.

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