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About

Gender forum is an online, peer reviewed academic journal dedicated to the discussion of gender issues. As an electronic journal, *gender forum* offers a free-of-charge platform for the discussion of gender-related topics in the fields of literary and cultural production, media and the arts as well as politics, the natural sciences, medicine, the law, religion and philosophy. Inaugurated by Prof. Dr. Beate Neumeier in 2002, the quarterly issues of the journal have focused on a multitude of questions from different theoretical perspectives of feminist criticism, queer theory, and masculinity studies. *gender forum* also includes reviews and occasionally interviews, fictional pieces and poetry with a gender studies angle.

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Editorial

By Laura-Marie Schnitzler, University of Cologne

1 Heading into its fifth year, *gender forum*'s Early Career Researchers issue has now become an established place for insightful new research. This year's issue presents the format's trademark broad range of interest, showcasing new research that deals with material as diverse as song lyrics, stage plays, performance art, biography, and finally, online forums.

2 In "The Disruption of Normativity: Queer Desire and Negativity in Morrissey and The Smiths", Frederic Rukes analyses the negotiation of ambiguous and ambivalent depictions of gender in the lyrics of singer-songwriter Morrissey. While Morrissey refuses to classify himself in any predefined categories of gender and sexuality, his own and his band's musical canon is rife with narratives of queer desire and instances of sexual intimacy, which often allow for both a gay and a straight viewpoint. It is precisely this ambiguity that offers the possibility of an interpretation offside a compulsory heterosexuality and –normativity, therefore opening it to a queer audience. It is furthermore among the reasons why lyrics by Morrissey and The Smiths qualify as queer texts. In order to establish and defend such a view, Rukes draws on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's approach of a queer reading and her work on homosocial desire in literature, Harold Beaver's examination of homosexual signs, and Teresa de Lauretis definition of queer texts. Deriving from Jack Halberstam's concept of the queer art of failure, Lee Edelman's critique of reproductive futurism, Judith Butler's reflections on the term *queer*, and José Esteban Muñoz's conceptualisation of a queer utopia, Rukes shows how Morrissey uses different formulas of negativity and longing to generate power from, thus transforming them into critique of regimes of the normal.

3 James D Wardwood's article on "The Razor Edge of Accommodation: Violent Perception and the Nonbinary Body in *Gender Failure*" too engages with issues of stigmatisation and discrimination in the context of nonbinary identities. Positing the question what it means to be "retired from gender", and what role such an identity plays in daily life, Warwood engages with the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Judith Butler to elucidate the experience of nonbinary – that is, external to the male/female gender binary – gendered individuals, and the ultimate unintelligibility of that experience. Although an arbitrary system, the gender binary serves as a mechanism of so-called social truth: because the nonbinary reality rejects this truth, the nonbinary gender performance not only appears unintelligible to the binary other, but also represents a threat to social stability. Warwood uses the memoirs in *Gender Failure* – written by two self-identified nonbinary individuals – to consider how

social norms inform binary perception and how that perception constitutes the nonbinary self. Perceived from within the binary matrix, the nonbinary self appears unintelligible: as a result, the validity of their gendered reality is threatened. Conscious of the conceptual gap between nonbinary and binary individuals, this project explores gender as the subject of the perceptive act and not only outlines the delegitimization of the nonbinary reality but also suggests opportunities to make space for non-normative gendered experiences.

4 Continuing this issue's concern with non-normative gender experiences, Molly Marotta analyses the artistic and personal biography of 18th century actress Charlotte Clarke. In "Instrument and Screen of All Your Villainies:" Charlotte Charke, *Deviant Bodies*, and Disguise in George Lillo's *The London Merchant*, Marotta's analysis of *The London Merchant* (1731) as a required moralising viewing for young apprentices contrasts the play's seemingly simple moral (men and women should do as their positions, masters, law, and God require; transgressions are not to be tolerated) with the subtextual meaning generated by Charke's acting. While scholars have respectively discussed Charke's life and autobiography and *The London Merchant*'s morality, the intersection of this actor's personal history and her performance in this play has not been analyzed for its intrinsic properties. Charke's life experiences, celebrity, and presence on stage point to the fact that the consumption and destruction of transgressive female or feminized bodies sustain the prevailing systems of morality of the play. Looking at the eighteenth-century drama and Charke's role in it through Christine Cloud's work on cross-dressed writing, Marvin Carlson's work on the haunted stage, and Felicity Nussbaum's work on celebrity culture, this play illustrates the ways in which performance serves to utterly disrupt the meaning of a play as cultural icon and broken hegemonic symbol.

5 In "Feminist Interventions and Intercultural Mobilities in Satoshi Miyagi's '*Othello* in *Noh* Style'", Roweena Yip too offers a reading of gender on the stage and examines the ways in which moving the excluded female body onto the *Noh* stage. *Noh* is a classical Japanese performance form from the 14th century that only allowed male actors. Casting actresses in contemporary productions such as Satoshi Miyagi's '*Othello* intervenes in the performance history of *Noh* – particularly because the visual presentation of the actress's distinctly feminine features foregrounds the materiality of the female body on the *Noh* stage. This production therefore constitutes a materialist feminist intervention both into the *form* of historically all-male *Noh* performance, and into the *focalisation* of Shakespeare's narrative. It thus provides a specifically female articulation of the memory and experience of trauma. Desdemona's memory of the past becomes the dramatic plot of *Othello* re-constructed, to

enact a new subject position: Desdemona's ghost. This material intervention facilitates temporal and spatial mobilities unique to intercultural performance, opening possibilities for theorising at the intersection of interculturalism and gender. By fracturing the temporality of Shakespeare's *Othello* narrative, this intercultural *Noh* performance mobilises and re-constructs the working-through of traumatised female subjectivity as taking place in the present, shifting narrative authority to Desdemona's ghost.

6 The final article of this year's Early Career Researchers issue has been contributed by Megan Lieff, who engages with the "Effects of Usenet on Discussions of Sexual Assault in the BDSM Community in the 1990s". Finding that although informed consent between adults is a mainstay of BDSM—bondage/discipline, dominance/submission and sadomasochism—its practitioners have had to fight accusations to the contrary. Though BDSM practices are generally consensual, assault undoubtedly occurs within the BDSM community. This paper focuses on how the idea of assault has been handled by BDSM community members; how survivors and perpetrators have been treated, how assault and consent have been defined, and how communities have approached preventing future assaults. In order to explore these issues, this paper historicizes the issue of rape in the BDSM community by examining academic and activist writing from BDSM focused community organizations and online forums throughout the 1990s. Lieff's analysis documents the evolution of these conversations from the advent of BDSM specific newsgroups on Usenet through the late 1990s. In the 1990s, for BDSM practitioners who were able to access the Internet, forums such as Usenet provided a new opportunity for anonymous and safer spaces in which to process and discuss assault within the community. Specifically, the alt.sex.bondage newsgroup was home to some of the first documented conversations about trigger warnings, BDSM specific anti-domestic violence resources, and community wide conversations about the existence of rape and abuse in BDSM.

7 In keeping with this issue's interest in engendered stages, the issue closes with Ali Alsmadi's review of *Beyond Spain's Borders: Women Players in Early Modern National Theater* and Kirsten Stoddarts review of Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale*.

The Disruption of Normativity: Queer Desire and Negativity in Morrissey and The Smiths

By Frederic Rukes, Cologne University, Germany

Abstract

Two of the terms most frequently used by scholars and music journalists alike to describe former The Smiths singer Morrissey's persona are *ambiguous* and *ambivalent* – an evaluation that applies among other things to his attitude towards gender and sexuality. While Morrissey refuses to classify himself in any predefined categories of gender and sexuality, his own and his band's musical canon is rife with narratives of queer desire and instances of sexual intimacy, which often allow for both a gay and a straight viewpoint. It is precisely this ambiguity that offers the possibility of an interpretation offside a compulsory heterosexuality and –normativity, therefore opening it to a queer audience. It is furthermore among the reasons why lyrics by Morrissey and The Smiths, as I will argue, qualify as queer texts. In order to establish and defend such a view, this paper will draw on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's approach of a queer reading and her work on homosocial desire in literature, Harold Beaver's examination of homosexual signs, and Teresa de Lauretis definition of queer texts. One of the pillars of de Lauretis's classification is that of non-closure of a narrative and is thus closely linked to queer negativity and non-futurity. Morrissey and The Smiths' oeuvre offers a significant set of songs that embrace these ideas. Deriving from Jack Halberstam's concept of the queer art of failure, Lee Edelman's critique of reproductive futurism, Judith Butler's reflections on the term *queer*, and José Esteban Muñoz's conceptualisation of a queer utopia I will show how Morrissey uses different formulas of negativity and longing to generate power from, thus transforming them into critique of regimes of the normal. It is in this diverse and subversive expression of queer negativity and desire that Morrissey disrupts normativity and its underlying stigmatising and discriminating potential.

Introduction: Breaking the Binary

1 Two of the terms most frequently used by scholars and music journalists alike to describe former The Smiths singer Morrissey's persona are *ambiguous* and *ambivalent* (see for example Campbell; Dillane et al.; Hawkins; Hubbs; Manco; Soghomonian). This evaluation of him applies as much to his political stance, national identification and ethical code as to his attitude towards gender and sexuality. Accordingly, Morrissey has always been an artist resistant to easy categorisation, which is reflected especially in his refusal to identify with certain forms of sexuality: "I don't recognise such terms as heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual and I think it's important that there's someone in pop music who's like that. These words do great damage, they confuse people and they make people feel unhappy so I want to do away with them" (152). This statement, made by Morrissey in 1985, reflects his aversion to predefined classifications and normative obligations, as he recognises such labels as

instruments of a practice of exclusion.¹

2 Instead, throughout his career Morrissey has offered several, sometimes contradictory, alternatives to such existing categories that range from celibacy (Hubbs 271), transgender identifications (277) and his proclamation of himself as “a prophet for the fourth gender” (269) to identifying as “humasexual” (Dillane et al. 149).² Nadine Hubbs argues that celibacy, trans affiliations, and fourth gender serve as ideal positions to disrupt the binaries of heterosexuality and homosexuality as well as of female and male (270-71). A similar observation is made by Aileen Dillane, Martin J. Power, and Eoin Devereux on humasexuality, which they describe as a “fluid” approach to the “whole spectrum of sexual experiences” (150) that withstands any coercion into binary categorisation. Precisely the seeming contradiction between such positions as celibacy versus humasexuality, namely the *ambiguity* or *ambivalence* that comprises the insistence upon both concepts, further strengthens the deconstruction of binaries and troubles their significations. Additionally, Pierpalo Martino uses the terms of the *same-other* and the *oxymoronic self*, that have been brought forward by Augusto Ponzio and Gavin Hopps, to contend how Morrissey has been able to achieve an iconic status by performing a faithful “highly recognizable *persona*” (229) that is however always situated in a complex transcending discourse of in-betweenness (237).

3 In their discussion of gender and sexuality in Morrissey and The Smiths, all of these critics agree that the troubling of binaries through ambiguity is constitutive of the lyrical canon of both the band and the solo artist. What is yet missing in these analyses is a comprehensive application of queer theory to the discourse of the songs in form of a thorough identification of their subversive queering strategies. My aim is to fill this gap and to provide a theoretical basis for the discussion of queer issues in Morrissey’s lyrics, which I argue are mediated in a way that not only troubles binaries but also disrupts a compulsory (hetero)normativity. My main theoretical approach will be that of a discourse-analytic, poststructuralist, and deconstructive queer reading as brought forward by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick with her work on homosocial desire in literature, which I will extend to song lyrics. Discarding a normative view, as informed by the dominant culture and its assumptions, I will discuss the lyrics from a queer perspective, thus exposing their erotic subtexts and queer

¹ For a discussion of the oppressive power that is unleashed with the emergence of normalisation as an instrument of measurement and a new form of meaning production, see Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* (1975), especially page 184.

² Nadine Hubbs states that Morrissey uses the category of the fourth gender as a supplement to the third gender, namely the “gender invert – a female soul in a male body or vice versa” (269). Morrissey adds to his identification as humasexual the explanation “I am attracted to humans” (Dillane et al. 149), thus revealing it to be congruent with pansexuality.

themes and potentials (Kraß 22).

4 With regard to the ambiguity and the clashing ideas presented in Morrissey's lyrics, scholars like Sheila Whiteley and Dillane emphasise that any analysis of a certain text is based on interpretation and assumptions that exist alongside other possibilities that may transcend the intentions of the artist herself (Whiteley 106, Dillane et al. 156). Because of the multiplicity and theoretical boundlessness of text meanings, Hubbs notes that many of Morrissey's lyrics can be interpreted from a gay *and* from a straight viewpoint (269). While I agree with all of these findings, based on Teresa de Lauretis' definition of queer texts, I will argue that, although there is usually a straight viewpoint available in Morrissey's lyrics, they nevertheless qualify as queer texts,³ which are susceptible to such ambiguous positions.

5 Deriving from J. Jack Halberstam's concept of the queer art of failure and Lee Edelman's critique of reproductive futurism, this evaluation will be supported by the localisation of queer negativity in the lyrics, which often deal with liminal characters on the margins of society who struggle to conform to the imposed norms and expectations of their surroundings. Based on Judith Butler's reflections on the term *queer* and José Esteban Muñoz's conceptualisation of a queer utopia, I will show how Morrissey uses this negativity to generate power, which he transforms into a form of critique through resignification of formerly stigmatising and discriminating spaces.

6 In *Fear of a Queer Planet*, editor Michael Warner argues that the term queer "defin[es] itself against the normal rather than the heterosexual" (xxvi). It is precisely that positioning against normalising perspectives of the dominant culture and, instead, the endorsement of diversity and the supposedly strange and divergent, that informs the queer quality of Morrissey's writing and makes it such a potent example of pioneering queer popular music.

The Potentiality for Queer Desire: This Charming Man

7 In her analysis of Morrissey's narratives, Hubbs concludes that to univocally designate his music as 'gay rock' would be "to miss the point completely" (288) since the narratives derive their force precisely from their ambiguity. This evaluation does not contradict her observation that the lyrics are "rife with sex and gender anomalies" (287) and "queer-insider language" (285) which are detected especially by queer listeners and are often overlooked by

³ This evaluation of the lyrics as queer texts adds to my queer reading approach, although it must be stressed that queer reading and queer text are independent of one another: a queer reading can be employed on any text and might be particularly interesting for conservative, heteronormative texts – the text itself does not have to be queer to be approached this way, but in the case of Morrissey's lyrics I argue that it is.

straight ones, partially due to a “mainstream ignorance of queer codes” (285). Hubbs stresses that such ambiguity concerning a gay or straight viewpoint

is not particularly confusing to queer subjects, to whom its utility and indeed necessity is intimately known. Even cultivated sexual ambiguity is not something that tends to jam or erase well-formed “gaydar” readings – to the contrary, it tends to reinforce positive readings. (285)

It is because of this circumstance, which allows for gay *and* a straight viewpoint (as well as multiple other viewpoints), that Morrissey’s work appeals to a queer audience: the fact that the lyrics offer the possibility of an interpretation offside a compulsory heterosexuality and – normativity is among the reasons why they qualify as queer texts. To label them as *gay texts* would prevent other possibilities. The term *queer* is more fitting here because, according to Butler, it is a term of affiliation, one that must remain open, temporal, and under deconstruction in order to extend its range and to constantly include those who are abjected by others (*Bodies* 229-30). Only by occupying such a wide space, it can prevent itself from logics of what is and what is not ‘normal’, as Warner explains: “The preference for ‘queer’ represents, among other things, an aggressive impulse of generalization; it rejects a minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political interest-representation in favor of a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal” (xxvi). To resist these regimes of the normal means to liberate the discourse from the limitedness of essentialist categorisation and instead open it to a multitude of possibilities.

8 Now, in order to argue for the queerness of a text and to explain the sexual ambiguity that facilitates the richness of possibilities that makes it queer, it is helpful to identify some of its non-normative potential. In the case of Morrissey and The Smiths, there is great homosexual potential, which can be justified with the detection of homosexual signs as well as with instances of absent heterosexual desire. This is different from arguing that the meanings of these texts are essentially homosexual, because I claim that they never lose their ambiguity. This has to do with the arbitrariness of the signs that are dispersed throughout the lyrics, the deliberate voids, and the resistance to declaring a final evaluation of a situation. Even in the instances in which homosexual desire and absent heterosexual desire are plausible possibilities, they are not enunciated in the form of labels but instead remain open to other interpretations. Accordingly, when I will identify these instances in the following, they should in no way suggest a univocal meaning that rules out other viewpoints.⁴

⁴ The reason why, despite my explained above preference for the term *queer*, I will not discard the terms *homosexual*, *gay*, or *same-sex desire* completely, has to do with my understanding of the terms as merely descriptive and my interest in representation. While, on the one hand, as informed and introduced by Michel Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality*, I argue for the constructedness of the concept that today is called *sexuality* (with all its attached labels), which relies primarily on the preferred sex of the sexual partner, and which is under

9 As introduction to her reading of canonical mid-eighteenth to mid-nineteenth novels in her respective monograph *Between Men* (1985), Sedgwick exposes the homophobia towards “social bonds between persons of the same sex” (1). While the term *homosocial* had been coined for same-sex activities beyond the bounds of homosexuality and desire, Sedgwick suggests the therefore oxymoronic term *homosocial desire* to bring back the “potentially erotic” to homosocial bonds and argue for “the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual – a continuum whose visibility, for men, in our society, is radically disrupted” (1-2). As she notes, this continuum is much less disrupted for women than it is for men. The latter are faced with the dichotomy of the rejected “men-loving-men” on the one hand and the accepted “men-promoting-the-interest-of-men” on the other hand – a situation that “suggests that ‘obligatory heterosexuality’ is built into male-dominated kinship systems, or that homophobia is a *necessary* consequence of such patriarchal institutions as heterosexual marriage” (3). As a counterexample for patriarchy’s requirement of homophobia and the “radically discontinuous relation of male homosocial and homosexual bonds” (5), Sedgwick presents the (at that time) culturally accepted case of paederasty in ancient Greece. Here, the bond of mentorship between the adolescent boy and the experienced older man, which was evocative of romantic cross-sexual love and in no way violated ancient notions of masculinity, was structured along the lines of class, age, and role, namely the passivity of the boy as love object and apprentice and his pursuit by the man. However, the assignment of these roles was not permanent, since the boy, growing up, would eventually take on the role of the man for another boy (4).

10 From a modern perspective, the concept is without question highly problematic because of the age difference, but it should be noted that the seamlessness of the male bonds that is demonstrated here is resistant to modern notions of homophobia. This is also reflective of the discourse in Morrissey’s lyrics.⁵ Consequently, the continuum between homosocial and homosexual male bonds is left wide open through the ambiguous or undefined relationships

deconstruction in queer theory’s overall project to oppose normativity, on the other hand I understand that these labels have great social and political consequences for people who construct their own identities around such terms, who get stigmatised, are refused certain political rights, or, in some countries, are even persecuted on the basis of these terms. For such reasons, I do not think that the realities that are caused by the modern concept of sexuality can or should be argued away. (Monique Wittig writes on heterosexuality, which I think is also true for homosexuality: “So we are dealing with an object both imaginary and real” (8). Or as Jonathan Ned Katz puts it: “The idea that heterosexuality and homosexuality are historically constructed seems to many to challenge the reality, profundity, and value of their desires. That perception, I believe, is wrong” (17). I agree.) It is important that these minorities are represented and included in the public discourses of the world’s different cultures, including popular culture, which is my major motivation to examine queer discourses.

⁵ In line with the idea of male homosocial desire, in his biography, Morrissey remarks on the poetry of Patrick MacGill: “Partial disclosures of male closeness fascinate me, because it’s something that is nowhere in the life around me. All males are adversaries in muggy Manchester, and it is now my grim intent to break spells” (97).

the protagonists in Morrissey's narratives share with one another. In these structures, the state of homosexual desire and homosocial affection between men is often either convertible, with both being possible, or sheer undecided. What is striking when it comes to the presentation of desire in Morrissey's work is that, in accordance with the overarching ambiguity of his text, it is usually not one of concrete denotation but one that is composed of signs – therefore leaving much space for a queer reading as encouraged by Sedgwick, in which the strict separation between homosocial activities and desire is eliminated.

11 The effect of Morrissey's composition of signs around homosocial desire is one of denaturalisation and violation of the illusion of essential truths in favour of diverse potentiality. In this, I see strong correlations with Dirk Schulz's observations made in his work on Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in which Schulz attributes to both novels "a queer understanding of the inseparability of life as text and text as life, of the concurrent peril and allure of unequivocal signification, and of the heteronormative ordering of the symbolic stabilised through reiterative performativity" (10). He proceeds to argue that while both novels acknowledge "that there is no 'outside' to the symbolic ordering of human existence", they both find escape in "the possibility to embrace the arbitrariness of signifiers instead of arresting their possible meanings through their naturalisation" (10). I find a similar awareness and strategy in Morrissey's texts in his play with queer signs. Beaver, who like Schulz bases many of his insights on Roland Barthes' work on mythologies, writes on the relation between the natural and the sign:

Whatever the charge, the fundamental ethical problem is this: to recognize signs wherever they are, not to mistake them for natural phenomena, and to proclaim rather than conceal them. It was Ferdinand de Saussure who made the revolutionary pronouncement that although the meaning of many actions may seem natural, they are always founded on shared assumptions or conventions; that what is obvious in the case of linguistic signs is also true of other signs. The social model, or aspiration, is all-pervasive. (100)

When it comes to Morrissey and The Smiths' characters, their dependency on a mutual deciphering of signs is also apparent and becomes an important generator for their acknowledgment of desire. In this it is interesting that the desire is often much more apparent between the male speaker⁶ and the male object of desire than towards the female object.

12 One of the most famous examples of extreme potential for male homosexual desire in The Smiths' early career can be found in their single "This Charming Man" (1984) in which

⁶ Although Morrissey proves of being capable of taking a female perspective in his songs and constantly shifting modes, through his male voice the listener tends to perceive the speaker in the lyrics as male. Accordingly, a male addressee of desire makes an interpretation for a homosexual relation probable. While in fictional literature the narrator and the author are strictly separate entities, in music this differentiation is less clearly defined because the artist's voice automatically functions as a mediator between the speaker in the lyrics and the artist herself. Nevertheless, we cannot assume that the speaker and Morrissey are necessarily the same and thus the gender-relation between speaker and addressee remains always ambiguous.

the charming man in his car picks up the speaker, a younger male, from a lonely scenery:

Punctured bicycle on a hillside desolate / will nature make a man of me yet? / when in this charming car / this charming man // Why pamper life's complexity / when the leather runs smooth / on the passenger seat? // I would go out tonight / but I haven't got a stitch to wear / this man said, "It's gruesome /that someone so handsome should care"⁷

The charming man appears to seduce the seemingly indecisive speaker, who does not feel like he has the appropriate clothes to wear to go out, by passing him the compliment on his looks. However, at this point the speaker has already made up his mind as indicated by the rhetorical question "Why pamper life's complexity?" Hubbs defines this, here more ostensible than actual, conflict as the "mind/body problem" (281), a recurrent theme in Morrissey's lyrics, whereas in this instance the narrator gives in to physical pleasure and chooses body over mind. The hint towards sex in cars is emphasised by the queer-coded allusion to leather fetish and, as Hubbs notes, by the melismatic⁸ way in which Morrissey indulgently lingers on the word *seat*, thus mirroring the erotic subtext of the lyrics in Morrissey's vocal performance (282).

13 Most importantly, in Morrissey's structuring of the encounter between the speaker and the charming man, descriptive elements that could guide the listener/reader through the course of the action are kept at a minimum level. Instead, sentences are left incomplete, e.g. missing verbs, as in "Punctured bicycle / on a hillside desolate" or "when in this charming car / this charming man". What remains mostly, are snippets, images, signs, short interior monologue, and direct speech, all of which make for a sharp impression of fragmentation, which is highly representative of the modernist writing of the early 20th century and its criticism of realism's truth claim for an objective reality and which, in turn, matches both the late Victorian and the modernist novel analysed by Schulz. The blanks that persist in the fragmentary narrative style, that Morrissey displays in "This Charming Man", leave a lot of room for interpretation, which as a result relies more and more on signs that hint at the possibilities of relations between the charming man and the speaker. The homosexual potential that is set free in this opacity,⁹ Beaver further explains in the relation between the homosexual and the sign:

The homosexual is beset by signs, by the urge to interpret whatever transpires, or fails to transpire, between himself and every chance acquaintance. He is a prodigious consumer of signs—of hidden meanings, hidden systems, hidden potentiality. Exclusion from the common code impels the frenzied quest: in the momentary glimpse, the scrambled figure, the sporadic gesture, the chance encounter, the reverse image, the sudden slippage, the lowered guard. In a flash meanings may be disclosed; mysteries wrenched out and betrayed. (104-105)

⁷ All song lyrics are taken from the original CD booklets as listed in the primary sources. A website that lists all Morrissey and The Smiths lyrics as they appear in the booklets is www.passionsjustlikemine.com.

⁸ A melisma is the singing of different notes in a single syllable (Hubbs 293).

⁹ I borrow the term from Nicholas de Villiers' concept of queer opacity through which the closet finds "an opening for the creation of a queer public persona that manages to resist the confessional discourse" (163).

The exclusion of the common code, again, refers to the heteronormative ordering of the symbolic in which the homosexual has no place and which is why she relies on the signs, the potential hidden meanings. This is both true for the two men in the song as well as for the interpreter of the song. Why did they meet on the desolate hillside? Was it coincidence or intent? What exactly happens between them? The hints are rare, but from a queer perspective the scenario, the desolate hillside, could be an agreed upon area of cruising for sex. However, the relationship between the two men could be much more serious than that and one of deep romantic love, as implied by the demand “He said ‘Return the ring’”, which suggests that the man asks the speaker to break off an engagement, perhaps in favour of their love and possible being together. Whatever the men’s background and familiarity, despite the many blanks, they seem to read the signs correctly, as the speaker appears to understand the seduction in the man’s compliment. And, of course, they know much more than the speaker gives away to the listener of the song, for whom the play with signs becomes just as relevant.

Loss and Protest: How Soon is Now?

14 Besides the potentiality for queer desire as exemplified in “This Charming Man”, there is also a concise tone of queer loss, rejection, affliction, and non-conformance in Morrissey’s lyrics which is distinctive of his writing. This queer negativity, that is evocative of the antisocial thesis in queer theory, and particularly of Halberstam’s discussion of the queer art of failure, is less directly linked to physical aspects of sexuality but to the psyche that is a consequence of the conflict of being queer in a heteronormative society. It constitutes another attribute signifying Morrissey’s narratives as precisely queer, thus placing them within the realm of de Lauretis’s definition of queer texts for a number of reasons. De Lauretis defines

queer a text of fiction – be it literary or audiovisual – that not only works against narrativity, the generic pressure of all narrative toward closure and fulfillment of meaning, but also pointedly disrupts the referentiality of language and the referentiality of images, what Pier Paolo Pasolini, speaking of cinema, called “the language of reality.” (244)

Although song lyrics due to their length automatically only depict a very limited segment of a narrative and in this way can never be expected to reach the same level of narrativity as prose texts do, the obstruction of fulfilment and closure as well as the disruption of referentiality applies all the same to Morrissey’s lyrics, as has also been shown above in the example of the fragmentary narrative style of “This Charming Man”.

15 Accordingly, non-fulfilment in the songs is often associated with the impossibility of and a non-response to love, while images remain vague, disguised, and ambivalent, constantly revolting against clarity, definiteness, and essential meaning. In The Smiths’ “How Soon Is

Now?”, the speaker fittingly characterises himself as follows: “I am the son / and the heir / of a shyness that is criminally vulgar / I am the son and the heir / of nothing in particular”. This non-particularity, which is identified as the speaker’s heritage, is precisely what blocks any reference point. It describes a queer legacy that draws the speaker toward negativity as an alternative place of existing as created by rejection and loneliness: “There’s a club, if you’d like to go / you could meet somebody who really loves you / so you go, and you stand on your own / and you leave on your own / and you go home, and you cry / and you want to die”. The hope in the first two lines, both sarcastically and sympathetically referencing the naivety of optimistic notions of love, is shattered by the experienced disappointment of going home alone. As emphasised by the use of the generic *you*, it is a collective and repeated experience which has ascended to a leitmotif eternally inhibiting any closure to the narrative. Inevitably, the non-closure results in pessimism: “see I’ve already waited too long / and all my hope is gone”. As much as this is a declaration to giving oneself up to fate, it is a defeat that does not come without revolt and demand: “You shut your mouth / how can you say / I go about things the wrong way / I am human and I need to be loved / Just like everybody else does”. From a queer perspective it would be hard not to interpret this as a reaction to discrimination against a non-heteronormative lifestyle that has been simply dismissed as ‘wrong’ by others.

16 The themes discussed in “How Soon Is Now?” are, according to Halberstam, paradigmatic for a kind of art he terms the queer art of failure: “I propose that one form of queer art has made failure its centerpiece and has cast queerness as the dark landscape of confusion, loneliness, alienation, impossibility, and awkwardness” (97). It describes a state of mind that has been born out of rejection, condemnation, and a poverty of choices – an embrace of the negative in order to produce alternatives to normative, capitalist, and live-affirmative concepts of compulsory success. Halberstam uses James C. Scott’s wording “the weapons of the weak” (88) to describe this queer strategy as a “way of refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline and as a form of critique” (88). Morrissey draws on this value of losing and therefrom develops different modes of embracing failure as critique. While the speaker in “How Soon Is Now?” acknowledges the impossibility of love for his supposedly different way of living and at the same time calls attention to the inequality that is incorporated therein, the protagonist in Morrissey’s “Dial-A-Cliché” gives his parent a forum for her homophobic requests only to reveal their stereotypical nature and the harm they do to the person addressed this way:

“Do as I do and scrap your fey ways” / (dial-a-cliché) / “grow up, be a man, and close your mealy-mouth!” / (dial-a-cliché) / But the person underneath / where does he go? / does he slide by the wayside? / or... *does he just die?* / when you find that you’ve organized / your feelings,

for people / who didn't like you then / and certainly don't like you now // [...] // "the Safe way is the only way! / there's always time to change, son!" / Yes well I've changed / but I'm in pain! / dial-a-cliché. (emphasis in original)

By giving a direct voice to the cliché reactions to queer forms of being, Morrissey emphasises the destructive force that is released by such utterances. Through contrasting them with the damage they cause, the intensity of the failure ultimately increases. The subtle sarcasm of the rhetorical questions and of the repetition of the title adds a further layer to the handling of the negative: the speaker is aware of the cruelty, he is affected by it, but he also finds a way of dealing with it by means of mockery. In line with Halberstam's understanding of the queer art of failure, this strategy may seem like a passive reaction to the homophobia of the parent, when it is really a quiet but insistent form of protest (88).

17 In recognising the *power* of the negative, Morrissey's usage of it is perhaps most closely connected to Muñoz's concept of queer utopia. Through the seemingly deep pessimism that entrenches Morrissey's lyrics and which is articulated in melancholia, mourning, and self-pity, the narratives find an escape in queer time and utopian desire, as Muñoz explains: "Queerness as utopian formation is a formation based on an economy of desire and desiring. This desire is always directed at that thing that is not yet here, objects and moments that burn with anticipation and promise" (*Cruising Utopia* 26). Again also evocative of the unbound desire as described by de Lauretis, Muñoz sees in the longing for "that thing that is not yet here" a powerful critique of present conditions and the possibility of a queer future:

It is in disappointment and failure that queer utopia emerges as an affective structuring device for implementing or, for that matter, *imagining* transformation. In this respect, queer utopianism is a nonreproductive futurism; it challenges 'straight time,' the parameters of which are 'an autonaturalizing temporality.' (22)

With queer utopia, Muñoz both dismisses Edelman's queer rejection of a future and embraces his critique of compulsory reproduction. To Muñoz, queerness is *precisely* about the future since the present order, for queers, to a great deal offers pain and loss. This is also inscribed in the title "How Soon Is Now?" because, for the queer speaker, the *now* which promises pain relief is not in the present, as in 'straight time', but in the future. Therefore, in the question "How Soon Is Now?" lies an acknowledgement of that queer temporality which queers can use for their own purpose:

To accept loss is to accept the way in which one's queerness will always render one lost to the world of heterosexual imperatives, codes, and laws. To accept loss is to accept queerness—or more accurately, to accept the loss of heteronormativity, authorization, and entitlement. To be lost is not to hide in a closet or to perform a simple (ontological) disappearing act; it is to veer away from heterosexuality's path. [...] Being lost, in this particular queer sense, is to relinquish one's role (and subsequent privilege) in the heteronormative order. (73)

This state of being lost also runs through – but is not limited to – the songs discussed thus far. Here, to accept this state does not mean not being able to protest: “Astonishment helps one surpass the limitations of an alienating presentness and allows one to see a different time and place” (5). Rather, to accept means to acknowledge that the loss is inherent in queerness’s positioning to the heteronormative order. A good example of this is The Smiths’ song “I know It’s Over”:

Oh mother, I can feel the soil falling over my head / and as I climb into an empty bed / Oh well. Enough said / I know it’s over still I cling / I don’t know where else I can go [...] I know it’s over / and it never really began / but in my heart it was so real / and you even spoke to me and said: // “If you’re so funny / then why are you on your own tonight?” [...] Love is natural and real / but not for such as you and I, my love.

Again, the impossible love is mourned by the speaker, a love that is not, a love that is utopia, merely imagined. The queer quality of that love becomes apparent especially in the very last sentence of the quote in the sarcastic statement that “love is natural and real” – except for the imagined lovers. It mocks and critiques an essential belief in love that is only valid for those of the heteronormative order. For those outside of this order, love can only be realised in utopia and so in spite of the despair and hopelessness (“I don’t know where else I can go”) the longing for “that thing that is not yet here” becomes the place of queer possibility. On the B-side “Please, Please, Please, Let Me Get What I Want” the protagonist claims “Haven’t had a dream in a long time / See, the life I’ve had / can make a good man bad // So for once in my life / let me get what I want / Lord knows, it would be the first time”, which again finds escape in its longing in form of a clear demand. On escape and longing Muñoz writes:

Furthermore, escape itself need not be a surrender but, instead, may be more like a refusal of a dominant order and its systematic violence. Queer fantasy is linked to utopian longing, and together the two can become contributing conditions of possibility for political transformation. Utopia’s rejection of pragmatism is often associated with failure. And, indeed, most profoundly, utopianism represents a failure to be normal. (*Cruising Utopia* 172)

In mourning, protesting, acknowledging, even wallowing in pain and failure, songs by Morrissey and The Smiths represent both queer fantasy and utopian longing and, indeed, a failure to be normal, as not belonging to the heteronormative order and therefore lacking something in the world: “Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing” (1). Queerness is therefore not situated in the heteronormative here and now but somewhere on its margin, as Muñoz states, “queerness is always in the horizon” (11). The lyrics reflect that in their embrace of the negative, transforming failure both into hope and protest.

3.2 Owning the Stigma: Keeping the Population Down

18 Morrissey's encompassment of queer negativity does not stop there. He has other modes of using the dark and twisty for his purposes. The characters of the songs discussed in the previous section all indulge in their alienation and grief without forgetting to protest against the masses who do not accept any deviation from their heteronormative behaviour and are partly the reason why those queer characters feel so disconnected from this world. While Morrissey fights this inequality by revaluating his queers through letting them stand up for themselves and reclaim their power in a melancholic embrace, in the songs I examine in the following the stigma and marginalisation seem to have been completely accepted. Where the speaker in "Dial-A-Cliché" quotes the parent in order to comment on it and raise awareness of the stigmatisation, the commentary in "There's A Place In Hell For Me And My Friends" (1991) is missing:

(we had no choice / we always did) / all that we hope / is that when we go / our skin / and our blood / and our bones / don't get in your way / making you ill / the way they did / when we lived / There is a place / a place in hell / reserved / for me and my friends.

The profound homophobia, literally the fear of being 'contaminated' with homosexuality and HIV, appears to have been entirely internalised in the queer perspective. Even the initial attempt to justify the queer position is shut down immediately by this same queer voice, admitting queer people would have had a chance and would be to blame for their suffering, their 'illness', and their being in the way – hell would be all they can expect for it. There is an outrageous brutality and destructiveness in these words that makes them hard to read or listen to for any approximately open-minded and empathetic person. The tremendous damage of these lines, however, does not stem from the fact that, unfortunately, some people feel that way about people who are different from them – a pathologisation queer people face all over the planet – but, instead, from the very fact that the queer speaker occurs to have adopted this opinion of himself and his friends and transformed it into self-hatred. This effect is amplified by the delicate manner in which Morrissey sings those words, burying the touch of sarcasm deep underneath the speaker's gut-wrenching self-denunciation. It is exactly this scenario of auto-stigmatisation, a place of ultimate negativity against the self, where the song derives its power and its stark audience response from.¹⁰ It is a power that forces the homophobic listener to confront herself with her own violent ideology and the damage it causes, and therefore becomes a form of protest disguised as its opposite which functions much more discursively than to simply state what is wrong with this world. Rather than opposing the homophobia within the heteronormative order, the lyrics oppose the order itself.

¹⁰ Critics describe it for example as a "mature", "heartbreaking", and "haunting" "torch song" (Hogan; Kinney).

19 I argue that, in using this subversive tactic, Morrissey ties in with a queer tradition of reclaiming and reusing a stigma, with the term *queer* itself being one of the best examples.¹¹ Instead of allowing this former “paralyzing slur, a mundane interpellation of pathologized sexuality” (Butler 223), to exercise its destructive force it has been refunctioned by those it was supposed to abject. Butler ascribes this phenomenon to the temporality of a term: “The ‘ever new’ possibilities of resignification are derived from the postulated historical discontinuity of the term” (224). Only through the repeated citation the insult had formerly extracted its force, which illustrates the performativity of a term:

If a performative provisionally succeeds (and I will suggest that “success” is always and only provisional), then it is not because an intention successfully governs action of speech, but only because that action echoes prior actions, and *accumulates the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior, authoritative set of practices*. (226-227, emphasis in original)

To repeatedly reuse a term in different contexts then is to change the trajectory of its history, which takes away its authority and eventually prohibits the success of the performative. In Butler’s words: “To recast queer agency in this chain of historicity is thus to arrow a set of constraints on the past and the future that mark at once the *limits* of agency and its most *enabling conditions*” (228, emphasis in original). “There’s A Place In Hell For Me And My Friends” uses these limits and enabling conditions to resort agency. However, there is one important difference to the refunctioning of the term *queer*: the stigmatisation here is not reclaimed in order to turn it into something positive, it is rather used to take the destructive power away from those who asserted it in the first place, leaving them with nothing else left to hurt since that power has already been reused by the abjected themselves. They, by turning this negative power against themselves, become some kind of martyrs who hold up a mirror to those who caused them pain. Nevertheless, it is a negative power that has been reclaimed. The repeated use of “me and my friends” in the song makes it a collective power, again representative of a wider community. It could even be claimed that the resignification, ultimately, turns the narrative from a failure into a success, evoking, again, a queer utopia as imagined by Muñoz.

20 “Ambitious Outsiders” (1997) from the suitably titled album *Maladjusted* combines this strategy of regaining agency over a stigma with an aspect of queer negativity that Halberstam, de Lauretis, and Edelman approach in their texts in contrast to Muñoz’s queer utopia: that of no future and the queer death drive. Unlike the guilty and masochistic tone of the previously analysed song, the mood in the controversial “Ambitious Outsiders” is threatening. Instead of taking the submissive position of the committer of diseases, here the

¹¹ Another example is the slogan “Pits and Perverts” for a benefit concert for the striking British miners, used by the alliance Lesbian and Gays Support the Miners (LGSM) in 1984.

collective “we” adopts the stigma of the child molester and the objector of reproduction and the future in a self-assertive manner:

Bolt-lock your doors / Alarm your cars / And still we move in closer / Every day / Top of the list / Is your smiling kids / But we'll be smiling too / So that's OK / Oh, and by the way / Thank you, because you're / Giving, giving, giving / And we're receiving – / No, no, we're taking / Keeping the population down // Your taxes paid, but / Police waylaid / And we knows / When the school bus / Comes and goes / We're on your street, but / You don't see us / Or, if you do / You smile and say 'Hello'.

The warnings in the beginning allude to the image of the homosexual being an invader to the ‘normal’ people’s lives, whose priority is to steal their kids, either to molest them or to use them as substitutes for their own non-reproductivity. The theme of giving and receiving is ambiguous, hinting at both the supposed stealing of the homosexual, while the heterosexual is productive (in terms of offspring), as well as at the ‘abjected’ sexual practices, especially of the male passive gay person (who receives). “Keeping the population down” then quite literally refers to the homosexual’s non-reproductivity, which is purportedly in danger of causing the demographic change of declining birth rates. The crude joke of the pedophile who waits for the school bus plays with the invisible threat that proceeds from the possibility of homosexuality, that – just like being a killer – could apply to any random person on the street. The colloquial usage of the singular verb form of “know” in connection with the plural “we” emphasises the status of the outsider. In a very morbid sense, the ambitiousness in the title can be either understood as the speaker’s willingness to come for the kids, or as a sarcastic comment on what this queer outsider is precisely not, since he does not – like ‘everyone else’ – strive toward reproduction and therefore a future of humankind.

21 Again, the power of Morrissey’s discourse lies in its seeming confirmation of stigmata against homosexuals, this time even going one step further by affirming these in a shocking fashion. The speaker appears to proudly embrace his own, as well as his companions’, non-reproductivity and rejoice over the danger this poses to the nuclear family – a demeanour highly evocative of Edelman’s queer critique of reproductive futurism as a “constraining mandate” of heteronormativity with the “pervasive invocation of the Child as the emblem of futurity’s unquestioned value” (3-4). His project to oppose this mandatory futurism and instead “embrace a figural identification with the death drive as *jouissance*” (de Lauretis *Freud’s Drive* 87) is discussed by both Halberstam and de Lauretis with mingled feelings. For Halberstam, Edelman’s antisocial agenda is not radical and political enough, which Halberstam ascribes to Edelman’s “unnervingly tidy and precise theoretical contractions of futurity” and his claim to “exert a kind of obsessive control over the reception of his own discourse” (107). In contrast, Halberstam praises the “symbolic and literal nihilism” (108) of

films like *Trainspotting* and bands like The Sex Pistols. I would argue that “Ambitious Outsiders” also reflects that kind of attitude, with the speaker even stating, “Well, it’s your own fault / For reproducing” (“Ambitious Outsiders”).

22 Differently, de Lauretis’ issue with Edelman lies in his understanding of a negated future that is both metaphorical and empirical:

The difficulty here is one of hearing two discursive registers at once, the ironic and the literal, the figural and the referential, the literary or speculative register of theory and the empirically or fact-based register of politics. The best illustration of this is Edelman’s figure of the Child as Imaginary that secures the future. When the figure is read referentially, through the political [...], that Child, despite the capital letter that marks its figural being, becomes literally the empirical, living child next door [...]. (258)

A similar statement could be made about “Ambitious Outsiders”: if its critique is directed at heteronormative reproductive futurism, are the kids in the school bus then figural or referential? The answer is that Morrissey’s discourse evades de Lauretis’ evaluation through the nature of its embrace of the negative. That is to say, the embrace is not an actual or at least not a completed one. It is rather evident that the speaker in “Ambitious Outsiders” wears the stigma as a weapon, but does not truly believe in its verification. By pretending to confirm the right-wing populist and homophobic ideas like the stereotype of the homosexual as pedophile or the reproach of homosexuality as the cause for declining birth rates, the song discloses the absurdity of homophobic accusations, makes fun of and intrinsically denounces them. Again, the outrageous embrace of the most vicious forms of stigmata against queers, in the end, is resignified and turned into a protest that is disguised as affirmation.

23 It is questionable if this is the kind of oppositionality “that would oppose itself to the logic of opposition” (Edelman 4) that Edelman had in mind, since the resignification somehow returns the narrative to the value of the social, even if that is in support of a different group outside the heteronormative order: “The embrace of queer negativity, then, can have no justification if justification requires it to reinforce some positive social value; its value, instead, resides in its challenge to value as defined by the social, and thus in its radical challenge to the very value of the social itself” (6). The positive social value in “Ambitious Outsiders” lies in its ultimate longing for a more accepting, respecting, diverse, and inclusive social community that does not stigmatise and thus does not imagine queers as child molesters – the queer utopia is back on the horizon. And yet, because of the sarcastic setup, it is left unclear in how far the song actually indulges in its critique of a mandatory reproductive futurism as proposed by Edelman. After all, the mocking and critique of the parents addressed in the song, who place life’s meaning in reproduction, in their “smiling kids”, while accusing the queers of “keeping the population down”, might as well be genuine. The song therefore

functions on numerous different levels, troubling clear significations and remaining, once more, ambiguous.

Conclusion: Queer Texts, Strange Ways

24 There is much more left to be said on Morrissey and The Smiths with regard to issues of sexuality, gender, and normativity, there are many more song lyrics to be analysed, many more aspects to be considered, and many more perspectives to be adopted in the process. For instance, in addition to my close textual reading of the lyrics, my project would benefit significantly from a musicologist approach that takes into account the way the innovative music and the idiosyncratic singing style of Morrissey affect the queer discourse that he engages in the lyrics. Furthermore, biographical aspects could be consulted and greater detail could be paid to the many instances of queer desire and gender fluidity, the intersections with disability studies and the camp aesthetic that suffuses Morrissey's song writing.

25 However far from being a 'complete' discussion of the queer discourse initiated by band and solo artist, what I have presented in my analysis of the song lyrics, is some evidence for their qualification as queer texts and their significant potential to disrupt, resignify, and denaturalise rigid, limiting, and excluding conditions and practices of the (hetero)normative order. The queering strategies Morrissey uses to oppose the confines of normative assumptions and essential significations include the maintenance of textual ambiguity, especially with regard to the possibilities of queer desire, the disturbance of narrativity and referentiality, the expression of sexuality as unbound drive, as well as the prevalence of queer signs. As a response to the stigmatisation and marginalisation that might be directed at queers and other subjects 'diverging' from the norms of the dominant culture, Morrissey employs diverse counter-strategies that embrace queer negativity in the form of grief, alienation, failure, and loss that are evocative of the antisocial thesis as brought forward by Edelman or Halberstam, and derive their power from protest, subversion, resignification, or a refusal of opposition.

26 At any rate, the songs by Morrissey and The Smiths give queer people a voice, a seat at the table, a sign that they are recognised, and, perhaps, the courage to embrace their queerness, embrace their differences, embrace their negativity, embrace the fact that there are approximately 7.5 billion people on this planet who are all not able to meet the norms. Although this may not always be much of a consolation in situations when one feels alienated, disconnected, marginalised, or even abjected, Morrissey reminds his audience that in their 'strangeness' they can still assert power over themselves and their choices: "So the choice I

have made / May seem strange to you / But who asked you anyway / It's my life to wreck / My own way", asserts the speaker of "Alma Matters". Even if he cannot fit in and may be frowned upon for it, he derives some satisfaction from the circumstance that he alone has the control over his 'strange' ways; and he might as well have some fun with it. In living up to that idea – and to cite the fitting title of the fourth Smiths' studio album – *Strangeways, here we come!*

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The Razor Edge of Accommodation: Violent Perception and the Nonbinary Body in *Gender Failure*

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Abstract

What does it mean to be “retired from gender,” and what role does such an identity play in daily life? Engaging with the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Judith Butler, this project attempts to elucidate the experience of nonbinary – that is, external to the male/female gender binary – gendered individuals, and the ultimate unintelligibility of that experience. Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological approach to perception allows for an exploration of the social norms and regulations that determine how gender is defined in Western culture; combined with Butler’s significant work on gender, phenomenology proves a useful tool for revealing the constructedness of gender. Although an arbitrary system, the gender binary serves as a mechanism of so-called social truth: because the nonbinary reality rejects this truth the nonbinary gender performance not only appears unintelligible to the binary other but also represents a threat to social stability. This paper uses the memoirs in *Gender Failure* – written by two self-identified nonbinary individuals – to consider how social norms inform binary perception and how that perception constitutes the nonbinary self. Perceived from within the binary matrix, the nonbinary self appears unintelligible: as a result, the validity of their gendered reality is threatened. Conscious of the conceptual gap between nonbinary and binary individuals, this project explores gender as the subject of the perceptive act and not only outlines the delegitimization of the nonbinary reality but also suggests opportunities to make space for non-normative gendered experiences.

1 In the recent text adaptation of their live show *Gender Failure*, Ivan Coyote and Rae Spoon – two individuals assigned female at birth who now identify as nonbinary and use the singular pronoun¹ “they” – narrate their nonbinary gender experiences as products of the binary matrix. The nonbinary self lives external to the gender binary, identifying as neither male nor female, nor anywhere in between, thereby orienting themselves in opposition to the normative structure of gender.² The nonbinary performance can take any form, but the binary other rarely perceives the authentic nonbinary identity – that is, the identity the individual believes themselves to possess. Because it originates in subjective experience, the violent perceptive act

¹ About pronouns: Because of their position outside the gender binary, nonbinary individuals frequently prefer personal pronouns that reflect that position. Gender-neutral pronouns range from the familiar (they/them/theirs) to the unfamiliar (zi/zir/zirs). To avoid confusion – and because Spoon and Coyote have explicitly stated their preferences – I will use the third-person singular pronoun “they” when speaking about nonbinary individuals. However, “they” will also be used in its traditional binary – singular and plural – forms in this paper; to the best of my ability (given the constraints of language) I will make it clear what “they” refers to.

² Any discussion of nonbinary necessarily challenges the male/female binary at the same time that it creates a binary/nonbinary dualism. At present, I lack the meta-language to avoid the construction of this other binary.

superimposes the self's own meanings over the other's reality; this violence plays out most evidently at the point of contact between the nonbinary self and the binary other. This paper will use these memoirs to consider how the illegibility of nonbinary genders derives from binary gender norms and the ways in which those norms threaten the nonbinary self; I will also offer possibilities for making space for non-normative gender identities.

2 The stories in *Gender Failure* flesh out a gender narrative that resists categorization and familiarization. The nonbinary gender experience tends to alienate the individual owing to a social system that compulsively seeks to organize and stabilize threats to the binary order by erasing delinquent realities. Coyote and Spoon expound on such alienation, highlighting the centrality of illegibility to the nonbinary identity. As explicit objects in a perceptual field (whether stage or text), Coyote and Spoon recount lived illegible moments shaped in opposition to the binary hegemony, bringing attention to the binary perceptive violence that constitutes their nonbinary realities. At the same time, the materiality of their narratives – performed with their nonbinary bodies – reject the impossibility of the nonbinary; by using the physical articulations of their gender as narrative tools, Coyote and Spoon disrupt a binary audience's instinct to seek intelligibility in their performance. The result is space made for a legitimate – if illegible – nonbinary gender identity.

3 The nonbinary self refuses binary meanings, becoming an illegible figure for binary others. Thus, though the nonbinary gender experience varies by the extent to which individuals attempt to socially and physically perform their identity, it has a substantial impact on the their relationship with the world around them. When a binary self perceives a nonbinary other, binary truths are forcibly applied to make the nonbinary other legible (Butler 57). Illegibility of the nonbinary gender experience occurs on multiple levels, most notably the physical body, language, and sociality. The struggle for – or resistance to – legibility characterizes the relationship between the nonbinary self and the binary world. Due to their position within a binary matrix, the nonbinary self destabilizes the predominant experienced worldview and as such poses a threat to the security of binary categories. Presumptions regarding the other's perceived gender identity necessarily erase the reality of that identity: if my experienced gender falls outside the binary, my gender will be read as a (delinquent) binary identity.

4 Phenomenology provides a useful system for understanding the ways nonbinary identities challenge gender intelligibility. Literally, phenomenology is the study of phenomena: our

perception of things; things as we perceive them in our experiences; and our experience of things and of our perception of things (Smith). More specifically, phenomenology studies consciousness as constructed by our experiences of the world. In a phenomenological approach to social interactions, processes of performance and perception create a system wherein self and other arrive at different and often conflicting conclusions about identity. The observing self perceives the performance of the other and supplements the imperfect impression with anticipated profiles that stem from the self's own modes of truth. The resultant synthesized image of the performing other cannot faithfully represent the reality of their existence, as the observing self cannot know the truths that define the other. Such a disparity of course occurs in all social interactions but it is especially pronounced in the perceptive relationship between the nonbinary self and the external binary world.

5 The gap dividing binary perception and the nonbinary experience is an insurmountable one. In a phenomenological framework, knowledge of the self – nonbinary or otherwise – is always complete and knowledge of the other is always imperfect: as the self observes, aspects of the other remain hidden as a result of distinct consciousnesses. The self must literally experience the consciousness of the other in order to accurately perceive the other's existence (Merleau-Ponty 359). This gap forces the self to make presumptions about the nature of the other's hidden reality, creating what Edmund Husserl calls a "world," quotation marks suggesting an imposed reality that is somehow less authentic than the actual reality (138). This causes a distortion between how the self identifies and how the other perceives that identity. The only constant is the experienced world, which exists subjectively to every individual's position within it, thus lacking conformity in how it affects its subjects. In other words, although the nonbinary self and binary other experience the same objective world, their subjective identities determine the meanings they will derive from it: where the other moves in the binary world with relative ease, the nonbinary self must actively make space for its identity within a normalizing gender matrix.

6 For individuals with unintelligible gender presentations, the public restroom embodies this effort. Here, gender segregation reifies the gender binary and so gender presentations receive stringent scrutiny. Binary perceptions pose a threat to the nonbinary self, who may face persecution based on their gender presentation; likewise, the binary self may feel threatened by the uncategorizable (and therefore dangerous) body of the nonbinary other. Sexual morphology rarely plays a role in public interactions, as it is not on display and therefore the other cannot

perceive it. If morphology affects public life in any way, it is in the choice between gendered restrooms.

7 Coyote – who performs a butch masculinity – uses public restrooms only as a last resort, a result of having endured countless instances of harassment. Due to their anatomy – or perhaps because the other option presents a greater threat to their safety – Coyote chooses to use the women’s restroom when gender-neutral, single-stall facilities are unavailable (205). They know their gender presentation startles or even frightens women who perceive Coyote through a binary lens; as only two restroom options exist, so too must Coyote’s nonbinary self adhere to one of two accepted gender presentations. Coyote understands the fear their appearance elicits: women who support strictly segregated restrooms express concerns that men will use any leniency as a front for committing sexual violence (Benvenuto). Coyote’s own experiences, however, suggest that the nonbinary self cannot expect safety in the women’s restroom either:

[E]very time a nice lady in her new pantsuit for travelling screams or stares at me, I try to remember that this is maybe her first encounter with someone who doesn’t appear to be much of a lady in the ladies’ room. [...] She doesn’t know I have been verbally harassed in women’s washrooms for years. She doesn’t know I have been hauled out with my pants still undone by security guards and smashed over the head with a giant handbag once. (206-7)

Although in general the nonbinary gender experience resists binary categorization, the use of public restrooms requires compliance. Coyote chooses the restroom based on their anatomical configuration; however, the binary other cannot perceive this aspect of Coyote’s body – perceiving only masculine gender attributes – thus misreading Coyote’s presence as a threat. The nonbinary body, in its incoherence, signifies an existence that cannot be read as human by the binary other (Butler 28).³ The inhuman nonbinary self threatens the safety and stability of the binary other, demonstrated by Coyote’s experiences in the extreme binary apparatus of the public restroom.

8 The stage performance of *Gender Failure* toured internationally in 2012. As a result of minimal staging, the audience’s focus is only on Spoon and Coyote. This setup enables a transgression of gender norms at a micro level: the image of their physical bodies reifies the nonbinary experiences described in their narratives, forcing their audience to reconcile Spoon

³ Drawing on Hegel, Judith Butler defines the human as that which is recognized in terms of “socially articulated and changeable” norms. She adds that “sometimes the very terms that confer ‘humanness’ on some individuals are those that deprive certain other individuals of the possibility of achieving that status, producing a differential between the human and the less-than-human” (2).

and Coyote's performances with their 'ready made' binary gendered meanings.⁴ The text reproduction transfers that ability, placing photos of the authors alongside personal essays. In both media, Spoon and Coyote control the discourse: the audience cannot escape the embodied reality of the nonbinary narratives they perceive and consequently struggle to overlay their binary truths onto the nonbinary other (James 2-4). The staging of the live performance as well as the creative control in publishing the book affords a significant ability to determine the delivery of their words; however, despite the deliberate presentation of their identity, the gap between their nonbinary selves and the binary other remains (Flegg).

9 A primary source of the illegibility of nonbinary genders stems from linguistic barriers: the binary matrix offers little space for the articulation of nonbinary existence without resorting to the use of binary language. As a result, nonbinary identities rely on the binary for articulation: even the term 'nonbinary' requires the existence of the binary for its meaning. Examining nonbinary genders from within a phenomenological framework reveals the indeterminacy of nonbinary realities that cannot be perceived by those who do not inhabit them: intelligibility may be attempted, but only on the terms of the binary matrix. Throughout *Gender Failure*, Spoon and Coyote strive to elucidate the nonbinary experience; however, for an audience observing from within the binary structure, perceptions of the performers' gender will always derive intelligibility from binary meanings: the masculinity of Coyote's body, for example, becomes meaningful according to the context of the butch woman, rather than that of a nonbinary experience.

Bodies and Embodiment

10 The body one feels oneself to inhabit is not necessarily the one the other perceives (Salamon 3). Mannerisms, body language, dress codes, and any number of cosmetic modifications contribute to bodily performance; however, the meaning of the synthesized whole depends on the observer's position in relation to the binary. In considering the body of the other the "very first of all cultural objects," Maurice Merleau-Ponty asks how an object in space can render an existence legible (348-9). The body-as-object occupies a place in the field of perception; this field accrues social and cultural contexts that inscribe meaning onto the

⁴ Such meanings – acquired through everyday interactions with the external world – are always already available to shape perception. They are therefore uncritically attached to the perceived object. For further discussion, see Merleau-Ponty 176-86.

perceived object. However, the whole of the object can never be perceived in one moment; instead, the perceived whole is the result of the synthesis of retained and anticipated profiles of the object (Detmer 103). The anticipated profiles are those informed by the perceptive field's social and cultural contexts and the observer's relation to them. Consequently, the meaning of these yet-to-be-seen aspects of the perceived body emerges from the observer's preexisting meanings, overwriting the reality experienced by that body. The public body, therefore, is never quite only our own: through the body "gender and sexuality become exposed to others, implicated in social processes, inscribed by cultural norms, and apprehended in their social meanings" (Butler 20). While the self assumes autonomy over how the body is presented for recognition, the social meaning of that performance depends on external forces.

11 The nonbinary body resists recognition by the binary other. Perceptions of the nonbinary body that originate from within the binary matrix strip the nonbinary self of the reality of their existence. Judith Butler suggests that for those who depend on the boundaries of the gender binary for stability, the uncategorizable nonbinary body prompts a violent need to restore order (34). Coyote experiences violent retaliation in public restrooms because of their apparently delinquent body. The violence enacted upon Spoon – whose perceived androgyny frustrates expected femininity – emerges from external social forces and manifests as self-harm. In both cases, the violence acts as a regulatory mechanism for maintaining the order set by the gender binary. The friction between the body of the nonbinary self and the external world begins for both Coyote and Spoon in childhood. In a set of chapters entitled "Girl Failure," the authors describe the ways their bodies resist binary legibility before their nonbinary gender identities are realized.

12 Coyote's sense of 'girl failure' originates in the demise of a childhood friendship. In Janine, Coyote finds a friend who also loves sports and despises Barbies: a comrade in the struggle against the traditional narrative of girlhood (22). Around the cataclysmic start of junior high, however, Coyote begins to feel distanced from Janine, who shows a budding interest in home ec and cheerleading. In retrospect, what Coyote sees as the culprit in this estrangement was the interposition of womanhood, which includes Janine's devotion to cheerleading, her interest in boys, and her growing breasts (23). The moment that drives the decisive wedge between the two friends, Coyote says, is a slumber party. Rather than their traditional celebration of Janine's birthday – movies and a bucket of fried chicken shared between the two of them – Janine throws

a slumber party and invites her newer, more feminine friends in addition to Coyote. The party is unsurprisingly miserable, but it only gets worse after Coyote and the girls settle into sleep: curled in the dark on their thin bedroll, Coyote overhears Janine telling her friends about Coyote's genital configuration; although not diagnosed intersexed, Coyote's body is indeterminate enough that these preteen girls know to categorize it as physically abnormal. They giggle and shriek words like 'sick' while Coyote feigns sleep (24). Rather than attempting to force binary legibility onto Coyote's body, the girls create a third category that defines Coyote as abhorrent to the binary ideal, demonstrating the utility of the normal/abnormal (human/inhuman) binary in policing conformity to the gender binary.

13 Coyote marks this moment as the beginning of their fear of changing in front of others: in public locker rooms, they protect themselves from such gender policing by changing in toilet stalls and they have "a scar on [their] elbow where [they] split it open on the rough edge of a toilet paper dispenser to prove it" (24). As a result of that first vocalized fear of their physical ambiguity, Coyote learns to accommodate the concerns of binary others in public spaces and experiences their own fear of physical and psychic pain in the process. In some situations, such as public restrooms and locker rooms, Coyote has to take conscious steps to perform legibility in order to protect themselves from the violence intended to maintain the gender binary. According to Butler, "the person who threatens violence proceeds from the anxious and rigid belief that a sense of world and a sense of self will be radically undermined if [the nonbinary body], uncategorizable, is permitted to live within the social world" (34). The binary other's anxiety stems from the possibility that the strict gender categories on which they depend for social meanings are unstable or, worse, unnatural; thus acts of physical and psychic violence – only sometimes labeled 'hate crimes' – aim to reinforce the stability of the binary, sustaining the terms that define the human. Butler asserts that these terms are both "socially articulated and changeable" (2); that they are socially articulated is evident in the urgent need to punish those who transgress binary gender boundaries. The vehemence behind such acts, however, suggests that the person who threatens or enacts violence resists the changeability of such social terms, instead attempting to maintain order "on the basis of intelligible gender" (34). Whether the punishment takes the form of a group of giggling preteen girls, the existence of so-called 'bathroom bills,' or physical assault or murder, violence toward nonbinary bodies and performances is meant to delineate what can be considered human. Consequently, even

innocuous tasks in the public world – such as using a public changing room – run the risk of punishment.

14 For Spoon, ‘girl failure’ corresponds with a deep bodily shame. Raised in a Pentecostal household in Calgary, Alberta, Spoon comes of age steeped in conservative notions of appropriate gender roles and behavior. Despite having been socialized as a girl in such a strict atmosphere, Spoon says, “being a girl is something that never really happened for [them]” (27). This phraseology suggests that ‘being a girl’ is not an innate quality of the female body but rather something that has been imposed upon it, the social construction of the gender-neutral infant into a gendered being. Spoon feels they never went through this gendering process and instead remains fundamentally gender-neutral.

15 In an attempt to avoid verbal and physical retribution, Spoon adopts the performance of legible binary femininity expected by their parents and peers. The disruption of this disguise occurs in a sex-segregated junior high gym class. One of the first activity units for the girls is dance aerobics; outside, the boys play rugby, which “look[s] violent,” but not as dangerous as what Spoon expects to experience on the dance floor (28). Having been taught that dancing is sinful, Spoon finds that their body struggles with the movements that come so easily to the other girls. Spoon wonders whether their body also resists the overt feminine performance prescribed by an external social force (ibid.). The gym teacher expects all of the girls in her class to step easily into the binary femininity that is their birthright. Because the binary other perceives Spoon’s body as female, Spoon feels a compulsion to conform; they participate in dance class until “some distant part of [their] psyche” impels them to bolt in fear from the gymnasium, literally escaping the binary expectations the instructor and their peers impose upon them (29).

16 This coercive binary conformity instigates a violent relationship between Spoon’s internal nonbinary self and their external perceived body. In the locker room of that same gym class, Spoon overhears their classmates talking about shaving their legs; ashamed of never having performed this binary behavior, Spoon ducks into a toilet stall to change (27) – like Coyote, Spoon finds refuge in the only individual space in the public locker room. This ‘girl failure’ torments Spoon throughout the day. That night in the bathtub, they use their mother’s pink razor to shave; unskilled in this particular feminine act, Spoon cuts their legs (28). This attempt to conform to binary gender expectations literally wounds the self, both at the level of the skin as well as on a psychic level; the blood dripping from Spoon’s legs embodies the razor-

edged divide between acceptable and delinquent gender performances.

17 Intelligibility derived from the perceptive process depends on established meanings, especially those that have been set by a regulatory apparatus. The nonbinary self disrupts this process: operating from outside these limiting boundaries, Spoon and Coyote present bodies that defy binary readings. The resulting perception is an amalgamation of nonbinary identity and binary meanings. This incoherent being – and the reality of its unintelligible existence – demonstrates the extent of the constricting perceptive apparatus set by the binary. Thus perceptions from within the matrix threaten the nonbinary self: if their social performance is always read according to binary meanings, can a nonbinary self be considered legitimate? In order to encourage an accurate reading of their body, the nonbinary individual must take up the task of verbal self-articulation.

Speaking a Language That Can Be Heard

18 After positioning the physical body in the social world, the next strategy for articulating an existence is the use of language. For the nonbinary self, the articulation of existence inevitably comes up against the barrier of available language; no specific language for describing the nonbinary exists: articulation must be attempted via binary language. Gayle Salamon identifies self-definition as a linguistic act, thereby underscoring the power of language; at the same time, she acknowledges the difficulty in using language to articulate non-normative genders: “gender...must be separated from language in order to be seen clearly, and the labor of elucidating that which escapes language through the use of language itself is a formidable and frustrating task indeed” (82). The nonbinary gender experience already seems unintelligible to the binary other; the use of the established language – in both pronouns as well as the adjectival agreement in romance languages – undermines the project of articulation by situating the nonbinary experience within the confines of binary understanding. The nonbinary self only approaches intelligibility through a reliance on the hegemonic gender system, a means that necessarily strips away the crucial independence from the binary.

19 When language fails to achieve its goal, binary others cannot perceive the reality of the nonbinary existence; precise language allows the self to take up the other’s thoughts, and without it the distance between perception and reality cannot be bridged. Coyote describes this distance between themselves and the surgeon’s staff prior to their chest reconstruction surgery: although the

staff has experience working with transgender patients and conducts their task professionally and amiably, Coyote “never quite feels like [the staff] truly [understands them]” (96). Even when the binary other can take in the general sense of the narrative told by the nonbinary self, the reality of that self remains unintelligible. The staff’s only experience with non-normative genders comes from interactions with previous (binary) transgender patients; their ‘ready made’ meanings lead them to perceive Coyote’s gender according to these interactions, overlaying Coyote’s reality and creating Husserl’s phenomenological “world” (138).

20 Nonbinary gendered individuals know that the language to accurately define their existence does not exist. Merleau-Ponty explains that, when direct perception fails to create an accurate understanding of the other, the self must rely on observed correlations between the experience of the self and the other (352). While this precludes a wholly authentic representation of reality in general, it is especially evident in terms of the nonbinary identity, as the binary other lacks the experience to observe any actual correlations with the nonbinary self. Thus the nonbinary existence is silenced or erased in the act of being perceived. The internal hurt this causes in the nonbinary self reifies the lack of space afforded them in the binary world. Coyote acknowledges that the nature of communication between the nonbinary self and the binary other makes recognition impossible, and yet:

[The] truth is that every time I am misgendered, a tiny little sliver of me disappears. A tiny little sliver of me is reminded that I do not fit, I am not this, I am not that, I am not seen, I can’t be recognized, I have no name. I remember that the truth of me is invisible, and a tiny little sliver of me disappears. Just a sliver, razored from the surface of my very thick skin most days, but other times right from my soul, sometimes felt so deep and other days simply shrugged off, but still. All those slivers add up to something much harder to pretend around. (246)

Like Spoon, Coyote feels the razor-sharp edge of gender conformity. Their gender performance and identity is not legible for the binary other, and so the reality of the nonbinary self is pared away until only a skeleton of their existence remains. Without the language to correct binary perceptions, Coyote and other nonbinary individuals must resign themselves to a narrative that can be interpreted by binary observers but that does not accurately reflect their identity or experience.

21 In transitioning to a nonbinary gender performance, Spoon comes up against the question of pronouns. As the primary tool for delineating between gendered beings, pronouns pose a significant challenge in navigating the social world as a nonbinary person. Though many options

for gender-neutral pronouns are unfamiliar (ze/zir/zirs, for example), many nonbinary individuals – perhaps in an attempt to remain somewhat legible to binary others – use the singular ‘they’ (“Need”). When Spoon – not yet identifying as nonbinary – initially learns that people use this pronoun, they think “it would be pretty hard to get people to actually call you that outside the queer community” (200). This concern gets at the issue of legitimacy often tied up in the use of language to articulate a nonbinary gender identity: Western language depends on a binary system for intelligibility, and so any language that makes room for nonbinary articulation is perceived as illegitimate. Even as a member of the community, endeavoring to use ‘they’ for (queer) others feels like learning a foreign language for Spoon; still living according to the binary matrix, Spoon themselves struggles to accept this third gender pronoun as legitimate. As their gender identity shifts to nonbinary, however, “they” comes to feel more accurate: the gender-neutral pronoun gives Spoon space to perform their gender without allowing the perceiving other to rely on language to read Spoon’s gender (201). At first, Spoon worries that going public with their new preferred pronoun will end their musical career. For a few years they continue to use “he” professionally, requesting the masculine pronoun when people use “she.” Then, after one too many pronoun corrections at a music festival, Spoon comes to a realization:

It was the same difficult fight it had always been. [...] I realized then that I was always going to have to fight for my pronoun, and if I was going to have to do that anyway, I should be fighting for the one that made me the most comfortable, rather than a compromise that I thought would be more accepted. (202)

Spoon finds “taking the responsibility off [themselves] to earn [their] pronoun [...] to be more comforting than going by the ‘they’ pronoun is stressful” (203). They are frequently met with those who claim that the use of “they” as a singular pronoun is confusing or grammatically incorrect; however, many Canadian media outlets have responded favorably to Spoon’s request. The public use of “they” by Spoon and other nonbinary artists begins the work of expanding conceptions of gender, ultimately making more space “for all gender minorities” (ibid.)

22 Coyote, too, uses “they” because it feels more comfortable than either binary pronoun. That comfort plays a large part in creating a livable nonbinary life for Coyote (221). Coyote and Spoon both strive to be recognized as the gender they believe themselves to be; however, the terms that determine recognition originate in socially constituted binary gender norms. This, Butler claims, could make the subject’s life unlivable. Unlivability is not the terminus of imposed binary norms, however; the critical interrogation of the terms that delineate unlivability

allows for the possibility of “establishing more inclusive conditions for sheltering and maintaining life that resists models of assimilation” (4). An opportunity for more inclusive conditions can be found in the acceptance of gender-neutral pronouns as legitimate. Pronouns, Coyote believes, should be used based on what makes a person comfortable (221). Unfortunately, this line of reasoning does not make sense for most binary-minded individuals, who understand that, even though the binary spectrum includes varying degrees of femininity and masculinity, “she” and “he” cover all possible gender identities.

23 A linguistic common ground must therefore be established so that the nonbinary existence can be made intelligible to the binary other, thereby creating space in the lexicon for nonbinary voices. Currently, Coyote finds that they have to use language in such a way that provides binary legibility rather than expressing their existence: by, for example, assuring the women in the public restroom that Coyote was also assigned female at birth (208). The common ground, then, is uneven. Because of their daily experience on such uneven ground, Coyote believes that a truly accurate language – binary or otherwise – cannot exist: “These are just words, and words are always imperfect, words are just sounds we make with our mouths that point our minds to think of things that cannot be fully described in words anyway” (247). Acknowledging the truth of this characterization of language – particularly the language meant to define the individual self – could establish a compromise – if not a common ground – where language is accepted as subjective. Such a compromise, while imperfect, would delay if not overcome the imposition of the other’s meanings.

The Nonbinary Self as Social Object

24 The meaning of an individual’s existence depends entirely on their interactions with the social world. The binary matrix is a permanent field of existence, and though the self may turn away from it, the meaning of their gendered existence will always be situated in relation to it (Merleau-Ponty 361); the pervasiveness of the binary matrix makes total escape from its constraints impossible. Friction between the nonbinary self and the external world – caused by binary others, gender norms, and physical spaces – threatens the stability of the nonbinary identity. As a result of their negative experiences with public restrooms, Coyote feels that such friction arises from the exclusion of nonbinary people from public spaces: “we live in a world that is unable to make room enough for trans people to pee in safety” (205). The physical and

social structures of the binary world are not accessible for nonbinary individuals, causing people – including Coyote – to seek out wheelchair-accessible, gender-neutral restrooms; consequently, the nonbinary gender identity becomes a literal impairment for navigating the external world. Coyote, though, does not see women in public restrooms as adversaries, but rather “the potential for many built-in comrades in the fight for gender-neutral, single-stall locking washrooms in all public places” (208). Sex-segregated restrooms allow gender-normative individuals to police unintelligible nonbinary bodies; gender-neutral restrooms would not only protect the safety of both groups but also make room for nonbinary people within the physical and social binary architectures.

25 An individual claims space within the binary social structure in their use of identity labels. The identity labels that nonbinary individuals use can sometimes overlap and conflict with binary notions of identity. Coyote, for example, still identifies as butch; in their usage, however, “butch” does not qualify the noun “woman” (233). Although butch is a binary term used primarily in the lesbian community to signify masculinity, Coyote has claimed it as a gender category for their nonbinary identity; for them, ‘butch’ occupies the non-space outside the gender binary, although others do not always read it as such. In all perceptive acts, the binary other will resist nonbinary readings and will instead project their ‘ready made’ binary meanings onto the nonbinary self. Coyote finds that, even in the queer community, others ascribe differing binary gender labels to them in an effort to ‘claim’ Coyote as a spokesperson. After a solo show in Seattle, a woman approaches Coyote and thanks them for speaking up for butch women; Coyote smiles, but does not feel that had been the crux of their show. Shortly after the woman leaves, a young man steps up to Coyote to thank them for representing transgender men; again, Coyote simply smiles, knowing that correcting the man will serve no purpose (233-4). Both communities, in claiming Coyote as their own, perform the binary violence of erasing Coyote’s actual identity. Coyote understands that the misinterpretation stems from “limited language and the scarcity of shared meanings of words” (235); as with heteronormative binary others, the nonbinary self can achieve a linguistic common ground with a queer other only if the language used can be expanded to provide space for the nonbinary experience.

26 Like Coyote, Spoon performs on public stages and faces the scrutiny and judgment of binary audiences. As a musician, Spoon has to negotiate their presence as an object onstage with their gender presentation. By situating their gendered body on a stage, Spoon offers it up to the

other's gaze. Merleau-Ponty sees this as constitutive of a dialectic of the self and other in which the gaze of the other has the ability to steal the body from the self. As a perceived object, the body is the first point of contact between the self and the other; should the nonbinary body be read according to binary meanings, the other not only imposes a familiar (binary) gender but also denies the possibility of nonbinary autonomy (Merleau-Ponty 167). When Spoon performs their music in homophobic and transphobic venues, the patrons' gaze steals Spoon's body as well as the gender identity Spoon inscribes at its surface. To preserve the meaning of their gender performance, Spoon begins to selectively choose venues where patrons allow Spoon to break gender rules; such patrons also seem more accepting of Spoon breaking musical genre rules, providing space for their musical style (164). Spoon's musical career can serve as a microcosm of their nonbinary gender experience: the hazards Spoon's objective body encounters in the binary social world constructs the performance of their gendered body; binary observers who find some intelligibility in Spoon's performance allow Spoon to bend norms (even slightly) to suit their identity.

27 Spoon's performing career makes them hyperaware of the violence of the other's perceptive gaze. They understand that in social interactions binary individuals compulsively assign a gender to one another and act out the appropriate script (217). The meaning of gender and gender performances depends on how others external to the self perceive and interpret a gendered existence, despite the self's autonomous quest for recognition. Butler calls this the "lively paradox" of gender presentation (21). Once intelligibility is acquired, the binary other imposes it on the nonbinary self, erasing the actual nonbinary existence. The reality of this erasure disrupts Spoon's performance of their nonbinary self: because the instinct is to assign binary gender narratives to the nonbinary self for intelligibility, Spoon must know how others read their gender in order to know how to behave so they might be recognized as human.

28 Spoon and Coyote – whose identities the binary other overwrites – experience the perceptive act as one that erases their gender identities. Because the available modes of self-articulation – bodily and verbal – become meaningful only in the other's perception, the nonbinary self must accept a compromise in their gender performance: Coyote, for example, allows themselves to be viewed as both a butch lesbian and a transgender male because they know those individuals need the validation Coyote provides in their work; they use the feminine pronoun when doing work in public schools because they "want those women and girls to see

every kind of she there can be” (222). Coyote’s nonbinary self loses its visibility in these interactions; however, the strategic production of binary intelligibility allows them to encourage gender difference and ambiguity in others, opening up the breadth of accepted gendered realities just a little.

Conclusion: Making Space

29 In May 2011, Kathy Witterick published an article in the *Ottawa Citizen* stating that she and her husband planned to raise their youngest child gender-neutrally. This would mean keeping the baby’s sex private from all but a select few and letting the child vocalize their own gender identity once that identity took shape. The family received over a hundred interview requests and were the subject of global debate about raising a child without gender; public response ranged from vocal support to accusations of child abuse. Their plan was not to force the child to identify as nonbinary but rather, by not imposing the gender binary, they could gift their child autonomy in defining its gender identity without the influence of social norms (Witterick).

30 Can a child be raised completely gender-neutrally? In a system where everything is defined by its relation to a binary, it seems unlikely that parents could totally avoid the influence of gender norms. Certainly the Wittericks’ alternative lifestyle makes their decision feasible: all three of their children are homeschooled, and the family lives off the grid in a remote area of Ontario (Poisson). Removed as they are from society, the child can grow up without imposed gender expectations, but not everyone has this luxury. In fact, Jack Halberstam believes that trying to avoid gendering a child is a futile task. Instead he calls for encouraging alternative forms of femininity or masculinity that go against social expectations – for example, encouraging forms of female culture that do not require dolls and makeup, or discouraging the masculine activity of bullying (Danbolt 4). These proposed alternatives – while certainly breaking from heteronormativity – seem to sustain binary intelligibility; indeed, Spoon’s and Coyote’s experiences demonstrate the difficulty of presenting an intelligible nonbinary gender identity – but does this mean that there is no space for nonbinary within the binary matrix?

31 Nonbinary individuals like Spoon and Coyote make small efforts every day to claim space for themselves: both have chosen gender-neutral pronouns; Spoon uses their music as an expression of their identity; Coyote pursues nontraditional (i.e. nonbinary) medical transition. While these small acts do not demand a gender revolution, they do make it possible for Spoon

and Coyote to live according to their identity. Their work as public speakers and entertainers presents the reality of the nonbinary experience; in doing so, nonbinary audience members feel their identity validated, while their binary peers are made aware of the broad spectrum of human experience.

32 The nonbinary gender experience – one that goes so completely against the binary hegemony – means there is an unbridgeable conceptual gap between the nonbinary self and binary other. However, this does not mean that nonbinary is illegitimate and untenable in a binary context; indeed, the existence of *Gender Failure* demonstrates that nonbinary as a category can be presented in such a way that it becomes accessible for a binary audience. Public speakers like Spoon and Coyote put themselves at the mercy of the violence of the perceptive act; although their authentic selves may disappear in the face of binary perception, the candidness of their gendered realities makes space for their existence, starting with those who choose to hear their stories.

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“Instrument and Screen of All Your Villainies:”

Charlotte Charke, Deviant Bodies, and Disguise in George Lillo’s *The London Merchant*

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Abstract

George Lillo’s *The London Merchant*, 1731, was required viewing for leagues of apprentices due to its seemingly straightforward moral: men and women should do as their positions, masters, law, and God require; transgressions are not to be tolerated. However, Millwood, the play’s powerful prostitute, rails against the aforementioned ideals, pointing out how men consume all that is beneficial to them, and how they subsequently dispose of the rest. She seduces and manipulates George Barnwell and uses him to lie, steal, and murder. At the play’s end, Millwood and George are hanged. This suggests that her ideas and those influenced by them die with her. Since this play was so widely viewed, it is important to take note of which actors were filling which roles in the production. Charlotte Charke—a notorious cross-dresser—played the role of George in 1734 and 1744. She played the role of Millwood twice in 1735. In the role of George, Charke’s performances imbue the role with a sense of deviance, if not ridiculousness, before his encounter with Millwood, who is unfairly blamed for his transgressions. Millwood crafts a story of abandonment for economic survival; Charke’s lived experiences as a woman abandoned by her husband, her father, and her family, imbue this role with authenticity. While scholars have respectively discussed Charke’s life and autobiography and *The London Merchant*’s morality, the intersection of this actress’s personal history and her performance in this play has not been analyzed. Charke’s life experiences, celebrity, and presence on stage point to the fact that the consumption of transgressive female bodies sustain the prevailing systems of morality of the play. Looking at the eighteenth-century drama and Charke’s role in it through Marvin Carlson’s work on the haunted stage, and Felicity Nussbaum’s work on celebrity culture, this play illustrates the ways in which performance serves to utterly disrupt the meaning of a play as cultural icon and broken hegemonic symbol.

1 George Lillo’s *The London Merchant* (1731) was required viewing for leagues of apprentices due to its seemingly straightforward moral: men and women should do as their positions, masters, law, and God require; transgressions are not to be tolerated. However, Millwood, the play’s powerful prostitute, rails against the aforementioned ideals, pointing out how men consume all that is beneficial to them and dispose of the rest. She seduces and manipulates George Barnwell and uses him to lie, steal, and murder. At the play’s end, Millwood and George are hanged. This suggests that her ideas, and those influenced by them, die with her. Since this play was so widely viewed, it is important to analyze the effects the cast could have on

the audience. Charlotte Charke—a notorious cross-dresser and famous actress—played the role of George in 1734 and 1744 and the role of Millwood twice in 1735 (Highfill 168-173). In the role of George, Charke’s performances infuse the role with a sense of deviance, if not ridiculousness. Charke’s female body was concealed in the clothing of a male character, signaling to the audience that they should pay attention to what is being concealed and revealed in the play. When cast as Millwood, Charke’s lived experiences as a women abandoned by her husband, her father, and her family, imbue the role with the authenticity that Millwood must invent for economic survival. The importance of authenticity is two-fold. If George does not believe her story of woe is authentic, then he will not try to assist her. If the audience does not find her story authentic, or at least plausible, then they can easily dismiss her other assertions. It is important to note that apprentices were frequently required to see this play, and Lillo purposefully wrote a play about an apprentice for an audience of apprentices in order to “obtain sustained influence over their actions and moral sentiments” (Freeman 114). While scholars have respectively discussed Charke’s life and autobiography as well as *The London Merchant*’s morality, the influence of Charke’s presence on stage would have changed the audience’s perception of the moral lesson of the play. Charke was a celebrity actress and the daughter of famed actor, playwright, theater manager, and poet laureate Colley Cibber (“Colley Cibber”). The eighteenth-century was a time of celebrity obsession, not unlike today’s celebrity culture. Charke’s life experiences, celebrity, and presence on stage invite the audience to question the play’s destruction of Millwood and George and brings to light the ways in which the play’s moral of obedience does not serve the apprentice audience in the least. I will investigate the eighteenth-century drama and Charke’s role in it in order to show the ways in which performance can utterly disrupt the meaning of the stage play as a cultural icon and broken hegemonic symbol.

2 Charlotte Charke, née Cibber, was a well-known English actress with a penchant for cross-dressing, male roles, and odd jobs (Highfill 167-178). Several critics focus on Charke’s autobiography *A Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Charlotte Charke* and the ways in which theater, her roles, and her writing intersected. Her autobiography came out eleven years after her last performance as George Barnwell in *The London Merchant* (Charke). In spite of the gap between Charke’s performances and the publication of her ‘tell-all’ autobiography, critic Christine Cloud’s reference to Charke as “the notorious 18th-century English actress/cross-dresser,”

indicates the extent to which Charke's body and her history of cross-dressing would have been legible and known to the audience (860). When Charke cross-dressed on-stage, audience members noticed her or noticed her name in the playbill, and if they did not notice her, the newspapers of the time made sure to point out her cross-dressing. In the same theatrical season in which Charke played George Barnwell, "The *Daily Journal* of 21 May reported: 'We hear the Mad Company at the Haymarket {last winter} design to keep up that Character, by performing the Beggar's Opera in Roman Dresses, and exhibiting Hurlothrumbo, in which Mrs Charke attempts the Character of Lord Flame'" (Highfill 169). This is, in short, to say that the audience was well aware that Charke was filling these traditionally male acting roles.

3 While Cloud accurately describes important historical information about Charke and reinforces her level of celebrity, she misreads Charke as a "transvestite figure" and does not acknowledge the full extent to which Charke's cross-dressing was for survival and not for rebellion or to express her identity. In order to get work and "afford but daily Bread for [her] poor Child and Self", Charke must play the role of a male waiter off the stage (Charke 156-157). Additionally Cloud over-emphasizes Charke's role as "a deviant" (869). As Cloud notes, Charke may have been referred to as "'the known trouble maker, Charlotte Charke'; 'Colley Cibber's queer daughter'; or even Cibber's 'unsatisfactory daughter'" (870). However, sentimental tragedies, domestic tragedies, or she-tragedies of the eighteenth-century courted the tears and sympathy of the audience through a main character's deviant act and subsequent punishment. Since cross-dressing was a regular occurrence in the theater, the audience would more likely be moved to sympathy by Charke's tragic backstory than morally offended by her on-stage cross-dressing.

4 In addition to the sheer number and variety of roles Charke played throughout her career, everyone from Polly in *The Beggars Opera's* to Roderigo in *Othello* to George, Lucy, and Millwood in *The London Merchant*, she played many roles in life off the stage: daughter of Colley Cibber, wife, man, mother (Highfill 167-169). As a young girl, she cross-dressed in her hometown, but as with her on-stage cross-dressing, as soon as she started cross-dressing, she started being discovered beneath her disguise (Charke 19-21). In pointing to Felicity Nussbaum's argument about the ways in which celebrity actors' lives and roles intersected during the eighteenth-century, it is likely that the audience would have known something of Charke's personal life: "rather than transcending one's private self, acting involved animation and

sometimes exaggeration of an alleged personal identity” (Nussbaum 20). Charlotte Charke’s marriage to Richard Charke, her first husband and “a Drury Lane Theatre jack-of-all-trades,” was hardly charmed (Highfill 167). Richard was unfaithful and irresponsible with the money Charlotte earned (170). Charke’s husband took financial advantage of her until they ultimately split, leaving Charke with their daughter to support themselves (Smith 85). Additionally, after attempting—and failing—to reconcile Charlotte Charke and a theater manager and learning of Richard Charke’s embarrassing behavior, Charke’s father Colley Cibber broke with his daughter and refused to further assist her (170-171). It is at this point that Charke’s cross-dressing shifted from being voluntary as a young woman and a welcome challenge on stage to a survival strategy upon which her and her young daughter depended. At many points in her autobiography, Charke details how she and her daughter were often financially destitute. In between acting jobs, Charke would resort to asking friends and relatives for money, begging, or cross-dressing in order to acquire a job in a male-only field. In one part of her autobiography, Charke describes how she, dressed as a man, worked as a waiter for a gentlewoman for a period of time, having to leave the job because of solicitations of marriage to the maid’s female friend and the ultimate discovery of Charke’s gender (Charke 156-165). When Charke cross-dressed off-stage, it was under tragic circumstances but clearly to great effect; she was able to acquire economic as well as romantic gains, if she so chose.

5 The success with which Charke can cross-dress in both the theater and the street indicates that London’s legal tenets against cross-dressing and the play’s moral tenets against duplicity can be undercut. Charke’s history as a cross-dresser should make the contemporary audiences of her performance question the point of such tenets when those who violate them do so in order to merely survive. Charke’s autobiography gives us clues about the extent to which the audience was aware of her troubles. In the introduction to her autobiography, Charke notes that she attempts to “satisfy a Curiosity which has long subsisted in the Minds of many” (13). This indicates that her story was inquired after, if not found out, and she would add to this curious buzz by pulling stunts like writing a play about a conflict with her manager (62). Additionally, her father “endeavoured to promote [her husband’s] Interest extreamly amongst People of Quality and Fashion,” before Richard Charke proved to be a scoundrel (52). Her husband’s association with ‘people of quality’ and the acting community made it more likely than not that Charke’s “new Pair of Horns” or other marital troubles were the gossip around town (54). Her

financial difficulties off stage were suspected to influence the recipient of a ‘benefit’ performance. A ‘benefit’ performance is one where an actor or actress receives the bulk of ticket sales for that evening. In the same summer she played Millwood (1735), Charke also played “Sir John Loverule in *The Devil to Pay* and danced a minuet and the *Black Joak* with Miss Brett for the entertainment of visiting ‘Chinese Mandarins’ and for the benefit of a family in distress—possibly her own” (Highfill 169). Those performances feature Charke cross-dressing on stage, as opposed to performing in a ‘woman in breeches’ role. When a ‘woman in breeches’ character appears in a play, the character is cross-dressing. However, when a woman plays a male role, the actress is cross-dressing. This carries with it the legal, economic, and social ramifications of successful cross-dressing. While cross-dressing on stage, be it a woman in breeches role or a woman playing a male part, was simply a matter of changing costumes, Charke’s external cross-dressing, in the position of the waiter for example, was illegal (Cloud 858). Similarly to Charke’s own autobiography, *The London Merchant* features many transgressions.

6 The multiple seductions in this play involve a series of putting on and taking off ‘arts’ formed by body language and speech. The most immediate is Millwood’s seduction of George. In performances where Charke acted the part of George, the audience would have seen a woman seducing another woman, which would simultaneously foreshadow the fact that George was beginning to fall into a life of sin and, consequently, show a scintillating seduction scene between two women. Felicity Nussbaum, in her work *Rival Queens: Actresses, Performance, and the Eighteenth-Century British Theater*, states that “the eighteenth-century audience’s pleasure in cross-dressed roles, as many critics have argued, was aroused partly though its recognition that the character was in camouflage, and that the woman’s body beneath the disguise could be readily distinguished” (197). Therefore, in Charke’s performances in male roles we have the dual forces of eroticism and rebellion at play. Before George arrives at her house, Millwood decides what disguise she should affect:

MILLWOOD. Now, after what
manner shall I receive him? Let me consider...If to seem what one is not in order
to be the better liked for what one really is, if to speak
one thing and mean the direct contrary be art in a
woman, I know nothing of Nature. (1.2.80-91)¹

¹ All references to the play are from *The Broadview Anthology of Restoration & Early Eighteenth-Century Drama*, listed in the Works Cited page at the end of the text.

Millwood's emphasis on the "Nature" of women as duplicitous makes herself and other women seem untrustworthy to the audience. Charke's disguise or 'manner' of acting the part of George, a man of supposedly pure virtue, doubly endorses this idea of female dissembling. However, in the context of both Charke's life experiences and the discovery of Millwood's mistreatment later in the play, this so-called natural inclination to 'say one thing and mean another' actually becomes a survival strategy. Additionally, the preceding line complicates this "Nature." The goal of this "seem[ing] what one is not" is in service of preserving or gaining approval for authenticity, "for what one really is," in a roundabout way of preserving personal safety until that affection is guaranteed. Later on, George comes to regret his transgressions and promises himself that he will never see Millwood again (2.1.191-194.). She tries again to use her beauty and femininity, but when that fails, she weaves a tragic tale—told through her maidservant Lucy—that wins George to her favor again (2.2.73-169). After hearing Millwood's story, George's resolve melts away:

GEORGE. Oh where are all my resolutions now? Like early
vapors of the morning dew chased by the sun's
warm beams, they're vanished and lost as though
they had never been. (2.2.159-162)

Here we see an uncovering mixed with imagery from nature. These 'warm beams,' seemingly natural to Millwood's pitiful story, are in fact artifice. Additionally, the beams uncover what has been present all along—George's desire and affection for Millwood. Grass under morning dew is still grass; George's desires cloaked in guilt and regret are still desires; Charke's body is still read as female. Charke's presence points to the idea that an inclination towards vice can be hidden, but not totally deleted or ignored. When combined with the natural imagery in the text and Millwood's discussion of feminine-duplicity-as-nature, the play presents a paradox: if it is natural for women to say one thing and mean another or to act 'better' than they are, and George's well-intended 'resolutions' disappear like a covering of dew, then the audience gets the sense that while women rely on duplicity for survival in nature, it is because men's system of morality is equally duplicitous. Charke, when cast as Millwood, emphasizes to the audience that women try to survive based on any means necessary because that is how Charke herself was forced to live off stage.

7 Millwood weaves a tale about her current situation in order to trick George into giving her more money. This tale contains the threads of abandonment, male betrayal, and financial

distress found in Charke's lived experience. The story is, more specifically, as follows: Millwood had a rich guardian, then the guardian's wife dies; he falls in love with Millwood and demands that she marry him or "[he'll bring] in an account of his/ executorship, wherein he makes her a debtor to him" (2.2.111-146). When the guardian discovered that Millwood had an affair with George, he demanded sex from her or total ruin (2.2.111-146). Destitution and ruin at the hands of a man ties Millwood's fake tale to Charke's lived experience with a husband who used her financially and pursued other women. Without Charke's actual experiences of male betrayal, Millwood would be received as a villain at this point in the play: someone who manipulates a young person to her advantage, much like the man in her story. However, Charke's celebrity—or notoriety—and lived experiences soften the character's actions and begs the question to what extent Millwood's is story actually a fabrication. The audience knows, on the one hand, that Millwood invented this story with the purpose of manipulating George. However, with Charke's background of male betrayal and the knowledge that Millwood is a prostitute, it is plausible that, while different from the exact story she tells, Millwood definitely experienced "villanies" that put her in the position she is in (4.2.299). The aforementioned 'villanies' are Millwood's way of describing the hypocritical, destructive patriarchal moral of the play.

8 While Charke's performance in the role of Millwood might make the audience more sympathetic to Millwood's position, Millwood does reproduce the system of manipulation for financial gain, convincing George to rob, lie, and eventually, murder. However, when Millwood's part in the plot was discovered, she reveals that her motivations and actions were modeled off the way in which men in power use that power in order to reach their ends, no matter what violence ensues because of it:

MILLWOOD. I found it therefore
 necessary to be rich, and to that end I summoned
 all my arts. You call 'em wicked, be it so; they were
 such as my conversation with your sex had furnished me withal
 ... War, plague, and
 famine has not destroyed so many of the human race
 as this pretended piety has done
 ... What are your laws, of which you make your boast,
 but the fool's wisdom and the coward's valor, the
 instrument and screen of all your villainies (4.2.248-299)

Not only does Millwood claim that she learned her 'arts' from her interactions with men, but also she accuses larger structural factors, such as religion and laws, of barely concealing the evil men

are doing. The image of the screen is particularly powerful here: a screen is always simultaneously concealing and revealing what it stands in front of. The function of the screen in this scene invokes Marvin Carlson's theory of 'ghosting' in *The Haunted Stage*, wherein typecasting and stock characters created this web of audience expectations, 'ghosting' the currently viewed cast and play with previous casts (53-59). For example, if Charke is cast as George and then is cast as Millwood, audiences would have in mind Charke's performances as both characters, as well as other actors' performances of those characters. Millwood also reminds the audience that a screen may obscure a message, but it still functions as a literal and figurative dialogue: "they were / such as my conversation with your sex had furnished me withal". When confronted with a 'screen' of male conversation, laws, or religion, Millwood had to mimic the behavior of those holding the screen—those men in power—in order to survive. Millwood heard 'through' the screen when she interacted with those in power who had mistreated her, thereby teaching her to mistreat others. Her attempts to name the screen or come through the screens reveal the harmfulness of a morality of masculine production and feminine obedience, and tip the audience's sympathies towards the transgressive voice of an oppressed woman. When Charke is cast as George, clothing and disguises function similarly to the screen Millwood points to above.

9 George's experience of guilt and the inclination to literally cover his crimes draws attention to the thinly veiled female body on stage. This calls into question whether George's innocent body was even innocent in the first place. If George's clothing could conceal a criminal body, Charke's body, then the audience might question the extent to which George's professed morality is actually covering up its nefarious motions. Unlike Millwood, George does not recognize that his obedience and naïve attachment to ideas of sin ultimately serve to control him. He is overcome with guilt throughout the majority of the play. For example, after losing his virtue to Millwood and stealing from his master, he discusses the seemingly eternal misery that stems from concealing one's sins:

GEORGE. Though hypocrisy may awhile *conceal* my guilt,
 at length it will be known, and public shame and ruin
 must ensue. In the meantime, what must be my life?
 Ever to speak a language *foreign* to my heart, hourly
 to add to the number of my crimes in order to
conceal 'em. (2.1.8-13 emphasis added)

Language such as “conceal” and “foreign” indicate that to be dishonest is to be covered or othered, even from the self. Here, the actions and silence of a body are what conceal his guilt and crimes. Continuing to act normally covers the deviant’s transgression, as opposed to a mask or lie covering the face or reputation. George could find peace and self-familiarity in confessing, peeling back the façade of normality that conceals his crimes, and accepting his punishment. However, George is forced to continue to disguise his feelings and actions when Thorowgood, his master, rejects his confession.

BARNWELL. Hear me on my knees confess.

THOROWGOOD. Not a syllable more upon this subject. (2.1.182-183)

As Charke must keep her body hidden in plain sight, so must George keep his crimes hidden from the sight of his mentor. If George were to be found out for stealing or cavorting with a prostitute, then he could lose his position as an apprentice, “eliminat[ing] the possibility of social security” (Wallace 132-133). There is a tension, a dramatic irony, because the character George is so concerned with revealing his ‘true’ sinful self to Thorowgood in order to be forgiven, and the actress Charke is concerned with covering herself, so as to be legible as male. The audience is aware both of Charke’s body and George’s transgressions, regardless of a confession from either, which allows them to see the ways in which Thorowgood’s suppression of George’s confession is a harmful act of control. George disguises himself, doubly covering Charke’s body, and much like the laws and religious institutions Millwood cites, gives George access to a screen that allows George to commit murder.

10 Later on in the play, George actually puts on a vizard, or mask, before he murders his uncle. This is unnecessary, as dead men can tell no tales, and the audience knows that it is George behind the mask, but the fact that it happens nonetheless draws further attention to the repeated acts of covering and uncovering that destabilize the play’s promoted message. The physical covering ‘allows’ George to commit the crime; in covering himself, he is no longer himself or bound by his moral code. This is similar to the freedoms cross-dressing allowed women both on and off stage (Nussbaum 195). He has disguised himself, even from his own conscience:

GEORGE. Now for my disguise. (*Plucks out a vizard.*) This is his hour of private meditation. Thus daily he prepares his soul for heaven whilst I—but what have I to do with heaven! Hah! No struggles,

conscience—
Hence! hence remorse and every thought that's
good;
The storm that lust began must end in blood.
Puts on the vizor and draws a pistol. Exit. (3.3.35-43)

George sends out his remorse and conscience and then conceals his face. In acting as a different person, he is able to separate the actions of his 'character' from those of his personhood, but as we see above in Carlson's work, an actress cannot separate himself or herself from the character being played, and George cannot separate himself from his sin.

11 Even after he throws off the mask in disgust and regret, there is still an actively transgressive body hidden in plain sight: Charlotte Charke's body (3.3.36). This crime of parricide becomes even more frightful for the audience when they consider the fact that it is a penetrative act, stabbing, that kills Uncle Barnwell (3.3.32). A woman, playing a male role, stabbing a father figure in the play invokes this idea that when women or feminized bodies enact maleness and dominance, they can destroy the patriarchal order. From Cloud, we see that cross-dressing is a powerful act because it avoids categorization; it occupies a liminal space between male and female; it "expose[s] the construction of the gender binary...[and] demonstrate[s] just how permeable the borderline between the 'Self' and 'Other' really is" (857-859). In not choosing to 'be' male or female off stage, or act exclusively in male or female roles on stage, Charke's presence is an act of defiance against gender norms. It is one thing to have this dissent from Millwood's character, but it is entirely another to see these ideas filtered through George. When George returns to Millwood's doorstep and she offers to hide him, George says in despair, "Oh hide me from myself, if it be possible" (4.1.21). This line is a chilling misrecognition; it is impossible to hide from oneself. Behind this line lies the sense that the hidden or repressed moral narrative is ever-present, much like Charke's female body on the stage. This putting on and removing of disguises mirrors the earlier seduction of George, in which he tries to keep his virtue 'on' in the face of Millwood's wiles.

12 We have previously discussed Millwood's tale of abandonment and the influence of Charke's casting on that story. It is important to note, however, that while Millwood invented the story, her maidservant Lucy is the one who tells it to George, punctuated by Millwood's cries of agony and despair. The displacement of narrative further emphasizes the idea that the story could have happened, and in the case of Charke did happen, to any woman, virtuous, deviant, or

otherwise. Essentially, like the men in the play use religion and the law to ‘screen [their] villainies,’ Millwood uses Lucy to screen her own. That is to say, Millwood uses masculine methods for financial gain. While Lucy is giving George the details of Millwood’s ‘situation,’ Millwood only speaks to either emote or to pretend to prevent Lucy from talking to George. Millwood gives several dramatic lines throughout like “I have said too much” and “How I shall live hereafter, Heaven knows” (2.2.103, 122). These outbursts could be considered comical, depending on the actress playing the role of Millwood, but in this case, since Charke was negotiating issues of abandonment, mistreatment, and financial insecurity, her presence on stage would have imbued even this false scene with a sense of authenticity. Millwood also positions herself and Lucy as actresses, fully knitting together Charke and these characters:

MILLWOOD. Alas! (*Weeping.*)

LUCY. (*Aside.*)

We are right I find; that’s my cue.—Ah, dear sir, she’s going she knows not whither, but go she must. (2.2.86-86)

Actresses ‘play acting’ within the framework of the play works to draw attention to the notion of acting itself. If Lucy looks to Millwood for her cue, then so should the audience look to Charke for a cue about where the morality cracks at the edges. What is especially interesting is that Lucy, during this performance for George, notes that she has encouraged Millwood to simply have sex with the guardian, as he demands (2.2.163-165). Openly exchanging sex or one’s body for money both serves the patriarchal structures, especially in this case where the offer is coercive, and subverts them. Millwood’s actual position as a prostitute and Charke’s actual job as an actress require them to display their bodies in order to be financially independent outside of the support of a husband.

13 Charke’s ability to cross-dress, ultimately, gives the viewer of the play a way to empathize with Millwood’s point of view. Charke turned to cross-dressing in her life off the stage in order to survive when she was destitute and needed work. Robert Mack, while predominantly interested in Charke’s autobiography, gives some insight into the practical benefits Charke gained from cross-dressing. “On the whole, modern readers are likely to agree that it is considerably more probable that the actress’s initial reasons for deciding to pass on occasion ‘EN CAVALIER’ (*Narrative*, 47) were connected as much to her seemingly constant indebtedness and financial insecurity as they were to an more personally complex or psychosexual motives” (198). This understanding of Charke’s financial situation connects her to

Millwood even more. During her debate with Thorowgood, Millwood outlines a system in which men are free to follow their inclinations and consume all those who are weaker than them:

MILLWOOD. I know you and I hate you all. I expect no mercy
and I ask for none. I followed my inclinations, and
that the best of you does every day. All actions
seem alike natural and indifferent to man and
beast who devour, or are devoured, as they meet
with others weaker or stronger than themselves. (4.2.276-281)

Charke follows her inclinations to dress like a man to survive. This quote calls attention to the ways in which Millwood makes money through the seduction and manipulation of those who are weaker than her. It is because of Charke's deviation from Millwood's story—Charke has not used her cross-dressing to incite a murder—and the legitimacy Charke's biography lends Millwood's survival strategies that Millwood's character becomes more sympathetic to the audience, rendering her protestations against the way men act in the world as fact, lived experience. Millwood is a woman who is destroyed because she acts like a man in a man's world, but not as successfully as Charke. Before Millwood and George's destruction, by hanging, there is an additional scene of seduction that further calls the audience's attention to the ways in which the play's moral system is constantly being undermined: a scene of seduction between George and his fellow apprentice Trueman.

14 This less obvious seduction scene that comes towards the end of the play becomes more evident when we consider the casting of Charke as George: Trueman's seduction of George back into their homosocial friendship. Trueman states,

TRUEMAN. We have not yet embraced and may be interrupted.
Come to my arms...Our
mutual groans shall echo to each other through the
dreary vault. Our sighs shall number the moments
as they pass, and mingling tears communicate such
anguish as words were never made to express. (5.2.111-127)

Here we see a level of anxiety—the embrace might not happen or might be interrupted. The sense of urgency is not unlike the scene between Millwood and George, but in this case, the seduction does not result in monetary gain. This is right before George is taken away to the scaffold. Before the doubly transgressive body of Charke as George is removed from our sight, we see in this moment a more surface-level viewing of the play is subverted. Instead of a pure friendship between two young men, we see and immediately eroticized moment of death and the

female body, taking liberties and embracing a(nother) man on stage. Charke's body causes viewers to be skeptical of George's initial virtue and eroticize him in a way that draws attention to the ease with which those not in power can fall from grace in this moral system.

15 Charlotte Charke's presence on stage, cast as George Barnwell and Millwood in *The London Merchant*, subverts a traditional reading of the play's moral through Charke's performance as a cross-dressed woman, cross-dressing in her daily life, and her ill treatment at the hands of her husband and family. Charke's notoriety in the press, her female body in man's clothes, and her experiences as an economically disenfranchised woman all contribute to how the audience might 'read' her performance. There is not only the ghost of Charke's personal experiences but also the ghost of her past theatrical characters. Charke's role as George then Millwood then George again would have shown how complicated and interrelated their characters' relationships were on stage, and, truly, how similarly they are rendered in the play. George appears to be a pre-Millwood character: an innocent person who is destined to be snuffed out by the prevailing ideology of the play. Additionally, playing Millwood before playing George again compounds the deviant ghosts that always already haunt Charlotte Charke's acting roles. While *The London Merchant* seems to establish two conflicting ideologies—obedience and 'rightful' manipulation versus a rejection of patriarchal systems of control—in order to snuff out any inklings of disobedience in the minds of the apprentice audience, casting Charke as George and Millwood in various productions only draws the audience's attention more directly to the places where the violence and deception behind the 'screen' comes through.

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Feminist Interventions and Intercultural Mobilities in Satoshi Miyagi's '*Othello* in *Noh* Style'

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Abstract

I shall examine the ways in which moving the excluded female body onto the *Noh* stage in this production constitutes a materialist feminist intervention both into the 'form' of historically all-male *Noh* performance, and into the 'focalisation' of Shakespeare's narrative, providing a specifically female articulation of the memory and experience of trauma. Desdemona's memory of the past becomes the dramatic plot of *Othello* re-constructed, to enact a new subject position: Desdemona's ghost. This material intervention facilitates temporal and spatial mobilities unique to intercultural performance, opening possibilities for theorising at the intersection of interculturalism and gender. *Noh* is a classical Japanese performance form from the 14th century. However, *Noh* performance only allowed male actors, so there emerges a disjunction between female character-types, and codified performances that did not involve the actual participation of female actors. Consequently, feminine identity and subjectivity is rendered always performative, an effect of the citation and repetition of formal aesthetic codes. Casting actresses intervenes in the performance history of *Noh* – particularly because the visual presentation of the actress's distinctly feminine features foregrounds the materiality of the female body on the *Noh* stage. Desdemona's ghost inhabits the multiple temporal and spatial configurations of the narrative as well as that of the *Noh* stage, allowing for a complex working-through of her trauma. The material presence of the actress intervenes in the narrative focalisation of Shakespeare's *Othello* – which concludes with the effacement and silencing of Desdemona's agency and voice through death. By fracturing the temporality of Shakespeare's *Othello* narrative, this intercultural *Noh* performance mobilises and re-constructs the working-through of traumatised female subjectivity as taking place in the present, shifting narrative authority to Desdemona's ghost. The narrative is now focalised through her perspective as *shite*, the primary character in *Noh*, and is articulated in her own narrative voice: she is effectively wresting her narrative voice and agency from Shakespeare's text in this intercultural performance.

1 I shall examine the ways in which moving the historically excluded female body onto the *Noh* stage in Satoshi Miyagi's "*Othello* in *Noh* Style" (2005-2006), available on *The Asian Shakespeare Intercultural Archive*¹, constitutes a contemporary materialist intervention of the feminine, both into the 'form' of historically all-male *Noh* performance, and into the 'focalisation' of Shakespeare's narrative. This intervention allows for a specifically female articulation of traumatic memory and experience – which in turn stages an intervention into the gender politics in both Shakespeare's *Othello* narrative, and in the performance history of *Noh* theatre. This is not to suggest a dichotomous distinction between performance forms and narrative focalisation; rather, this production becomes a site through which to examine the

¹ All images in the article have been obtained from this archive.

ways in which contemporary intercultural performance stages the negotiation between gender and power in relation to both the cultural capital of the Shakespearean text, and the “homosocial and patriarchal” structure of *Noh* theatre (Geilhorn 36). In this production, Desdemona’s memory of the past is effectively the dramatic plot of *Othello* re-constructed, so that a new subject position can be mobilised in relation to both Shakespeare’s narrative as well as the dramatic structure and conventions of *Mugen Noh*: the ghostly yet distinctly embodied female subjectivity of Desdemona’s ghost. This material intervention – both into Shakespeare’s narrative and into *Noh* performance – facilitates temporal and spatial mobilities unique to intercultural performance, and opens possibilities for theorising at the intersections of interculturalism and gender.

2 The plot of the play is as follows: a travelling monk from Venice arrives in Cyprus, and encounters four female jug bearers. The monk asks after the story of the place, and one of them emerges, revealing herself to be the ghost of Desdemona. She recounts the narrative of Shakespeare’s *Othello* briefly, and her narrative is interspersed with enactments of the *Othello* plot, particularly the scenes in which Iago is manipulating Othello. The play concludes with Desdemona performing an extended dance sequence, as she gradually recedes from the stage.

3 Miyagi’s decision to foreground the material presence of the female actor on the *Noh* stage alters both Shakespeare’s narrative and the conventions of *Noh* drama. In Miyagi’s production, the essence of the Shakespearean narrative of *Othello* previously encountered by the audience is presented in the form of *Mugen Noh* – which itself is shown to be adaptive according to certain parameters, such as Miyagi’s gendered casting decision. Miyagi’s decision to cast female actors must be considered in relation to both the performance history of *Noh* theatre, and to the notion of feminine subjectivity in Shakespeare’s play. *Noh* is a classical all-male Japanese performance form that developed from sacred rituals and festivals in the fourteenth century, and has been historically preserved and performed according to highly codified conventions, even as its contemporary manifestations in performance remain deeply inscribed within and concerned about the historicity of its form and themes (Komparu xv). *Noh* plays were historically performed in a five-part cycle – and *Mugen Noh* – to which Miyagi’s production is most closely associated – is a type of *Noh* play about ghosts and supernatural figures in the main role of *shite*. Temporality is conventionally non-linear in *Mugen Noh*, and the play progresses through accounts of prior events given by the *shite*, the primary character, to the *waki*, the character who functions as the auditor and the mediator between the audience and the *shite*. In this production, Desdemona’s ghost is the *shite*, and

the *waki* is a monk who has travelled from Venice to Cyprus very much after the events in Shakespeare's *Othello*.

4 Working in intercultural theatre inevitably involves working from within the interstices: between text and performance, and between cultures. According to Yong Li Lan, the intercultural performance of Shakespeare is thought to be “a reproduction of the play in non-Western performance conventions, as a means of exploring another culture’s relationship to the culture represented by the Shakespearean classic text and its authority” (527). Multiple confrontations take place in each intercultural performance, within and among dramatic texts, performance forms, and cultural histories and relations, so that both text and performance have to be mobilised and placed in relation to each other in order to examine the specific ideological and aesthetic relationship each performance enacts in relation to Shakespeare’s text. The malleability (or mobility) of the *Othello* narrative renders it open to appropriation through intertextuality and through intercultural performance in this production: it is shown to be continuously evoked, altered, and reworked across cultural and historical territories and boundaries. Julie Sanders observes that any act of appropriation facilitates a “journey away from the informing source into a wholly new cultural product and domain” (26), and the journey in Miyagi’s production involves epistemological, cultural, and ideological shifts away from the conventions of Western realism in the history of Shakespearean performance, towards the conventions of Japanese *Mugen Noh* performance – while simultaneously acknowledging the textual and performative processes and legacies through which Shakespeare’s *Othello* as “source text” informs and inflects Miyagi’s “cultural product and domain” (Sanders 26).

5 Initially, scholarship on intercultural theatre had not considered the relationship between intercultural theatrical performance and theories of gender. In writing about intercultural theatre, Patrice Pavis limits his approach to aesthetic considerations of performance forms, insofar as it conceived as “the exchange or reciprocal influence of theatre practices...as a crucible in which performance techniques are tested against and amalgamated with the techniques that receive and fashion them” (2). Crucially, he goes on to stress that “one should avoid turning intercultural theatre into a vague terrain for comparing themes of cultural identities...or for contrasting ways of thinking” (2). Similarly, in writing about the spectatorship of intercultural theatre, Yong considers how a spectator might relate to “what resists access as the foreign in a performance” (530). However, the “foreign” is conceived in terms of cultural identity, to the exclusion of other categories of identity such as gender and sexuality – and therefore, to the exclusion of other forms of domination and oppression or

othering. Meanwhile, as Laura Lengel and John T. Warren observe in their Introduction to the edited collection, *Casting Gender: Women and Performance in Intercultural Context*, while much work has been done to address the role of women in Western theatre², “in studies of performance, intercultural performance, and intercultural communication, there is a lack of scholarship by and about women” (5). What emerges, then, is a parallel pattern within both intercultural theatre and feminism, of not taking the other into sufficient account - and thereby neglecting the productive discourse that might be generated at their intersections with each other in considering the politics of identities as performed and received in theatrical performance. More recently, however, scholars have begun to consider “the cultural processes underlying women and performance in intercultural contexts”, particularly in relation to gendered power relations and the material lived experiences of women (Lengel and Warren 9).

6 Nevertheless, as Arya Madhavan notes, the investigation of women’s roles in Asian performance practices “still remains marginalised” and underdeveloped³, such that addressing “a lack of discourse constructing and generating multiple female narratives within the wider Asian performance strands” is becoming an increasingly urgent imperative in theatre scholarship (346)⁴. In her article on women in Asian theatrical traditions, Madhavan contemplates the possibilities offered by “female intercultural theatre forms”, which “may not share the conceptual paradigms of intercultural theatre practice” such as those offered by Pavis (349). However, while feminist performance scholars call for conceptual, political, and aesthetic paradigms that might account for women’s participation and contribution to intercultural theatre in Asia, the very contours of a critical apparatus are disparate and only beginning to emerge, that might account for these diverse theatrical endeavours⁵. In response, this paper is part of a larger project in which I shall attempt to uncover the epistemological, aesthetic, social, and political stakes embedded in the critical and performance praxes of intercultural Shakespeare in Asia, particularly concerning women’s participation in theatrical

² See Sue Ellen-Case *Feminism and Theatre* (reissued 2008); Elaine Aston *Feminist Theatre Practice: A Handbook* (1999).

³ Despite the commitment in the Introduction to “move beyond the Western-centred nature of intercultural performance and intercultural communication theory and practice by creating a forum for voices outside socio-politically dominant nations to be heard” (3), most of the chapters in *Casting Gender: Women and Performance in Intercultural Context* (2005) are based on contemporary theatrical practice in Europe and America, with barely any reference to Asian theatrical practices and contexts.

⁴ Responding to this imperative, *Women in Asian Performance: Aesthetics and Politics*, has been edited by Madhavan (2017), which addresses the historical roles of women in various Asian performance contexts, and the aesthetic and political interventions they are enacting in contemporary practice.

⁵ *Women’s Intercultural Performance*, ed. Julie Holledge and Joanne Tompkins (2000) is the first sustained and comprehensive attempt at providing “examples in which intercultural performance by women is refracted through culture and gender, or how the self meets the other (in terms of both gender and culture) in theatre” (2).

productions in various roles and capacities, as well as the (re-)presentation of feminine subjectivities – stakes that may be underrepresented or elided when the current critical preoccupation in intercultural scholarship remains centred on the dimension of cultural identity. In “*Othello* in *Noh* Style”, various strategies of text and performance come together to create an intercultural performance that allows for interventions into the gender politics problematised in both Shakespeare’s narrative and in *Noh* theatre. I hope to critically engage with both Western feminist performance criticism, and with Asian intercultural performances of Shakespeare, in order to offer possibilities towards invoking an intercultural feminist perspective. This perspective must necessarily attend to the intersections between gender and culture, as the nexus between two domains not only of identity, but as discursive and representational categories.

7 On the one hand, the ‘formal’ presence of Desdemona’s ghost as a character in *Mugen Noh* is accounted for by the fact that the *Noh* canon contained five categories, one of which was the Woman Play, or *kazura mono* (“wig pieces”), so called because the male actor playing the female character would have to wear a wig (Komparu 36). Crucially, *Noh* performance only allowed for the presence of male actors on stage; only wigs, masks and robes indicate a female character. As a result, there emerges a disjunction between the formal demands of *Noh* for female character-types, and codified performances of these character-types that did not involve the actual participation of female actors. Even in the present day, while there are a few women who are allowed to perform *Noh*, they are very much a minority: in an article for the *Japan Times*, Eric Prideaux notes that there are “some 250 female *Noh* professionals nationwide”, which comprises “a sixth of the total of 1,540” professional practitioners (11th April 2004). Moreover, women are often excluded from access to professional training, as well as the symbolic social network “modelled on the patriarchic (sic.) family system (*ie seido*)” (Geilhorn 31). For instance, women are not allowed to participate in certain rituals within the *Noh* schools due to the historical concept of *kegare* (“defilement”) associated with biological processes of menstruation and childbirth. Consequently, feminine identity and subjectivity is rendered as always performative, an effect of the citation and repetition of formal performance codes of *Noh*. In response to this, Takakuwa Yoko asks whether the putting on of “the theatrical mask of womanliness” by the opposite sex in all-male theatrical traditions can ever fulfil female identity sufficiently (202), or whether femininity can only ever be a series of performed attributes and behaviours in this non-realist theatrical form, and not an essential identity category, as is often expected in Western realism.

8 Hence, Miyagi's decision to cast actresses in the roles of both *waki*, and especially *shite*, can be said to intervene in the performance history of *Noh* theatre – particularly because of the uninhibited visual presentation of the material embodiment of the lead actress, Mikari's, distinctly feminine features. At once liminal and ghostly, Mikari is also profoundly embodied and female. For instance, she does not wear a mask for the role, unlike most *shite* actors. Instead, the feminine features of her face are highlighted by the application of make-up: the contours of the eyes are accentuated with strong black eyeliner and sparkling eyeshadow, which also contrasts with the dim lighting on the stage; her lips are painted a sensuous red, and the whiteness of her skin is emphasised, in line with both Shakespeare's reference to Desdemona as a "white ewe" (*Oth.* 1.1.94-95), as well as with the *haiku* by Natsume Soseki, appears on the screen during the performance: "A chrysanthemum whiter than snow...". Consequently, even when her expressions are inscrutable and masklike, the vivid presentation of Mikari's distinctly feminine features foregrounds the materiality of the actress's body in this particular *Noh* performance (Fig.1).



Fig.1 The use of make-up

Similarly, the costume design by Takahashi Kayo emphasises the slightness of Mikari's waist and highlights the languid movements of her figure on stage (Fig.2).



Fig. 2 The various costumes worn by the *shite*

Therefore, the visual presentation of make-up and costumes, as well as the lack of masks for the female characters in Miyagi's production, all serve to draw attention to the distinctiveness of female corporeality. For a classical form like *Noh*, where the concept of character is as conventional archetype, this intercultural production visually foregrounds the corporeality of the female *shite*, and while she cannot quite be conceived as an individuated character in the style of Western realism, her material presence certainly constitutes an intervention of the feminine into the performance history of *Noh* theatre. In this way, therefore, the body of the woman can be read as a corporeal, embodied text that intervenes in and complicates both the history of Shakespearean performance and dramatic criticism, as well as that of *Noh* theatre.

9 Mikari's physical presence on stage as the ghost of Desdemona is also laden with 'symbolic' purpose for both text and performance, insofar as the narrative of trauma in Shakespeare is now focalised through her perspective as the *shite*. Kunio Komparu explains

that the *shite* “not only serves the practical function of showing a series of events, but also mediates a shared dramatic experience, guiding the consciousness of the audience as the imaginary symbol dominating the *Noh* space” (157-8). At the beginning of the production, the *waki* encounters a group of four female jug-bearers, from which the individuated subjectivity of Desdemona’s ghost emerges as both narrator and spectator of her own trauma, guiding the consciousness of the audience towards a re-construction and a working through of her traumatic death and subsequent afterlife. This is how the opening scene is described by the *waki*, who enters into the present moment of performance, which is also set in the aftermath of events in Shakespeare:

MONK
 I am a traveller from Venice.
 I have visited all the famous sites of the Mediterranean except for one, Cyprus.
 ...
 Under the light from the setting sun the dense olive mountains on the left draw towards the shore.
 The deep blue Mediterranean Sea is on the right.
 The two complement each other perfectly.
 The landscape of Botticelli’s masterpiece must be like this.
 The crisp shadows of the trees captured in the sea forever.

10 In conjunction with the vivid language used in the opening scene, which establishes the spatial setting as that of Cyprus, the *mise-en-scène* evokes a haunted atmosphere of “shadows” and “the setting sun”, with barely any light on stage, so that the white dresses of the jug-bearing women appear translucent. Such is the present in which the travelling-monk *waki* encounters the ghost-*shite*. There is an aura of mysticism – of traces of things that have already happened in the past, prior to the narrative events unfolding on stage – which immediately shrouds the audience’s first encounter with this *Mugen Noh* production and its characters. In this way, therefore, Miyagi’s production is “doubly haunted”, since “the pre-existing story is known not only to the audience” through the historical processes of transmission of Shakespeare’s narrative, but also through “the central figure of the play, who now looks back upon it as a spirit”, in this case the spirit of Desdemona’s ghost as *shite*, whose memories form the substance and content of the production (Carlson 20). The substance of the play is eventually revealed to be a re-enactment of Desdemona’s memory as contained within the myth of *Othello*, focalised through her perspective and articulated in her own narrative voice.

11 The intercultural relationship between Shakespeare's text and *Noh* performance in "Othello in *Noh* Style" is enacted through the appropriation of Shakespeare's tragic narrative as Desdemona's personal history, so that the narrative is "relocated" not only into a new social and cultural geography – that of contemporary Japan – but also into a different temporal frame, as it is displaced into the past within this contemporary *Noh* performance. This narrative allows for a complex intervention in the temporality of the plot of Shakespeare's *Othello* – which, as we know, concludes with the ultimate effacement and silencing of Desdemona's feminine agency and voice through death. By fracturing the temporality of Shakespeare's *Othello* narrative in order to make it serve as personal and mythic history, this *Mugen Noh* performance is able to mobilise and re-construct the working-through of traumatised female subjectivity as taking place in the present, shifting narrative authority and focalisation back to the female ghost. The narrative of trauma is now focalised through her perspective as *shite*, the primary character in *Noh*, and is articulated in her own narrative voice: she is effectively reclaiming her identity and wresting back her narrative voice and agency from Shakespeare's text, so that the "truth may be revealed" from her subjective perspective in the present moment of performance.

12 The dramatic structure of *Mugen Noh* is profoundly concerned about temporality: "the time of right now is interrupted...by memories of the past, and this creates a 'present' that corresponds to our own consciousness and that carries forward the dramatic action" (Komparu 77). In Miyagi's play, narratives of both past and present are shown to be contained within the performance of *Noh* in ways that reveal the extent to which time itself is gendered through performance. The narrative provided for by Desdemona's ghost in the present is interspersed with the re-enactment of anterior events in Shakespeare by male actors playing Othello and Iago, accompanied by a male chorus (Fig. 3). The stage becomes brightly lit with the first appearance of the male actors, whose presentation of masculine military authority harks back to the martial past of Cyprus in Shakespeare. In contrast to the soft, languid movements of the female actors in the previous scene where Desdemona introduces herself to the monk, the dynamic, angular, and tightly coordinated dancing of the male actors, accompanied by the strong rhythmic beating of the drums, serves to heighten the performance of masculinity in this martial scene, where the Venetians are shown to have 'captured' the island of Cyprus. The abrupt change in musical rhythm and volume, as well as the increased dynamism in movement, renders the juxtaposition between past and present in the two scenes even more apparent not only in terms of atmosphere, but also in terms of rhythm. *Noh* is governed by the *jo-ha-kyu* rhythm: *jo* refers to the beginning, signalled by a

non-beat; *ha* means break or ruin, suggesting “the destruction of an existing state”; finally, *kyu* means “fast”, indicating the speed of the rhythm that signals the end of the play (Komparu 25): the scene with the male performers marks a *ha* rupture in the rhythm and temporality of the opening scene.



Fig. 3 The *ai-kyogen*, with Othello in the foreground, and the ghost of Desdemona stage right

13 Structurally, this can be accounted for as the *ai-kyogen* segment in classical *Noh*, which is an interlude between the two parts of the entire play. Significantly, the *ai-kyogen* is enacted to account for the *shite*'s narrative. Interestingly, Komparu notes how typically, the *ai-kyogen* actor “introduces a period of real time into the fantasy time by coming on as a person in the present” (163). However, this principle is inverted in Miyagi's production: instead of “coming on as (people) in the present”, Iago and Othello are male figures relegated to and framed by Desdemona's past, so that the *ai-kyogen* effectively constitutes a re-enactment and re-construction of anteriority, of the masculine and martial past that is Shakespeare's *Othello*, which in turn is rendered as the substance of the ghost of Desdemona's memory. Instead, the time of the present belongs to the feminine, and is inhabited by the bodily presence of female actors.

14 When it comes to spatial mobility, Miyagi incorporates certain dramaturgical strategies to distinguish the temporal ordering of space in the production, evoking both the history and the present of Cyprus. Desdemona's ghost is able to mobilise and occupy the multiple temporal and spatial configurations of the narrative as well as that of the *Noh* stage, allowing for a complex working-through of her trauma. As *shite*, she is able to mobilise and physically negotiate spatial possibilities on the *Noh* stage in two ways: first, in her liminal

presence as both narrator of her trauma on the main stage, and second, as a spectator watching anterior events that lead to her trauma, at the threshold of the *Noh* passageway, called the *hashigakari*. This spatial mobility allows for her liminal presence in the production, perceptibility visible – with the ghostly capacity to be present everywhere and at all times.

15 Komparu explains that the *hashigakari*, the bridge on the *Noh* stage, symbolically evoked “time-transcending journeys between this world and the other world of ghosts and spirits” (124). As this liminality is shown to be inherent to the performance of *Noh*, Desdemona’s ghost is able to occupy the multiple temporal and spatial configurations of the narrative as well as that of the *Noh* stage in the capacity of *shite*, allowing for a complex working-through of her personal experience of trauma. When the re-enactment of the narrative takes place through the male characters on the main stage, for example, the figure of Desdemona’s ghost recedes to the *hashigakari* passageway, by the side of the stage which is barely lit – yet her liminal presence still remains perceptibly visible, endowed with the ghostly capacity to be present everywhere and at all times.

16 The liminal yet profoundly embodied presence of Desdemona’s ghost is rendered manifestly corporeal in the *buyoh* dance she performs at the resolution of the play, as a physicalised act of repeating and working through her trauma on stage, which is shown to intervene in both the myth of Shakespeare’s narrative, as well as in the rhythmic conventions of *Noh* performance. Much like the figure of the ghost, trauma is “unassimilable, not being known in the first instance”, according to Cathy Caruth (181): both have the capacity to transcend and to move beyond categories of understanding and experience. Similarly, the performance of *buyoh* by Desdemona’s ghost evokes the in-betweenness of feminine trauma: simultaneously embodied yet disembodied, verbal yet pre-verbal, visually arresting yet functional, offering the play a formal resolution, yet suggesting cyclical recurrence. The dance gradually becomes a macabre re-enactment of Othello’s stifling of Desdemona in Shakespeare, taking the form of self-strangulation, as an armoured gauntlet is fastened on Desdemona’s right hand to signify the hand of Othello (Fig.4).



Fig. 4 The (self-) strangulation of Desdemona

In effect, the disembodied ghost of Desdemona becomes two bodies at once, that of Othello and that of Desdemona herself. Formally, the dance also intervenes in the *jo-ha-kyu* rhythm of *Noh*, the conventions of which have been previously discussed. The performance of *buyoh* by Desdemona's ghost at once arrests and suspends the *kyu* pacing of the play, which is meant to indicate the fast, dynamic rhythm as the *Noh* play moves towards resolution. Instead, the dance directs and focuses the visual attention of the audience towards her bodily movements, emphasising both female corporeality and offering the *Noh* stage as a site through which the traumatic myth of Shakespeare's *Othello* can be worked through and negotiated. Consequently, the dance becomes an event of rupture, as the female subject enacts the simultaneous process of her own corporeal destruction, and spiritual creation.

17 Yet for all the symbolic possibilities that this act offers towards cathartic resolution, as it might have done in Western tragedy, there is no final sense of closure and reconciliation in this *Noh* production; rather, as Desdemona silently moves back into the *hashigakari* afterwards, the traumatic haunting can be said to continue relentlessly on – and beyond – the *Noh* stage, as the myth of Shakespeare's *Othello* narrative is left unresolved and open to further re-iterations and appropriations in intercultural theatrical practice. As Marvin Carlson writes, “all theatrical cultures have recognised...this ghostly quality, this sense of coming back in the theatre, and so the relationships between theatre and cultural memory are deep and complex” (2). This ambivalent conclusion is also perhaps indicative of both the possibilities and the precarity of intercultural feminist theatre: on the one hand, Madhavan asserts that “modern theatre provides a well-deserved respite for Asian women to experience with exciting new material and spaces hitherto unavailable to them” (349), yet in the case of *Noh* theatre in Japan specifically, Barbara Geilhorn cautions that “all-female *Noh* bears the

risk of self-marginalisation”, insofar as it risks “widening the perceived gap between a male and female aesthetic” (33) – as indeed, the gendered construction of temporality in this production indicates. Nevertheless, various strategies of text and performance have come together in “*Othello* in *Noh* Style” to create an intercultural dramaturgy that allows for interventions into the gender politics formally and symbolically problematised in both Shakespeare’s narrative and in *Noh* theatre, allowing for a hybrid form to emerge that is neither fully Shakespeare(an), nor fully *Noh* – that nevertheless remains haunted by traces of a fraught cultural history and memory in the midst of ongoing cross-cultural and transnational encounters.

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Effects of Usenet on Discussions of Sexual Assault in the BDSM Community in the 1990s

by Megan Lief, independent scholar

Abstract

Unequal roles in sexual and erotic practice are sometimes thought of as inherently abusive, especially to women. Although informed consent between adults is a mainstay of BDSM—bondage/discipline, dominance/submission and sadomasochism—its practitioners have had to fight accusations to the contrary. Though BDSM practices are generally consensual, assault undoubtedly occurs within the BDSM community. This paper focuses on how the idea of assault has been handled by BDSM community members; how survivors and perpetrators have been treated, how assault and consent have been defined, and how communities have approached preventing future assaults. In order to explore these issues, this paper historicizes the issue of rape in the BDSM community by examining academic and activist writing from BDSM focused community organizations and online forums throughout the 1990s. The growth in participation in online BDSM communities had a huge impact on social violence awareness within these communities. Community books, newsletters and conference materials from the 1980s suggest that prior to the existence of groups such as alt.sex.bondage on Usenet, nearly all conversations around rape and BDSM came from a subset of the feminist community (particularly kink organizations focused on queer women) interested in proving the consensual nature of BDSM practices. In the 1990s, for BDSM practitioners who were able to access the Internet, forums such as Usenet provided a new opportunity for anonymous and safer spaces in which to process and discuss assault within the community. Specifically, the alt.sex.bondage newsgroup was home to some of the first documented conversations about trigger warnings, BDSM specific anti-domestic violence resources, and community wide conversations about the existence of rape and abuse in BDSM. This paper will document the evolution of these conversations from the advent of BDSM specific newsgroups on Usenet through the late 1990s.

Well, without going into too much detail, it happened at his dorm room when they were beginning to experiment. He started to give her a back rub and she was falling asleep. He was a little more frisky. The next thing she knew, her hands were handcuffed and her face was in a pillow. She called the safeword but he ignored it. When he was nearly finished, he seemed to realize what was happening and stopped. However, he seems to have a memory block (according to her). Like I said earlier, I haven't had a chance to ask him about it yet. There was no physical harm but A LOT of emotional harm...

— Anonymous User, 5fi2querimit@vms.csd.mu.edu

You just described the worst nightmare of someone in the scene.

For a long time, I've had the notion that it's almost impossible for a person who's BDSM-aware to rape someone. We're too aware of consensuality, of communication, of safewords, to ever let it happen.

— M. Madeleine

— “Safewords and trust”, *alt.sex.bondage*, Google Groups, 22 August 1993

Why Rape and BDSM?

1 For decades, the U.S. BDSM community has struggled to define the idea they refer to as “What It Is That We Do” in contrast to rape and sexual violence. Historically, BDSM has been painted as inherently violent to women and tantamount to rape. In response, practitioners have heavily stressed the ways in which BDSM, when appropriately practiced, is safe and consensual. Amidst these debates, however, frank discussions about the reality of actual consent violations is often lost.

2 This misunderstanding has been compounded by a history of stigmatization from both mainstream and feminist commentators. Very recently, however, there has been an increase in analysis of BDSM coming from a feminist perspective (Deckha, Newmahr). Recent studies have specifically addressed, for example, the experiences of trans or disabled practitioners, whether kinksters can be feminist, and how class and race impact scene demographics (Bauer; Reynolds; Scheff and Hammers). In this spirit, this paper seeks to contextualize the BDSM community's response to rape and rape culture.

3 Historically, conversations around BDSM and sexual assault have been focused less on the behaviors and experiences of community members, and more on the perceptions of outsiders and the defenses community members construct in response to those perceptions. The idea that all BDSM activities may be inherently violent or akin to assault has been heavily explored by feminist and non-feminist writers.¹ There is a well-documented set of defenses against these

¹ Opinion among feminists about BDSM—among other issues, mostly pertaining to sexuality—divided feminist thought in what became known as the ‘Sex Wars’ (Duggan; Ferguson). This division was between a camp which saw BDSM as a reification of the exploitation of women (Dworkin; Jeffreys; Linden). Opposed by a faction which saw an absolute prohibition on particular forms of sexual expression to be infantilizing and opposed to a more complete concept of women's agency (Califia; English et. al.; Rubin; Rubin and Califia; Samois Collective).

accusations that have been developed by both activists within the BDSM community and sympathetic researchers. Still, the question of how genuine sexual assault is experienced within the BDSM community—and how participants understand these experiences in dialogue with each other—is massively under-explored.

4 An understanding of Usenet, a popular Internet forum in the 1990s, is integral to exploring the changing discourses concerning rape within the BDSM community. The alt.sex.bondage newsgroup (henceforth a.s.b) allowed users an anonymous, and therefore relatively safer space, in which to have some of the first documented conversations about trigger warnings, BDSM specific anti-domestic violence resources, and community wide conversations about the existence of rape and abuse in BDSM. This paper will document the shift in the BDSM community's narratives around sexual assault in order to provide a useful foundation for other researchers and anti-rape activists looking to understand the history of the BDSM community and to further engage in present-day activism.

A Brief Background on BDSM

5 BDSM is a “6 for 4” acronym; B/D is bondage/discipline, D/S (often written “D/s”²) is dominance and submission, and S/M is sadomasochism. The BDSM community (sometimes described as the ‘scene’, or a collection of regionally specific scenes; ie the ‘New York Scene’³) is a diverse series of networks of people who associate with some or all of the sexual kinks included within these acronyms, and have the social privilege and/or ability to organize around them. The kinky practices encompassed by BDSM are broad and varied; my descriptions here are by no means a definitive explanation.

6 For people participating in BDSM, a wide variety of behaviors not included in mainstream understandings of sexual activity are understood to be within the normal range of consensual practices. Because of the inherent risks to BDSM practices, and the surrounding

² Some members of the BDSM community imbue the case of names, titles and pronouns with significance; titles or names for the dominant partner will be capitalized, but not for the submissive partner. Thus they might write ‘dominance/submission’ as ‘D/s’. However, this is not uniform to the BDSM community, and some would argue that this is disrespectful to the submissive partner, or unnecessary. For this paper, all references to ‘dominance’ or ‘submission’ will be in matching cases.

³ For BDSM practitioners ‘the scene’ often refers to the understanding of the broader BDSM community. ‘A scene’ might be a local manifestation of this community, but in a slightly different context ‘a scene’ could also refer to a clearly defined and specific kinky encounter.

stigma, the community prides itself on the centrality of negotiated consent. Negotiations include questions of what activities will be engaged in, how long the scene will last and what props are acceptable, long before the scene starts. Additionally, it is standard practice in the BDSM world to use what are known as ‘safewords’. A safeword is any agreed upon code, phrase or signal that tells both partners to stop their activities and check-in with each other that they are both okay. Because roleplaying is commonly part of kinky encounters, it can be necessary to have a word that partners use to step outside of their defined roles. This allows partners to monitor, in real time, each other’s active consent. If either partner wants to stop an activity, they know they are free to use the safeword.

7 Kink identity also intersects with the variety of venues in which kink is practiced. The kinksters I am writing about in this paper—and that I am most familiar with—are people for whom kink is a part of their private social lives. But this does not represent everyone engaged in kinky practice. Internet-only practitioners, isolated players and sex-workers all have a stake in kinky activities. What they sometimes lack, however, is access to a semi-stable community, which for most BDSM practitioners requires some amount of disposable income and time. It is also important to note that many scenes have a majority of white, heterosexual and cisgender participants; lack of access to specifically queer and POC spaces often further marginalizes those involved in or adjacent to the BDSM community.

Methodology

8 In this paper, I am historicizing the issue of rape in the United States BDSM community in the 1990s. My primary source was the discussion threads in the alt.sex.bondage and soc.subculture.bondage-bdsm hierarchies on Usenet. I chose these newsgroups because they are the richest resources for uncensored discussions of S/M in the 90s—especially with regard to discussions around rape and social assault. I also reviewed research studies, academic articles, activist publications, erotic fiction and blogs, as well as informal historical collections of information about BDSM and kink on the Internet. Additionally, I visited the Sexual Minorities Archive in Northampton, Massachusetts where I was able to review a large collection of primary sources about the BDSM community in the 1980s and 1990s. My research is also informed by anecdotal information from personal participation in the BDSM community.

The 1990s, Overview

9 The early 1990s saw significant interactions between the kink community and government power. In 1989, the Corcoran Gallery acquiesced to pressure from Congress to cancel a controversial exhibit of sadomasochistic themed photography by Robert Mapplethorpe (Gamarekian). In the context of existing debates around censorship and pornography, this action angered many in both the art and the S/M worlds. Three years later, in 1992, representatives from several sections of the kink community met with members of the National Endowment of the Arts to strategize around this issue. Though activists in the leather⁴ community were not dealing directly with government power, they were acting in response to it, in alliance with more mainstream organizations. More positively, the 1990s also saw the removal of consensual S/M from the DSM in 1994. The 1990s also saw an increase in events, books, and resources for the BDSM community.

10 Germane to all of these public events was the 1989 formation of a.s.b on an Internet service called Usenet where issues relevant to the BDSM community both momentous and everyday could be discussed. This newsgroup⁵ represented one of the very first places that the BDSM community was able to gather online and it remained popular for relatively tech-savvy kinksters until 1997, when a new group, soc.subculture.bondage-bdsm was formed. Usenet communities presented an unprecedented opportunity to explore fears, fantasies and questions about BDSM in a truly safe and anonymous situation. For others who were not actively involved in a local scene, this was the first time they could meet and talk with other kinky people.

11 Outsiders writing about BDSM were very aware of the impact the Internet had on this community. In 1994 Richard Kadrey wrote an article for *Wired Magazine* simply entitled “Alt.Sex.Bondage”. In this article, Kadrey acknowledges that some readers may have a lurid fascination with a.s.b, and attempts to give a more realistic depiction of the group. In 1995, sociologists published a review of the kink community based entirely on observations from Usenet posts (Ernulf).

⁴ The Leather subculture is understood by many to be a subsection of the general BDSM subculture, though it is in many ways culturally distinctive and has its origins in gay leather subculture. Though participants in leather subculture will often wear leather in a conscious attempt to indicate they are part of this group, participants in leather generally have a far more nuanced and complex understanding of what leather culture and community means.

⁵ ‘Newsgroup’ is the word used to describe a subject based discussion thread on Usenet.

Early 1990s, Usenet Transforms Conversations Around Rape and BDSM

12 In December of 1990, roughly a year into the existence of a.s.b, William December Star started a thread entitled “Rethinking rape stories in a.s.b”. The conversation that followed was a discussion about how fantasy rape erotica should be treated by newsgroup participants. William states that while he⁶ had formerly opposed posting unlabeled rape-erotica to the group, he became persuaded that posts should not require warning labels. He ends his post by stating that:

As a general rule, I still don’t like to read rape stories -- or at least ones which glorify rape [...] but my own personal hang-ups should be just that -- my own.
 (“Rethinking” n.p.)

After his initial post, several posters responded to William, either supporting his viewpoint or pushing back against what they saw as a permissive attitude towards rape fantasy stories in a.s.b. One user, Mikki Barry, was emphatically in favor of labeling rape stories because of her belief that they might trigger painful emotions for women and rape survivors. Though Mikki goes out of her way to make clear that she does not support censorship in a.s.b, she asks why a.s.b posters are upset by the idea of requesting these labels. Reflecting common anxieties about mainstream perception, Mikki asked:

Aren’t we, as a group, trying to show the mainstream net that bondage is a consensual, fun activity? Don’t you think that rape and other non-consensual stories denigrate [sic] that goal? I don’t see why ASKING that those types of stories not be posted is a BAD thing. (“Rethinking” n.p.)

Ultimately, this thread did not reach any conclusions. Although labels about the content of erotic stories would eventually become standard in a.s.b (used at least sporadically starting in 1993), this would not take place for several years. But the issues at stake in this thread—the place of representation, fantasy and censorship, were common threads in early 90s conversations around rape within the scene. For those with regular Internet access, a.s.b represented a chance for

⁶ Some notes about names and pronouns of Usenet posters: The names for Usenet posters are all based on users’ chosen aliases. I will not make any attempt to distinguish here between pseudonyms or given names. Some posters to a.s.b posted through anonymizing services that obscured their email or username; in these cases I will refer to them as being anonymous users, unless they signed their messages with a nickname. Additionally, in places where posters posted with traditionally gendered names (ie, William, Stacy) or gendered titles (Lady, Master, etc) I reference them with the traditionally associated gendered pronouns unless they have indicated otherwise in their posts. I reference posters who did not post under traditionally gendered names, or through anonymizing services, with “they/them” pronouns, unless their posts clearly indicate a gender or pronoun. Often, gender is implied, but not clearly stated in Usenet posts. In these situations, I use “they/them” pronouns.

members from all corners of the community to discuss kink in a shared environment, and to do so with the freedom of anonymity. But that did not mean they could escape existing baggage.

13 Much of the early discussions of rape on alt.sex.bondage were fixated on controlling community representation, and many of these discussions concerned issues of censorship. For example, less than a year after a.s.b began, a System Administrator at the University of Toronto removed access to a.s.b at his university, citing concern about bad publicity that might result from circulating a fictional rape fantasy that had been posted (“Hugh” n.p.). One poster was so concerned by this censorship that they urged fellow users to provide an uncensored copy of Usenet to anyone who could not access it.

14 Despite the emphasis on fantasy and representation in early a.s.b threads about rape, frank discussion of actual sexual violence did exist in an unprecedented way on Usenet. In October of 1991, writing under the nickname ‘Confused’, a poster started a thread on a.s.b with the subject “If a safeword isn’t used, is it rape?” Confused wrote about feeling conflicted about a recent interaction with a sexual partner. They had a history of kinky play and one evening when fooling around, Confused’s partner had said ‘no’ but Confused ignored her—claiming this was because she still seemed turned on. Confused clarifies that they asked her if she wanted to stop and reminded her that she could use her safeword at any point. The partner did not use her safeword, and Confused continued the scene until their partner broke down sobbing. Confused ends the post by asking their fellow a.s.b readers:

Did I engage in Date Rape by doing this? Or was it a simple lack of communication?

I DID invite using the Safeword, and that request was declined. (“If a safeword” n.p.)

Conversations started by Internet posters like Confused mark some of the first times folks in the BDSM community showed an openness to public conversation about date rape and lack of consent. While there was a paucity of conversations about rape relative to the overall content of a.s.b, these interactions proved significant.

15 Conversations about potential violations of consent were at odds with the community conviction that BDSM practitioners were *specifically better at honoring consent than mainstream society*. For many kinksters, the only conversation they were ever exposed to about rape in a BDSM context centered on best practices for consent and these posts on Usenet were

eye-opening. As M. Madeleine opined many kinksters felt they were “too aware of consensuality, of communication, of safewords” to ever let rape happen (“Safewords” n.p.).

16 As the posters on a.s.b struggled to determine how to respond to rape and sexual violence in their community, several themes emerged. a.s.b posters would often debate among themselves the appropriate community response to assault survivors—with both supportive and dismissive commentaries being posted. They also concerned themselves with what they viewed as uniquely grey areas around assault, because of the nature of BDSM. And they were very invested in separating what in later years would be referred to as “WIITWD” (what it is that we do) from genuine rape and assault.⁷

17 An example of this tension between dismissal and support can be seen in some threads from 1993. A poster describes outlining to their partner unwanted behaviors—which were so triggering they would be unable to respond or protest; in spite of their insistence these behaviors were unacceptable to them, their partner violated these boundaries leaving them feeling violated and betrayed (“Safewording n.p.”). Several commenters sympathized with the poster, and expressed a belief that they had been raped. One said:

Yes. Your ‘partner’ is a danger. After your expressly forbidding them to do something, they went ahead and did it anyway, knowing full well that what they were about to do would squick you, and that’s what they wanted. They were rude, they were inconsiderate, they were dangerous. (ibid.)

Not all responses were this supportive, however. In the same year, one poster created a post accusing a frequent a.s.b poster called Averti of sexual assault. Rather than receiving supportive feedback, most posters were dismissive, with one saying:

I [don’t] understand why this was posted here. I don’t expect anyone [sic] to be held responsible, or to act as the Posting Police just because someone posts in this newsgroup. (“An Assault” n.p.)

18 By and large, however, the most frequent conversations going on around assault in the kink community centered on the idea of “WIITWD” being fundamentally different from assault. Though these conversations were heavily represented in Usenet forums, they also existed offline.

⁷ An example of the complex nature of their struggle for community response standards can be seen in some posts that went up in the early years of a.s.b. In 1991 there was a series of long and tense posts, about whether or not men could be raped, particularly by women. Though these conversations were not strictly tied to discussions of BDSM practice, many posters expressed distress over the idea that posters in the community did not understand the basic concept that anyone, including men, could be sexually assaulted (“A New(?) Question”).

For example, in 1993, the Eulenspiegel Society,⁸ published “S&M Safety vs. Abuse” with a sidebar including an official statement from the National Leather Association (NLA) calling upon the “Leather/SM/Fetish” community to “hold batterers accountable for being violent” and emphasizing types of violence that do not fall in the rubric of consensual S/M (Ward). This document reinforces the idea that kinksters were attempting to define what they did to combat assault, both on and offline.

Mid 1990s, Public Conversations About Domestic Abuse and Rape in the BDSM Community

19 Dialogues around rape and assault tied to BDSM increased significantly in the mid 90s, both online and offline. A significant number of publications about domestic violence in S/M came out during this time, in conference materials, journals and magazines targeted at many segments of the S/M community. Unlike posts on Usenet in the early 90s, these articles did not generally address rape specifically. Rather, they focused on the existence of domestic violence within the scene—both uncovering examples of it, and providing tips and resources to scene members to help empower them against this abuse.

20 One of the most interesting print documents during this time was entitled “Domestic Violence in the S/M Community”. It was originally published in 1994, as part of the conference materials for the International S/M-Leather-Fetish Celebration, but spread quickly in BDSM publications, and online.⁹ In the original document put out by the International S/M-Leather-Fetish Celebration, there is a header before the article, causing the title to actually appear as “The Celebration Wants You to Know About...Domestic Violence in the S/M Community”. Although this would probably seem tame to members of the present day kink scene, in 1994 it was groundbreaking. The National Leather Association had previously issued statements addressing domestic violence, but none had been this direct about the need for community recognition of this problem.

21 The impact of this document, and the narratives it encouraged, can be seen in other literature on domestic violence available at this time. Both “The Leather Journal” (which

⁸ The Eulenspiegel Society is one of the oldest and largest organizations in the United States for members of the BDSM community. It was formed in 1971, and is based in New York City.

⁹ As evidence of the document’s importance: whole sections of it were utilized for the FAQ for soc.subculture.bondage-bdsm

targeted the broader S/M community and especially the heterosexual/pansexual scenes), and a magazine called “CUIR” (targeting the gay male community) published articles in 1994 about domestic violence within their communities (Morgan, Silverowl). Each article mixes more formal educational content, similar to the Celebration document, with personal anecdotes about abuse from the lives of the authors.

22 The popular press also sought to elucidate the difference between BDSM and domestic abuse; in Richard Kadrey’s article on a.s.b for *Wired Magazine*, he sought to dispel some of the negative rumors about the a.s.b community. Kadrey specifically addresses the issue of non-consensual fantasy erotica. He acknowledges that many “casual” readers of a.s.b were horrified by stories such as the “Diane” series about non-consensual sex slavery. But Kadrey also goes out of his way to make clear that the BDSM community does not support coercion, and that S/M is based on consent.

23 A year later, sociologists Kurt Ernulf and Sune Innala published “Sexual Bondage: A Review and Unobtrusive Investigation”.¹⁰ Directly addressing the potential for outsiders to conflate BDSM with abuse, Ernulf and Innala note that S/M practitioners are aroused by the consensual nature of their activities. They note that while an “unobservant or intoxicated top can be directly hazardous to the bottom’s life” (Ernulf 644); their research “indicate[s] that many dominant-initiators can only be aroused if the submissive-recipient enjoys the experience” (647).

24 These conversations about S/M and abuse happening offline—both within and outside of the community—were also reflected in a.s.b discussions around rape. In March, 1995, a poster using the name ‘The Reverend F-Squared’ wrote in response to the question “Where does one draw the line between BDSM and abuse?”:

For quite awhile [sic], I thought that this very Q could be difficult to answer. But in the past coupla’ months, The Eulenspiegel Society (TES) has been handing out flyers at every meeting entitled (I beleive [sic]) “Abuse and the S/M Commuity [sic]”.

I picked it up and read it. As I was reading the “Are you...?”, “Have you...?” Qs I was thinking, “Yeah, right! I see this as part of a BDSM relationship and *I* don’t consider this abusive”.

And then I read a Q that squicked me: “Do you have a problem knowing when a scene begins or ends?”.

¹⁰ An article which is singularly interesting for being among the first—if not the first—to utilize a.s.b as a source of information about the BDSM community.

Personally, I think that's a cool place to draw a line. ("Meaning" n.p.)¹¹

This concession to the final definition of abuse is interesting and significant; by allowing their mind to be changed by The Eulenspiegel Society's handout, 'The Reverend F-Squared' demonstrates the potential impact anti-domestic violence education was having within the community.

25 The 90s represented a sea change in a.s.b as questions about how the public understood BDSM gave way to vexing questions about community interaction and were to draw the lines between consent and abuse. One example of these trends can be seen in a thread posted in November of 1994 ("Scening" n.p.). a.s.b posters had been discussing hypothetical situations surrounding the use of alcohol during scenes. Many posters felt uneasy about involving drugs or alcohol in kinky behavior—with one poster adamantly insisting that substance use in kink is always wrong and that there is no scenario when a non-sober person can truly give consent.¹² But one poster pushed back:

Scening with me drunk may not be wise, it may have risks, but to imply it is the moral and legal equivalent of rape is just way over the goddamned line! I have experienced non-consensual sexual activity. I *know* what *that* feels like. This isn't it. (ibid.)

These conversations reflect a growing concern within a.s.b to define what constitutes rape and abuse in a kinky context.

26 During this period, a.s.b posters also became increasingly concerned with distancing themselves from criminal behavior which they worried would be associated with the BDSM community. The threat of legal prosecution was a significant concern given the high media profile of the Operation Spanner arrests.¹³ Posters on a.s.b—and the community at large—were

¹¹ The references flyer is likely a version of the widely circulated "Domestic Violence in the S/M Community" document mentioned earlier in this chapter.

¹² Because there is no single standard of consent—let alone what constitutes impairment—this topic could be debated endlessly especially when the sex in question is of potentially dubious legality (RAINN).

¹³ A brief summary of Operation Spanner: In 1987 police in Manchester, UK received a gay male S/M video, which they claimed to believe depicted acts of genuine torture, and subsequently raided multiple properties. Though the 'victims' came forward to explain that this was a consensually made S/M video and confirm they had been willing participants, police insisted on pressing charges, and in all 16 men were arrested and charged with assault. The defendants pled guilty, and sought appeal. The legal process lasted a decade, ultimately landing in the European Court of Human Rights, who ruled against overturning the convictions. In the US, Spanner escalated fears of legal persecution amongst BDSM practitioners despite there being no comparable case law in the US *and* Spanner fundamentally being more about the persecution of gay men than BDSM practitioners. (Similar questions of BDSM in the UK, with heterosexual couples, have been ruled legal.)

not only concerned with developing a set of best practices but to ensure their practices adhered to the law. Relevant to these concerns, a.s.b took interest in the investigation surrounding a sexual assault and torture accusation against a Columbia University graduate student (“More On”). In response, a representative from Conversio Virium, “a peer support group for folks interested in BDSM at Columbia University”, posted:

Let me just state for the public record here, that as spokesperson for Conversio Virium [...] that this monster never attended and certainly was never a [sic] member of CV.

We have gotten no reaction on campus directed toward us – don’t necessarily think we will because we are very open on campus about what CV is doing and supporting. (n.p.)

This is just one of many posts dedicated to distinguishing WIITWD from reports of criminal behavior. Reflective of changes in the perception of kink, focus shifted from arguing that kink is not implicitly assault to articulating an ethos of WIITWD differentiated from highly publicized sex crimes.

27 Alongside increased focus on distinguishing WIITWD from sensational crimes—Usenet posters continued to discuss actual incidents of domestic violence within the scene, attempting to discern a clear articulation of what constituted abuse. A moving example of this sort of dialogue can be seen in the conversation following a post by “LitLSubbie”:

My master crossed the line last weekend. I thought [sic] it was because he loved me but the more I thought about it, it was because of his lack of securitie [sic]. I don’t know what provoked him to beat the living shit out of me but he did. I used my yellow safe word and he told me to take the pain..What should I have done. I love him and am very devoted..should I walk away? Please help... (“Subs” n.p.)

Posters responded to LitLSubbie with overwhelming support and advice. Though not all agreed with how LitLSubbie should respond, they all were clear about their master’s behavior being unacceptable. One poster wrote in response:

I believe you're in a very difficult situation right now. We talk about safe, sane and consensual, but until it comes down to it, there's little talk about what to do after one of these boundaries are crossed. My advice is to talk to your dom, explain to him the problem. If he doesn't believe it's a problem and decides that you're the one with the problem, I would have to assume you are serving an abuser rather than a dom (there IS a difference)... (ibid.)

Another emphatic commenter called Leona Joy replied:

I know that the feelings of submission and loyalty can be quite compelling, almost overwhelmingly so. Please know that you deserve better, and are not obligated, required, nor expected to go back and put yourself in harms' way again. No matter **what** he says ...

... I know this is tough, but from what you've said, my advice to you as a sistersub is to **RUN** to the nearest exit. Or are you willing to allow his lack of security to cost you more, maybe your life? (ibid.)

28 The ability for LitlSubbie to get advice from community members like Leona Joy was totally unprecedented in the kink community prior to the existence of a.s.b. Though it is not possible to know what discussion had been happening in private homes and gatherings, in the late 80s, LitlSubbie would have had no central location to go to and expect this kind of support. If there was not local support, then likely there would have been none at all. But by the mid 1990s, these dialogues were relatively common. Even when a.s.b posters did not agree on how to handle abuse, by and large, they agreed that abuse was wrong and were invested in helping their fellow community members live safe, sane and consensual lives.

29 The ability to utilize Usenet forums for support and information was not unique to members of the kink community. A variety of people were able to connect with individuals they would have never met otherwise over shared interests both pedestrian and fringe (Hauben). Of particular importance for the development of later communities was the development of the alt hierarchy—of which a.s.b was just one component. On the principle of free speech, the alt hierarchy allowed *anyone* with computer access to create and maintain a forum—the only limitation was the interest of others in participating (Reid). This was an immense freedom which connected previously isolated individuals to discuss their fringe interests without inhibition and build a nascent community, in line with current internet subcultures.

1997-1999, The Discussion Moves to the Local Level

30 By the late 1990s, the BDSM community was becoming more comfortable discussing the possibility of rape and assault within the scene. Where a decade previously this dialogue had stalled in response to external crises, now the community was relatively stable. It was able to support the publication of a myriad of journals dedicated to BDSM and leather themes for all sexual orientations; yearly pseudo-beauty pageant style leather competitions; dozens of books with safety advice, relationship tips and play techniques; a national chapter-based organization

(the NLA); and beginning in 1997, the National Coalition for Sexual Freedom, an extant education and advocacy group dedicated to advancing the rights of “BDSM-Leather-Fetish, Swing, and Polyamory Communities”. This should not suggest a linear narrative of progress. Contemporary members of the BDSM community still express dissatisfaction with the extent to which rape in the community is addressed. However, these narratives are present because of the continuous negotiation concerning consent in the BDSM community.

31 While the long-standing conflation between BDSM and sexual crime failed to vanish, the community itself began negotiating a more active role in excluding those who violated boundaries—posting about criminal and non-consensual behavior involving community members. While previous discussions included attempts to define rape and sexual assault—even querying other posters opinions on whether or not personal experiences constituted rape—an increasingly active stance was taken towards *excluding* individuals for violations of consent. But in 1998 one poster on the soc.subculture.bondage-bdsm newsgroup (s.s.bb)¹⁴ wrote:

... at one such gathering a a [sic] newcomer arrived, and was apparently running a “fet party”. the members of the group attended [...]The problem arose soon after. It came to light that this person had been accused of, been convicted in a court of law for, and done time for, sexual assault. [...] Consentuality [sic] being as important as it was, [...] A vote was held and the decision amoungst [sic] the 20 some people attending was unanimous, they wanted the person banned from the events. He was told so (“Negativity” n.p.)

These conversations reflect the shift from simply differentiating kink from crime—the preoccupation even five years before this post in defining WIITWD—to actively defining the boundaries of permissible behavior *within the community itself*, further articulating the difference between kink and criminal assault.

32 Further policing of community boundaries is reflected in discussions about abuse and safety at local kink gatherings. Posters would often start threads seeking advice on how to deal with inappropriate behavior at their local gatherings, or query others.s.bb community members about what allowed them to feel safe at play parties. For example, in April of 1997, a poster using the name Leigh wrote:

I’ll cut to the chase: How does your local bdsm group handle unsafe “members”? Two women have come forward after being beat up by a “dom” who does not honor safewords. These (seemingly intelligent and genuine) women are afraid

¹⁴ s.s.bb replaced a.s.b when the later was overrun with spam

that someone will get killed. Our group will be gathering this Thursday to discuss what to do -- for this *and* less extreme cases (“ASB” n.p.)

The responses to Leigh’s request for advice were not uniform. One poster suggests that her group wait for “proof” before taking any action. In response, another poster, Joy Hilbert, pushed back asking, “what do you call ‘proof?’”, and demanding to know:

How many damaged slaves are required before “proof” is obtained? I’ve noticed this before - on asb and irl [e.g. ‘in real life’] - we say we want a safe community, but whenever anyone points the finger at an abuser we say can you prove it, or why are you mentioning it here, or are you sure you're not biased (ibid.)

Joy’s observation that there is a disconnect between the rhetoric of consent in the BDSM community and what actually happens is one of the major shifts in the late 90s. Eventually, analysis like this led to an extended discussion of rape culture in the BDSM scene in the 2000s (Pervocracy 2012a, 2012b; Stein; Stryker, Thomas). But in 1997, this was one of the first public spaces where this idea was so clearly articulated.

33 The end of the 1990s also saw shifts in the offline literature around rape and assault. A section in *A Professional’s Guide to Understanding Gay and Lesbian Domestic Violence*, published in 1999, entitled “Kinky Sexuality and Sexual Assault” signaled substantive changes in how those outside the community understood rape in the BDSM community (McClennen 1999). It is one of the very first rational and non-accusatory articles written about rape and BDSM intended for an outside audience. It is also among the very first academic studies of the issue of rape in the BDSM community. This increased respect from professional sources should be read in light of the work to increase safeguards in the BDSM community, especially noting the contributions of LGBTQ kinksters. Sources cited authoritatively include the work of Pat Califia, the NLA, and the widely circulated “Domestic Violence in the S/M Community” article. The authors also note the paucity of safe spaces and resources for BDSM practitioners who have been sexually assaulted. Two vignettes about kinky individuals who have been sexually assaulted are included, with the admonition that “a clinician must be familiar with the language and meanings [of] BDSM”. As the authors warn:

Sexual assault is a taboo subject with the BDSM community, as kinky sexuality is a taboo subject within the sexual assault and domestic violence fields. As long as rape advocates are uneducated about BDSM sexuality, victims of sexual assault who do kinky sex will not feel safe seeking services (McClennen and Gunther 53).

Conclusion

34 In the 1990s, conversations around abuse and sexual violence in the BDSM community transitioned from being severely constrained by a need to defend against external adversaries to a period of increased communication. This transition was facilitated by the decline in popular opinion—reflected in academic and popular literature—that BDSM was simply abuse. For those in the BDSM community who were able to access the Internet, Usenet was an incredible resource. The uncensored, anonymous and safe space it provided for BDSM community members—as well as those who wished to learn more about the scene—was unprecedented. The a.s.b newsgroup permanently changed how kinksters were able to communicate with each other, and how they understood themselves as a community including the articulating of a code of conduct related to consent: WIITWD.

35 The development of this community ethos does not indicate that it was uniformly accepted or interpreted homogeneously. Even into the late 90s, Usenet had its share of rape apologists—a problem compounded because anyone could join Usenet and opine on any subject without much oversight. As the number of posters on Usenet increased and the avenues of communication became more open, more posts started to center on local groups, and similar trends became apparent at the local level. There are threads suggesting assault victims should negotiate with their abusers, that local communities should demand excessive proof before removing suspected consent violators, that all play parties are inherently unsafe or, that all play parties are completely safe and that folks new to the scene have no reasons to worry. These same trends all existed—and continue to exist—outside of the BDSM community as well.

36 Today, many members of the BDSM community still may not be aware or interested in the analysis of rape culture being written primarily by concerned members of the community. But if they change their mind, this analysis exists. It is something they can Google. They can hire presenters to give workshops about it in their local communities. In our present moment, many of the productive conversations about rape in the BDSM scene exist at the intersection of a sex-positive feminism and the kinky blogging community. Yet, many of the bloggers tackling these issues are only tangentially aware of the full history contained within this paper—as there is a paucity of interest in providing a robust history of how rape has been handled in the BDSM scene. Through this paper I hope to begin filling the gap in academic research on this important

issue. Hopefully further research will continue to address the rich archive presented by Usenet for researching the BDSM community and research into other marginalized communities will follow suit.

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Anne J. Cruz and María Cristina Quintero, editors: *Beyond Spain's Borders: Women Players in Early Modern National Theaters*. Routledge, 2017

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1 In this volume of ten essays, Anne J. Cruz and María Cristina Quintero bring together valuable works examining the real and fictional women who played pivotal roles in the cultivation of early modern drama and in the theater departing from and coming into the Iberian Peninsula and other European realms. As a scholar of Spanish Golden Age Literature, I find that this collection enriches the study of drama and theater from a nontraditional perspective, where women engaged and impacted the transformations in the theatrical practices and the gendered effect of Spanish histories, legends and cultural stereotypes, especially as incorporated or adapted in the French and the English drama. The book exceeded my high expectations through the fruitful investigations it provides, restructuring to the readers a clear map of the role of women. After a perusal of the contents, these essays complement one another by drawing the evolving presence of women in the pan-European theater, especially in the tradition of Spanish *comedia* and Italian *commedia dell'arte*. Despite the editors' thematically organized units, however, each essay remains a discrete project elucidating women's experiences on both the domestic and the transnational stage. In presenting the analyses and conclusions of this volume, I shall focus my efforts on the chapters that offer the most provocative interventions in this field.

2 The main body of the book is divided into two parts that correspond to two opposite geographical crossings. In the first part, "From Spain to the Transnational Stage", the editors introduce five essays that offer articulate readings of the roles and influences of Iberian women on the stages of England, Austria, and France. The first two chapters are dedicated to tracing famous Spanish fictional characters such as *Malibea* and *La Celestina* and their domestication in the English Tudor Interludes. Chapter two focuses on the transformations of seventeenth century María de Zayas's female fictional characters in her story *Avarice Punished* that appeared in the heavy English and French translations, adaptations, and frequent borrowings in the works of Paul Scarron and Molière. The respective analyses and comparative studies of these two chapters offer the reader a profound understanding of gender and cultural practices that interplay between the stage and everyday life. For example, the first chapter elucidates the differences between the

rebellious and unconventional character of Malibea who rebels against practices of Man in the original Spanish drama and choose death over adhering to patriarchal normativity. However, the refashioning of Malibea in the English drama to appear obedient mirrors a conscious distance to the alien nature of the original text and reflects what the author describes as “mercantile humanism” (17), a sort of discursive order of educative narrative that commodified desire and legitimized the established civic norms of the English society. By the same token, chapters three, four, and five highlight the presence and the impact that Spanish princesses and queens had on royal courts and theaters of Paris and Vienna; these historical figures include María Teresa and Margarita María. These chapters reveal a concentrated interest of female playwrights in the Spanish plots and the existence of logistic royal routs that encouraged physical transference of celebrity Spanish dancers and actresses (e.g. Francisca Bezón to the courts of Louis XIV).

3 The second part of the book is invested in the contributions of foreign royal women coming from France, Austria, and Italy to create and perform foreign drama in the royal courts of Madrid that echo the cultural and theatrical practices of Paris and Vienna. In chapter seven, for instance, María Cristina Quintero delves into the lives and the contributions of different Habsburg women in bringing to Madrid their own national identity and cultural practices. What is interesting in this chapter—and recurrent in other chapters as well—is the illustrations of how the queens were both actresses and audiences to the same performances they created, as Quintero indicates: “The most important function of these spectacles was the introduction of the queen to her new subjects, and Margarita would have been the splendidly attired protagonist in this mutable performance” (133). An effective contribution of this group of articles is Ana Fernandez Valbuena’s essay “The *Commedia dell’Arte* in Spain” where she briefly discusses the influence of gender roles on and off the stage. By beginning her study with the importance of the history of the Italian *Commedia dell’Arte*, Valbuena quickly moves on to the development of this theatrical art and its transition into the Spanish market through professional companies, as in the example of the company of Stefanelo Botarga that influenced the Spanish theater of the sixteenth century (114). The highlight of this chapter is the discussion of the controversial gender performance on the Spanish stage; moral objections against women performing forced the Italian companies to use young male actors to play the female role. This gender crossing, moreover, insinuated homosexuality and ambiguity of gender. To solve this issue, a majesty decree (1587)

was needed to allow only the women who were married to actors participating in the same ensemble to perform (118).

4 The essays included in this volume should not be overlooked by teachers, students, and/or scholars interested in the role of women and the play of gender in the early modern period. One of the main strengths of this book is that it offers the readers a map of textual transferences and political cultural practices dominated by women, both fictional and real. The authors and editors of this excellent collection provide contextual, historical introductions and abundant notes that facilitate its comprehension in order to make its content available to a wide range of readers interested in gender and the woman's experience in the theater of the early modern period.

***The Handmaid's Tale* (Hulu, 2017)**

By Kirsten Stoddart, University of Salford, UK

1 In 2017, Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale* garnered 13 Emmy nominations, making it one of the highest performing series for Hulu in terms of award nominations (Miller).

2 This series, based on the 1985 Margaret Atwood novel, resonated deeply with viewers worldwide in 2017. Audiences saw startling similarities to their contemporary world and culture in *The Handmaid's Tale*'s flashback sequences (for example, the Women's March and related protests). The most affecting factors for them were, more often than not, the heartbreaking world view presented by *The Handmaid's Tale*, that seemed all too possible (Reilly). *The Handmaid's Tale* follows a year or so in the life of Offred (Elisabeth Moss), once called June. She is an indentured servant in the new nation of Gilead, once the United States, where an ultra-conservative religious movement has toppled the government and divided citizens into varying categories according to their usefulness and behaviour. In an age of infertility, all women of childbearing age who have previously had children become Handmaids. Their sole responsibility it is to bear the children of their Commander and his wife. Once a month, the household (including all service staff) gather to pray, then the Handmaid is routinely raped by her Commander in a ceremony involving his barren wife, with the intention to conceive a child. In day-to-day lives, Handmaids (or women in general) may not read, learn, discover or create. Once a day they meet an allocated shopping partner (in Offred's case, the former university teacher and married lesbian, Ofglen, played by Alexis Bledel) to visit specific shops to buy produce for their masters.

3 The routine drudgery of this daily re-enactment is one that both Atwood's novel and the 2017 Hulu series convey well. In a world where women, in most locations, take for granted the ability to read, surf the internet, study, write and speak out, the imprisonment and

silence of Offred's reality is affecting. We imagine a world where we could not check our Twitter account or wish a friend a happy birthday via Facebook.

4 However, the updates to the original text are what make this series feel so relevant. In an early episode there is a reference to the dating app, Tinder, which, in 2017, has an estimated 50 million active users (Ward).

5 In Trump's America, with issues of gender and race at the forefront of world attention, it is alarmingly easy to imagine the gentle turning of screws that might lead to domination by the male sex. In fact, Michael Sainato and Chelsea Skojec point out that many comparisons can be drawn between women's lives in the fictional Gilead and real-life Saudi Arabia (Sainato and Skojec).

6 Much of the feminist discourse surrounding *The Handmaid's Tale* has been more about the series' addressing of race rather than gender.

7 In Atwood's original Gilead, white supremacy had taken hold. People of colour were sent to the far-off National Homelands to be enslaved, presumably. The creative team here decided that the 2017 Gilead had another angle: a world in which fertility trumped everything else. Race, sexual orientation, crime. Women with viable uteri were Handmaids and, if they misbehaved, punished rather than removed.

8 Showrunner Bruce Miller shared that they did not want to present a television series that omitted people of colour: "What's the difference between making a TV show about racists and making a racist TV show where you don't hire any actors of color?" he asked (Dockterman). But critics now accuse *The Handmaid's Tale* team of making a series that does not address race appropriately or, indeed, at all.

9 One specific criticism argues that the experiences of the Handmaids as displayed here mirrors almost exactly the experiences of Black women during America's near three hundred years of slavery (Jones). That parallel, however, not referenced here, even though Atwood

herself indicates that her Gilead is modelled heavily on America's history of Slavery (Berlatsky).

10 Showrunners, cast and viewers all agreed (Biddlecombe) that *The Handmaid's Tale* was not a series to binge-watch. It was too heavy, meant to be digested slowly, meditated upon. That is a big call in an age of habitual binge-watching, but this is not a series to be taken lightly. From the violence against women to the regimented rape of Handmaids in the homes of their Commanders, to the execution of LGBTQ+ people and doctors who perform abortions, *The Handmaid's Tale* serves up confronting violence and terror that is extremely affecting. When Ofglen is discovered having an affair with a 'Martha' (a housekeeper), the Martha is brutally lynched in front of a traumatized Ofglen. However, instead of meeting her own death, Ofglen is brought to the hospital. Under general anaesthetic, and with no warning, Ofglen is subjected to medical female genital mutilation, justified by the evil Aunt Lydia (Ann Dowd) with the cold line, "you won't want what you can't have".

11 This series adaptation is conflicting. On the one hand, it feels somehow representative of 2017 America, presenting a future view that seems shockingly possible. Donald Trump's America presents us with a real-world situation in which not only women and LGBTQ+ people but also people of colour and those of non-Christian faiths are increasingly demonized. Given that, there is a sense in which racial and other discriminations are not addressed adequately in this adaptation, or for this point in time. The character of Moira, for example, played excellently by Samira Wiley, conveys a fighter who refuses to accept the status quo, but there is little more that mirrors the activism currently so essential in the present, real world. While the Women's March brought millions together, it was still dominated and claimed by white women. And, while Elisabeth Moss, Alexis Bledel and Madeline Brewer (electric as mentally-ill Janine) are strong actors and do justice to their

written roles, there is a sense of something missing. Race, racism and the overt sense of white supremacy are ignored in this adaptation.

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