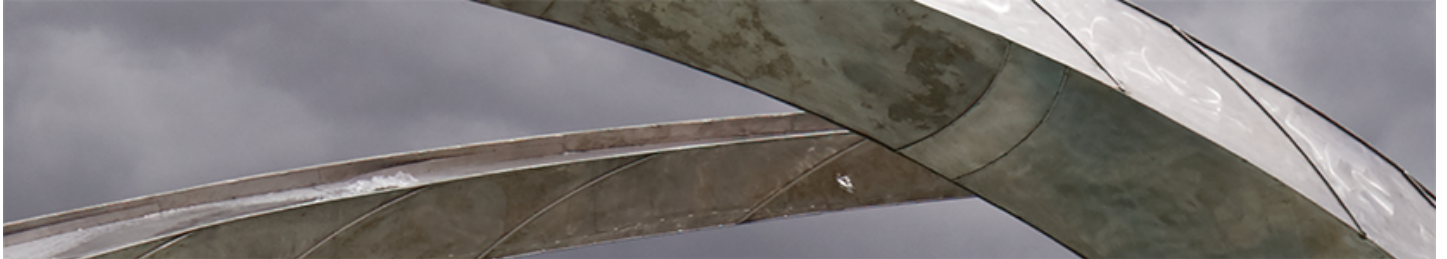


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Rainbowing Down for Straight? How Heteronormativity Secures its Reign

Guest edited by
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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 Frederic Rukes, University of Cologne, Germany

1 In 2019, Stonewall celebrates its 50th anniversary. While rainbow flags and merchandise fill the streets of cities celebrating Pride all over the world, queer experience remains highly ambiguous, its status complicated. Although the commercialization of the LGBTQ* movement points both to a growing awareness of pluralism in public discourses as well as to economy's comprehension of diversity's buying power, it may also represent the mainstream's grasp on what used to be exclusively queer spaces out of necessity: Pride month has just ended and already Boston's approved 'Straight Pride' is lurking. Scheduled for August 31 (Stock), the event exemplifies only a fraction of heteronormativity's ongoing reign¹ over global social structures, but almost symbolically stands for the rigor with which a privileged majority (here, in terms of gender and sexual identity) continues to take the lion's share. Normalized identity and behavior is maintained and only challenged temporally when the 'unusual' seems more profitable.

2 Because the above is a fairly general and figurative attempt to describe this issue's question of heteronormativity's reign—the bowing down of the queer rainbow despite all the progress of the past fifty years—the following papers serve both as an examination of the phenomena and as an intervention. Thus, one article discusses the ambiguity of coming out narratives and thereby offers a concise example of processing sexual identity under heteronormative pressure. The other three articles present queer readings of classic and contemporary storytelling comprising the genres of neo-noir film, comedy-drama television, and the short story. Such queer readings challenge and disrupt conventional and heteronormative readings of written and screen narratives, opening the discourse to a diverging and potentially more progressive input.

3 An adequate introduction to the discussion of the power proceeding from regimes of the 'normal' is Tyler Allen Tennant's "The Quiet Queer: Coming Out & Queer Fabrications". In his essay, Tennant examines how coming out narratives have been coopted and rearticulated in market-friendly terms through infocapitalist algorithmic and platform technologies. He reads "It Gets Better" videos as quasi-sequels to coming out narratives which further obfuscate difference in queer experience and uphold heteronormativity through resignation and indoctrination into the world of 'queer fineness'. In this context he examines

¹ Thank you to my friend and colleague Dr. Dirk Schulz (GeStiK, University of Cologne) for coming up with the title and the concept of this issue.

the revelatory properties of the speech act of coming out as well as the structures demanding such an act, by looking at celebrity queer culture, fandom, and queer icons to interrogate the complexities and consequences of the coming out process.

4 In his article “‘This is the girl’: Queer Nightmares, Fantasy, and Reality in *Mulholland Drive*” Justin Holliday discusses how David Lynch’s film *Mulholland Drive* (2001) offers filmic clichés to deconstruct assumptions about queer identity. Although some critics of the film have suggested that the film upholds heteronormativity, according to Holliday, Lynch unravels the limits of linear space and time to contest a singular reality. Analyzing *Mulholland Drive* via theories of queer temporality, Holliday suggests that a singular, supposedly correct reading of this film’s chronology is undermined. In fact, a queer theoretical perspective shows that, despite the alleged privileging of the heteronormative order, the tropes of neo noir allow the characters to celebrate the possibility of queer desire through the negation of a unitary self.

5 By examining the ways the two protagonists of the Netflix show *Russian Doll* experience gender, madness, and interdependence, Meg Peters argues in “‘Realistically Queer’: Queer Connection and Interdependence in *Russian Doll*” that the series encourages open identities and highlights the importance of relations beyond hetero- or homonormative coupling. While both protagonists seem to fail at gender and at accepting help for their mental distress, their growing ability to connect with their surroundings and with the other characters allows them to heal from their respective traumas. Using queer theory, including understandings of vulnerability, interdependence, and gesture, Peters contends that even though both main characters are seemingly heterosexual, *Russian Doll* is queer in its insistence on queer temporality.

6 “Senselessness, Indeterminacy, and Sexual Ideology in Hemingway’s ‘The Sea Change’” by Sam Post contests many critics’ attempts of providing definite readings of Hemingway’s short story “The Sea Change” by showing that the story’s very evasion of determinacy is central to its thematic and narrative construction. In a detailed linguistic analysis of two of the story’s central conversations, Post argues that, in the process of naming, sense is paired with a normative heterosexual ideology and senselessness with a sexually non-normative ideology. Indeterminacy and paradox, analogous to the senselessness of the two analyzed conversations, accompany the protagonist’s metamorphosis, suggesting that his sea change is one in which he detaches from a heterosexual ideology and, like his counterpart, acquires a sexually non-normative ideology.

7 With different strategies and on different levels, all four articles of this issue of *gender forum* show how notions of indeterminacy and ambiguity that generate possibilities of resistance against heteronormative reign, ordering, and readings and, instead, open possibilities of simultaneity and coexistence of discourses. At the same, the essays disclose how normative structures of essentialism, categorization, and alleged definiteness work towards securing heterosexual ideology and turning the goals of the LGBTQ* movement on its head. Piercing through the pressure of a forced coming out narrative, deconstructing sexual identity through the trope of the cliché, shifting the discourse of queerness from sexuality towards temporality, or reevaluating sexuality on the basis of linguistic indeterminacy can all be understood as attempts to refute the reign of a heteronormative order and are examples of queerness paving its way.

Works Cited

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The Quiet Queer: Coming Out & Queer Fabrications

By Tyler Allen Tennant, Emory University, USA

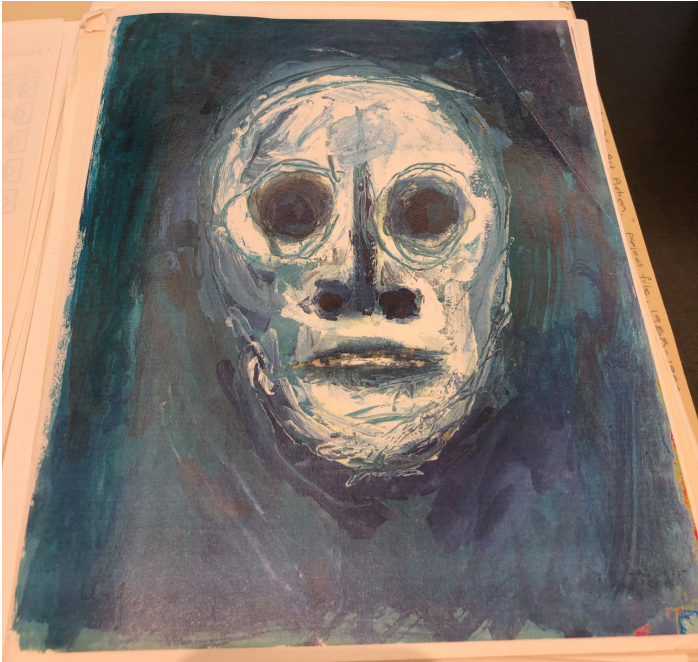


Figure 1 (S.A.M.E.): Bill Paul, afterimage, undated

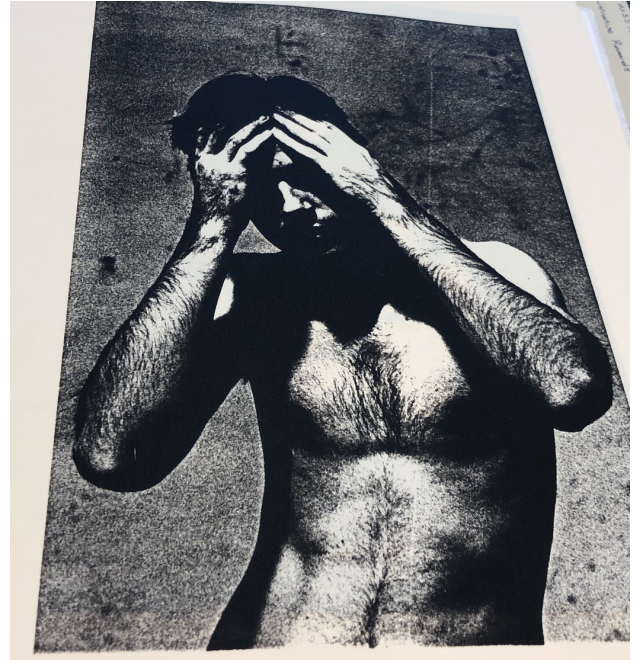


Figure 2 (S.A.M.E.): Bill Paul, unnamed, undated

“The goal of AIDS ART ACTION is to use visual art as a unique form to communicate an idea, an experience, a vision connected to AIDS or to the life of the person battling AIDS. The project will match a visual artist and a PWA, PWARC, or HIV positive person and together they will define the parameters of their collaboration” (S.A.M.E.).

Abstract:

The remnants of bourgeois consciousness maintain a split between the private sphere and public sphere, despite the ongoing mass privatization of all things in what Mark Fisher calls “business ontology” in *Capitalist Realism*. This proliferation of supposed borders between an interior world and an exterior world maintain the “in” and “out” of a conceptual closet from which one can come out. But coming out is not a universal or universalizing part of the queer experience: not throughout the globe, and not even in America. But how is it that somebody is generally not held up as “really queer” unless they’ve come out? Who gets to come out? Who doesn’t have to? Who doesn’t have the privilege to do so? And how does the fact that coming out never really ends insofar as coming out to new colleagues and friends and romantic partners is a perpetual process? Scholars like Jasbir Puar in *Terrorist Assemblages* and Chandan Reddy in *Freedom with Violence* reject the alleged hyper-immediate “outlaw” status of the homosexual subject by lamenting its militaristic deployment and its rearticulation into heterosexual terms, rendering it something palatable to the masses and exceptional only in its banal marketability. Other scholars, like Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner in “Sex in Public”, still uphold the reign of heteronormativity. This article will examine the “magical” and revelatory properties of the speech act of coming out, as well as the structures demanding that those with big profiles come out, by looking at celebrity queer culture, fandom, and queer icons to interrogate why some are expected to come out, ultimately reifying the coming out process. The article will also examine the ways that the coming out process actually supports the reign of heteronormativity by placing regulations on the interpellation of queer identity.

1 Established on October 11th, 1988 to commemorate the Second Annual March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights which happened that same day a year earlier (1987), National Coming Out Day (NCOD) entangled death and visibility with coming out, imbuing it with political significance (“History of Coming Out”). Notably, most of the sties containing information about NCOD all refer back to the *Human Rights Campaign* (HRC) entry on it, meaning its significance and discursive proliferations in other virtual locations are mediated through a human rights discourse. Sometimes known as “The Great March,” the political rally that NCOD commemorates had goals to 1) raise awareness of the AIDS pandemic and to 2) mandate the overturning of the anti-sodomy decision from *Bowers v. Hardwick*, whether or not this history is acknowledged or celebrated (Williams). Significantly enough, the ‘coming out’ video genre on YouTube has increasingly propagated objects on or around NCOD since the latter half of the 2000s (Wong). Additionally, NCOD celebrates this dual mission by institutionalizing coming out – that is, mandated coming out through institutional mediation – and, at least once a year, urging people to do so. NCOD is both an ‘event’ (i.e. having happened for a first time with a beginning and an ending) and an ‘ongoing process’ (i.e. repeatedly celebrated annually as marked on a calendar). As an event, NCOD institutionalized coming out and calcified it as a routine experience within

‘certain’ queer structures of living. As a process, which is a part of the ordinary, it avows coming out as a repeating, compulsory, and asynchronic self-hail, something that never ends, something that ‘never has a final event.’ The logics of NCOD are as follows: encourage people to come out so that the heterosexual majority would learn that statistically they likely knew at least one member of the ‘LGBTQ+ community,’ enmeshing visibility of the community, discernible as a community as such, directly to the stakes of life and death. As Robert Eichberg, co-founder of NCOD said,

Most people think they don’t know anyone gay or lesbian, and in fact everybody does. It is imperative that we come out and let people know who we are and disabuse them of their fears and stereotypes. (qtd. in “Robert” n.p.)

2 Furthermore, as more ‘professionals’ came out, the proliferation of queer epistemologies and queer expertise ensured that queer knowledge structures could enter the discourse. NCOD was founded by a psychologist, Eichberg, and an activist, Jean O’Leary, and their coming together was a symbolic merging of science discourse and queer-cultural ‘minority’ knowledges in their absolute agreement that AIDS was, indeed, a crisis, despite the Reagan administration’s inaction (“National” n.p.). The Second Annual March was the first time that activist group ACT-UP captured widespread media attention and received mainstream coverage (“Gay Rights”), despite a notable discrepancy in reported and estimated numbers of those in attendance, ranging from a quote of 200,000 in *The New York Times* (Williams) to an estimated 750,000 by police (qtd. in Balestrery n.p.). ACT-UP’s theatricality was honed through chants into an attempt at reclaiming “queer”: “We’re Here! We’re Queer! Get Used to It!” (Bronski 220). Their demands, taken together, indicated a desire for legal recognition for specific subjects, to be written into the code of law, to be judged using the paradigm of human rights discourse, and to be subjects deserving of state intervention—to be a citizenship category. As well, NCOD contributed to the *citizenification* of queerness insofar as sexual difference was acknowledged on a state-level, albeit in a limited capacity. To be recognized as a population meant recognition that they were worthy of being ‘known’ and thus ‘studied’ and thus, helped. Indeed, as Eve Sedgwick emphasizes in *Epistemology of the Closet*, the spatial metaphor of the closet as “publicly intelligible signifier for gay-related epistemological issues” is “made available... only by the difference made by the Post-Stonewall gay politics oriented around coming *out* of the closet” (14). Again, NCOD’s original intention to celebrate coming out as a method of securing legal and medical protections cannot be ignored.

3 The central claim is thus: coming out, despite its subcultural and activist-political origins, has been subsumed by late liberal and infocapitalist regimes of intimacy; thus, coming out has lost some of its radical potential—and yet, it still maintains an aura of sacredness for many. This makes a complex ecology for coming out: its sacredness hides its complicity in upholding heteronormativity through legitimizing binary, spatiotemporal oppositions *and yet* allows many the opportunity to claim an identity and find radical queer spaces of intimacy not necessarily beholden to heteronormative structures of living and ways of being. This ambivalence—this Derridean ‘undecidability’—makes coming out worthy of being re-interrogated, and perhaps re-situated into a larger structure of living. Another crucial element that cannot be ignored: gay male-ness was largely the topic of most of the coverage of the Great March, and of many studies into coming out, subsuming and erasing lesbian and other identities under the umbrella of ‘gay’ (Balestrery). This of course begs the question: who is supposed to come out on NCOD? And, who is to come out at all? As what, exactly? NCOD may have institutionalized coming out, but it is not the first or only (or necessarily even most significant) political cooptation of coming out.

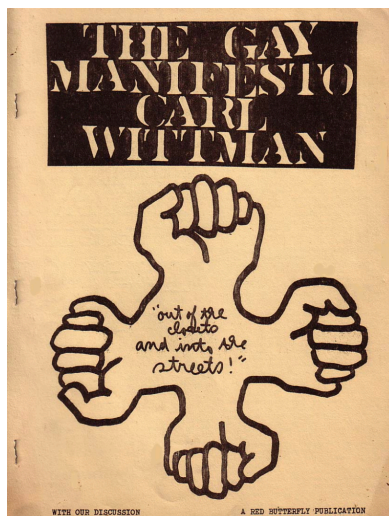


Figure 3 (Wittman): Notice the caption “out of the closets and into the streets”; this is one of the earliest instances of the spatial metaphor of the closet being used. Notably, homosexuality is linked with Communist ideologies in the manifesto, making clear a link between anti-capitalist politics and queer identity.

Come Out, Come Out!

4 In early 1969, coming out was designed as a political imperative by Communist Party member and activist Carl Wittman in San Francisco (Bronski 208, and Figure 3). In New York, a Marxist pamphlet urging gay liberation from Red Butterfly, which was a part of the New York Gay Liberation Front, emerged in manifesto-like aesthetic publication (Figure 4). This was followed by several iterations of active resistance against state intervention – typically the police – in queer spaces, which culminated finally in Stonewall in June of 1969, “less a turning point than a final stimulus” (Bronski 209) and yet still held up as the moment from which “the modern gay liberation movement dates its inauguration” (Sedgwick 14).

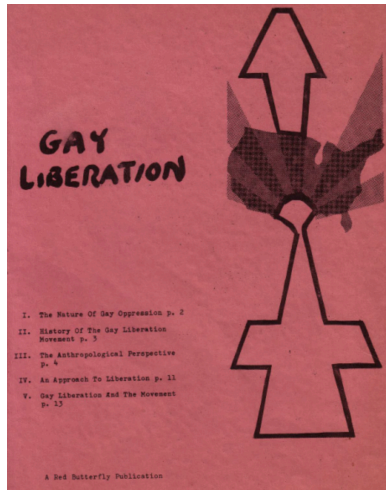


Figure 4 (Red Butterfly): The pamphlet clearly lines out the ways that they *feel* oppressed, translating affect into knowledge, and retroactively creating a shared sense of identity around suffering and survival.

5 Another notably major coming out movement came in 1978 in an effort to rally around defeating the ultimately doomed Proposition 6 in California, which prevented known lesbian or gay people and people “advocating, imposing, encouraging, or promoting ‘homosexuality’” from holding positions as teachers in public schools (Bronski 220). Harvey Milk is typically held up as the martyr for this iteration of coming out qua political movement and, by extension, a symbol for coming out, having famously urged people to do so during his career as a public servant: “Gay brothers and sisters, you must come out” (qtd. In Knapp). In this

way, coming out was not only about reducing “fears and stereotypes” (qtd. In “Robert”), but also was about making legible the “LGBTQ+ community” qua legitimate population as something with definable characteristics, specific demands, and particular health concerns. Another major ‘moment’ in coming out histories

involves the sudden influx of coming out videos uploaded on YouTube in approximately the latter half of the 2000s (Wong).

6 This suggests an interesting entanglement of technology, identity, and public/private spheres, and will be a focus of the latter half of this article. The first half will establish working definitions for key terms, and demonstrate their instability and complex dependence on contextual arrangements of bodies, space, time, and affect. Additionally, the latter half will look at coming out’s different forms: as vernacular expressions, racial components, entanglements with celebrity culture, and virtual embodiments in online spaces to better understand its mode and function in our contemporary moment of America. The article will consider the ways in which coming out has been coopted and rearticulated in market-friendly terms through infocapitalist algorithmic and platform technologies and reads “It Gets Better” videos as quasi-sequels to coming out narratives in a way that further obfuscates difference in queer experience and upholds heteronormativity through resignation and indoctrination into the world of ‘queer fineness.’ The concluding remarks will attempt to build a new paradigmatic infrastructure that looks beyond coming out narratives to the more complex ways that queer lives are lived, survived, and made.

Methodologies: To Stitch a Life

7 This article is invested in close-reading events and non-events as aesthetic objects in order to de-privilege the event as the locus of meaning-making and, instead, also locate significance in the ordinary, mundane, banal ongoingnesses. As such, it is devoted to compiling a discourse about coming out that contains affects, events/non-events, archival material, historical documents, and theory as aesthetic material-discursive texts. The methodological approach utilized is that of a variant of aesthetics, modeled on postcolonial scholar Deepika Bahri's usage of the term, partly taken from Theodor Adorno (Bahri 8); understanding aesthetics as the basic capacity for sensation and perception allows a reading of texts that interrogates the structures and patterns of objects that create particular affective states. Specifically, the article wants to understand the structures of queer living and how to read them in order to determine whether there may be structures specifically constitutive of the queer experience (i.e. universal) or if queerness is more of a fluid, particular, uncatchable thing. The article also wants to read queerness on its aesthetic limits of legibility across transnational contexts. What kind of 'object' is coming out?

8 'Coming Out': Coming out in the contemporary moment, generally speaking, names the moment whereby a person with otherwise non-heteronormative desires names themselves as such to another. This is more or less the cumulative average definition from four cultural sources: medical-institutional discourse via Planned Parenthood ("What's Coming Out?"); the commonsensical public encyclopedia entry via Wikipedia ("Coming out"); the vernacular, colloquial understanding via Urban Dictionary (GayerthanyouHA!); and the homonationalist, human rights discourse via the HRC ("Explore"). This definition, however, does not quite capture its ambivalences and uneven experiential distributions and proliferations of intimacies or affective intensities, so we must look for a better reading. Coming out, to begin is 'aspirational,' as it names the person one wants to become by speaking it. It is not enough to simply move through explicitly gay spaces like specific bars, nightclubs, or bathhouses, for instance, to engage in sexual acts, because coming 'out of the closet' is coming out as a 'kind,' rather than confessing an act.

9 Notably, the kind that a person may come out as may change with each retelling. This indicates an alteration in coming out as the person they intend to be: they may say something like 'I am bisexual' in order to become that identity, in order to initiate themselves into a particular community with its own rites and rituals and aesthetic ways of moving through the world. Troubling this further, there are sometimes conditionals attached to the coming out as such and

such ‘kind of person.’ ‘I am gay, *but I’m only into masculine guys,*’ for instance, they may say, disavowing certain components of the identity with the utterance and indicating a desire to simultaneously enter a particular space of group belonging and also distance themselves from becoming a certain kind of homosexual. Another example: ‘I am lesbian, *but I still want a family,*’ usually spoken as reassurance to family members concerned about reproducing bloodlines, which implicates queerness as somehow antithetical to established kinship systems.

10 Thus, the sonic components of coming out as a speech act are almost ‘transformative,’ and here language and utterance – self-proclamation – take primacy over actions. An ethical analysis of coming out ought to make room for difference, as well as for the aforementioned primacy of speech, and so the starting definition of coming out for this article is as follows: an ongoing, repetitive, and aspirational ritual speech act that, through its utterance, establishes belonging to a specific marginal community based around sexual or gender-based non-heteronormative difference. Notably, this article’s otherwise glaring absences include ‘coming out as disabled’ or ‘coming out as poor,’ as those are beyond the scope of this paper, but the article hopes to gesture towards a continuation of this project that can see to fruition the cross-comparative work linking together the politics of coming out for different marginalized publics. As such, in order to at least make room for contextual difference, this addendum is offered to the above definition: ‘coming out is not universally experienced by all non-heteronormative subjects, nor is it necessarily formally or content-wise similarly experienced by those who do come out, whether once or many times.’

Coming Out Rituals

11 The easiest way to understand the addendum is to defamiliarize coming out as a unique phenomenon and instead view it as a ritual that only some ‘members’ of the ‘community’ observe (‘community’ being always already an unstable term largely denoting the loosely definable aggregation of differing non-heteronormative sexual or gender identities). That is to say: there are some members of the community who have not come out and who do not need to come out to access certain intimacies; those who do come out must continually come out, ritualistically, in some way and at some point, to each new person in their life, directly or indirectly. Ritual is the “determined conducted of the individual in a society expressing a relation to the sacred and profane” (Penner). Coming out is a kind of ritual in which an individual expresses their identity,

orienting them towards a specific relationship with the sacred and profane, located within a sociocultural stratum with explicit majority logics defining what constitutes those two terms. Furthermore, viewing coming out as ritual allows an aesthetic analysis of its particular and heterogenous formalisms as though it were performance (Stephenson 141). Consider: coming out may consist of prepared speeches previously practiced in front of a passive audience, affective intensities, edited videos uploaded to YouTube, and, in some cases, dance (“Mac”). Ultimately, we must reconsider coming out qua ritual: 1) it is simultaneously a single event and an ongoing process and series of events; 2) it is not a universal queer experience, but is seemingly ubiquitous; and 3) it is only a small part of the unique crafting that queer people must do to build a life, and is not always the most significant component of an experienced life (which is to say, there may be significant ritual events, but they are not the primary register structuring experience).

12 Coming out troubles notions of the queer immediately by implying that there is a recognizable marker to tell whether or not someone is ‘really queer’: whether or not they have come out. Additionally, coming out, when viewed as a universal experience, by implication subsumes the diversity of sexual, racial, class-based, affiliation or ability-based difference found within the spectrum of LGBTQ+ into a single oppositional framework of straight vs. non-straight. Indeed, as Sedgwick pulls from Foucault, there is not one but many silences (3). Furthermore, Judith Butler argues that coming out implies a departure from heterosexuality, rendering non-heterosexuals as parodic copies of the ‘original,’ though she does ultimately destabilize this argument (313). ‘Queer’ as a signifier risks subsuming difference in a similar way, so the article’s usage of it is mindful of ethical implications; that is, the instability of the term queer in naming a group that escapes strict boundaries or definitions is recognized, but its strategic rapidity in signaling particular experiences is the aim of its usage within this article. When a ‘queer person coming out’ is said, it is meant to signify a refraction of possibilities, as coming out as a bisexual person is different from coming out as trans, which different from coming out as non-binary or lesbian, etc. There is, said another way, no linear temporal narrative that is applicable to all who come out; instead, coming out operates as a prism, refracting bodies into different directions, who are moving at different velocities and coming into contact with different obstacles. My usage of queer thus indicates an unstable, fluid object, but recognizes the strategic usage of shorthand to hail massive difference that leaves suitable room for that difference. We simultaneously do not want to domestically exoticize the gradations of sexual desire and difference in such a way that

ignores transnational circulations of terms, categories, and identities. That is to say that coming out is not something that everyone has access to, and those who do have access to it experience it in vastly different capacities based on their embodied, intersecting, (il)legible identities.

The Repeating Self-Hail: Event Aesthetics

13 Now that there is a working definition of coming out and other useful terms, the political and material-discursive dimensions of coming out can be explored – the ones that ramify against the interests of queer people. Coming out can radically reconstitute relations between bodies, space, and time, imbuing particular sites with affective intensities in the same way its articulation may be registered as a non-event to the person receiving the coming out: ‘Oh, we knew all along!’ Coming out is not always an event, in that it is never just a referent to a singular Event, because it happens more than once. It is a never-ending process marked by significant and not-so-significant moments. It is, then, more of a repeating self-hail, straddling the generic line between event and non-event. In fact, coming out marks a unique aggregation of place, bodies, affect, and time in relation, reconstituting all with their entanglement and submitting them all to forms of future memory work. Privileging the event as the locus of meaning-making, and seeing coming out as only an event undermines the ways in which it repeatedly occurs and over-determines it as the most significant structuring experience that constitutes a (queer) subject.

14 The spatial registers ‘outside of’ and ‘inside of’ mark queerness as locative; but because nobody is ever ‘out’ to everyone, the queer figure, to borrow Spivak’s usage of the term, is *undecidable*, that is, existing simultaneously on both ends of a polarity, and neither end at once, presence and absence (Spivak 71-73). The queer figure is both ‘present’ (outside of the closet) to some, and ‘absent’ (inside of the closet) to those not explicitly told. Attached to the notion of outside/inside is a measure of liberalist self-acceptance of one’s particular individuality; to be ‘inside of’ the closet is registered as not having fully accepted oneself as such. To be inside of the closet is to be deceitful, a liar, ‘hiding one’s true self.’ To be outside of the closet is to perform self-acceptance. Coming out, then, has been coopted by late liberal institutions and regimes of intimacy as a narrative of rehabilitation from a bad self to a good self, despite the impossibility of achieving full ‘out’-ness. Consider the temporal dimension: to exist as outside of, one must have been inside of at some point; to simply exist outside does not imply ever having been inside, but to be ‘outside of’ a space specifically ties a temporal development to coming out as one has to

have been inside of that space. Therefore, to be out names the presence of a threshold, where at one point one was in the closet. Every out person was once in, that is to say. And every out person is still in to a degree that there are people who do not know about it. That is not to say that they are willingly in the closet, but without the utterance of coming out, one is not necessarily registered as queer. Especially if they pass and thus allow their queerness to fall into an illegible hypopresence for the reading of someone by others.

15 That is to say that every queer person, insofar as every queer person is either still in or was in the closet, is or was deceitful, a liar, and not capable of self-acceptance, 'self-denying.' This rehabilitation narrative marks a linear progression reminiscent of other linear mythologies of always already moving towards perfection, from a place of deceit, dishonesty, self-rejection, to a place of self-acceptance, self-assuredness, honesty, external truth birthed by internal reality, fact. Coming out, as the ritual becomes rearticulated and normalized within the logics of late liberalism, globalization, and the industries and regimes of infocapitalism, thus creates a current and former self-individual. Queerness must be legible in such a way that it is palatable to the masses in order for them to tolerate difference, as there is only just enough room for a little bit of difference. Coming out is no longer necessarily a radical act, but instead is tied to the neoliberal values of self-expression, multiculturalism, and diversity.

16 The locating of otherwise 'boring traumas,' which is a term this article seeks to introduce into the discourse, are those mundanely painful and painfully mundane atrocities, those microcosmic happenings that are neither spectacular nor interesting to others, is a method through which to understand the complicated and complex ways that structures of living are saturated in traumas that appear otherwise-ordinary. They are those series of micro-traumas that add up to an ordinary part of a subject experience: everyone incorrectly and repeatedly mispronouncing a first name; the Pavlovian-conditioning spankings a child receives every time they leave their toys out; the constant confrontation with beach-ready airbrushed bodies during swimsuit season in commercials and magazines advertisements and billboards. They are those things felt in the reverberations between feeling the ordinary and feeling the catastrophic. This repeating self-hail, this constant, perpetual coming out, is a boring trauma: an otherwise-unspectacular happening, an event that occurs so often one becomes inured to it, that it becomes a part of the ordinary, saturating the quotidian. Boring traumas do not imply a need to ignore the 'traumatic event,' but instead asks us to recognize the smaller terrors that build up to do just as much, if not more, damage. Seen

through this lens, coming out as a repeating self-hail is traumatic insofar as there is a compulsory obligation for queer people to reveal themselves, to constantly confess not necessarily a singular act but the self as a ‘kind.’ The person coming out is not just placed into a limiting box, but through heteronormative hegemony is obliged to place themselves in that very box through speaking their identity and rectifying reality for others.

Into the World of Queer Fineness: YouTube & Genrefication

17 Focusing largely on gay male subcultures, historian George Chauncey argues that prior to WWII, coming out was about “coming out *into*” (my emphasis), as opposed to coming out *from*, a larger gay world – specifically, drag balls. Modeled as a parody of the White Anglo Saxon Protestant (WASP) debutante rituals of letting women ‘come out’ to the public world, coming out for gay male subcultures meant entering and accessing a specific queer space, itself an inversion of straight society (Chauncey 28). Originally, the metaphor for coming out was tied to physical movement into a particular site of intimacy, rather than a conceptual movement from inside to outside of a closet-space. Prior to coming out of the closet, however, other metaphors were used: “‘putting their hair up’” or “‘[dropping] hairpins’” (qtd. in Chauncey 27), showing how indicating one’s sexual orientation was originally tied to the body and to appearance. There was no movement of an internal reality through utterance to a spoken, external truth (the speech act of coming out), because the truth was already encoded within a specific customization of one’s physical appearance; indeed, one merely needed to properly ‘read’ the text of the queer body for queerness to be legible.

18 In regards to coming out during and after WWII, Charles Kaiser argues that “the army then acted like a giant centrifuge, creating the largest concentration of gay men inside a single institution in American history” (qtd. in Waxman). For the veterans from WWII migrating back into urban areas, coming out was more about finding community and belonging and intimacy rather than about the very political ends of informing, raising awareness, persuading, convincing. It is with McCarthy, the Cold War, and the hostile anti-Communist political climate of the 1950s in America, culminating in the Lavender Scare, when “outing” (both homosexuals and Communists) was used as a weapon to subject, or at least make vulnerable, certain individuals to state and interpersonal violence (Chauncey 30). The confluence of Communist ideologies with homosexual identities helped set the stage for the sexual liberation efforts of the 1960s and 1970s, imbuing

non-heterosexuality (the then-being-reclaimed “queer”) with political and radical potential, solidifying it as a threat to law and order. With this historical example, it is worth also emphasizing how coming out is complicated by the question of voluntariness, and whether one gets to come out (self-make) or if they are outed (other-made).

19 Is it ‘good’ or ‘bad’ to come out now? Some may regard it as a moral imperative, and others, a capitalist enterprise. Is it possible to ‘come out for capital’? Consider the problem posed by Foucault:

The question of knowing who we are sexually should no longer be posed. It is not then a question of affirming one’s sexual identity, but of refusing to allow sexuality as well as the different forms of sexuality the right to identify you. The obligation to identify oneself through and by a given type of sexuality must be refused (*Wrong-Doing*).

Foucault’s trepidations are furthered in his genealogical enterprise of determining sexuality’s contextual unfoldings (*History of Sexuality*). Indeed, he does not attribute the same kind of power to the sexual liberation efforts of politicizing coming out because of his assertions that sexuality has always already been a function of power. Tying it so directly to identity imposes and maintains cultural hierarchical thinking. Jasbir Puar, (at least implicitly) seems to be arguing against the kinds of claims that Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner make in the article “Sex in Public,” insofar as the U.S. is seeing the ascendancy of a national homosexuality that collectively, with heteronormative national forms, contributes to the War on Terror. Puar rejects the alleged ‘outlaw’ status of the homosexual subject because of the presence of gay subjects, themselves targets of marketing ventures, that are complicit in heterosexual projects of nation-building (*Terrorist Assemblages*). Indeed, Chandan Reddy makes a similar claim in *Freedom with Violence*: the legally encoded protection of LGBTQ+ identifying peoples was tied to a defense spending bill, inextricably and irrevocably linking together queerness with militarism in legal code and the committed national protection of individualism (Reddy 4-5). We can similarly see a series of ambivalences in the military trans ban proposed; in order to achieve ‘equality,’ queer subjects must protest for the right to engage in warfare. Berlant and Warner, taking a more spatial and affective approach than Puar and Reddy, who focus more on human rights discourse, however, gesture towards the idea that through zoning regulations heteronormativity is maintained through territory-making and mapping (Berlant, and Warner). That is, to take all three together, heteronormativity upholds its reign through literally taking up space and yet making a marginal amount of room for (some) kinds of queerness so long as it can be used to nationalist, and heterosexist, ends.

20 The earlier parts of this article dissected coming out's spatiotemporal ramifications to suggest that it is not necessarily a politically-motivated act, regardless of some of its very politically-oriented historical emergences. Additionally, the article has attempted to demonstrate how coming out refracts queerness into a heterogeneous mass of hyperdivisible bodies while at the same time subsuming difference, which, when taken with the former point, leads to the following claim: an analysis of the aesthetic components of coming out must always take into account its contextual unfolding as a coopted tool. That is to say, coming out 'in some ways' provides a limited, pessimistic view of queerness, found in dishonesty, self-rejection, and absence that only serves to reproduce neoliberal narratives of rehabilitated self-acceptance, privileging and ultimately reifying the 'individual' as the locus of personal responsibility in a world "operating by Thatcher-esque post-social logics" (Rodríguez Acosta, and Tennant). The commodification (and subsequent genrefication) of coming out narratives, recognized as profit-making products that are in demand for specific audiences, is another instance of infocapitalist subsumption: the taking of a radical act and rearticulating it in market-friendly terms to turn a quick profit. 'Coming out,' as a method that contributes to categorization processes and tagging as particular consumer categories, means coming out as a particular kind of 'buyer'; studies have been conducted and analyzed on the buying power of the LGBTQ+ community through companies like Bloomberg, revealing how the community is hailed as a market category in contemporary times (Green). This implicates coming out's secondary function as opening up new markets and new kinds of buyers.

21 Historian Blaine J. Branchik provides a history of the gay (white, male) market segment, and notes that in pre-1941 America, the conjuncture of urbanization and the Industrial Revolution led to gay migration to cities and other urban areas and, as Branchik notes, for the most part, any advertising to the gay segment was inadvertent. They were not yet legible as consumer categories; this changed in the period between 1941 and 1970. Gay-owned businesses, the territorialization of concentrated geographical zones where large swaths of the gay population converged and gathered and lived within, and publications needing advertisers all contributed to new economic activities oriented towards sexual difference (Branchik 3). The third period (from 1970 to the present) is a period of integration, where sellers are now devoted to "proactive mainstream targeting," which overlaps with "fear of boycotts," ramifying across industrial marketing ventures. This proactive targeting requires "studies completed on size and wealth of market," like the aforementioned buying power studies (3).

22 “Omnipresent surveillance technologies and performance assessment regimes” (Rodríguez Acosta, and Tennant) and algorithms accumulate data that construct profiles of online users built through behavioral tracking and data monitoring. With YouTube videos featuring coming out narratives marked and tagged as ‘queer products’ for search engine optimization purposes, searching for and watching a particular video can ‘ping’ the user as a particular kind of user. In this way, the act of virtual movement supplanting the speech act, one ‘comes out’ through their interaction with particular online queer objects and virtual sites of intimacy in a way. That said, imagine a ‘questioning’ teenager living in a rural area with limited access to queer resources seeking guidance and community by watching coming out narratives on YouTube when their parents aren’t home; they will be tracked and targeted as queer, perhaps even before coming out themselves. Platform infocapitalism interpellates them as queer through virtual movements and economic activities, extending the identity of queerness into the realm of consumerism and queer markets (that to be queer means to be statistically likely to buy this or that product). The troubling implications are of course that infocapitalism can predict and thus ‘know’ before a yet-to-come-out queer person may know about themselves. By contributing to networks of buyer-creation, coming out also supports the reign of heteronormativity by proliferating buyer-bodies, whose complicity in maintaining hegemonic market structures supports hierarchies already in place. By conditioning queerness as a consumer category, in the way that most identity categories are subsumed into ‘target markets’ and ‘economic populations,’ its existence is tied specifically to economic activity, capturing queerness.

23 One of the ways in which celebrities come out, or at least exploit their queerness, is through “It Gets Better” videos, which are generally monologues by people announcing not only their non-heteronormativity (coming out) but also providing hope to those currently in pain that life allegedly ‘gets better’ than it was when, say, one was being bullied in high school. Puar’s interrogation of the efficacy and aesthetics of “It Gets Better” videos in *The Right to Maim* illustrates an alarming trend: a world of otherwise-queer resignation. The video rests on a temporal comparison and continuity: things will be better than they once were, the logic goes, which is itself a repetition of linear progress narratives. It is nothing but audacity to display such disaffection towards present suffering by undermining its urgency and instead foregrounding the alleged potentiality of, say, upward mobility, itself a recitation of the American Dream just translated into queer vernacular and a reification of capitalism, neoliberalism, and the present socioeconomic structures of living.

Considering the cataclysmic threshold that climate change puts us within, it would be perhaps too easy to argue about the ways in which it is not, in fact, getting better. The videos, frustratingly, ignore the ways that it may not even get better for people with intersecting marginal identities, ignoring and erasing processes of racialization, hypervisibility, gender expression, and so on. “It Gets Better” videos, to a more troubling extent, could arguably be said to be about recruiting queer representatives to become complicit in heteronormative power dynamics and structures by the very act of telling others that they too should resign themselves to the conditions of their world. Is it about resignation, about being *just fine*. If ‘coming out’ is the process whereby one becomes one what says one is, then saying ‘it gets better’ is the process whereby one can become fully initiated into the realm of heteronormativity.

Conclusions: Queer Fabrications

24 Perhaps the most damning crime of coming out is in its attempt to capture desire, something no object can fully contain, and articulate it as a solidified identity. Coming out is about expressing something that simply cannot be fixed, that escapes whenever one speaks it. As such, its legitimacy as the primary marker of one’s queer identity – whether they have come out or not – should be, and here this article says it is, in crisis. It is not the primary means of self-actualization for queer people, nor is it available to every queer person, nor does it ever end. Instead, this article proposes that we view coming out as a smaller ritual in a greater process, of a smaller connection in larger queer structures of living. Returning to NCOD (est. 1988) and the “Great March” (1987), the material-discursive and symbolic significance of the quilt cannot be understated. The AIDS Quilt was conceived in 1985 by activist Cleve Jones in San Francisco; following the assassination of Harvey Milk and George Moscone, an event was put together where placards displayed the names of those lost to AIDS and, visually, from afar, the placards together apparently looked like a patchwork quilt (“The AIDS Memorial”). Afterwards, a great quilt was stitched and used during the Second Annual March. The quilt itself displayed the names of those lost to AIDS, a visual entanglement of lives metonymically represented, and established hypermediate connections between previously disparate and disconnected lives.

25 This is what we may now call, and what I call, *queer fabrications*, because piecing a life together from disparate, disconnected parts involves a kind of stitching together of things that may not make sense together but are enmeshed regardless; formally, the quilt allows room for visual

asymmetry, for contradiction in image and representation, for potential to ever-expand. Queer fabrications names the creation of such a life-quilt, the aggregation of figural devices, and allows room to acknowledge coming out as a possible part of the quilt, as still sacred to some, but not universally stitched into everyone's quilt. It involves the very difficult task of piecing together a life whose desires in many ways are non-represented intimacies, whose desired relationship kinds have not many models to act as foundational knowledges. It involves processes of remembering lineages, of commemoration, of piecing together histories unknown into histories known, of weaving life and death and lost knowledges and experiences into a lived archive, messy it may be (Manalansan). It involves processes like disidentification, which is for José Esteban Muñoz a third approach to re-code ideology and strategically repurpose it for queer needs. If coming out is changing your interested in status on Facebook, then queer fabrications is building a dream-board for your life on Pinterest. Indeed, queer fabrications leaves room for difference, and offers a challenge to the idea that every queer person is somehow 'parody' or 'copy' of heterosexuality (Butler 313).

26 But it is not without intervention. There are those who say that the quilt ought to look a certain way. There are certain mediations that queer people must live through in order to survive, like through various private and public institutions and regimes of intimacy or how PrEP has now created a medical mediator for sexual relations (this article is not arguing that PrEP is bad, obviously, merely that queer relationships are in some ways intervened in by a state industry). Perhaps it wouldn't be a step too far to posit a metaphorical collaboration between queerness and the myth of Arachne, that to be queer is to be a quilter, who pieces together truths and narratives and bits and pieces about the pleasures and terrors of being and becoming queer. To be queer is to have a quilt destroyed, just like Arachne, by an authority enraged at the embodied defiance of majority cultural logics and jealous of talent and the kinds of epistemologies and perspectives that can come from being queer; indeed, jealous of the kinds of pleasures and joys that can only come from queer intimacies.

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“This is the girl”:

Queer Nightmares, Fantasy, and Reality in *Mulholland Drive*

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Abstract:

The article discusses how David Lynch’s film *Mulholland Drive* (2001) offers many filmic clichés to deconstruct assumptions about queer identity. Although some critics of the film have suggested that the film upholds heteronormativity, Lynch unravels the limits of linear space and time to contest a singular reality. Analyzing *Mulholland Drive* via theories of queer temporality will suggest that a singular, supposedly correct reading of this film’s chronology may not be easily determined. In fact, approaching this film from a queer theoretical perspective offers the opportunity to show that, despite the alleged privileging of the heteronormative order, the tropes of neo noir allow the characters to celebrate the possibility of queer desire through the negation of a unitary self.

1 “We don’t stop here,” says Rita, played by Laura Elena Harring, in the opening line of *Mulholland Drive* (2001). This scene offers a surreal dissection of time: as the men in the front seat are about to murder her, joyriding teenagers hit the car, leaving her the only known survivor and an amnesiac. The trope of amnesia—featured prominently in lowbrow entertainment like soap operas and made-for-TV movies—becomes a prominent signifier regarding David Lynch’s intertextual practice with genre. This approach creates a space for him to play with concepts like a convoluted diegesis mediated through clichés. As Frida Beckman posits, “Lynch overtly invites Hollywood clichés to fill new functions in an eccentric universe that thereby becomes simultaneously very familiar and very strange” (31). Although many of the events and character types in *Mulholland Drive* are allusions to tropes in films, particularly in noir, these characters are more than just carbon copies of characters from past films. Lynch offers a space for these complex, mysterious characters to experience love and tragedy. Their experience overlap times and spaces, blending such tropes, often found in lowbrow entertainment with highbrow ontological exercises—namely, a seemingly impossible narrative structure that resists coherence. In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam borrows Stuart Hall’s concept of “low theory” to explain that this way of thinking “makes its peace with the possibility that alternatives dwell in the murky waters of a counterintuitive, often impossibly dark and negative realm of critique and refusal” (2). Solving the mystery without equivocation is not the point of the film; rather, the audience should view Lynch’s film as a way to critique aesthetic

attempts “to disengage the high from the low” to use a phrase from Kriss Ravetto’s analysis of neo noir (210).

2 Lynch’s film reveals that in a culture saturated with popular allusions, high and low art may be integrated to contest boundaries. *Mulholland Drive* critiques the restrictions of desire and shows alternative possibilities for people, especially queer people, to exist. Rita seems to become psychologically untethered to the past, although she intuitively avoids police and makes her way to an apartment of a supposed stranger named Betty, played by Naomi Watts. Betty, who has just arrived in Hollywood to fulfill her dream as an actor, seems so hopeful and willing to do anything to obtain a role, yet she initially appears to be a stereotype to counteract the dark, mysterious woman: blonde, young, and innocent, or to put it succinctly, an ingénue. Instead of calling the police, Betty decides to help Rita recover her memory, leading the two women to develop a bond that surpasses friendship and even romance. Their relationship becomes queer not only because of their physical desire for one another but also because of their need to unravel the mystery whose strangeness becomes attached to their bodies, as emphasized by the growing erotic tension between them that culminates in a sexual encounter. While the characters’ motivations and connections may appear unknowable, the audience can only begin to interpret the mystery by rejecting this dreamlike truth as a unitary, logical force. Rather, freedom in *Mulholland Drive* is based on the making and un-making of the self by deconstructing temporal boundaries to find different lives (or at least ways of living), even if such an existence does not cohere into a unitary identity.

3 Because *Mulholland Drive* features a narrative pattern that rejects linearity, my reading will be based on theories of queer temporality, which refute normative chronology (or linear patterns of time) in favor of promoting new ways of existing. Halberstam, who originally discussed this concept in *In a Queer Time and Place*, explains, “‘Queer time’ is a term for those specific models of temporality that emerge within postmodernism once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance” (6). Therefore, Halberstam’s earlier work on queer time facilitates later work on low theory to show how queer people may not always adhere to heteronormative structures, such as marriage, childrearing, and monogamy (although rejection of such practices is not limited to LGBTQ people). The queering of time results from opposing what Elizabeth Freeman refers to as “chrononormativity, or the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum

productivity” (3). Freeman’s work centers on the idea of time “binding,” emphasizing, “naked flesh is bound into socially meaningful embodiment through temporal regulation” (3). The queer body may twist time and point the narrative in multiple temporal paths; thus, *Mulholland Drive* opens up the possibilities of different interpretations that may be logically opposed to one another. This reading, which resists normative temporal structures, will evince the lesbian desire of Watts and Harring’s characters as more than just self-reflexive or illusory. *Mulholland Drive* is particularly transgressive as a film that engages in tropes (like the femme fatale and the ingénue) popularized during the Hays-Code era of Hollywood, which functioned as “a solution to the ways movies lower Americans’ moral mass resistance,” such as promoting forms of supposed sexual deviance, which include but are not limited to portrayals of homosexuality (Tratner 58).

4 Lynch’s film refutes chrononormativity by offering a mystery with few clues and two disjunctive narratives. In addition to the search for Rita’s identity, Adam Kesher, played by Justin Theroux, is a director of a film, but his life soon turns to shambles when he refuses to heed the exhortation to cast an actor named Camilla. In other words, he refuses to accept that “this is the girl,” a repeated line that eventually takes on various meanings and underscores the possibility of slippery significations of what language means in this dreamlike world. These two narratives move back and forth, suggesting that they must be related. However, none of the characters meet until more than halfway through the film, suggesting that Lynch refuses the regulation of time in the name of productivity. Instead, he chooses a more ludic approach to add to the mystery, which facilitates the failure of narrative coherence.

5 Amidst this narrative dissonance, the film is hard to classify, and this combination underscores the vacillation between cinematic familiarity and strangeness. The film hybridizes various forms of lowbrow entertainment: comedy, horror, thriller, the Western, drama, romance, musical, and noir in order to uphold what many viewers consider an extended fantasy. Critic Debra Shostak argues that implementing so many tropes from different popular genres gives the film a working lexicon, claiming, “The multifarious fantasies that are the customary material of Hollywood illusions—the clichés of the genre film, for example—allow us compensations for the impossible real.” This symbolic presentation of allusion as illusion allows Betty, along with the audience, to find comfort in what is familiar even as this boundary is pushed further from the traditional reality of most mainstream films. Offering a singular, linear, and easily accepted true

path of Betty's life may in fact be impossible, as scenes in the final act of the film show, and exploring the narrative's layers in terms of multiple temporal paths will emphasize the overlapping of fantasy and reality.

6 The film engages with the surreal but often is grounded by the language of cliché, which may be the most fitting language to compensate for the incommensurability of fantasy and reality, as mediated through cinema. Lynch even presents this citationality to cliché in obvious ways, such as when Betty convinces Rita that she can make an anonymous call from a payphone to find out if there was an accident on Mulholland Drive. Betty says, "Let's check the police report. It'll be just like in the movies." This metafictional moment accumulates a surreal quality not only because Betty makes a statement about the movies within the movie, but also because Rita, the mystery woman, wants to avoid the police as if she intuitively knows she is in some sort of extralegal trouble. On the surface, Rita appears to be the femme fatale as she drags Betty into her problems, yet as with most of Lynch's films, the narrative is more obscure than the well-known if occasionally narratively complex twists in noir films that audiences may be familiar with. Furthermore, unlike many other films in noir, the goal is not to discover the mystery. For instance, Rita has thousands of dollars in her purse, but the audience never learns for certain why. Instead, the focus often turns to the twists and turns of the characters' paths, emphasizing the ineluctability to know a unitary truth behind the mystery.

7 Furthermore, this juxtaposition of strange incidents and cliché diction reflects the centrality of cinema within cultural consciousness. Jean Baudrillard posits, "[W]hat you are presented with in the studios is the degeneration of the cinematographic illusion, its mockery, just as what is offered in Disneyland is a parody of the world of imagination...Ghost towns, ghost people" (58). This sense of spectrality—of some trace—suggests although language, cliché or otherwise, cannot fully express characters' motivations, cinema holds some key to exploring these motivations through images, however peculiar they may seem. Perhaps the most telling instance of this metafictional allusiveness to the film as film occurs after a scene of Kesher meeting a character known as the Cowboy who tells him he will say to the executives, "This is the girl," in effect casting Camilla, although he has only seen her headshot thus far. Lynch never fully resolves why this "girl" must be the actor, instead linking clues that may defy the conventional logic of propelling a straightforward chronological narrative or divulging the incontestable identities of characters. Still, *Mulholland Drive* creates patterns based on such

clues that add to the mystery, effectively couching it within the realm of noir, while also maintaining a queer resistance to conclusive explanations or linear timelines.

8 Immediately after the scene with Kesher, the next scene cuts jarringly to reveal Betty shouting at Rita, “I hate you. I hate us both.” Seconds later the camera pans to show that the two women are reading a script for a role that Betty wants, which ends with both women breaking up into uncontrollable laughter as Betty holds a knife. In the following scene, Betty is at a studio doing the real audition. Her costar, a man about twice her age and named Woody (a name that offers a space for a juvenile phallic joke, considering the scene), says they should “play it close...just like in the movies,” echoing Betty’s comment during the payphone scene. Between the two women, the scene appears comical, but with Woody, the scene becomes devious and uncomfortable. Betty readily takes charge and assumes the role of femme fatale, speaking in a sultry voice, grabbing Woody’s hand, putting it on her buttocks, and kissing him. She so easily creates this new noir interpretation for the role, as opposed to the maudlin interpretation reminiscent of a soap opera in the previous scene. Consequently, the audience can infer two things about Betty: she may only be playing the role of ingénue with Rita, and she may find it currently impossible to acknowledge her lesbian feelings.

9 Displacing this erotic energy onto a man whom she does not care about suggests that Betty knows how to perform and assume different identities; this performance of the self speaks to her desires, both conscious and subconscious, which are mediated through social constructs, including the tropes of films. This performance, made possible through tropes like the ingénue and the femme fatale (or more broadly the dichotomy of the supposedly good, innocent woman and the bad, devious woman), is not merely personal fantasy. Even for audiences unfamiliar with film noir, such identities as good and bad characters are reinscribed in cinema that audiences have viewed for decades, which underscores how the social realm shapes perceptions of identity. According to Derrida, whether speech is private or public, it is already purloined from the subject; in order to signify, this “working lexicon” (to reiterate Shostak’s term) must come from outside the subject. Derrida explores how “Difference,” which he cites as duplicity, “simultaneously opens and conceals truth, and in fact distinguishes nothing—the invisible accomplice of all speech—is furtive power itself” (194). Betty’s different interpretations of the same role are furtive, for she has learned how to perform these roles through careful social inscription. Hence, the differences cannot reveal to the audience who the true Betty may be. The

juxtaposition of these conflicting roles demonstrates this concealment, suggesting that a unitary true self may not exist outside social performativity, which is learned throughout an individual's life and therefore more complex than a performance at an audition.

10 This bending of narrative may make even less sense unless the film is considered as part of the cinematic landscape and America itself. By alluding to tropes from so many genres in addition to including scenes on a film set, Lynch exposes the ways that the often elusive, illusive American Dream is represented as both the goal of the conscious self and the “dreams” of subconscious motivation. In his book *America*, Baudrillard writes, “When I speak of the American ‘way of life,’ I do so to emphasize its utopian nature, its mythic banality, its dream quality, and its grandeur,” naming Los Angeles, the setting of Lynch’s film, as one of the locales that epitomize such qualities (103). Although Baudrillard also emphasizes the blurring of dream and reality earlier in his book *America*, the dream, or perhaps myth, of achievement, particularly achievement in Hollywood, saturates Americans’ cultural consciousness.

11 The shifting of Betty’s roles not only foreshadows the strange narrative turns toward the end of the film but also reflects the way Lynch works within the neo noir framework even as he stretches it to its limit by showing characters whose actions may seem familiar to audiences based on other noir films while also rejecting a linear or even fully resolvable narrative. Jerold J. Abrams contends that in neo noir, “one self is always ahead, and the other is always behind. And this is precisely why the idea of time is so very important to the structure of all neo-noir” (10). The past and the future always already seem ungraspable, and therefore, a coherent identity becomes difficult, if not impossible, for Betty in particular to maintain. Furthermore, the film’s ability to play with time reveals its queerness. According to Heather Love, queer people may be temporally “backward”: “[E]ven when they provoke fears about the future, they somehow also recall the past” (6). As Betty attempts to live in the present, she is caught in disjunctive narratives that do not seem to fully reconcile with one another. Moreover, her lesbian desire for Rita is anti-chrononormative for a film that features Kesher’s film about a saccharine 1960s biopic of the fictional singer Sylvia North, a film that appears to focus on straightness, both in terms of heterosexuality and a straightforward narrative.

12 Betty’s desire to help Rita solely seems based on identifying with the ingénue cliché because she fulfills this character type so well. Later, however, her lesbian desire for Rita becomes ostensible, and their interactions acquire a more surreal quality that extends beyond the

original innocent role Betty fits in. In her article about *Mulholland Drive*, Jennifer A. Hudson affirms that Betty's subconscious motivations cause her to "reverse coherence" and that the film depicts "the language of dreams...which resists the order of signification" (19). An audience familiar with the different genres Lynch integrates likely knows that the film traipses through various cinematic tropes, which juxtapose the obscure meanings in some of the scenes that are revealed only later if at all. In contrast, Betty, so caught up in her desire to realize her dreams, remains unaware that she seems to be living in a cinematic pastiche. This lack of awareness allows Betty and other characters to experience scenes that do not have always clear signification as if they are living in a dream world wherein the pieces may work together, but the lack of linearity indicates that the narrative may not necessarily form into a unitary whole. Furthermore, the concept of dreaming works in terms of developing a goal. Betty, who moves to California to become a movie star, has fallen for what takes precedence in American culture: "*the passion for images*, and the immanence of desire in the image" (Baudrillard 59; original emphasis). Her language lives in the images of film genres she knows, and that in fact, Lynch would expect his viewers to know. Consequently, the audience can begin to make meaning out of these familiar tropes while also discovering that a single comprehensible meaning may be unattainable because these signs have become detached from linear coherence.

13 This desire for the image even affects *Mulholland Drive* outside the narrative world itself. David Lynch has what may seem an unorthodox method when casting actors because most actors do not have a traditional audition for roles in his films. Casting director Johanna Ray explains in an interview Lynch's preferred casting method: "That's how he [Lynch] picked most of the actors for *Mulholland Drive*—out of a photo album." In a different interview, Naomi Watts claims that Lynch talks to his potential actors, creating a dialogue based on intuition: "He wants to tap into your gut too because I feel like there's more freedom if that's what's leading you than thoughts in the head" (Lynch and Watts). Watts's experience reaffirms the role of dream logic, a matrix of feelings that seems to defy the conventional restrictions of language, including the reductive need to label clear identities or characters' motivations and reveal a unitary meaning of all details in the film. Thus, even the creation of this film rejects the normative practice of traditional auditions and instead focuses on the way fantasy and reality overlap, reinforcing the queerness of the film as Lynch makes decisions based on headshots similar to what happens in the film when the "girl" Camilla is designated as the one who must have the role.

14 In *Mulholland Drive*, Watts's character consistently rejects heterosexual possibility, instead following queer temporalities. After the uncomfortable audition with Woody, a casting agent takes Betty to Adam Kesher's film set, and the two separate narratives finally converge. Betty and Kesher's eyes meet in perhaps the greatest cliché of cinema to underscore heterosexual desire as the default position; however, Betty then runs away, telling the casting director she has to meet her friend. While lesbian desire has remained latent so far, this scene is not a case of a missed romantic connection. Rather, Betty running away signifies her choice of Rita over Kesher, even if she currently can only situate that desire within the language of friendship. Having the two almost meet acts as a rejection of the heteronormative script wherein the leading male and female characters must eventually fall in love. Because Kesher is filming *The Sylvia North Story*, a 1960s musical that plays on ersatz nostalgia, Betty running away enables an even greater freedom from a filmic cliché: she rejects the Hays Code-era heterosexism that Kesher's film likely would portray.

15 Still, the narrative only pretends to have achieved coherence. Betty and Rita go to find a woman named Diane Selwyn and discover that she is dead. Rita screams in horror while Betty tries to cover her mouth so that no one will know they have broken into the apartment. This scene defies linguistic signification as the mystery becomes more gruesome and contrasts with the time of supposed chrononormative safety on the film set. Afterward, Betty and Rita consummate their relationship, and Betty tells Rita she is in love with her, which pushes the false safety of the ostensibly clean-cut, wholesome, and heteronormative narrative world of *The Sylvia North Story* even farther away, both in terms of the chronology of the film and in the sex between these two women.

16 Afterward, Rita repeats the word "silencio" in her sleep as if she is undergoing a persistent nightmare, which may foreshadow the nightmarish reality the two women are about to enter when Rita asks Betty to go with her to Club Silencio. According to Hudson, "Club Silencio acts as a liaison between the worlds presented in *Mulholland Drive*...Club Silencio is the 'no place' filled with contradictions, where things both are and are not" (23). A magician opens the show by assuring the audience in Spanish, "*No hay banda*" ("There is no band."). After disappearing in smoke, a singer, known as La Llorona de Los Angeles, comes onstage and performs a Spanish version of Roy Orbison's "Crying." Betty and Rita hold hands and openly weep. This is the first time they have touched one another in public, creating a queer space that

seems to exist outside the restrictive world of chrononormative and heteronormative regulation of fantasy. Club Silencio allows everyone there to revel in the illusion of a live performance; however, the performance is so emotional that the characters treat the illusion as reality. The two women can finally be together in public and express themselves however they wish because this space does not require them to respond within the linguistic realm but rather just to be. In other words, while watching La Llorona in this liminal space, Betty and Rita can express the pain and beauty of living, including living as queer women in a heterosexist world, just by touching one another, expressing their emotional reactions freely, and moving away from the linguistic clichés from earlier in the film. At the end of the performance, though, La Llorona collapses. The vocal recording continues, reminding everyone this performance is all an illusion, which functions as yet another allusion to lowbrow culture in the form of a popular song, showing how the high and the low can blend to contest social assumptions of unitary identity.

17 This shattering of illusion enacts a major shift in the narrative. At the end of this performance, Betty discovers a blue box in her purse, and she and Rita return to solve the mystery. The blue key found in Rita's purse does seem to fit, but now Betty has disappeared. As Rita unlocks the box, the camera pans into darkness to reveal a new world. Betty is not Betty; *she* is Diane Selwyn, the woman whose body is found earlier in the film. No longer is she the ingénue but rather a rude, disheveled woman who wishes to hold on to her fantasies. This scene exposes the film's anti-linearity. Because the rejection of a linear or cohesive narrative is undeniable, Haring metaphorically has revealed the truth in the event of opening the box. Derrida cautiously uses the term "event" to show "[i]ts exterior form would be that of a *rupture* and redoubling" (278). Although Diane (Naomi Watts) cannot exist outside the narrative space of the film itself, through this event, Lynch deconstructs, even "ruptures" the narrative he has crafted so carefully and possibly has committed duplicity to express this difference in Watts's characters. As a result, the audience may not only question the verity of Watts as Betty but also the reality she has created around her and even the Diane character as well.

18 The new Diane so desperately wishes to maintain her fantasy that she imagines Camilla (now Laura Haring) appearing. Diane attempts to force Camilla to have sex but is really just alone as she masturbates in misery. In her seminal essay, "Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl," Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick explains the radical possibilities of masturbation: "Because it escapes both the narrative of reproduction and (when practiced solo) even the creation of any

interpersonal trace, it seems to have an affinity with amnesia, repetition or the repetition-compulsion, and ahistorical or history-rupturing rhetorics of sublimity” (820). Diane’s masturbatory experience appears to “rupture” the boundaries of her alleged fantasy: this queer temporality briefly returns her to an erotic time with Camilla, whether real or fictional (Derrida 278).

19 However, this return cannot be stable because this fantasy shatters when Camilla exhorts Diane to stop, juxtaposing a prior scene of rupture—finding Diane’s corpse—now that language forces Diane to attach specific meanings to this failed relationship. In other words, there is not sublimity for Diane but rather the dread within her mind and her body that even masturbation cannot protect her from herself now. This example of lesbian desire opposes the tenderness of the previous sex scene, as contrived as it may be, and its very crassness returns the audience to the darker side of noir. It is important to note that Lynch’s dream logic does not privilege one type of Watts’s experiences over the other; instead, the seemingly contrived love scene between Betty and Rita and the crass masturbation scene featuring Diane work together to underscore the slippage of identities.

20 Furthermore, the heteronormative script has been flipped along with another significant identity. Because Rita is now Camilla, she is the girl who must be cast in Keshner’s film. On the film set, where Diane appears to have a small role, Camilla asks her to stay on set while everyone else leaves as Keshner becomes more deeply involved with his film and shows the male lead how to romance Camilla’s character. The rejection of compulsory heterosexual clichés from earlier is now contrasted with the rejection of the lesbian. Shostak claims that despite the beauty of the original sex scene between the two women, which she interprets as mere fantasy, “[t]he film seems...to pass narrative judgment,” citing Diane’s “excessive lesbian desire.” However, lesbian desire is always already excessive, especially on a film set that promotes a limited script of heteronormative sexual desire.

21 If Watts as Diane is the real self and Betty is only a construction of her mind, then the first hour and fifty minutes of the film have only been Diane’s fantasy. Notably, having sex with Rita, in other words attaining her dream, catalyzes the narrative arc in which Diane must open herself up to the truth: she cannot be the good person she wants to be. Such a realization suggests that maybe Diane has repressed this version of herself and created an elaborate fantasy to recapture or at least reimagine the possibility of love with Camilla (whom she recasts as Rita).

Although some critics may view the film after the reveal of Watts as Diane as her real identity, the film does not claim definitively that this is now reality, and the surreal aspects in the final scene underline this uncertainty. Because this difference in identities both conceals and reveals, *Mulholland Drive* refuses to privilege a singular interpretation, instead opting for

the play of substitutions...this movement of play, permitted by the lack or absences of a center or origin, is the movement of supplementarity. One cannot determine the center and exhaust totalization because the sign which replaces the center, which supplements it, taking the center's place in its absence—this sign is added, occurs as a surplus, as a supplement. (Derrida 289)

The switching of signs, particularly something as socially weighted as people's names, decenters assumptions about who these characters are and what roles they have, including sexual desires.

22 Diane cannot escape herself forever because this truth—her queer desire—is etched on her body, whether Watts is really Betty or Diane. The audience's introduction to Watts as Diane during the masturbation scene may be unsettling but still links this new character to her former one by emphasizing her lesbian desire. This connection between truth and the body configures Diane's desires within Elizabeth Freeman's theory of "erotohistoriography." According to Freeman, "Erotohistoriography does not write the lost object into the present so much as encounter it already in the present, by treating the present itself as hybrid. And it uses the body as a tool to effect, figure, or perform that encounter" (95). Bodies come into contact with their histories, which can penetrate and destabilize identity-based boundaries.

23 The body, especially the queer body, offers possibilities to protest against heteronormativity. Judith Butler reads Derrida's "logic of the supplement" as an idea that "entails a rethinking of the social specificity of taboo, loss, and sexuality" (145). Even as it may appear that Diane plays the role of queer outsider, addressing her sexual desire in this mode that resists linearity underscores that she is more than just the tropes she has played earlier as Betty. Her lesbian desire not only addresses the rejection of a presumed heteronormative script but also the postmodern reminder of neo noir that "total, transparent self-consciousness recedes indefinitely into the future and indefinitely into the past, always to be chased but never to be caught" (Abrams 21). Therefore, the clichés of the film actually help to emphasize the complexity of trying to resist an ordered, heteronormative self in favor of blending fantasy and reality so that the queer characters are not just victims or villains, as the case may be in many Hollywood films.

24 In this alternate world, Camilla and Kesher become engaged, once again designating Diane as the queer outsider. Diane only seems to be someone Camilla has helped to get roles. Thus, the final instance of “This is the girl” is the most menacing of all: Diane hires a hit man to kill Camilla, giving him a headshot of Laura Harring while at a restaurant. The image, along with the name, has shifted, exposing the slippage between signifier and signified, as the girl, along with other women, acquires new identities. Now the waitress is named Betty, suggesting that characters like Diane can make, remake, and unmake themselves but only as long as the illusion may hold some semblance of reality, even if that reality contradicts the rest of the film. Rather than privileging just a single narrative, such as affirming that Naomi Watts is really Betty or Diane, this meaning toward identity can be explored as an “infinite omni-temporality and universality” (Derrida 160). Viewing the film as a site of multiple timelines and universes resists giving in to any single version of reality in a fictional work and pushes against the boundaries of the narrative space itself.

25 For many people who have viewed *Mulholland Drive*, the question remains whether the last part of the film is reality, fantasy, nightmare, or somewhere in between. What brings the characters together is a breakdown of coherent meaning sutured across the narrative space by displacing identities. This displacement matters because in the final act, Rita is not an amnesiac but Kesher’s current lover and the real Camilla, showing that the supposedly fictional narrative at the beginning of the film may only be Diane’s fantasy. Perhaps the new version of *The Sylvia North Story* with Harring as Camilla and Watts as a minor actor may just be a metafictional joke, as if queer desire can be displaced by switching women’s identities, which appears to satirize the Hays Production Code era of wholesome, not homosexual, cinema.

26 But where does *Mulholland Drive* actually begin? The initial scene of the car crash is repeated—sort of. Instead of Rita/Camilla in the car, it is Diane. When the car stops, she repeats the line, “We don’t stop here”; however, the tension eases as Camilla opens the door. The two women walk through a secret path, suggesting this temporal loop allows lesbian desire to exist, at least as a brief image. Yet this queer temporality becomes imbued with the heterosexual script: Camilla leads Diane to her party where she and Kesher announce their engagement, leaving Diane as the queer outsider once again. Still, this emphasis on heterosexual desire becomes complicated when Camilla kisses another woman as if to make Diane jealous and to exert her freedom from Diane rather than simply to flaunt a public heterosexual self. Beckman agrees that

this scene shows radical potential with “the classic female identities...renegotiated” to show that Lynch’s twist on neo noir does not resolve fantasy or reality, queer or straight (42).

27 The simple and often accepted reading is that Watts’s character has fantasized most of the narrative; however, Lynch does not want the mystery solved so easily. These sliding signifiers, including names and desires, emphasize the play within the structure of the film itself. Butler’s theory of performativity helps to articulate the elusive identities of these characters:

[E]very signifier is the site of a perpetual *méconnaissance*; it produces the expectation of a unity, a full and final recognition that can never be achieved. Paradoxically, the failure of such signifiers—“women” is the one that comes to mind—fully to describe the constituency they name is precisely what constitutes these signifiers as sites of phantasmatic investment and discursive rearticulation. (142-43)

This opening of identity offers “new possibilities for political resignification,” particularly for traditionally marginalized groups like women who may identify as queer or lesbian (Butler 143). The film acknowledges many cinematic tropes that leave traces of ideas about gender, sexuality, and power found repeatedly in films from various genres. Still, the audience does not have to accept this film as just a story of repression and guilt exposed or queerness punished but can find ways to see how someone often maligned or forgotten in cinema can create a new position for herself even if that position may play with, or even contradict, the narrative space.

28 At the end of the film, miniature versions of people she has met as Betty come back to haunt Diane and seem to prompt her to commit suicide likely because of her guilt over ordering a hit on Camilla and the shattering of her fantasy of saving her. After the sound of a gunshot, images overlay one another: Watts and Harring’s faces from the Club Silencio scene overlap a wide shot of Los Angeles, suggesting ghostliness, loss, and a dreamlike state. Blending the surreal horror and the seeming reality of a gunshot helps to elude the conclusion that this must be what really happens, that Diane must have been the true self all along. Additionally, the oneiric vision suggests that language need not be privileged over a Derridean “surplus” of emotion and that Lynch’s penchant for intuition can help to find new meanings or possibilities for people to live, similar to how the term “queer” has evolved to encompass so many different identities. Queering time allows for accepting the possibility that the purported fantasy may in fact be a movie within a movie or even a reality on a separate plane of existence. This can be a reparative reading, a concept originally proposed by Sedgwick to counteract what she referred to as a

“hermeneutics of suspicion,” which can be applied to the rejection of the queer menace that Diane is portrayed as (*Touching Feeling* 124). In fact, Diane’s suicide may be real, but the Betty character may be a reincarnation rather than fantasy.

29 Although Lynch has had a cult following for decades, *Mulholland Drive* perhaps has made the most significant lasting cultural impact out of all of his films. Based on the votes of 177 film critics from around the world, a 2016 poll shows that *Mulholland Drive* is the greatest film of the 21st century (“The 21st Century’s Greatest”). This film has helped to reshape the cinematic landscape by reminding audiences of what they love about film, whether it is a mystery, a romance, the downfall of a corrupt character, or a chance for a character’s redemption. One of the most important facets of the film is that it rearticulates the portrayal of women, especially queer women. Despite some critics’ claims that lesbian identity and homoerotic desire are punished, the film allows for multifarious readings that push against the limits of the heteronormative script. Queer desire can have another chance to flourish by blending the highbrow of narrative complexity and the lowbrow of cliché so that the impossible becomes not only possible but also strangely familiar.

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“Realistically Queer”: Queer Connection and Interdependence in *Russian Doll*

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Abstract:

By examining the ways that Nadia and Alan—the two protagonists of Netflix show *Russian Doll*—experience gender, madness, and interdependence, this article argues that *Russian Doll* encourages open normativities and highlights the importance of relations beyond hetero- or homonormative coupling. While both Nadia and Alan fail at gender and fail to properly accept help for their mental distress, their growing ability to connect to their surroundings and to the other characters allows them to heal from the trauma of living and of dying. Using queer theory, including understandings of vulnerability, interdependence, and gesture, I argue that even though both main characters are seemingly heterosexual, *Russian Doll* is “realistically queer” in its insistence on queer temporality. Key words: *Russian Doll*; queer theory; open normativities; temporality; interdependence.

1 In a recent article for *Them*—an online platform run by Condé Nast—two queer married women who took part in the making of *Russian Doll* “explain how they helped the Netflix hit become realistically queer” (Bendix n.p.). Such a statement may be confusing for anyone expecting *Russian Doll* to centre the relationships of women with women or men with men. In fact, the two main characters, Nadia and Alan, do not ever have a relationship with someone of the same gender, have sex with someone of the same gender, or even discuss the possibility of having sex or a relationship with someone of the same gender. Nadia, a cisgender woman, has relationships and sex exclusively with men, while Alan, a cisgender man, has relationships and sex exclusively with women. It would therefore be easy to argue that the show is realistically heterosexual, as relationships between men and women are normalized—through these two protagonists—while other side characters engage in other kinds of sexuality. For example, Lizzy is “fucking a 22-year-old” named Jordana (“Nothing in This World Is Easy”), and finds herself “mixed up in something very nice,” or what Nadia calls “a fuck pile,” a collection of mostly naked bodies in the corner of Maxine’s living room (“The Great Escape”). On the surface, it would appear that heterosexual relationships are centred and queer existence is sidelined in *Russian Doll*.

2 Unlike many other shows, however, *Russian Doll*’s two main heterosexual characters do not end up in love or even in lust. Rather than representing heterosexuality as the solution to the

problems that unfold in the show, alternative kinds of relations are encouraged. Like the article in *Them*, I argue *Russian Doll* is realistically queer in the broadest sense of the word *queer*, disconnecting sexuality from the sexual act itself, and queering relations in and through time. By extending queerness beyond sexuality, queerness is defined not necessarily by relationships between two people of the same sex, but by many alternative kinds of relationships, including those between humans and animals, humans and fruits, and even humans and inanimate objects. Unrealistic queerness would therefore be defined next to or in relation with heterosexual relationships, as homonormative sexual or romantic experience between two people of the same sex/gender. *Russian Doll* is realistically queer, not because it represents same-sex couples, but because it highlights the shared vulnerability and interdependence that exists in all relationships, beyond sexual or romantic feelings.

3 This article explores queer theory to argue that *Russian Doll*'s insistence on relationality¹ makes it a realistically queer story, even if it maintains heterosexuality as normal through its two main protagonists. The realistic queerness that the show encourages is one that looks beyond homonormativity that might imagine queer experience through monogamous non-heterosexual relationships, instead encouraging love and connection in and through relationships between all things. This queerness also challenges representations of grief and madness through a representation of gender done wrong. Both main characters challenge conventional representations of their own gender, stretching normative perceptions of gender. I begin by looking into gender within *Russian Doll*, arguing that Nadia and Alan's connection marks an undoing of gender that encourages what Alexis Shotwell calls "open normativities" (139). I follow by examining the ways that madness connects to gender performativity, demonstrating that the characters are called mad because of the gender undone; this madness is in part a manifestation of grief that can only be resolved with connection to others. Finally, by examining the shared vulnerabilities of the characters, including the nonhuman animal characters and the nonanimal objects, I demonstrate that interdependency, not normative heterosexuality, resolves the problems of the characters. *Russian Doll* pushes the boundaries of relations between all beings, making it challenge hetero/homonormativity, and closed normativities that would act as resolutions to mental distress, and the linear nature of time. *Russian Doll* is realistically queer

¹ Relationality here refers to the many relationships that are highlighted in *Russian Doll* that emphasize the interdependence between all living beings.

because of its insistence on gender failure, its challenge of conventional solutions to mad distress, and its emphasis on relationality within and against time.

“It is a long story involving multiple deaths” (“The Great Escape”).

4 From the Netflix trailer, *Russian Doll*’s plot seems similar to that of *Groundhog Day* (1993), as Nadia finds herself back at her 36th birthday after being hit by a car and dying. Indeed, many critics have compared *Russian Doll*’s time loops to *Groundhog Day*’s time-warp (see for example McGovern 2019). However, unlike *Groundhog Day*’s protagonist Phil Connors, Nadia cannot repeat each day by falling asleep. Instead, Nadia stays alive overnight or as long as it takes before she dies again, and returns to the birthday party. Halfway through the season, we are introduced to a second character that also dies and relives each day, Alan. The two characters, female and male, must uncover the mystery behind their dying and returning. Both characters struggle with gender norms, as Alan is dumped by his long-time girlfriend on the same evening he was planning to propose—and the same day he dies— and Nadia is more in love with her cat Oatmeal than any man or any child. Nadia is “the most selfish person” that Alan “has ever met” (“The Way Out”), while Alan is so “sensitive” that his girlfriend has put off breaking up with him, in fear that he might harm himself (“Reflection”). These transgressions of norms—that women should not be selfish and men should not be sensitive—are ones that are highlighted and emphasized for the audience.

5 Queer theory has had a specific interest in gender norms, arguing that women are not necessarily oppressed particularly because of their gender, but that womanhood or femininity is associated with norms that contribute to oppression (see for some examples: Wittig 1998; De Lauretis 1999). Judith Butler has been at the centre of many of these debates, famously arguing that gender is performative—and differentiating this performativity from gender as performance (*Gender Trouble* xiv). Butler argues that normativity is a process, rather than an individualized experience (*Gender Trouble* 34). Individuals cannot do gender wrong, as it is only within a collective understanding of gender that one person might be doing gender incorrectly or correctly. These characters are therefore not necessarily individually doing gender wrong; rather they are experiencing gender within a system that upholds certain norms, with other characters expecting their gender to be presented and experienced in specific ways.

6 Gender, for Butler, is inextricably linked to sexuality, as doing gender correctly often means doing gender within the bounds of heterosexuality (*Gender Trouble* 30). Heterosexuality is not confined to women being sexually attracted to men and men to women. Rather, heterosexuality is also an unattainable standard, where women gain femininity through their relationships with men and men gain masculinity through their relationships with women. This dependence between the genders demonstrates the way that heterosexuality is—as Butler articulates—“imitation of itself,” and is set up to fail (“Imitation and Gender Insubordination” 314). Gender within *Russian Doll* is represented, in many ways, as failure. Nadia’s obsession with her cat Oatmeal prompts her one-night stand, Mike, to ask her “what do you want me to do, call you a Sad Cat Lady so you could say you aren’t one?” (“Nothing in This World Is Easy”). Instead of rejecting the title of “Sad Cat Lady,” Nadia replies by arguing that being interested in cats has never been “sad,” and calls Mike an Uber so she can design video games in peace. Nadia’s interest in video games and casual sex alerts the audience to Nadia’s failure to properly desire men and to properly present herself in relation to femininity.

7 Meanwhile, Alan is trying to do masculinity right by keeping his apartment clean, working out, and marrying his college sweetheart. His plans to control the situation fail, as Beatrice, his girlfriend, has actually been seeing Mike all along. Alan’s masculinity is positioned in relation to his ability to keep a heterosexual monogamous relationship. Without his girlfriend, Alan’s masculinity is put into question and he feels like a failure, so much so that he jumps off a building. Similarly, at the middle of the first episode, Nadia runs across the street after finding Oatmeal and is struck by a car, dying for the first time. She dies because of her failure at womanhood, represented by her need for a cat instead of a child. Similarly, Alan’s first death, suicide, is directly related to his breakup; his manhood is questioned and therefore he must die.

8 Jack Halberstam’s analysis of queer failure is relevant here, if only because the time loop that acts as the main conflict in *Russian Doll* is based partly in the ways that both characters fail at gender. Halberstam argues that many pieces of popular culture can teach us about failure and gender, and the ways that these failures allow for alternative kinds of living. Halberstam’s claim that “under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world” is demonstrated by the failure of gender that takes place in *Russian Doll* (Halberstam 2-3). Because of Nadia and Alan’s failure at gender, represented by Alan’s suicide and Nadia’s

search for Oatmeal, time also fails, and the two characters must live and relive their last night on earth many times. Nadia and Alan's many deaths can be taken as many failures that allow gender to be undone, redone, and undone again. While the first deaths indicate that Nadia and Alan are failing at gender, they do not proceed to do gender correctly. Unlike *Groundhog Day* which highlights the main character's incorrect gender performance in order to end on the correct gender work—which of course involves a monogamous couple and their plans to live with children in the suburbs—Alan and Nadia are still strangers to each other by the final episode of the first season. While their previous partners, Alan's Beatrice and Nadia's John, both have children by the end of the season, Alan and Nadia do not. This refusal of the child represents a kind of open normativity made possible by the "box of timelines" they find themselves within ("Ariadne").

9 Alexis Shotwell argues that while most of queer theory positions normativity as a negative thing that queerness must challenge, not all normativity is negative (138). Calling normativity inherently negative erases the potential for new kinds of normativities that challenge the restrictive position of heteronormativity and more recently, homonormativity. In taking seriously Butler's claims that normativity is created through social interactions, rather than fixed understandings of "real" gender/sex, Shotwell argues that queer understandings of the world are necessarily normative ones, but normative in a way she calls "open normativities" (139). If normativity is "the process by which people claim that a given way of being is good or beautiful, or to be endorsed," then arguing for a queer liveability is arguing for an alternative kind of normativity (139). Shotwell argues that open normativities name the normativities that prioritize flourishing without writing futures in advance, clarifying:

When I use flourishing as a goal for open normativities, I mean it to name the contingent, without-guarantees partially shared world that recognizes both ethical entanglement and irreducible difference. (155)

Her clarification mirrors the experiences that take place in Nadia and Alan's world of looping death, as Alan's claim that "we become what we repeatedly do" ("Alan's Routine") is challenged throughout the series, especially by Ruth, Nadia's aunt and guardian, when she says "[h]olding two incompatible ideas in your head at the same time and accepting both of them—that's the best of being human" ("Superiority Complex"). Rather than searching for the correct way of doing

gender between each death, the characters must hold onto the two incompatible realities of being both living and having died.

10 While the characters begin by failing at gender, according to Halberstam's definition of gender failure, this gender is never fully resolved. Rather, the characters explore what it might mean to experience gender more openly. Nadia's initial obsession with her cat is less obsessive by the end of the season, while Alan accepts a flowery scarf from Lizzy's girlfriend in the final episode, unflinchingly softening his masculinity. The characters support an open understanding of normativity, with no hetero-monogamous coupling taking place to wrap up their struggles, or even any homonormative ending that might uphold the same kind of heterosexual normativity. Instead, the characters depend on each other in death and in life, highlighting how interdependence, not individual gender performance, creates and sustains gender normativity—and that it is possible for this gender normativity to be open. The ending also opens heterosexuality, challenging the impossible standard of correct relational experience by having both heterosexual male and female main characters remain strangers, not lovers by the end. In doing so, it challenges the closed normativity of monogamous heterosexuality, and the closed normativity of proper feminine or masculine performance. Unlike *Groundhog Day*, which ends with Phil performing a masculinity that finally entices a woman, *Russian Doll* ends with two characters that still do not perform gender in a way that would entice the other into romantic attachment. Even if the loops begin because of gender failure, the loops do not end because of gender success.

“Now I’m stuck with a body that is broken in a world that is literally falling apart and a mind that wants to kill me” (“The Way Out”).

11 If the time loops are not resolved by gender success, they are resolved through a resolution of mental distress, rather than gender performance. Feminist analyses of madness in literature and film have often critically examined claims of ‘crazy’ women and men, pointing to how these claims have supported power around gender. Madness has also been examined through other lenses, for example through disability studies and Mad studies, which have largely taken these claims seriously, while also acknowledging—in ways that feminism sometimes lacks—that mental distress is a reality, rather than just a metaphor for patriarchy. Elizabeth Donaldson, for example, argues that feminist analyses of madness often present madness in

literature as a metaphor for radical resistance to gender norms. She argues that feminist claims of madness acting as a radical resistance to patriarchal control erase the realities of mental illness as a real embodied experience (112). However, it is important to note that mental distress, mental illness, and madness² are often controlled or managed through medical explanations and institutions without recognizing the social impacts on feelings and behaviours. I disagree with Donaldson, because I take seriously the social aspects of diagnoses and diagnosable behaviours, feelings, and experiences. A bodymind is never a neutral object. If mental distress is embodied, then it also is connected to bodily norms as to proper gendered behaviour and feelings.

12 *Russian Doll* not only undoes gender, but also challenges normative portrayals of madness, especially narratives that say a particular kind of help is required if someone is experiencing mental distress. Mental illness is presented as a solution to the impossibility of the loops that Nadia and Alan are experiencing. At first, before the audience is introduced to Alan, Nadia must fiercely uphold her sanity, rejecting the many people who call her crazy or ask—as a drug-making doctor asks her—whether she has a history of mental illness in her family. In the first two episodes, Nadia struggles against the implication that the loops she is experiencing is based in her own insanity, repeating that she is not crazy and that not everything has to do with the ways that her mother exercised self-harm and eventual suicide. The history of mental illness in her family is represented as a justification for calling her crazy too, as the inability to conform to proper gendered behaviour is passed on from her mother onto her.

13 From the first episode, the audience positions Nadia's 36th birthday as connected to the ways that her mother killed herself before turning 36. Nadia's "family history of mental illness" is therefore not only genetic, but also part of intergenerational trauma, foregrounded by her grandparent's experiences as Holocaust survivors. Nadia must uncover how the past is connected to her potential future, with a queer understanding of time. Because of her mother's history as well as her grandparents' history, suicide is presented as a possibility for her, but one that she never seems to want. In contrast, Alan's suicide is connected to his own normative understandings of gender and compulsory heterosexuality—that is, queer failure for him leads to death because he is unable to imagine another future. In a subsequent time loop, Alan goes to

² I use these three terms to highlight the many ways we can refer to mental health. Many scholars argue that the ways that we discuss these experiences speak to whether we align ourselves with the medicalization of mental distress (see for example Reaume (2006); Burstow (2013)).

talk to his mother, a Black woman, about his mental distress, but instead lies to her, telling her that Beatrice has agreed to marry him. The second—and third and so on—chance of living again, for both characters, becomes a chance to live differently, to live queerly, even if that life includes the reality of mental distress through trauma.

14 For both, the trauma of failing at gender, and the reality of intergenerational trauma, is also a trauma of death itself and of grief. Nadia is still grieving her mother's suicide and feeling guilt over her mother's death that she thinks she partially caused by leaving her when she was a child.³ This might be a representation of mad grief, as Jennifer Poole and Jennifer Ward describe it, as it has lasted for years (Poole and Ward 94). The prolonged grief that Nadia experiences could be diagnosed as "Prolonged Grief Disorder" (PGD) under recent recommendations for changes to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). Thus, Nadia struggles to be recognized as sane, even if time loops create a reality for her that is not aligned with others, because she desperately needs to imagine a different future for herself, one that does not end in suicide.

15 This struggle to be recognized as sane is not uncommon for women who are deemed to be doing gender wrong. Throughout history, women have been more likely to be diagnosed with a number of psychological or psychiatric disorders and there is a great deal of feminist literature that is invested in challenging the pathologization of gender undone (see for example Chesler 1972; Ussher 2011). At the end of the second episode, Nadia finally seems to agree with the people in her life who call her crazy, telling her former guardian, Ruth, who is also a psychologist, the safe word that they agreed upon when she was growing up, asking to be put into a psych ward. Once in the back of an ambulance on her way to the closest psych ward, she realizes her mistake, as three white men decide whether her behaviour or feelings merit admission to the psych facility. When the men ask her to remove her necklace—a gift from her mother—she struggles against the three men and the confinement that will follow, but they attempt to sedate her, crashing the car and restarting her loop as she dies once again. Alive again at her birthday party the day before, Nadia says, "nobody locks us up" ("The Great Escape"). This moment can be read as Nadia's connection to her mother, as she holds the necklace close as

³ When Nadia was ten years old, she decided that her mother's behaviour, including smashing mirrors and eating nothing but watermelon, was too much for her to live with and she asked her social worker to place her in Ruth's custody instead. A year later, her mother committed suicide, leaving her feeling as though she was partly at fault.

she says the line. Nadia thereby rejects a medical understanding of her madness, while also highlighting the connection she has to others in this moment: the “us” of this statement foreshadows Alan’s mental distress that could so easily be medicalized, and his refusal to get help.

16 Indeed, both characters not only do gender wrong, but also refuse the proper actions that should be taken if experiencing mental distress. While Nadia is convinced by the end of the second episode that she needs help, it quickly becomes clear to her that this help should not take place in medical systems that see incarceration as a solution to being mentally unwell. Alan is equally resistant to the medicalization of mental distress, repeating that he does not “do therapy” (“Superiority Complex”). Again, this is perhaps for good reason, as Black men have often been represented as dangerous to themselves and others, with many Black scholars challenging these representations (see for example Pickens 2019). While Alan’s resistance to therapy may in part be part of Alan’s struggle for masculine control—as he listens to “affirmations” rather than taking advice from others—Alan admits to Beatrice in his final scene with her that he has “let somebody help” him (“The Way Out”). The help that he is referring to is not in the form of a therapist or psychiatrist—as he is referring to Nadia’s support in this moment—, but this support nevertheless helps him work through his mental distress. He locates his distress in both his body and his mind, saying:

No matter how much we think we’re fooling people, our bodies, they can’t keep lying the way that our minds can... mine stopped lying a long time ago. For years, I’ve just been I’ve just been hollow. I thought if I worked hard enough, if I kept putting the time in, and if I kept my head down, you know, did everything right... this aching, gnawing feeling of being an absolute failure would just go away... and now I’m stuck with a body that is broken and in a world that is literally falling apart and a mind that wants to kill me. (“The Way Out”)

Alan’s realization that the world is “literally falling apart” is in part because of his own (gender) failure that allows him to let go of this failure. Alan’s mental distress is resolved when he lets Nadia help him, and he acknowledges that everyone else is also trying and failing to live. Nadia’s mental distress is also resolved, not through talk therapy or medicalization, but through Ruth’s help, whose friendship and support allows her stop having to repeat claims of sanity. *Russian Doll* therefore makes claims about mental distress that do not involve medicalized or pathologized “help” or “therapy,” instead advocating for community support.

17 Often these claims for community support come through Ruth, as she makes a number of claims throughout *Russian Doll* that challenge a conception of mental distress as medical, including a conversation she has with one of her clients. She tells him that instead of talking, he should aim to be held. This challenge to the idea of talk therapy, instead advocating for touch therapy encourages an embodied understanding of mental distress that does not necessarily support the medical model of mental health. Ruth's encouragement to touch as a means of therapy connects to how Juana Maria Rodriguez writes about queer gesture as a matter of queer futures. While Nadia and Alan struggle throughout the series to access a future that they keep failing to acquire, Ruth is always encouraging her clients to gesture or feel their way through the past and into a future—as a way of healing from mental distress. Rodriguez writes that “thinking about queerness through gesture animates how bodies move in the world, and how we assign meaning in ways that are always already infused with cultural modes of knowing” (2). In other words, touch acts as a way of healing and traveling into the past and into the future. In Alan's final conversation with Beatrice, he tells her that she did tell him about her infidelity with Mike: “every time I touched you, and you gently pulled away” (“The Way Out”). Gesture tells us about affection and love. By engaging in touch beyond romantic or sexual touch, Nadia and Alan learn about the world around them, and how they can unloop their timelines through a queer relation to time and to others.

18 Gender and mad failure appear to disrupt time within the world of *Russian Doll*, forcing both characters to return to the past as their present and their future. Time becomes challenged in part because of both characters' failures to adhere to gender norms and to mental health norms. In refusing to get help as defined by the other characters, they must discover the help that does work for them. The help that does work is a queer kind of help, one that emphasizes their relations to others within their present, past, and future. Time becomes part of their queer experience throughout the show, shaking their understanding of mad progress and their relations to humans, non-human animals, and non-animal humans.

“Your friends can't help you if you don't let them, as I have said before” (“The Great Escape”).

19 Nadia and Alan struggle with gender failure and a failure to heal, but they both also struggle with time failure. The appearance of children in *Russian Doll*, as representations of the

future, could represent gender failure in Nadia and Alan: both characters watch their former lovers connect with children that are not theirs. However, another way of seeing children is through the work of Lee Edelman, who contends that because homosexual relationships cannot lead to procreation, queer people have been represented as advocating for “no future” or for death (30). Rather than challenging this concept, Edelman takes seriously the representation of children as the future, pointing to the queer alternatives to children and to futures without children. Advocating for queer death and for no future means challenging closed normativities that might only focus on children as the future, rather than the queer adults of now. In *Russian Doll*, a television show that centers on death, children represent a connection to the past, present, and future, as the show queers temporality. Nadia’s hesitance to meet John’s daughter, Lucy, for example, represents her inability to see a future with her ex-partner John, but also to see a future where she becomes her mother. Throughout the show, Nadia’s own mother comes through as the past that Nadia must not allow to become her future. Similarly, while Alan tries to fit into the position of fiancé and future father, he does so in part to show his mother that he is capable of happiness. However, Nadia comes back from the past in the form of the child she once was. The future she must challenge also includes herself as a child, reappearing in the present. Unlike neoliberal media that represent children as representations of normative, closed futures, children in *Russian Doll* do not necessarily represent a normative future, so much as they represent a connection to the past. Through a twisted temporality that focuses on “multiple deaths,” *Russian Doll* encourages the audience to see children as representations of the future, the present, and the past.

20 Indeed, this twisted temporality acts as the most realistically queer aspect of the show, as Nadia and Alan must imagine their futures to be unstuck or open to radical change, because of a universe over which they have little control. Instead, they keep going back to the past, with their present not necessarily going forward. This universe explicitly connects the experiences of Nadia and Alan to their surroundings in a way that supports Butler’s theories of vulnerability and interdependency. Butler argues that vulnerability is necessary to make connection with others:

I have suggested that we rethink the relationship between the human body and infrastructure so that we might call into question the body as discrete, singular, and self-sufficient, and I have proposed instead to understand embodiment as both performative and relational, where relationality includes dependency on infrastructural conditions and legacies of discourse and institutional power that precede and condition our existence. (“Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance” 21)

In many ways, *Russian Doll* mirrors this call to pay attention to the infrastructural and social supports in place that permits lives to be lived. The series begins with this encouragement, with her friend Maxine telling Nadia in the second episode: “Your friends can’t help you if you don’t let them, as I have said before” (“The Great Escape”). This statement is mirrored back to Alan later in the series, as his friend, Faran tells him “No one can do anything by themselves” (“Alan’s Routine”). While both Nadia and Alan try repeatedly to accomplish life with independence, they are pushed into the arms of their friends and family. While both struggle to ask for help—and not without reason, as both have experienced coercive mental health help—they ultimately need to recognize their own interdependence before they can live.

21 Interdependence has been an increasingly important concept in feminist theory, as theorists like Butler advocate for a more political understanding of vulnerability. More recently, disability theory has also been interested in understanding the potential conflicts between feminist understandings of care or help and anti-ableist understandings of care or help. Nick Watson et al. argue that while feminists have largely critiqued models of care from the point of view of the carer, disability scholars have critiqued models of care through the perspective of the cared-for (331). While both positions are vulnerable to abuse, as the carer could be inadequately compensated for their labour, while the cared-for could receive inadequate or coercive care, there is also a potential mutual benefit in arguing for interdependence. If both sides are vulnerable to abuse, both sides can also benefit from mutual care. In *Russian Doll*, it is only through mutual care and interdependence that the characters can be free of their looping timelines.

22 When Nadia first connects with Alan, she realizes that her experiences of dying and living are not only her own. She describes Alan as “basically a child that the universe has tasked me with babysitting” (“Superiority Complex”). This description points once again to Alan’s failure of gender, as he is less a man and more a child that Nadia must care for. However, there are moments before the two meet that highlight how both characters experience interdependence, even if it is not with each other. For example, in the first episode, Nadia notices that many of Maxine’s fish disappear between timelines. When she asks Maxine about the missing fish, Maxine responds that she “always had two fish: ketchup and mustard” (“Nothing in This World Is Easy”). In the second episode, after she dies repeatedly by falling down the stairs, Nadia enlists Lizzy’s help to get down the fire escape steps. Later, Maxine also helps her down the stairs. Meanwhile, fish and other non-human animals are disappearing, alongside some non-

animal objects as well. Alan leaves the bathroom one morning to find that his fish is missing, and as we know from the first episode, Nadia's cat Oatmeal is lost as well. Mirrors are suddenly gone in one timeline, while Alan's engagement ring is not returned to his bag after he throws it into the ocean in one loop. Finally, fruit, vegetables, and flowers have been wilting and dying since the first loop. These moments of missing objects represent the queering not only of the two main characters, that both fail at gender and madness, but the entire universe in which they exist.

23 The seventh episode acts as the climax of missing objects and animals, as Nadia and Alan realize that humans are also going missing. Nadia forces her friends Maxine and Lizzy to come with her to the deli because she is afraid that they will go missing too. The episode intersperses these moments with flashbacks to Nadia's childhood and her experiences of a mother frantically in need of as many watermelons as possible. This child, Nadia from when she lived with her mother, begins appearing in adult Nadia's time loops. Her mother's insanity is suddenly solidified as the main cause of all of the death and living, as Nadia admits that she feels responsible for her mother's death. Her mother had her promise "don't ever let them tear us apart" when she was a child and that promise is coming back to haunt her in the form of a smiling child version of herself ("The Way Out"). The watermelons of the past are also mirrored in the looping present, through the decaying fruit. The mirrors that go missing are missing because her mother broke all of the mirrors in the house. However, Alan's apartment also becomes emptier, as other objects also begin to go missing. While Nadia is haunted by her grief through the missing mirrors, decaying fruit, and child-version of herself, Nadia's inability to forgive herself and forgive her mother is thus also connected, not just to the mirrors or fruit, but to all structural parts of the universe in which she finds herself.

24 Thinking through time as a nonlinear and relational concept necessitates thinking through sexualities in non-Western ways. Kim TallBear, a citizen of the Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate nation, is an Indigenous scholar whose work traces Indigenous sexuality studies and the possible open normativities that could encourage seeing sexuality as inherently connected to non-human animals, non-animal objects, and other humans in many different kinds of relations. She argues that sexuality is not just about the sexual attraction between two consenting adults, but about the connections between humans and the land, between humans and their relatives, between humans and non-human animals, between non-human animals and the land, etc (TallBear 160-161). The connections between us and everything else that we can experience through touch, through

spirituality, and through love can make up an alternative kind of sexuality that is extremely counter to normative hetero- or homonormativities (TallBear 163).

25 In “Making Love and Relations Beyond Settler Sex and Family,” TallBear explicitly argues that settler understandings of monogamy and sexuality have impacted otherwise more fluid normativities within Indigenous community. Instead of advocating for “a return” to a more “traditional” Indigenous sexuality or relationality, TallBear writes:

Rather, we might consider that the goal is to disaggregate so-called sexuality not back to tradition, not forward into progress, but into and back out into that spider’s web of relations. (Or any visual that works for you.) That is a web or net in which relations exchange power, and power is in tension, thus holding the web or community together. (160-161)

TallBear’s explicit mention of temporality is especially useful when discussing *Russian Doll*, as she rejects a fixed or closed understanding of sexuality, and a fixed or closed understanding of time. Nadia and Alan must not move forward or backward in time, but instead must recognize their relationality and their interdependence with the objects, nonhuman animals, and humans around them. In order to resolve the time loops that they find themselves in, Nadia and Alan must recognize that they are not alone. In fact, Alan asks her in the final episode: “will you promise that if I don’t jump, I’ll be happy?” and Nadia answers “No, absolutely not, but I will promise you that you will not be alone” (“Ariadne”). This claim, that Alan will not be alone, is enough to stop him from killing himself in the final moments of the show. The show advocates for its audience to recognize that we are all not alone, because of the humans, nonhuman animals, and objects around us. These all have the potential to show us our connections and relations.

26 In the final episode, Nadia and Alan find themselves alive, back with the humans, non-human animals, and objects that had previously disappeared. However, they also find themselves alone once again, as they are in separate timelines; Nadia finds Alan drunk and without any memories of the previous deaths, and Alan finds Nadia about to have sex with Mike, also unable to remember the previous deaths. Nadia must convince Alan not to kill himself, while Alan must encourage Nadia not to waste her evening on Mike. This uneven work is also representative of the general uneven storyline of the two characters: Alan’s time loop is resolved when he has an adult conversation with his ex-girlfriend, while Nadia must literally confront a younger version of herself, and the potential that she caused the suicide of her mother. This unequal distribution

of personal growth, with represents the ways that women do more emotional labour for the men in their lives, upholding masculinities as well as being held accountable for femininity. However, this unevenness is also perhaps part of the open normativities that the show encourages, as women are rarely represented as full characters, outside of their relationships with men. This reversal of roles represents a potential encouragement for women to live queer lives, that is, to live full lives without making the story all about men.

27 In fact, Nadia rejects the idea that Mike is at the core of the time loops, arguing that the sex was “mediocre at best” and that Mike’s sex could not have “set off a whole world-bending multiverse wonderland fucking splitting-level shit” (“Reflection”). Mike’s ability to get women to sleep with him is therefore not the cause for time to move differently, instead, it is presented as an annoying reality that women want to have sex, and that he is there. Nadia does not need to align herself with misogyny in order to end the time loops. Nadia rejects Mike even in the last episode when she has no memory of dying, as Mike tries to explain that Alan’s behaviour is completely in relation to Mike’s actions. Nadia’s rejection of misogyny and of mediocre sex, demonstrates that other kinds of connection are more fruitful.

“One night, something miraculous happened: they made it through alive” (“Aradne”).

28 *Russian Doll* encourages its audience to imagine queer relations in and through time. The two main characters, although both seemingly heterosexual, refrain from falling in love, instead struggle to heal from the trauma they are forced to rehearse. In the process, they live queerly, exploring relations with other humans, non-human animals, and non-animal objects. These aspects, that I have fleshed out more fully throughout this article, highlight the many ways that *Russian Doll* is realistically queer.

29 *Russian Doll* has allowed me to revisit queer theory and connect it to disability theory, feminist theory, and Indigenous sexuality studies. The television show is “realistically queer” because of its encouragement of alternative kinds of gender and sexuality, because of its challenge to normative solutions to mental distress, and because of its emphasis on interdependence as the only solution to problems of mental distress and failing at gender. While the show also centres on the experiences of heterosexual relationships and heterosexual sex, these aspects are overshadowed by the emphasis on community and collective healing. Collective healing, as represented through the returning objects, people, and plants, involves an

understanding of interdependence. Without the other characters, the other animals, and the other objects, Nadia and Alan would never be able to re-place time and finally face death. Nadia and Alan must also recognize the ways that their lives intertwine, not as romantic or sexual partners, but as beings sharing the same world.

30 In the future, more should be written about this show, especially since it has been picked up for a second season. For example, this article did not allow for the space to fully examine the ways that race plays into the experiences of the characters. Studies of suicide, death and dying might be especially useful as well, alongside a growing examination of gendered experiences of suicide. Finally, a psychoanalytic reading of Nadia's relationship to her mother, as well as Alan's relationship with his mother, but there are endless possibilities for this "long story involving multiple deaths" ("The Great Escape").

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Senselessness, Indeterminacy, and Sexual Ideology in Hemingway's "The Sea Change"

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Abstract:

"The Sea Change" is a somewhat anomalous entry in the Hemingway oeuvre. The story tells of the separation between a man and a woman at a bar. 'The girl,' we learn, is leaving 'the man' for another woman, at which the man condemns her other relationship as 'vice' and 'perversion.' Ironically, the man likely himself harbors homosexual desires, and at the promptings of the girl, comes to accept his non-normative sexuality. While many critics have attempted determinate readings of 'The Sea Change,' in this paper I show that its very evasion of determinacy is central to its thematic and narrative construction. In the first section, I treat a statement that the man makes – 'I'll kill her' – in which I find a typology illuminative of the man's ideological stance. In the following two sections, I give a detailed linguistic treatment to two conversations which, crucially, are constituted by indexicals. I find that naming is of central import in the two conversations and that sense is paired with a normative heterosexual ideology and senselessness is paired with a sexually non-normative ideology. In the final section, I treat the last act of the story in which the man undergoes his sea change. Indeterminacy and paradox, analogous to the senselessness of the two analyzed conversations, accompany the man's metamorphosis, suggesting that his sea change was one in which he detaches from a heterosexual ideology and acquires a sexually non-normative ideology, as the girl presently has.

1 "The Sea Change" is a somewhat anomalous entry in the Hemingway oeuvre. The story tells of the separation between a man and a woman at a bar. The "girl," we learn, is leaving "the man" for another woman. The man has difficulty understanding the girl's desire and eventually comes to condemn her other relationship as "vice" and "perversion." Ironically, it is likely that the man himself harbors homosexual desires, and in the final act of the story, he relinquishes his pro-heterosexual ideology and acquires a sexually non-normative ideology. This "sea change" is initiated when the girl confronts the man regarding his use of "perversion" as a label for her homosexual relationship. Throughout, the story is conspicuously cryptic, and even that the girl is leaving the man for another girl is only ever indicated, but never outright stated. The narrative is composed almost entirely of dialogue, which has led to considerably different interpretations. Though critics are uniform in their belief that the girl desires to be with the other woman, their interpretations of the deeper gender, sexual, and moral contentions are divergent.

2 While many critics have attempted determinate readings of "The Sea Change," in this paper I show that its very evasion of determinacy is central to its thematic and narrative

construction. There are several critics who have propounded upon the story's indeterminacy, but none have ventured to centralize and excavate linguistically that indeterminacy¹ as I so do here. In the first section, I treat a statement that the man makes – "I'll kill her" – in which I find a typological significance that illuminates the man's ideological stance (Hemingway 306). In the subsequent two sections, I give a detailed linguistic treatment to two conversations which, crucially, are constituted and framed by indexicals – some with reference and others without. I find that sense is of central import in the two conversations and that sense is paired with a normative heterosexual ideology and that senselessness is paired with a sexually non-normative ideology. In the final section, I treat the last act of the story in which the man undergoes his sea change. Indeterminacy and paradox, analogous to the senselessness of the two analyzed conversations, accompany the man's metamorphosis, suggesting that his sea change was one in which he detaches from a heterosexual ideology and acquires a sexually non-normative ideology, as the girl presently has.

Masculine, Heterosexual Language and Ideology

3 The crucial line for understanding this story is "I'll kill her," which is spoken by the man (Hemingway 306). It immediately follows the narration that follows the opening dialogue. It elucidates the prejudice embedded in the characters' language for heterosexual values, the man's commitment to these values, and ultimately, the limits of these values' intelligibility. As an experiment, it is worth revising the line, "I'll kill her" to, "I'll kill him." In the latter statement, there are many resonances of stereotypical masculinity. They are seen in different variations of popular culture: in movies, the high school football player and Wild West gunslinger; in other media, the knight or warrior. "I'll kill him" is spoken by a male who perceives a sexual threat in which another male appears to woo the first's partner. Regardless of whether the male's partner rejects or accepts the advances of another, the male regards the other's advances, whether actually romantic or not, as threatening.

4 The male who speaks, "I'll kill him" is an archetypical alpha male. The archetypical male is violent, angry, strong, vigorous, oftentimes thickheaded, quick to fight, and popular or in a position of social standing. "I'll kill him" connotes power. Oftentimes in popular media, this

¹ See: Nakjavani 164-171; Clark-Wehinger; and Rubóczki.

statement is situated at the rising action of the story in which the archetypical male believes that his relationship with his partner may be compromised. It is positioned at the rising action to convey a sense of drama such that the encroaching male (often the protagonist) will be confronted with the impending danger of the archetypical male's intrinsic violence: the archetypical male will bring to bear the totality of his physical and social abilities to (re)secure his relationship with his partner.

5 "I'll kill him" reflects a deep interdependence of social power, which is established and reestablished through physical power, and sexual power. Social power is the means through which the archetypical male acquires sexual power, and sexual power is the means through which he acquires social power. They reinforce one another and cannot be regarded individually but as parts of a whole. Following the utterance of "I'll kill him," there is a physical confrontation, which is often the climax of the narrative, between the archetypical male and the encroaching male. Depending on the genre, it may be a fist fight, a duel, or a fight to the death. The archetypical male believes that should his sexual power be compromised, his social power would too be compromised. He must ensure his sexual position, and he accomplishes this through applying his social power to the encroaching male in the form of a fight. "I'll kill him" is the archetypical male's indication that he will attempt to maintain his power.

6 The fight between the archetypical male and his partner's suitor can be bloody and belligerent. It is not frivolous. "I'll kill him" beckons a dramatic gravity, so we, the audience, seriously regard it. We understand that the archetypical male has the physical and social ability to inflict upon the other male great harm and that the archetypical male psychologically and ethically regards his violence as reasonable means to ends. We are presented with great drama because the suitor is liable to very great danger, yet capable of success. This archetype reflects an animalistic, natural world in which an alpha male ensures his social and sexual position through strength and violence. The "fight for the girl" drama appears dramatically profound because it resembles something evolutionarily deep – at least within popular typologies.

7 In "The Sea Change," the man's utterance of "I'll kill her" projects this archetype. His reliance upon it suggests a particular ideology. The man places his partner's lover in the position of a rival and encroaching suitor. The man regards his own social and sexual position as subverted by his partner's suitor and so, according to the rules of the invoked archetype, must address the suitor with violence to reestablish his former position.

8 The irony of the line is in its change to a feminine pronoun (“I’ll kill her”). If the archetype that is called upon is one in which two males square off in a dramatic fight, then could we imagine a male and female squaring off likewise? Could we imagine the slighted popular, high school boy beating up a girl high school student? Could we imagine in the Western movie the gunslinger and brawler with grizzle on his cheeks and whiskey on his breath fighting a woman? Should we imagine a woman fighting one of the males with the same dramatic gusto that accompanies the male-male drama, we imagine a strong, masculine woman. We do not imagine the high school cheerleader in the movie brawling with the quarterback antagonist. We do not imagine the fair medieval Lady fighting for the hand of her lover against the brute knight.

9 When masculinity is divorced from both parties in these scenes, there is no struggle but one very strong person (male) brutalizing another person (female). The great evolutionary drama that implicitly condones male-male violence is inapplicable to a situation in which there is a lesbian relationship. Instead, we witness in these scenes ugly and brutal violence. The response of the crowd would likely not be spectacle but a call to the police.

10 In “The Sea Change,” the man rationalizes his partner’s affair through the archetype of the male-male struggle. The archetype provides him with a conceptual toolkit to regard infidelity. Though the archetype succeeds in addressing infidelity, it fails in addressing a non-male suitor. The struggle over a woman is a grounding dramatic trope for our culture – rightly or wrongly – but only succeeds dramatically when it is a male-male struggle. The male-male struggle incorporates the interdependent relationship of social power, established through physical power, and sexual power. When a sexual threat is introduced by a lesbian relationship, the social, physical aspect dissipates, as demonstrated by the ugly, undramatic brutality one might expect to see should a man fight a woman. “I’ll kill her,” therefore, serves as a parody of the gravity which we culturally attach to the male-male struggle for a relationship with a woman.

11 The male-male struggle prioritizes physical strength, which is traditionally greater in males than in females, and is therefore valued in masculinity. The male-male struggle is masculine and heterosexual. It conceives of heterosexuality as the only sexuality and of masculinity and femininity as the only genders. The masculine gender values male physicality, and the feminine gender values female sexualization. This is an ideology. It is not universally applicable, hence its failure to intelligibly address a homosexual relationship. The man relies upon this ideology for about two thirds of the story. From this ideology, the man condemns the girl’s homosexuality, for

the only way from which to make sense of homosexuality from the vantage of the heterosexual ideology is through condemnation.² Ultimately, the girl succeeds in distancing the man from his heterosexual ideology, at which point he is capable of accepting her homosexuality and his own non-normative sexuality.

Conversation 1

12 The opening of the story exemplifies a clash between the heterosexual ideology and the sexually non-normative ideology of the girl. There is a lack of sense in the conversation, though we as readers may be beguiled into regarding the conversation as sensible. The opening conversation is as follows:

“All right,” said the man. “What about it?”

“No,” said the girl, “I can’t.”

“You mean you won’t.”

“I can’t,” said the girl. “That’s all that I mean.”

“You mean that you won’t.”

“All right,” said the girl. “You have it your own way.”

“I don’t have it my own way. I wish to God I did.”

“You did for a long time,” the girl said. (Hemingway 306)

There are several linguistic issues that emerge. The forms of speech do not align with their contextual meanings. As a result, the conversation is either sensible, but sensible only to the characters and not to us readers, or senseless. The uncertainty of sense for the reader parallels the incomprehensibility for the man of the girl’s love for another woman.

13 The man begins the story with “All right.” Denotatively, the phrase’s meaning is an indication of agreement. For such to occur, there must be first a statement with which one can agree. However, there is none provided here. “All right” acquires meaning as an index, but there is no antecedent to make it sensible. As a kind of coupling, the man’s first line ends with, “it,” which too lacks an antecedent. We can infer as a solution to the absence of antecedents that the story opens *in medias res*, in which case we simply are not privy to previous elements of the man

² I use various types of “sexuality” throughout the paper for the sake of ease. The word presumes a sexual identity that commits one to particular attractions. However, I do not believe that the characters in “The Sea Change” are so fixed, but rather maintain sexual attractions that cannot be easily translated into one sexual identity.

and girl's conversation. Significantly though, Hemingway forces us to engage immediately with a fantasy (an exophoric index) to accommodate "All right" and "it" as sensible and, more broadly, the story itself as sensible. We will see that this method, in which an index is offered without an antecedent, appears frequently in "The Sea Change." It is used as a means to accommodate non-heterosexual relationships positively within the language, upon which the characters rely, but which prejudices the heterosexual values that "I'll kill him" represents.

14 As we read on in this opening conversation, we realize that there is a disagreement between the man and girl. There is a good deal of bitterness between the couple such that the meanings of "All right" and "What about it?" change. "All right" no longer serves as a statement of agreement but as a sidestepping of sorts with the purpose of ending the conversation. Its contextual meaning inverts its literal meaning such that "All right" indicates disagreement (not, perhaps, unlike a teenager "agreeing" to clean up her room). "All right," though it initiates the story, is the man's attempt to end the conversation before one can exist. Paradoxically, the man invites the continuance of the story by posing the question, "What about it?" However, this statement too inverts, for it now signals a challenge rather than a question. The man does not wish for the girl to supply him with absent knowledge, but to confront her out of frustration with her. So the first two quotes not only are absent of antecedents that could equip them with sense, but have contextual meanings that are directly opposite their literal meanings.

15 The girl answers the man's question, "What about it," with "No... I can't." This is an inappropriate answer to his question, so it seems to respond to what preceded the transcribed conversation. The man responds to her statement more sensibly: "You mean you won't." And she, "I can't... That's all that I mean." In these three statements there are two pro-verbs, "can't" and "won't," that do not have antecedents. These statements endophorically lack sense, so the conversation becomes, "Yes. No. Yes. No." The girl affirms, and the man denies. Though the girl says, "No... I can't," I regard her statement as an affirmation because with a pro-verb without an antecedent, the statement establishes the position to which the man responds. She breaks the ground of the topic of conversation. Though the denotative meaning of the statement is negation, the functional meaning of the statement is affirmation. As before, there is an inversion of literal and contextual meaning.

16 Without antecedents to contextualize these pro-verbs, the conversation, which appears to be a dialogue on face value, is in fact two concurrent monologues whose contents stand as

antipodes to one another. The girl and the man stand as representatives of two ideologies: the man, heterosexual values, and the woman, pro-homosexual values. These ideologies do not engage with one another, i.e. a conversation, but talk at one another. And as the girl and man remain committed to their respective ideologies, there will not be a place of mutual understanding in which intelligible conversation can emerge. Imagine as an analogue encountering two strangers on the street exchanging, “Yes,” “No,” “Yes,” “No,” etc., and attempting to understand their “conversation.” What appears as dialogue is anything but.

17 In that vein, the girl and man’s fight in this conversation is not about the absent portion of the conversation, but about what is meant. The man attempts to translate the girl’s words, which reflect her pro-homosexuality, into his words, which reflect his anti-homosexuality. He is unsuccessful in this attempt however. The girl says, “I can’t... That’s all that I mean,” and the man says, “You mean you won’t” (Hemingway 306). The man acquires the girl’s statement, “I can’t,” reinterprets it, and dictates to her what he believes she means: “you won’t.” The man attempts to force the girl’s statement into the frames of his comprehension because from his framework, “I can’t” is not meaningful. He is precluded from understanding her. The girl responds by telling the man that her statement, “I can’t,” is “all that [she] mean[s].” She does not accept the man’s reinterpretation of her statement and so insists upon her initial statement. As a result, there is no movement to intelligibility between the couple.

18 In this first exchange between the man and girl, we have witnessed a tension between literality and form on one end, and context on the other. As the story progresses, the tension is amplified between these two poles, in which literal meaning parallels heterosexual, normative values and language, and context parallels non-heterosexual, non-normative values and language. We will see that the man’s acceptance of non-normative sexuality coincides with an acceptance of speech that under literality is senseless, but contextually is sensible. The girl translates the man’s words out of his ideological framework and into hers just as the man had attempted in this first conversation. She is successful, at which point, the man accepts his own homosexuality and a sexually non-normative ideology.

Conversation 2

19 The girl must speak intelligibly within the heterosexual language frame to communicate her homosexuality positively. There are not words available that refer to homosexuality positively

however. To address this issue, she uses pronouns that do not have antecedents to refer to her, and the man's, homosexuality. The pronoun can interact sensibly with the heterosexual language without committing to anti-homosexuality. The result looks on face value sensible, just as in Conversation 1, but lacks sense literally. The only way to regard the girl's pronouns as sensible is to believe them to have exophoric reference, which is analogous to Hemingway's *in medias res* technique in Conversation 1. In the case of the following conversation, which is the climax of the story and in which the man accepts his homosexuality, the exophoric references are the man and girl's experiences. The girl implores the man to view the world without language, for she recognizes that the only communicable, public language that they share prioritizes heterosexual relationships and vilifies non-heterosexual relationships. The conversation is as follows:

"You can't forgive me? When you know about it?" the girl asked.

"No."

"You don't think things we've had and done should make any difference in understanding?"

"Vice is a monster of such fearful mien," the young man said bitterly, "that to be something or other needs but to be seen. Then we something, something, then embrace." He could not remember the words. "I can't quote," he said.

"Let's not say vice," she said. "That's not very polite."

"Perversion," he said.

...

"I'd like it better if you didn't use words like that," the girl said. "There's no necessity to use a word like that."

"What do you want me to call it?"

"You don't have to call it. You don't have to put any name to it."

"That's the name for it."

"No," she said. "We're made up of all sorts of things. You've known that. You've used it well enough."

"You don't have to say that again."

"Because that explains it to you."

"All right," he said. "All right." (Hemingway 308)

20 For the sake of ease, I will italicize the pronouns in each line and provide their respective antecedents. When there are no conspicuous antecedents, I will provide my best guess for the antecedent, whether exophoric or endophoric, provide my rationale for the antecedent, and provide commentary where necessary.

“You can’t forgive me? When you know about *it*?” the girl asked.

i. “*It*”: *Homosexuality*

There is no antecedent to which “it” refers. Given the context of the conversation however, “it” most likely refers to *homosexuality* rather than to, say, *the girl’s homosexual relationship*. The girl apparently believes that the man could forgive her affair under the basis of “know[ing] about” something. It would be strange for the girl to ask for forgiveness based on the man knowing about her cheating. It would be reasonable, however, if she justified her affair based on its categorical difference: that is, she is homosexual and her heterosexual relationship with the man is unfulfilling. The man could personally know about an unfulfilling romantic and sexual relationship if he too were homosexual. In that case, he could sympathize with her position and indeed forgive her.

“No.”

“You don’t think things we’ve had and done should make any difference in understanding?”

““Vice is a monster of such fearful mien,” the young man said bitterly, “that to be something or other needs but to be seen. Then we something, something, then embrace.””

He could not remember the words. “I can’t quote,” he said.

- i. The man responds to the girl’s question with a roundabout quotation. If ever there were an instance of the man understanding himself and homosexuality through received language, it is here. The quote is a bowdlerized version of the following from Alexander Pope’s “An Essay on Man” (with the relevant lines italicized):

*Vice is a monster of so frightful mien,
As, to be hated, needs but to be seen;
Yet seen too oft, familiar with her face,*

We first endure, then pity, then embrace.

But where th' extreme of vice, was ne'er agreed:
Ask where's the North? at York, 'tis on the Tweed;
In Scotland, at the Orcades; and there,
At Greenland, Zembla, or the Lord knows where:
No creature owns it in the first degree,
But thinks his neighbour farther gone than he.
Ev'n those who dwell beneath its very zone,
Or never feel the rage, or never own;
What happier natures shrink at with affright,
The hard inhabitant contends is right. (Pope 287)

The man adopts the moral importunities of Pope's poem as markers of proper behavior. (That said, he does not adopt the ambivalences of Pope's vice, but only its ironical absolutism.) The man evidently understands the "things [they've] had and done" within the terms of "vice." He regards himself and the girl negatively, and their respective non-heterosexualities and non-normativities negatively. From the vantage of heterosexual language, he and she are vicious people. He cannot "understand" or "forgive" the girl's homosexual relationship, for he is yet committed to the heterosexual vantage.

Significantly, the man grafts onto the "things [they've] had and done" an adopted framework. He understands these "things" not from his immediate experience, but from a mediator, which is, in this case, heterosexual language. The girl obviates this mediator in that she appreciates her actions and relationships directly (hence her use of pronouns), and this approach is what she convinces the man to acquire in the following lines.

"Let's not say vice," she said. "*That's* not very polite."

i. "*That*": *Saying vice*

"Perversion," he said.

i. "Perversion" is a rather harsh word to use to label the girl's homosexuality. It intensifies "vice." It is not an explicitly echoed word as "vice" was, but appears to be produced independently by the man. Its introduction can be regarded as

an instance of the man's heterosexual ideology coalescing into a linguistic form. It represents the heterosexual ideology's grossest antagonism against homosexuality.

....

"I'd like it better if you didn't use words like *that*," the girl said. "There's no necessity to use a word like *that*."

i. "That": *Perversion*

The pronoun "that" endophorically refers to "perversion." Any ambiguity concerning the antecedent seems far less (if any at all) than that associated with the girl's use of "it" to represent *homosexuality*. As discussed earlier, sense is paralleled to the heterosexual ideology, and senselessness is paralleled to sexually non-normative ideology. Note that when the topic matter is that of the heterosexual ideology, the language retains sense and names are made conspicuous (e.g. the antecedent-pronoun correspondence of "perversion" and "that"). Speech that is sensible, therefore, is conditioned upon the promotion of heterosexual values.

ii. "That": *Perversion*

"What do you want me to call *it*?"

i. "It": *Homosexuality*

The man has evidently nametagged "perversion" to the girl's homosexuality. As he did in the interaction in the opening conversation ("I can't." "You mean you won't."), the man attempts to make sensible the girl's words. Making sense of the girl's words, however, means rendering them through the heterosexual ideology. The man attempts, here, to solidify a name for the "it," which the girl has not named. Providing a name such as "perversion" would remedy any ambiguities of sense which the girl has occasioned through her omission of antecedents. The name ("perversion") that the man can give to the girl's homosexuality emerges from the man's ideological commitments to heterosexuality and so, inherently negatively characterizes the girl's sexuality and her relationship with the other girl.

"You don't have to call *it*. You don't have to put any name to *it*."

i. "It":

Homosexuality

As in the first exchange in which the man tries to make sense of the girl's words ("I can't." "You mean you won't."), and the girl resists the man ("I can't.... That's all that I mean."), the girl battles the man here on his priorities and assumptions. The issue of sense climaxes in that the girl proposes to not name and to sustain the senselessness. She recognizes that the only available words to discuss her homosexuality in the heterosexual language are negative words such as "vice" and "perversion." Her position to not name repudiates an essential, if not the essential, component of language. The man has concerned himself with maintaining and establishing sign-signified correspondence, which takes the form of antecedent-pronoun correspondence in this conversation.

The man's concerns are linguistic: his view of the "things [they've] had and done" is mediated by the ideologies of his language. The girl's priorities are opposite those of the man: she judges the "things [they've] had and done" by the experiences themselves divorced of language. Her concerns are not linguistic. She appears senseless in that matter, but her concerns allow her to view herself and her relationships without the burden of a constrictive ideology. The linguistic and sense concerns of the man are, as she tells him here, superfluous.

ii. "It": *Homosexuality*

"That's the name for *it*."

i. "That": *Perversion*

ii. "It": *Homosexuality*

"No," she said. "We're made up of all sorts of things. You've known *that*. You've used *it*² well enough."

i. "That": *That we're made up of all sorts of things.*

ii. "It": *Homosexuality/ The girl's homosexuality/ That we're made up of all sorts of things/ That you've known that we're made up of all sorts of things*

iii. The shift in antecedents corresponds to a shift in control of the conversation. Prior to these sentences, the man has determined the direction and topic matter

of the conversation. The girl has responded to the man's invective against her with ineffectual and tepid language ("Let's not say vice. That's not very polite"; "I'd like it better..."; and, "There's no necessity..."). When the man is on the offensive and in control, the antecedent-pronoun correspondence is sustained. "It" remains attached to "homosexuality," and "that" remains attached to "perversion." When the girl here introduces a topic of her own choosing (one in which she evidently believes strongly and which best represents her motivations for being with the other girl) and thus determines the direction of the conversation, the antecedents of the pronouns "that" and "it" mutate to reflect her acquisition of power.

Beginning with "it" here, the pronouns no longer have definite antecedents. The pronouns reasonably manage to stand in for many phrases, ideas, and experiences. The multiplicity of reasonable antecedents linguistically reflects the girl's admonition, "we're made up of all sorts of things."

These sentences are some of the first indications that the man is sexually non-normative, a topic that the man is very sensitive about. The girl denies the man's belief that "perversion" is the name for homosexuality on the basis that "we're made up of all sorts of things." Given that and that the man has evidently "known that," it is reasonable to believe that the man has either known non-heterosexuality because he himself, like the girl, has homosexual attractions, or that he has known non-heterosexuality beyond the confines of perversion through the girl's homosexuality. I side on the former due to the apparent personal nature of the man's knowledge of being "made up of all sorts of things." However, neither option can be absolutely confirmed or rejected based solely on these lines.

"You don't have to say *that* again."

- i. *"That": That we're made up of all sorts of things/ [I've] known that we're made up of all sorts of things/ [I've] used it ["it" from the preceding line] well enough*

The first two options seem reasonable antecedents. The third, though within the immediate sentence is reasonable, contextually seems unlikely as an option. Should the issues which the man backs away from be "you've used [the

girl's homosexuality and/or relationships] well enough," the reason for the girl leaving the man would presumably be out of spite. He would have taken advantage of her, and she is now separating from him because he is a bad partner.

Given that there remains a camaraderie between the couple and given that the girl offers and nearly commits to returning to the man ("But I'll come back. I told you I'd come back. I'll come back right away."), it seems unlikely that the girl is leaving the man because of what he did in the past. It is more likely that the girl is leaving him – at least for the time being – to pursue a homosexual relationship absent of the man.

If the third antecedent is not an option, the other options centralize the man's homosexuality. Tellingly, the man says "again," which implies that the girl has urged the man in the past to pursue his own homosexuality. There are suggestions throughout the story ("I understand. That's the trouble. I understand [said the man]. 'You do,' she said. 'That makes it worse, of course'." And: "But when we do understand each other there's no use to pretend we don't [she said]. 'No,' he said. 'I suppose not.'" (Hemingway 308)). These suggestions are not accusatory however. They are phrased communally such that the man and girl are paired in their desires. Now that the girl is separating from that pairing, each person must choose how to proceed without the crutch of the other. The man, ostensibly, has relied upon his partnership with the girl in the past to obscure his homosexuality, whether through private or public denial.

Now that the girl is leaving the man, the man must confront his homosexuality: he no longer has the crutch of the heterosexual relationship to prevent himself. Or he no longer has the appearance of heterosexuality, which may have furnished him with a public "virtue" to accommodate his private "vice." The latter seems more likely given the girl's accusation "You've use it well enough." As before however, there are many more possibilities than there are certainties.

"Because *that* explains *it* to you."

- i. *“That”*: *That we’re made up of all sorts of things/ You’ve known that we’re made up of all sorts of things/ Homosexuality*
- ii. *“It”*: *Homosexuality/ That we’re made up of all sorts of things/ You’ve known that we’re made up of all sorts of things*
- iii. The ambiguity of the antecedent of “that” in the line preceding this one (“You don’t have to say that again.”) makes the antecedent of “that” in this line all the more troublesome to determine. In fact, it is difficult to know if the pronouns “that” and “it” maintain their antecedents at all.

The topic that the man chafes at (“You don’t have to say that again.”) is that “we’re made up of all sorts of things” or that he has known that “we’re made up of all sorts of things.” Both possibilities are refutations of homosexuality as “perversion.” This line, then, serves as an explanation of the girl’s homosexuality, her relationship with the other woman, and the man’s homosexuality. The negative rendering of homosexuality has been dissolved. Correspondingly, the pronouns “that” and “it” can connect to several antecedents. The sense of this line is not conspicuous nor absolute: this is the linguistic refutation of the heterosexual language’s prioritizing of sense, which is sign-signified correspondence. As a multiplicity of sexualities are offered in response to heterosexuality as the only sexuality, a multiplicity of antecedents is offered for these pronouns.

“All right,” he said. “All right.”

- i. The girl has won the conversation. She has convinced the man. From this precipice, the rest of the story unfurls. The man concedes to the girl’s desires to leave him, and he embarks upon a reconceptualization of his ideology. He has been detached from the heterosexual ideology by this quote’s saying, at which point his sea change commences (“strange” and “different” invade the story).

Strangeness and Difference in the Story’s Final Act

20 As discussed at length above, the man relies upon the heterosexual ideology. His efforts to dissuade the girl of her homosexual relationship can be figured as sustentions of a normative ideology. Not only is the man at personal risk from the girl’s homosexual relationship, but the

heterosexual ideology is at risk of destabilization: the success of the girl's relationship limns the applicability, intelligibility, and, therefore, claim to normativity that the heterosexual ideology presumes.

21 Hardly can it be said that the girl is a minor or simple character in this story. However, given that the final scene of the story does not include the girl, the story's central character is the man (in true Hemingway fashion). The girl is, I would argue, well committed to her relationship with the other woman. Though she does behave far more kindly and politely to the man than he to her, which perhaps takes the mask of ambivalence regarding her sexual choices, her sexuality and her recognition of her sexuality are never dubious. The titular "sea change" refers to her not at all or only in that she has metamorphosed prior to this story.

22 The man is, however, the journeyer in this story. We witness his sea change in which he moves from the heterosexual ideology to a sexually non-normative ideology. This movement is variously figured through a matrix of binary crossings, each iteration of which carries particular resonances. They are:

Out of place	In place
Periphery	Center
Foreign	Domestic
Uncomfortable	Comfortable
Uncanny	Canny ³
Strange	Norm
Difference	Norm

When we first happen upon the couple, we are told that they looked "out of place." Their skin, recently tanned, suggests a vacation. They are marked as different, and their difference is reticulated with foreignness. Though they have recouped centrality in the form of metropolitan Paris, they bear the mark of the periphery. They are indeed "out of place." They are, however, residents of Paris, given that James the barman "knew these two" – a counter suggesting that they

³ I highly recommend Rubóczki regarding the uncanny: her approach to the man's sea change is considerably parallel to mine, though from a psychoanalytic perspective, in that she finds the reification of normative binaries inapplicable to the story. Rather, she finds the man's ultimate conception of non-normative sexuality more naturally aligned with the uncanny which can contain the man's heterosexuality whilst successfully admitting his voyeurism and the girl's homosexuality.

are in place. There is a paradoxical convergence of foreignness/domesticity, periphery/centrality, and out of place/in place.

23 In Conversation 2, the man, speaking from the heterosexual ideology, attempts to locate and stabilize the girl's homosexuality in the words "vice" and "perversion" - attempts to put her homosexuality in place, so to speak. However, the words "vice" and "perversion" locate homosexuality past the borders of the normative ideology. They locate it as foreign and peripheral. This firm binary of in/out commits its user to identify himself and the objects of his perception categorically as one or the other. That is, each person and each object is identified as in/out with certainty, the same certainty that the man purposed in his attempts to name the girl's homosexuality.

24 The girl's coup de grâce in which the man submits to her ("Because that explains it to you"), reflected in the resistance to naming and the indeterminacy of the pronoun's antecedents, initiates the man's distancing from the heterosexual ideology and his acceptance of a sexually non-normative ideology. The trajectory is heralded with the words "strange" and "difference." "Strange" naturally recalls, as so many commentators have noted, Ariel's song in *The Tempest* from which the term "sea-change" comes. Remarking upon Alonso's status, Ariel sings to Ferdinand, "Full five fathoms thy father lies/... Nothing of him that doth fade/ But doth suffer a sea-change/ Into something rich and strange" (1.2.400-405). The pairing of "rich" and "strange" positively posit Alonso's metamorphosis. "Strange" here may be regarded fondly as a kind of positive exoticism – a crossing of the final boundary one might say. We should note the history of the word however: the OED records "strange" as deriving from the Latin *extrāneus*, meaning "external, foreign."

25 However, "strange" in *The Tempest* is used in ways which reflect the play's preoccupations with the transgression and complication of border rather than the preservation of border. The island of *The Tempest* is, of course, on the periphery, or perhaps even without orientable place. The colonial reflections within the play suggest a dissemination of power emanating from a centered nation; that, though, is complicated by the political displacement that Prospero has suffered in that he no longer carries the titles or enforceability of his home nation. Magic and mundanity compete and complement. The island is a place of political and historical opportunity and freedom, reflected in Gonzalo's utopic Golden Age proposals (2.1.142-164), despite the inherently forbidding presence of beings indigenous (and therefore with claim) to the island. It is a place in which

dynasties simultaneously are rescued (Prospero to Miranda) and alchemized (Miranda and Ferdinand). Too, in the first use of “strange” in the play, Prospero, in describing his art, recollects, “In dignity, and for the liberal arts/ Without a parallel; those being all my study,/ The government I cast upon my brother/ And to my state grew stranger, being transported/ And rapt in secret studies” (1.2.73-77). While at home in Milan, he is “transported” out of place, made strange. Yet while on the island, with which his strange state is most apposite, he is politically, culturally, and spatially displaced.

26 The same strangeness, the same complication of border, attends the man in Hemingway’s “The Sea Change.” Strangeness intrudes upon the man in its first use: “his voice sounded strange to him.” Notably, the man recognizes the strangeness, yet the strangeness of his voice evidently surprises him. Its presence arrives upon the heels of the man urging the girl to leave. Some commentators have regarded the man’s urging the girl to “go on” contextualized by his desire for the girl – to “tell [him] all about” her affair with the other woman when she comes back to him (Hemingway 309).⁴ Others regard the man as detaching from heterosexuality and embarking upon homosexuality.⁵ In either interpretation, save for Rubóczki’s, the man “embraces,” to use Pope’s word, vice. The man’s sea change is, to them, an acceptance not of a sexually non-normative ideology but of a non-normative sexuality characterized by vice, which continues to sustain the ugly connotations that the man had levied against the girl in Conversation 2.

27 I baulk at the interpretation in which the man suddenly capitalizes upon his voyeuristic opportunity. These critics have regarded the man’s desire to “tell [him] all about it” as a kind of epiphany in which the man could benefit from the girl’s affair. However, the girl has already offered the man a voyeuristic window to her affair at the beginning of the story: “‘It doesn’t do any good to say I’m sorry’ [she said]. ‘No.’ ‘Nor to tell you how it is?’ ‘I’d rather not hear’” (Hemingway 306). His early resistance to voyeurism suggests that the girl’s departure from the relationship and physical departure from the man signify another problem, and that his later desire to be told of the girl’s relationship is superficial. Specifically, the man responds to the girl’s question “‘You want me to go?’” with “‘Yes,’ he said seriously. ‘Right away.’... ‘Now,’ he said” (Hemingway 309). The immediacy with which the man wishes the girl’s departure does not align

⁴ See: Tylers and Rubóczki.

⁵ See: Kobler; Comley and Scholes; and Bennet.

with any sudden realization of voyeuristic titillation: there would be no necessity for immediacy, for the voyeuristic payout would inherently be delayed.

28 I baulk as well at critics' claims that the man has embraced a vice characterized as he conceived of it when condemning the girl's homosexuality. As discussed, strangeness is central to *The Tempest*, and the in/out binary is seriously complicated. The same complexity and boundary crossing are what the man embraces. The ideology from which he distances himself is the heterosexual ideology, which demands certainty and the preservation of border. Should he embrace non-normative sexuality contextualized as vice he is transported to the non-normative pole, but the essential fixity of the binary and its border are preserved.

29 The only vocalization of "strange" occurs in the following dialogue between the man and James the barman:

"I'm a different man, James," he said to the barman. "You see in me quite a different man."

"Yes, sir?" said James.

"Vice," said the brown young man, "is a very strange thing."

...

"You're right there, sir," James said. (Hemingway 309)

"Strange," bearing the allusive significance of *The Tempest's* treatment of border, is paired with "vice," thereby complicating the strict in/out, center/periphery, domestic/foreign, normative/non-normative (which the man specifically attached to "vice") binaries. If we regard the latter lines of Pope's "An Essay on Man," from which the man derives "vice," we witness a similar complication of border:

Vice is a monster of so frightful mien,
As, to be hated, needs but to be seen;
Yet seen too oft, familiar with her face,
We first endure, then pity, then embrace.
But where th' extreme of vice, was ne'er agreed:
Ask where's the North? at York, 'tis on the Tweed;
In Scotland, at the Orcades; and there,
At Greenland, Zembla, or the Lord knows where:
No creature owns it in the first degree,

But thinks his neighbour farther gone than he.
Ev'n those who dwell beneath its very zone,
Or never feel the rage, or never own;
What happier natures shrink at with affright,
The hard inhabitant contends is right.

Pope, perhaps ironically, attempts to geographically locate the border of vice to give it firm boundary, yet “th’extreme of vice... was ne’er agreed.” He only succeeds in relativizing “vice,” which in turn subverts the certitude with which the first four lines treat “vice.” The certitude of one’s rightness is similarly challenged in the final lines: those who are most liable to vice are those most close to it. The complication of border pervading *The Tempest* is echoed in Pope’s poem. That is, the in/out, center/periphery, domestic/foreign, normative/non-normative binaries do not have clear delineation: “vice” becomes relativized, unsteady certitude.

30 Critics have nearly unilaterally quoted the first four lines of Pope’s poem. They track the man’s narrative trajectory from endurance, to pity, to embrace. It is no wonder that they regard the final movement of the story as an embrace of vice, with vice maintaining its earlier negative connotations. Yet, in ignoring the latter lines of the poem, they have foregone the relativistic figurations so crucial to understanding the man’s trajectory in “The Sea Change.” The man acknowledges the relativity of “vice” and echoes Pope’s latter lines in the quote, “Vice is a very strange thing.” There is a temptation to read this line as the man yet subscribing to a firm in/out binary in that “strange” can refer to foreignness, which implicitly substantiates the domestic/foreign binary. Further, one might interpret the man’s quote, especially given that the line is interjected by an emphasis on the man’s foreignness (“said the brown young man”), as sustaining the certitude of the binary, yet depositing the man on the “out” pole of it. This interpretation would presumably support critics with the view that the man embraces vice, a euphemism for homosexuality.

31 However, the line following, “You’re right there, sir,” paradoxically endorses and subverts the firmness of the binary. The line can be read bivalently: either James agrees with the man’s statement (endorsing the foreign/domestic and, therefore, in/out binary), which would confine the man to the “out” pole, or James indicates the man’s seat, putting him “in place” and giving him centrality. Bordering “You’re right there, sir,” there are two sentences in which the patrons at the bar move to “make room” for the man so that the man “would be quite comfortable.” The bar has

been established prior as the place of comfort: immediately following the man's utterance of "perversion" in Conversation 2, the narration cuts to a scene at the bar between the patrons and James. We are told that "The two at the bar looked over at the two at the table, then looked back at the barman again. toward the barman was the comfortable direction." The couple, or the area in the periphery of the bar, is established as uncomfortable, whereas the direction toward the barman is comfortable. The man has spatially journeyed from discomfort to comfort, from periphery to center, and from, as at the story's open, "out of place" to in place.

32 There is a temptation to regard the man's movement to the bar as an embrace of his homosexuality. In the lines in which the barman's direction is established as comfortable, the patrons and the couple are each referred to as "the two." This correspondence may lead one to believe that there is a comparison between these two "couples." One may well take the bar's patrons as a couple standing for homosexuality and the peripheral couple standing for heterosexuality; that they are paired with comfort and discomfort, respectively, may lead one to interpret the man's movement to the bar as a movement away from an uncomfortable heterosexuality toward a comfortable homosexuality. I would caution against such a determinate reading however. The patrons at the bar are suspiciously never given gender in "The Sea Change." The bar cannot be said to be the place of men and therefore male homosexuality. Too, the man and girl depart on good terms. It appears that they will see each other again, at the very least, and likely be romantic with one another. The man maintains heterosexual attraction.

33 Rather, the man's journey, figurative and literal, is not from one sexuality to another, but from one ideology to another, and is accompanied by a recognition of his homosexual attractions and non-normative sexuality. His journey is one of self-reflection, which is simultaneously a renunciation of the heterosexual ideology. Immediately after the man's vocalization of vice's strangeness, and after the narrator has described the man as "brown" and "young," the man sees his reflection and sees that his statement to James – "You see in me quite a different man" – is quite true. Prior to the man's reflection in the mirror and the narrator's description of the man, there are no descriptions of the man individually. There is significant description given to the girl and even to James. The moments in which the man is physically described always are filtered through a description of the man within the couple, and even those are small in number.

34 The emphasis on the man's individual appearance suggests that the man has detached from an identity defined by his relationship with the girl. He ceases to "see" himself in such terms, but

now sees himself independent of his heterosexual relationship. Again, I caution against an interpretation in which the man renounces heterosexual attractions. Rather, I take him to renounce the heterosexual ideology. The binaries listed in the matrix above remain; their borders, however, are porous to the extent that their poles cease to delineate and instead converge.

35 So indeed, there remains the man's "difference." What kind of difference, peculiarly, goes unnamed. "Strange," following its pairing with "vice," ceases to be a descriptor of the man, and so the spatiality of domestic/foreign and center/periphery is dissolved. What is left is "difference," which the man recognizes, but does not evaluate. Rather, it is James who regards the man's look positively: "You look very well, sir... You must have had a very good summer." James recognizes the different look of the man, yet condones the man's difference and provides a place for it ("You're right there, sir"). The man is both in and out.

36 It may be optimistically interpreted that the paradoxical crossings of the binaries' borders in "The Sea Change" are a detachment of the heterosexual ideology from normativity, and that normativity itself is restructured to entail heterosexual and non-heterosexual preferences, the combination of which constitutes a novel non-heterosexual ideology. I would argue that it is this ideology that the man acquires in his final placement at the bar, and in which he embodies and conceives a host of porous binaries. I believe that this ideology enables the man's homosexual attractions but does not demand his enactment of them. Rather, the man has "embraced" the girl's homosexuality and his own non-normative sexuality. The various paradoxes and indeterminacies that attend the story's final act may be taken as the man's response to the heterosexual ideology, a resounding parallel to the girl's own response of senselessness to the language of the heterosexual ideology.

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