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New Waves – Feminism, Gender, and Podcast Studies

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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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Introduction: New Waves – Feminism, Gender, and Podcast Studies

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1 Taking its cue both from discussions about the ‘fourth wave’ of feminism that largely takes place in digital environments and from the growing interdisciplinary interest in podcasts, this special issue sets out to explore the aesthetics and politics of this medium with regard to matters of gender and sexuality. The field of podcast studies, advanced by pioneer Richard Berry (2006) and first substantial critical volumes such as Llinares et al.’s *Podcasting. New Aural Cultures and Digital Media* (2018) and Spinelli and Dann’s *Podcasting: The Audio Media Revolution* (2019), evolves out of (digital) media and cultural studies, with increasing input from fan studies in particular. It thus partakes in a tradition of inquiry with close ties to feminist scholarship and concerns with agency and power. While podcasts engage with a huge array of topics across all spheres of pop culture, including erotic fan fiction as well as LGBTQ+ issues, they are seen as a medium characterized by orality and audience participation, offering intimate and authentic settings for commentary and information (still relatively) free from the constraints of editorship and commercialism of other media.

2 As such, podcast and gender and queer studies appear to be a ‘natural’ fit – not least because podcasts, as oral medium, draw our attention to a constitutive part of ‘personhood’: If one considers its etymological roots, stemming from the Latin ‘personare’ (“to sound through”), it captures, Stacey Copeland reminds us, “the human understanding of the sound of voice as an indisputable part of both an embodied self and performative identity” (222). Following Copeland’s argument further, podcasting also “offers a powerful platform for a listening experience that can challenge visual-philic heteronormative and gendered expectations by engaging with the listener through the affective use of sound” (210).

3 Before delving any deeper into the relations between the medium’s affordances and gender and queer studies, a brief definition seems necessary (avid fans and seasoned scholars may skip this paragraph and the next): podcasting refers to a means of distributing MP3 audio files across the internet and to “a collection of cultural work and practice that spans journalism, performance art, comedy, drama, documentary, criticism and education” (Llinares et al. 5). Taking its name originally from a combination of broadcasting and an Apple product (iPod), podcasts are technically defined by their online-subscription feature (to a webpage’s RSS feed – meaning ‘really simple syndication’) which allows easy access and listening to from everywhere. As statistical research shows, this ‘everywhere’ is typically either ‘on the go’, that is while traveling, walking, or working out, or at home in bed or on the sofa. With the initial

gender gap between listeners now closing¹, the majority of podcast listeners are in their twenties, studying to obtain or already have academic degrees; they also mostly listen on their smart phones using in-ear headphones (see Statistica, 2019). This creates a predominant reception situation in which “the person speaking is literally inside the head, inside the body, of a listener” (Spinelli and Dann 83), a fact that sustains podcasts’ characteristic affordance of offering “intimacy as beyond sex” (77), fostering an isolated individual’s (the listener’s) connection with others through shared emotional experiences and a sense of authenticity and openness that remains, however, hard to pin down theoretically.

4 With podcasts – in comparison to other forms of cultural expression such as theatre or print literature – being easy to make and consume, and (still) largely free of charge, “there’s no lack of free advice on how to get started” (Campbell 36). Any quick literature research will produce, first of all, a plethora of “how to”- instruction manuals, concerning podcast production, online (self)marketing and technical guides (see, for example, Hagedorn, 2018), followed by statistical data analyses, prognosis of the development of the medium and its potential for branding and advertisement (the figures are generally expected to double in the near future), and, furthermore, the medium’s potential in educational contexts. The latter has been emphasised and explored (see, for example, Campbell, 2005; Rosell-Aguilar, 2013; also Llinares et al. 7) even prior to the current moment which arguably ushered in what Maximilian Alvarez calls a “golden age for educational audio” (Alvarez n.p.), even if this is due to necessity rather than ‘organic’ development or choice. This label evokes the earlier proclaimed “golden age” of audio and podcasting in general (see Berry, 2015; Ganesh, 2016; Llinares et al. 6). It refers to the period from the medium’s first emergence in the mid-2000s, from the inclusion of a podcast app on every iPhone, to it turning mainstream somewhere around the year 2014, which saw, aside from a number of facilitating changes in social sharing, produced content, and technologies, the live tour of *Welcome to Night Vale* through North America and Europe and the launch of the podcast success *Serial* as “identifiable landmark” (Berry 171).

5 The idea for this special issue was born in late 2019, and thus just before the onset of the global pandemic which was and will continue to irrevocably change medial practices and speed up digitalization. Now it is hard to imagine a timelier moment than our present one to engage with questions of how to foster knowledge, intimacy, and tolerance across distance. Podcasts offer a strange experience of ‘liveness’ – even if clearly, and in most cases very carefully, scripted and consumed remotely; they combine social distancing with intimacy and

¹ A least in the US, nearly as many women as men now listen to podcasts, see Lazovick (2018).

shared parasociality with comfortable ease, potentially exceeding what streaming series, reading eBooks, or other forms of remote knowledge transmission and teaching can offer. As the present crisis has taught us with regard to all online tools or digital practices, however, this still doesn't make podcasting as democratic and widely accessible by default as one would like. Yet podcasts's value in the context of higher education and their general appeal seem hard to dispute, as they "fit our lives in a way virtual reality headsets may never [do]", Ganesh writes, and "[t]hey liberate our eyes" (n.p.). For they work instead through the "magic" of the human voice, creating shared consciousness and intimate communication aurally (see Campbell 40); and therefore one might agree with Llinares et al. that podcasting generally "seems to possess the advantages of the internet while expelling some of the pitfalls" (2).

6 Especially fictional podcasts share much in terms of narrative forms and performative aspects with radio drama, theatre, but also prose fiction and film (see Sulimma in this volume), meanwhile the advent of interdisciplinary podcast studies signals the medium's recognition as an art form, "with its own unique modes of not just dissemination but also production, listening, and engagement" (Spinelli and Dann 2). Though one might debate how much 'newness' it brings and wherein exactly it lies, podcasting has no equivalent prior to the internet and is typically seen as an "ecosystem" or "distinctive culture" (Ganesh n.p.) within the realm of 'new' digital technology.

7 Dario Llinares (2018) has offered a useful, more specific conception of podcasting as a liminal practice, situated between convergence culture, transmedia storytelling and the dynamics between old and new media (see 127). His emphasis on podcasts' liberating potential, offering freedom from genre and identity constraints, "from disciplinary regimes and traditions, and from sanctioned modes of communication and knowledge production" (Llinares 125), underlines its relevance for gender and queer studies. As do several of the major features of podcasts listed by Spinelli and Dann, in particular that podcasts work through an intimate mode of listening; that they can "thrive on niche global audiences"; that they "are interwoven into social media and as such have a heightened capacity to enhance engagement with, and activate, an audience" (7-8). Added to this is the fact that there is significantly less editing, gatekeeping or censorship and, as a consequence, one finds podcasts dealing with all sorts of issues that would prove much harder, if not impossible to find in other mainstream media. In contrast to radio, for example, Spinelli and Dann explain: "The podcast edit is racier and bolder, and podcasts often contain material most national broadcasting regulators would rarely sanction. Where radio might suggest and allude, podcasting is full frontal" (69).

8 From the perspective of cultural studies, it is especially the engagement with marginalized voices, deviant opinions, or what we might deem narrative transgressions, that reveals podcasting's socio-cultural potential. It lies in the decentring and thus reopening for exploration of relations between text, image, and sound (see Llinares 141; Spinelli and Dann 63). Despite the isolation and loneliness of the podcast listener (due to individual consumption and asynchronous delivery), emotional involvement and personal storytelling are perhaps *the* twin key features of podcasts. Along with the medium's omission of visuals and the customary listening through headphones, this enables a particular kind of deep listening², which bears huge potential for empathy. Moreover, Podcasts have proven to be remarkably successful to date in building a shared sense of intimacy and closeness among fan audiences. In comparison to radio – the customary point of reference in critical studies – podcast audiences are more knowledgeable and actively choose what to listen and subscribe to (rather than frequently and randomly switching channels); this often leads to intense fandom and off-line manifestations of a “hybridized media fandom” (Spinelli and Dann 61; see 13-14; 47), where hosts and listeners get to interact in live events. Podcasting's creation of fan communities which thus might cross over from imagined into ‘real’ ones, presents rich grounds for research, as do the processes of communication between listeners as well as between producers and audience (see the articles by Euritt and Seymour in this volume).

9 Increasingly, one finds successful podcasts being turned into live tours or books, for example the award-winning British podcast *The Guilty Feminist* (published by Virago in 2018), hosted by comedian Deborah Frances-White and marketed as dealing with issues that “all 21st century feminists agree on”. Explaining the evolution of feminism to her audience, the *Guilty Feminist's* author/host emphasises that fourth wave feminism “is like the third wave but with added Twitter and podcasts” (Frances-White 17), meaning that feminists are still deeply concerned with intersectionality but have now taken greater control of means of (online) production of cultural and political content. While thus relating her own political agenda and media practices, she also argues that there is already a fifth wave forming:

All we know so far is that it is about action. It will promote the ideas of the intersectional movement from the third wave, which will allow us more of a mainstream, influential platform. It will take the social-networking capability from the fourth wave and use it to organise and galvanise and turn hashtags into consequences. (17)

² Spinelli and Dann describe it as “an active form of listening that lies between the casual experience of merely ‘hearing’ a radio broadcast and the immersive listening required for a soundscape or montage” (65).

10 Rather than dispute what wave contemporary feminism is currently on – the main question here being if the “increased usage of the Internet is [...] enough to delineate a new era” (Munro 23),³ even though new technologies are widely seen as central to current feminist debates and activism (25), it seems productive to explore podcasting’s role and contribution to it, with this issue being a first small step that might inspire others. With regard to content, there is no shortage of podcasts that address feminist and female topics, for example *Girl Boss*, *Call Your Girlfriend*, *How to be a Girl*, *The Guilty Feminist*, *Stuff Mom Never Told You*, all titles taken from a list recently compiled by Katy Cowan (2019), which suggest, however, a much stronger lean towards liberal feminist issues than concern with intersectionality or trans* identities. While so-called ‘fourth wavers’⁴ commonly define themselves as intersectional feminists and describe their agenda, firstly, as the “attempt to elevate and make space for the voices and issues of those who are marginalized” (Cochrane n.p.), a second major branch of twenty-first century feminism is the ‘leaning in’ variety, popularized by Facebook CEO Sheryl Sandberg, geared towards self-promotion and professional success (see Pruchniewska 25; 28).⁵ The articles in this volume engage with both aspects, without this being the main analytical focus.

11 Considering podcasts’ increasing move from the margins of entertainment culture and knowledge transmission to mainstream centres, they present ample and suitable spaces for “the rapidly expanding conversations about women, feminism and gender equality taking place around the world right now” (Cowan n.p.). Like other popular online formats, such as ‘mommy’ or ‘sex blogs’ for example, especially the “chumcast” variety of podcasts epitomizes the medium’s potential to tackle controversial topics in intimate, casual settings and easy conversational manner (see Korfmacher in this volume). In this way, podcasts engage with and reveal the political potential of digital practices focussed on personal and everyday experience (see Pruchniewska 33), echoing, in fact, the slogan of the second feminist wave: “the personal is political”. This catchphrase captures what podcasting does and it doesn’t. One might argue that the (collective) political risks being obscured by an overemphasis on personal stories, but

³ Geographical and national differences are hugely important here. In countries like Turkey, women make up almost three quarters of social media users (see Munro 23; and Zorlu and Özkan in this volume).

⁴ There is, of course, also a podcast with engages specifically with female empowerment and fourth wave feminism, *The IV Wave Podcast* (2017-2018), co-hosted by author and poet, Mirtha Michelle and entertainment attorney Jamie Baratta.

⁵ See Pruchniewska (2019) for a study of the use of social media in connection to feminist politics of the fourth wave.

the affordances of the medium, undoubtedly foster close listening practices to voices one might otherwise hear differently, or not at all. The central aspect in this context, emphasized by Sienkiewicz and Jaramillo, is that “[t]he privacy and safety of the podcast closes the distance between listeners and hosts’ experiences” (271). While certain subjects might have special affinity for podcasting, “such as sex and psychological play and manipulation” (Spinelli and Dann 10), it is, above all, the often evoked deep “sonorous intimacy” (Llinares et al. 2) of podcasts that makes them an ideal vehicle for dealing with and object for the analysis of gender and LGBTQ+ issues. For it seems inevitable, Llinares et al sum up, that being “a private, silent participant in other people’s interests, conversations, lives and experiences, relating to a subject you are passionate about, generates a deep sense of connection” (Llinares et al. 2). The experience of affective connectivity is the prerequisite for challenging and overcoming borders of all kinds.

12 Beyond thematic content in podcasting and narrative forms that share concerns and lends themselves to analysis from a contemporary feminist vantage point (which I take here explicitly to include intersectionality and queer studies), there is strong medial/metaphorical relation between the waves of feminism and podcasting. Critics usually set the beginning of the fourth wave around the year 2008 (see Munro, 2013; Cochrane, 2013), which coincides with the emergence of podcasting. Meanwhile other voices, prominently among them Nancy A. Hewitt (2012), have argued for the need to reconsider the popular and pervasive metaphor of feminism’s waves⁶ – that is, their perception as grand sweeping oceanic waves, which does little, in fact, to capture historical realities of the struggles, progression, and achievements of (global) feminisms. As Hewitt suggests, the wave metaphor might be regenerated by drawing on another, more adequate model, namely radio waves. The radio wave analogy introduces greater human agency, as radio waves appear less as ‘natural’ events, nor as a single, unified powerful surge: they are composed of long and short waves, determining the frequency of the broadcasted signal. They disseminate information and “their use involves the intervention of women and men to shape, transmit, and listen to the messages” (Hewitt 660); this also entails recognizing the potential of a once new technology (radio) rather than of an old force of nature (oceanic waves) “to enhance the civic knowledge and participation of ordinary men and women” (659). Hewitt’s reconsideration of the feminist wave metaphor, when applied to podcast studies, a new medium that is seen as the continuation of radio, reveals them as an important part of digital and twenty-first century intersectional feminist practices.

⁶ See also Jo Reger’s *Different Wavelengths* (2005) and Hewitt’s *No Permanent Waves* (2010).

13 The focus on disembodied voices, so central to podcasting, bears potential for feminist studies not only to move beyond “visualphilic tendencies” (Copeland 209), but to explore how voice becomes “a site where gender is naturalized and denaturalized at the same time” (Schlichter 47), how sound production and material voice might challenge and ‘queer’ perceptions of gender and sexuality (see Copeland; Gregory in this volume – and, as a counter example, Zorlu and Özkan’s study on female streamers using video). Furthermore, the confrontation with disembodied voices and the activity of “listening in”⁷ – which is akin to eavesdropping and specially compatible with thrilling or taboo subjects such as crime, eroticism, pornography – fosters a particular narrative intimacy, as cognitive research suggests that the brain works harder to engage with audio stories than with visual ones (see Spinelli and Dann 74). In different ways, depending on their genre, podcasts can potentially aid the overcoming of boundaries (though long-term impact studies of their effect are lacking). This specifically includes barriers created by (however unconscious or deliberate) judgement by heteronormative listeners with regard to the identity of a podcast’s characters, hosts, or guests (cf. 87). Lukasz Swiatek (2018) captures this in his notion of podcasts as intimate “bridging medium”, which highlights, once more, their ability to generate a sense of intimacy despite a lack of physical proximity, to facilitate access to new knowledge, and to bridging socio-cultural divides between individuals and group; which is why LGBTQ communities have employed podcasts to unite and achieve communicative and educational goals (see 173, 179-180)⁸.

14 Fascinating as the medial specificity of podcasting and their potential ‘reach’ are, as a contribution to the expanding research field of podcast studies, this special issue also takes seriously the critical warning uttered by Julie Shapiro, executive producer of the podcast network *Radiotopia*, in an interview in 2016. Aware of the increasing hype surrounding podcasts as a new digital media, she said: “That’s a dangerous place where it is all function, no form” (cited in Spinelli and Dann 1). Indeed, we might be better off substituting the designation of podcasting’s “golden age” with that of an important “transitional moment”, but also a moment, as Spinelli and Dann note, “in which established practices are finally beginning to crystallize” (15). The time has come to look at forms as well as functions, at their interactions and to seek critical approaches which present “close analytical listenings” (5) without losing site of podcasts’ cultural situatedness and their special affordances. The contributions to this

⁷ See, for example, Grace Gist’s fascinating study of intimacy and voice in *Welcome to Night Vale* (2018).

⁸ An early case study of this aspect is King and Sandquist’s (2008).

issue, by early career and already more established scholars, all break new ground in trying to achieve this.

15 This brings me, finally, to the overview of the contents of the six articles. Anne Korfmacher looks at the porn review podcast *Girls on Porn* (2019-). This first case study, an example of a popular “chumcast”-style podcast, centres around the question if and how pornography can be an ethical expression of sexuality. The analysis explores how the podcast medium’s aural form – diametrically opposed to the voyeuristic visuality of mainstream pornography – shapes and enables the female hosts and their guests’ assertion of sexual agency, in their commentary of pornographic videos and the negotiation of personal erotic experiences. The article makes visible the characteristic tension in the medium’s creation of both private ‘safe space’, anonymity, and shared, public sociability. Alyn Euritt approaches the creation and conception of intimacy, almost reflexively referred to as a key affordance of podcasts, from a different angle. Analysing the first season of *Within the Wires* (2016), an alternate reality fiction podcast which takes the form of instructional relaxation tapes, her contribution focuses on how repetition (of specific lines, phrases, and memories by the narrator’s voice) and aural recognition (by the listeners) interact and form a means to construct intimacy and connections among a fan public. Acts of listening and recognition are also central to Chase Gregory’s reading of a 2014 episode of the popular storytelling podcast *The Moth*, which uncovers how gender, race, and class might attach to certain voices. Performer Sarah Jones, who tells her personal story of racial stereotyping and the dangers of West Coast jaywalking in a myriad of different voices, literally speaks these categories of identity into being on the podcast, only to challenge the fixity of these signs, showcasing the simultaneously disruptive and productive potential of speech.

16 With *Alice Isn’t Dead* (2016-8), the focus remains on the particular affordances of serialized, but in this case fictional, podcast storytelling. Maria Sulimma explores how the narrative represents (female) mobility and queer love, paying special attention to intersectional resonances and intertextual echoes of the literary and filmic trope of the ‘road trip’. While the podcast successfully develops queer temporalities and a capitalist critique over the course of its three seasons, its ending brings an inconsistent turn toward homonormativity. Another trope popularized through contemporary film and Tv series, though a much less enabling and instead discriminatory one, is at the heart of Jessica Seymour’s analysis of the actual-play comedy and adventure podcast *The Adventure Zone* (2014-). The “bury your gays” trope captures the disproportionate frequency with which LGBTQ+ characters suffer stereotypical representations and are being ‘killed off’ in contemporary mainstream media. The portrayal of queer characters in *The Adventure*

Zone changed from adherence to subversion of the trope, due to criticism by the podcast's audience. According to Seymour, this shows the potential of the podcast medium to instigate reciprocal change and to offer education in gender and sexuality for creators and listeners alike.

17 Deniz Zorlu and Nazlı Özkan examine the experiences of female streamers and podcasters on *Twitch* Turkey through interviews conducted with 35 respondents, thus adding a welcome empirical perspective and a focus on a different, specific national context. Their case study also broadens the focus to include online practices and narratives crucial to contemporary feminisms beyond podcast studies and the premise of oral media. Considering *Twitch*'s status as one of the currently most widely visited social media sites and biggest online game streaming platforms, Zorlu and Özkan ask how gender identities and geographical location shape streamers' experiences and usage of *Twitch* Turkey. While also carving out spaces for the formation of female solidarity, the streamers are affected by a combination of patriarchal pressures and a neoliberal, postfeminist thrust for aggressive competitiveness amongst themselves for viewership and income opportunities.

18 Jointly, the contributions to this issue testify to the diversity of podcasts and the critical approaches to this digital medium, bringing together cultural and media studies, fan studies, sociology, and narratology. Above all, they demonstrate podcast studies' manifold intersections with the concerns and political struggles of contemporary feminisms and gender and queer studies. They probe the medium's disruptive potential inherent in the forms, subgenres and narrative strategies of the selected examples. While these can offer no more than a glimpse into what more 'is out there', still awaiting discovery and recognition, this issue will hopefully spark further research at the intersection of digital feminism, narratives, and podcast studies.

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Reviewing Pornography: Asserting Sexual Agency on *Girls on Porn*

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Abstract

Can pornography ever be an ethical expression of sexuality? Laura and Rachel, hosts of the podcast *Girls on Porn* (2019-), participate in this ongoing discourse by reviewing professional and amateur pornographic videos on their podcast. Their aim is to help their listenership find ethical pornography and, in the course of reviewing a selection of pornographic content each episode, to explicitly subvert expectations about mainstream pornography by primarily focussing on the performance of women's sexual pleasure. The podcast makes use of the popular format of the "chumcast" shows—podcasts that thrive on the casual conversation and easy banter of their hosts (cf. McHugh). The popularity of this format may be explained by the unique affordances of the podcast medium, heightening feelings of intimacy, authenticity and embodiment (Llinares, Berry and Meserko). This article explores how the podcast medium's aural form impacts the hosts' assertion of their sexual agency in their commentary of the pornographic videos they watch as well as in the negotiation of their personal erotic experiences. The affordances of the podcast allow the hosts and their diverse guests to affirm their sexual agency and express their erotic fantasies in a safe space by providing an intimate atmosphere that prompts a paradoxical sense of anonymity as well as a parasocial connection to their listenership. Importantly, it also enables the hosts to mediate the pornography they watch through an aural-only medium which allows a distance to the visuality of pornographic videos which overwhelmingly relies on the objectification of female bodies.

Introduction: *Girls on Porn*

1 The recent call for contributions to the Routledge journal *Porn Studies* highlights an apparent shift in how pornography is being conceived and consumed, noting that, though "[p]ornography is traditionally understood as a visual medium [...] more recently it seems we may have entered the era of the frenzy of the aural" ("Call for Contributions on Audio Porn/Porn Audio"). Podcasts containing pornographic content abound and openly market their explicitness in the title of the show—*My Dad Wrote a Porno*, *The Porn Lover Podcast*, *There Will be Porn*, *Porn Stars are People*, *Porn Mom Podcast with Sally Mullins* and the *Porn Director's Podcast*—to name but a few. Podcasting's affinity for sexual content has been previously remarked on by Spinelli and Dann (10) and goes hand in hand with a growing interest in erotica and pornography which, according to gender and sexuality studies scholar Lynn Comella, "has never been higher" (439). This trend is particularly noticeable among younger women, who seem to be increasingly drawn to consume pornography (Fritz and Paul 640).

2 The pornographic content prevalent in such podcast audio material may include explicit narratives, often in the form of confessionals, feature intimate conversations between the hosts and provide interviews with guests from all walks of life—including the porn industry. Pornographic podcasts, the *Porn Studies* call for contributions continues, often participate in a

“podcast boom in commentary and analysis” (“Call for Contributions on Audio Porn/Porn Audio”), an observation I have previously explored with Alyn Euritt in an article on *My Dad Wrote a Porno* (Euritt and Korfmacher, forthcoming). In an attempt to provide contextualising insight into current social, political and cultural phenomena, commentary podcast hosts have taken up the mantle of—mostly amateur or semi-professional—commentators to explore topics ranging from the news to their favourite TV shows to the pornography they consume.

3 *Girls on Porn* (2019-) contributes to the boom both in commentary podcasts and in pornography podcasts as its hosts Rachel and Laura comment on pornographic content from a self-professed feminist angle. The podcast thus also joins the ranks of the growing number of explicitly feminist podcasts such as *Call Your Girlfriend*, *Feminist Killjoys*, *PhD* and *The Guilty Feminist*, whose hosts share a passionate involvement in some form of feminist politics. Hosted on the podcast network *Headgum*, the podcast spans 58 episodes as of early-April 2020, each centring around a review of a different popular search term on pornography aggregate sites. Joining the hosts, 22 of these episodes feature guests that are occasionally active members of the porn industry themselves, such as porn performers Mickey Mod and Jessy Dubai. The hosts’ explicit aim—to provide a helpful guide to more ethical pornography—structures the episodes: the podcast includes informative research about each episode’s specific popular pornographic search term, an overview over some of the more hilarious popular porn titles in that particular category, followed by a review first of a mainstream, often highly criticised pornographic video, and finally of a feminist alternative video the hosts endorse.¹ This podcast structure is interspersed with personal confessionals by the hosts as well as interviews with their guests and overall casual banter.

4 By focussing on both mainstream pornography and feminist alternatives, Laura and Rachel participate in a longstanding feminist discourse of whether or not “such a thing as feminist pornography” can truly exist (Potter 106). Tracing the remnants of the sex wars in the 1970s and 80s in today’s discourse surrounding pornography, this article argues that *Girls on Porn* is a feminist expression of female desire that is particularly suited to this aural medium. Drawing on research from the developing field of Podcast Studies as well as Porn and Feminist Media Studies, I contend that the aural form of the podcast affords the hosts and their diverse guests the opportunity to affirm their sexual agency, express their erotic fantasies and negotiate pornography consumption in a safe space by providing an intimate atmosphere that prompts a paradoxical sense of anonymity as well as a parasocial connection with their listenership.

¹ Mainstream pornography can be distinguished from other forms of pornography through its mass market and wide distribution which is contrasted by pornography with artistic or political goals (Fritz and Paul 640).

Importantly, it also enables the hosts to mediate the pornography they watch through an aural-only medium which allows a distance to the visuality of the reviewed mainstream pornographic videos which overwhelmingly relies on the objectification of women.²

5 I begin by tracing the legacy of the sex wars, briefly outlining the struggles surrounding female agency in relation to pornography discourses in order to analyse how the hosts of *Girls on Porn* review both mainstream and feminist pornography in light of these discourses. The section “Reviewing Mainstream Pornography” explores how Rachel and Laura mediate the common objectification of female bodies in mainstream pornography through their commentary while the subsequent section contrasts the hosts’ description and discussion of feminist alternatives. After considering these two main segments of *Girls on Porn*, I examine the intimate nature of the podcast and its audience reception, which leads me to consider how the podcast provides a platform for both the hosts and porn performers to ‘have a voice’ and be heard in the next section. Finally, I consider podcasting’s supposed “cloak of invisibility” (Meserko 29) to illustrate how *Girls on Porn* manages to provide as a safe space for its hosts, guests and listeners to explore their sexualities in relation to the consumption of pornographic videos.

***Girls on Porn* and the Legacy of the Sex Wars**

6 The legitimacy of pornography in feminist discourse has long been closely tied to its ethical implications, invoking the systematic exploitation of the female body, the suppression of female desire and the fetishization and forceful submission of marginalised groups of people (cf. i.a. Potter, Comella, Heath et al.). Can pornography ever be an ethical expression of the diverse range of female sexuality without maintaining or even actively supporting a capitalist, patriarchal industry that systemically exploits women? And if so, what does pornography need to look like, sound like, be produced like, in order to subvert conventions that, at least in mainstream pornography, indeed tend to lend credit to critical voices that seek to more strongly regulate or even radically outlaw pornography altogether?³

7 This debate is not recent and it takes its cue from the feminist sex wars, spurred originally at a conference in 1982 on the politics of sexuality, “creating a divide over issues broadly relating to sexuality—pornography, erotica, prostitution, lesbian sexual practices, and sadomasochism—and whether such practices are dangerous or pleasurable for women” (Heath

² This article consistently uses woman/women, man/men and female, male to reflect the usage of the terms in the referenced research but I want to explicitly highlight that trans men/women, genderqueer and non-binary folk are not exempt from either pornographic objectification (the opposite is often more likely), nor are they excluded in the *Girls on Porn* pornography reviews (cf. e.g. “Trans with Jessy Dubai”).

³ See Smith and Attwood for an introduction to different popular and academic stances on pornography.

et al. 199). “For obvious enough reasons”, Madhok et al. contend, “much feminist energy has been devoted to establishing women’s capacity for agency” (1), invoking a history of feminist theory focused on women’s systemic lack of agency. Since the sex wars, then, women’s agency in the production, consumption and representation in pornography has been a prominent issue of contention at the heart of the (feminist) ethical dilemma surrounding pornographic images. The discourse remains important and ever present, heightened by an overwhelming sense of what culture writer Katherine Angel refers to as an “anxiety about female sexuality, discomfort with female desire” (54) that seeks to shame and police women pursuing sex for their own pleasure. These anxieties are often connected to concerns about what it means to be a sexual woman in a society shaped by the desires of men and “the increasing ubiquity of pornographic tropes” (ibid.). Angel continues,

discussing sexuality in the public realm relies on two unsatisfying polarities: on the one hand, seeing forms of desire as shaped by culture (which is often misogynistic) and therefore rejecting these; or, on the other hand, embracing pleasure and therefore relinquishing any critical awareness. It is as if there were only two choices – being critical, or being a dupe. (55)

She thus highlights the prominent binary positions that are remnants of the sex wars and have been coined the “danger and choice stances” towards female sexual agency (Heath et al. 221) and which can invoke postfeminist sensibilities focusing on women’s (sexual) ‘empowerment’ (i.a. Gill and Donaghue, Gill, Burkett and Hamilton).⁴

8 Importantly, the hosts’ choice of production and distribution medium affords the creation of a show that is fairly independent from outside intervention and can centre on pornographic content without censoring repercussions to the project. The podcast medium is characterised by a number of such affordances, including the lack of production oversight, editors and corporate policies, universal podcast standards and platform oversight (Berry, ““Just Because”” 25, 21). In a number of episodes, Laura and Rachel talk about their experiences with social media site *Twitter*, which has previously suspended the ‘official’ social media account connected to the podcast (cf. “Passion with Betsy Kenney” and “Threesome with Mickey Mod”). This suspension of social media accounts related to sexual content of any kind is specifically addressed in the hosts’ conversation with porn performer Mickey Mod, who references the so-called “shadow ban” common on social media sites which prohibits particular groups and whole communities from reaching their intended audiences by blocking their content (cf. “Threesome with Mickey Mod”). As a consequence, sex workers are unable to

⁴ For a more in-depth discussion of the sex wars and their impact on the feminist definitions of female (sexual) agency c.f. Heath et al.

easily connect, making it difficult to call out unethical industry standards and oppose laws that, for instance, do not distinguish between sex work and sex trafficking (cf. “Threesome with Mickey Mod”). Laura and Rachel are not dependent on these social media sites which have been known to suspend content of a (potentially) sexual nature. As podcast hosts, they are more independent in their content choices.⁵

9 Thus, podcasting, John L. Sullivan argues, occupies the “status of a uniquely democratic medium” (45) and allows the exploration of even the most niche topics (39). This catering for niche or cult content is further maintained by the fact that, though steadily gaining in listenership and producers, podcasting so far remains peripheral to the dominant media and digital culture (Llinares et al. 6). This creative autonomy and positioning at the media cultural periphery, then, allows for podcasters to cater to “more idiosyncratic cultures of interest” (Llinares et al. 2) and is one of the reasons why podcasts with such explicit interests as *Girls on Porn* manage to exist and even thrive.

Reviewing Mainstream Pornography

10 The hosts of *Girls on Porn* use their podcast platform to point out and criticise a whole range of sexist, racist, ableist and paedophilic tropes that are prominent in mainstream pornography, highlighting their ubiquity and questioning their ethical implications. In particular, Laura and Rachel point out the objectification of female performers and their lack of sexual agency and authentic, that is, believable, pleasure. In an empirical study on the agentic and objectifying sexual scripts in pornography from 2017, Niki Fritz and Bryant Paul analysed 300 pornographic scenes to compare mainstream pornography with “categories of internet pornography aimed at women (including Feminist and For Women)”, focussing on “indicators of both sexual objectification (including stripping, cumshots, aggression, genital focus, and gaping) and agency (including self-touch, orgasm, and directing and initiating sex)” (639). Their conceptualisation of sexual agency stresses concrete acts including “to vocalize individual desires, and to direct, demonstrate, and experience personal pleasure” (Fritz and Paul 642) which is reflected in Laura and Rachel’s respective criticism and praise of the pornography they review. The study’s results suggest precisely what the podcast hosts and many of their guests bemoan in their commentary, i.e. that instances of female objectification are more prevalent in mainstream pornography, whereas explicitly stated queer feminist pornography contains more indicators of female sexual agency (Fritz and Paul 642).

⁵ Considering the proliferation of streaming services such as *Spotify* trying to acquire the exclusive rights to certain podcasts, we might see developments in content censorship over the next months or years, however.

11 The podcast's episode foci as determined by popular search terms provide a first insight into these conventions, including terms such as 'secretary', 'teen', 'big dick', 'gang bang' or 'Asian', on which the hosts of *Girls on Porn* further elaborate during their research segment and subsequent commentary. Often, these dominant tropes are connected to patriarchal conventions that fetishize particular bodies among the performers in mainstream pornography. In their episode on the search term "Big Dick", for instance, Laura and Rachel discuss the unrealistic and fetishized nature of the larger than average penis in pornography and explicitly blame a patriarchal industry for its existence (cf. "Big Dick"). Commenting on both the unrealistic standards these depictions set for men as well as the ensuing struggles of the (in this case) female performers (including "cervical pain" and "shallow BJs"), Laura and Rachel argue that the visual nature of most mainstream pornography is to blame for this unhealthy fetishization of unrealistic bodies ("Big Dick"). In the same episode, they also criticise the blatant aggression towards women in mainstream pornography, referring to the trope of "destroy[ing] that pussy" and the common focus on genitalia shots which seem to overwhelmingly objectify female performers ("Big Dick"). These objectifying tropes of mainstream pornography are criticised by the two hosts, as is the lack of agentic action by the female performer, whose masturbation scene and very vocal sounds of pleasure are judged as unrealistic by both Laura and Rachel (ibid.). This criticism of porn's objectification of women and the female performer's lack of agency during sex scenes constitutes a recurring talking point and discussion starter on *Girls on Porn*.

12 During the podcast episodes, the aural-only podcast medium forces the two hosts to mediate the chosen pornographic videos, thereby distancing their listeners from the visuality of the depicted sexual acts. This medium constraint is an affordance in disguise. Instead of assuming that their podcast listeners have watched the pornographic videos beforehand, Rachel and Laura recount the events in the videos and describe the sets and the performers' actions throughout. This recapitulation of events in the form of retrospective commentary affords a mediation and translation—or 'recodification' (cf. Raible)⁶—of the pornographic content through the feminist lenses of hosts Laura and Rachel and their guests. In its function of bridging a gap between the readers (here: viewers/listeners) of a text (cf. Gumbrecht), the commentary form of *Girls on Porn* frames the mainstream pornographic video as misogynistic and unexciting due to its objectifying (male) gaze and lack of female sexual agency. Thus, when the female performer in the porn video is masturbating, one of the hosts not only criticises the

⁶ According to Wolfgang Raible commentary is based on the phenomenon of recoding (*Umkodieren*): "Wenn wir andere *verstehen*, kodieren wir das, was wir verstanden haben, mit eigenen Mitteln und eigenen Vorstellungen um, wir passen es an unsere eigenen Wissensvoraussetzungen oder unser eigenes Vorverständnis an" (51).

sex act as blatantly fake but also talks about her personal, bodily reaction while watching the scene, confessing: “I was also dry watching it” (“Big Dick”). This mediation highlights the hosts’ affective, embodied responses, thereby, on the one hand, reiterating the fetishizing portrayal of female performers, and on the other, exposing the porn’s failure to have its intended effect on Laura and Rachel—to arouse.

13 The hosts also speculate about the performers’ pleasure during the production of the video, projecting their own experiences on the portrayed women in order to ascertain the authenticity of their supposed sexual pleasure. In the same episode, Rachel and Laura describe the female performer’s very young appearance as making them feel uncomfortable, and note that while she is “doing her best”, she seems “uninspired” and as if the male performer could easily “crush her skull”, considering his size in comparison to hers (“Big Dick”). The predominant sense of unease is palpable in these comments and is not particularly mitigated by the ironic tone in which one of the hosts describes the woman’s “fear and panic in her eyes” (“Big Dick”). Laura and Rachel continue to describe the female performer as a “ragdoll” and a “human pretzel” and declare their detachment from the sexual acts through both explicit statements and sighs that communicate their exhaustion with the, in their eyes, unbelievable sexual performance (“Big Dick”). The hosts’ commentary thereby mediates the visually unpleasurable pornographic content for the listeners and particularly highlights the female performer’s objectification and lack of sexual agency.

14 Hence, the hosts’ affective reactions to the pornographic videos are central the podcast commentary and not only include critical responses to the portrayed sex acts but also very intimate personal responses. While on one hand, the hosts heavily criticise mainstream pornography and its conventions and tropes, on the other, they also provide alternative expressions of female desire by including recommendations and commentary of feminist pornography in similar search term categories.

Reviewing Feminist Pornography

15 Laura and Rachel’s podcast objective, to provide ethical alternatives to mainstream pornography, overlaps with the aim of feminist pornographers to “take the economic, physical, and social vulnerability of performers seriously” (Potter 111). Tracing the history of feminist porn to the sex wars, Potter argues that pornography supporters within radical feminism recognised both the exploitation of women as well as the sexual violence committed against them (105). Instead of fighting for an outright ban of pornography, however, these feminists established alternative visions for pornography which

introduced new workplace ethics that protected female performers' physical safety, gave them the power and status to make their own creative decisions on the set, and eventually, provided the opportunity to direct their own films. (Potter 107)

In keeping with these ideals, feminist pornography introduced stricter rules to provide for their performers' safety, "the director had to put the actor's pleasure and agency at the center of the story, ask for actors' consent for any sexual act, permit actors to revoke consent, and provide clean and safe working conditions" (Potter 108). These are ostensibly minimum standards but according to Potter "[t]he industry is also less regulated than it has ever been" and "[a]lthough federal obscenity laws still exist, they are rarely enforced except when sexual materials feature, or are distributed to, legal minors" (108). The negotiation of industry standards and performer's safety and agency is also addressed on *Girls on Porn* and will be considered in section "Agency & Voice".

16 For now, I want to illustrate how *Girls on Porn* recognises the considerable shortcomings of mainstream porn by contrasting their critical reviews of mainstream pornography with feminist alternatives. In the same episode as analysed before, Laura and Rachel lead into their feminist porn review by highlighting the platform *Deep Blush* as an alternative site for more ethical pornography consumption. So as not to promote mainstream aggregate sites, the hosts only provide links to the feminist porn they review in their episode show notes and even offer their platform subscription passwords to their guests in order to encourage them to consume more ethical alternatives (e.g. "Secretary with Jon Gabrus"). During the commentary itself, the hosts once again describe the sexual scenes as they unfold and talk about their personal reactions to the performers' portrayed pleasure.

17 Whereas the mainstream video discussed in an episode is met with concern and a voiced lack of arousal, the feminist alternative is contrasted as arousing. In one scene of the feminist video, the hosts describe how the female performer 'dry humps' her male co-performer which is met with one of the hosts' note: "just from looking at it—that feels good" ("Big Dick")—which stands in stark contrast to the previous admission about the mainstream video: "I was also dry watching it". What is more, the hosts specifically mention the video's male performer Owen Gray as one of their favourite performers and assess the female performer's aroused reactions to his ministrations as authentic, analysing her body language and identifying with her pleasure: "I believe she came", "her feet were cramping", "her eyes rolled" ("Big Dick").

18 This perceived authenticity is highlighted on multiple *Girls on Porn* episodes whose hosts always emphasise the female performers' pleasure as more centred in feminist/alternative porn. Especially Owen Gray's "quiet check-ins" with his female co-performer are lauded by Laura and Rachel, who note the communication as particularly positive and arousing ("Big

Dick”). This focus on female pleasure highlights that the podcast hosts judge the pornography they consume predominantly based on the assumptions they make regarding the production of the video. Knowing that the pornographic video originated on an alternative porn website, was produced by a feminist pornographer or features performers vocal about ethical pornography, the hosts provide further ‘evidence’ of the presented video’s ethical nature by reflecting on the ostensible authenticity of the female performers’ pleasure. The contrast staged between mainstream and feminist alternative porn on *Girls on Porn* thus mostly centres around the apparent lack of authentic female pleasure in mainstream porn as well as the absence of harmful tropes and objectification in feminist alternatives and vice versa.

Intimacy & Exploring the Self on *Girls on Porn*

19 While the aural nature of the podcast medium distances the hosts and their listeners from the visuality of the criticised mainstream videos, it also affords an intimate discussion of other, more pleasurable, sexual expressions and experiences. Podcasting’s intimacy has been remarked on and explored countless times in podcasting scholarship (cf. also Euritt in this special issue), most notably by Richard Berry whose concept of podcasting’s “hyper intimacy” highlights the heightened sense of closeness podcasting can elicit:

Podcasts are listened to in an intimate setting (headphones), utilizing an intimate form of communication (human speech). Furthermore, in many cases, podcasts are presented by people from within a listener’s own community of interest or by people she/he may already have a relationship with via social media and are frequently recorded in a podcaster’s own personal or domestic space. (“Part of the Establishment” 666)

Especially the so-called “chumcasts”, “in which two or more hosts riff off each other, chatting in a casual or rambunctious manner around a theme, making the listener feel included in a private no-holds-barred conversation” (McHugh 12) seem to appear as particularly intimate in form. These chumcasts, such as *Girls on Porn*, invite listeners who “want a relationship with a presenter/host/story-teller rather than to immerse themselves in a sea of story/sound/visceral experience” (McHugh 16). This sense of a relationship between podcasters and listeners has also been noted by Melanie Piper, who argues that the podcast medium allows hosts to form parasocial bonds with their listeners (48).

20 Llinares et al. also emphasise how the technological affordances of podcasts—such as having to choose one’s podcasts more consciously than radio shows and listening to podcasts through headphones—can elicit a “deeply sonorous intimacy” for the podcast listeners (2):

To be a private, silent participant in other people’s interests, conversations, lives and experiences, relating to a subject you are passionate about, generates a deep sense of connection. Perhaps such immersion into a simultaneously interior and

exterior sonic experience may be the essential reason why podcasts have become so popular: they offer the listener a means to explore the self while simultaneously providing anchoring points in the chaos of a digital and material experience that is increasingly blurred. (2)

Girls on Porn hosts Rachel and Laura explore their personal sexual desires in relation to pornographic videos on the podcast, but also invite their listeners to join in, offering a “deep sense of connection” to their audience, as well as “a means to explore the self”. One *Apple Podcasts* five-star listener review explicitly references the introspective act prompted by the podcast:

I have so many 🧐🧐🧐 [three emojis with monocle] moments listening to this podcast. I held many preconceived notions and wives-tales as truths, but after each episode I walk away with the facts and *a new interest in exploring myself*. I’ve even had the courage to try some new things because of this podcast! I think listening to this every week has helped me understand different facets of my sexuality and of those around me. I can’t wait for each update! Thank you so much for your courage and creativity! (Caycegale!, emphasis added)

Apple Podcasts reviewer “Caycegale!” also notes the “courage” of the two hosts, thanking them for tackling an intimate and potentially taboo topic such as porn consumption which highlights the perceived value of the podcast for its listeners.

21 Other five-star reviewers point to similar aspects of the podcast, particularly illustrating that the podcast “becomes a social event that is akin to the practice of checking in with friends” (Piper 48):

I love Laura and Rachel’s personalities and openness (and voices 🗨️ [emoji sticking out tongue]) and I cannot get enough of them! Thank you so much for this beautiful work of art. (colbyjww)

Love the pod; laura and rachel are hilarious and *super relatable*. Amazing commentary. [...] (Jewelsmariee, emphasis added)

The hosts are funny and *genuine* and it's so refreshing to hear women talk freely about something I've always loved and been so fascinated by! I actually feel like I can talk to people about porn like any other media without feeling weird or “ashamed” now because of this podcast which has been really cool for me. I've even been turned on to some cool stuff and am officially paying for ethical, quality porn which I feel great about :) [...] (Cir49, emphasis added)

The reviewers emphasise the hosts’ relatability, authenticity, confessional engagement with their topic and even more personally, their voices. These comments indicate the sense of intimacy and close connection between hosts and listeners that seems to be elicited by the podcast.

22 This feeling of intimacy and parasocial relationship between podcasters and their listeners seems to be what is most captivating about the podcast medium (Tung n.p.) and can be linked to an increased preoccupation with authenticity, suggested by the informality and confessional nature of many podcasts. Kathleen Collins argues that most conversations on podcasts are “far less structured or planned and more spontaneous, intimate and confessional” than those found in traditional broadcasting (232). Indeed, the conversations on *Girls on Porn* are probably as intimate and confessional as one can get, talking about their personal porn watching habits and discussing their sexual preferences when having sex themselves. As Collins continues, especially in podcast interviews confessional behaviour by both host(s) and interviewee(s) is encouraged (ibid. 232). This confessional nature increases the perceived intimacy and authenticity afforded by the aural podcast medium and is, for instance, illustrated on *Girls on Porn* episode “Secretary with Jon Gabrus” in which their guest opens up about his personal porn watching habits. By establishing parasocial bonds with their listeners through authentically sounding intimate confessionals, then, the hosts create a community of more educated, entertained but also intimately engaged listeners.

Agency & Voice on *Girls on Porn*

23 By broadcasting their commentary of mainstream and feminist pornography as well as their personal sexual and porn experiences, Laura and Rachel’s motivation is both educational but also demonstrates, as Richard Berry celebrates in (amateur) podcasters, “a desire to engage their audience and have a voice” (“Part of” 644). The sense of intimacy invoked by the parasocial relationships of the hosts and their listeners is closely tied to the foregrounding of sound and particularly voice in podcasts. Not only does the human voice imbue digital communication with a greater sense or an “aura” of authenticity, it also reinscribes an embodied experience in ways that previous online media did not (Tulley 263, 259).

24 As feminist scholars and producers of their own podcast *Feminist Killjoys*, PhD Raechel Tiffe and Melody Hoffmann argue, “like the physical body, the voice occupies space” (116). Podcasting thus becomes an act of occupying space, of making oneself heard, of ‘having a voice’. This is especially pertinent considering the spatial dominance of “privileged bodies” and their voices in contrast to marginalized ones (ibid.). Podcasting about pornography on *Girls on Porn* can thus be read as an act of defiance against mainstream objectifying pornography and a celebration of feminist pornography centred around female sexual agency. Laura and Rachel’s podcast commentary not only criticises pornographic content, it also negotiates what it means to be a pornography-consumer in the 21st century and to express sexual desire and pleasure through the production of pornography.

25 *Girls on Porn* creates a platform for porn watchers like Rachel and Laura, on the one hand, and for porn performers to talk about their experiences and struggles in the industry, on the other. As Potter argues:

If mainstream porn makes women hyper-visible, the industry goes to great lengths to make the conditions of their labor invisible—work on porn sets is usually self-regulated, non-unionized, and without benefits of enforceable industry standards for wages and intellectual property—conditions that can contribute to exploitation. (111)

In contrast to mainstream pornography, *Girls on Porn* decreased the “hyper-visibility” of women in favour of making their sexual desires but also their concerns about mainstream pornography audible to the podcast listeners. It also provides a platform to speak about the invisible labour of pornography and to talk about the unregulated working conditions many performers have to face. Sharing his history in the porn industry and employment at kink.com,⁷ podcast guest Mickey Mod talks about his conscious decision not to work for unethical companies which often promote toxic masculinity, stereotypes and/or poor communication that can lead to unsafe situations for performers (cf. “Threesome with Mickey Mod”). He corroborates Potters’ argument with his personal experiences but also highlights that while many companies lack policies to protect performers, “porn is not a monolith” and many performers make conscious choices to participate in and promote only productions they feel comfortable endorsing from an ethical standpoint (“Threesome with Mickey Mod”).

26 In addition to women often being exploited in mainstream pornography, there is also still a lot of stigma around sex work and public knowledge about the industry has not changed as dramatically as porn itself (Potter 113). As a result, many performers are unable to “speak up” because “when performers are harmed or go unpaid, they are caught between a self-regulated industry and a justice system that does not recognize that sex crimes or economic exploitation can occur on a porn set” (ibid.). Unlike most advocates on either side of the discussions around “‘protection’ in the industry” who are not “listening to what performers themselves have to say about the working conditions in the porn industry, and what they want and need to do their jobs without fear” (Potter 109-10), *Girls on Porn* highlights the importance of listening to those implicated in the industry. The podcast, quite literally, invites its audience to listen, to inhabit an intimate aural space that highlights the performer’s voice, their specific inflection, accent, pauses and other linguistic patterns that connect them more deeply to the listeners than, for instance, a written article might.

⁷ Kink.com has been mentioned multiple times on the podcast as providing better working conditions for performers.

27 On episode “Trans with Jessy Dubai”, Laura and Rachel provide a platform for porn performer/“trans adult star” Jessy Dubai to talk about her experiences in the industry and her perspective on pornography as an artform (cf. “Trans with Jessy Dubai”). Recounting her performer history and family struggles, she talks about her start as an escort, how she had to confront serious familial abuse in the early stages of her career and how she finally managed independence starting her Myspace website and working for Kink.com (ibid.). While her experience as a trans woman suffering from abuse conjures up cycles of abuse that might have traumatised her so as to have impacted the way she frames her personal and professional narrative as a success story, the interview with Laura and Rachel also reveals an attempt not to pathologize the porn performer but to listen to her experience, instead. If the discourse around pornography’s ethics is clearly bound up with questions surrounding female sexual agency, it is also about one’s agency to speak about, contextualise and problematise these experiences. In the interview with Rachel and Laura, Jessy Dubai stresses her own pleasure in the porn performances she takes part in and emphasises her personal philosophy that pornography should be contingent on the performers’ comfort. “Never do anything you don’t want to, and only do things that you want to”, Jessy Dubai advises, not only addressing the hosts of *Girls on Porn* but also listeners who may or may not be porn performers who are just starting out in the industry (“Trans with Jessy Dubai”).

28 True to the ethos of the podcast, Jessy Dubai’s interview does not reinforce a “choice” stance that uncritically celebrates porn performers’ agency without considering structural constraints on women in the porn industry. Instead, recognising the capitalist driving force of the American porn industry, Jessy Dubai notes that she knows female performers who are not able to choose freely which companies they work for because they are not yet known in the industry (cf. “Trans with Jessy Dubai”). She thus mirrors her colleague Mickey Mod, whose description of the porn industry as “business driven” and “probably one of the purest examples of capitalism” seems to resonate for her (“Threesome with Mickey Mod”) and acknowledges her privilege due to her recognisability. Mickey Mod admits to a similar privilege and notes that his career has allowed him to be “more intentional” when choosing a job (“Threesome with Mickey Mod”). We should note, at this point, that the porn performers interviewed on the podcast reflect only on their personal experience with the American porn industry, and neither they nor Laura and Rachel touch on culturally specific differences regarding the porn industry and its legal status in other countries.

29 The podcast medium facilitates discussions surrounding pornography uniquely, not only because it provides a space for the hosts and their guests to express themselves and make their

voices be heard, but also because the medium's affordances enable the listeners to feel connected to their hosts who nonetheless remain concealed through the distinctly temporally displaced aural medium. While the porn industry "relies on performers' capacity to separate sex work from intimacy" (Potter 111), *Girls on Porn* connects porn performer with porn consumers in an intimate confessional space that allows for their voices to be heard. Especially considering the current pandemic crisis, listening to those disenfranchised and silenced in sex work and the porn industry might provide more compassion and awareness for the realities of their lives.

Podcasting's "Cloak of Invisibility"

30 While podcasts thrive on the parasocial relationships between the hosts and their listeners, the podcast medium's inherent temporal displacement and aurality also work to cloak the hosts in invisibility. As Vincent Meserko argues, as an auditory medium, the podcast medium provides "a cloak of invisibility" for the podcast hosts (29). In reference to comedy podcasts in particular, he notes how podcasts are caught in a "constant process of revealing and concealing—revealing the insights and wisdom of the comic while simultaneously concealing his or her identity behind the cloak of the invisible audio medium" (Meserko 38). In the case of *Girls on Porn*, the lack of visuality not only distances the listenership from the sexist and fetishizing mainstream pornographic content, it also banishes everything but the hosts' voices into the background. In addition, the hosts' casual chumcast-style conversations create a semblance of liveness that hides the temporal displacement inherent in the recorded nature of podcasts. This can be liberating for podcasters, Meserko argues, because it implies the immediate absence of a potentially critical or rejecting audience (33). He notes quite aptly, that it is not the podcast content, per se, that is entirely unique in its rhetorical form, but the "relational frames" that allow podcast communities to form between the host and the listener (Meserko 25-26).

31 On *Girls on Porn*, Rachel and Laura can share their most intimate erotic experiences with their listening audience, while being able to hide behind the cloak of the aural medium that makes it possible to hide full names, faces, bodies and other indicators as to the identity of the hosts. While many podcasts have several social media accounts connected to them, it remains fairly difficult to trace the hosts of many podcasts beyond their names and listening to a podcast is most of the time independent from/does not necessitate a trip to the podcast's

website.⁸ This apparent invisibility, paradoxically, does not seem to lessen the sense of authenticity and intimacy evoked by the podcast. Despite being a public space where hosts are able to perform parts of their selves, podcasts also afford the careful guarding of one's private life, hiding the hosts' identities in plain sight and protecting them from harassment or intrusion in their everyday lives (cf. Piper 56). After all, while listeners might connect with the personal experiences of the hosts, they only share a *parasocial* relationship with them—only the semblance of a deep connection.

32 This seemingly paradoxically intimate “cloak of invisibility” contributes to the sense that *Girls on Porn* provides a safe space for the hosts, their guests and the listeners to partake in private conversations about intimate topics. This is supported by Collins, who notes that “[t]he social world of podcasting, [...] engenders a perceived ‘safe place’ where like-minded listeners gather and create a sense of a virtual community” (236). This feeling of safety is especially important when it comes to intimate and potentially controversial subjects such as porn viewing habits.

Conclusion: The Future of Feminist (Porn) Podcasts

33 As an explicitly feminist porn-reviewing podcast with the aim to provide a guide to more ethical pornography, *Girls on Porn* provides a confessional safe space that affords its hosts and their guests to talk about the intimate topic of porn viewing, as well as a platform for porn performers to share their experiences in the industry. The podcast participates in the ongoing discourse surrounding female sexual agency by considering how mainstream pornography operates and how its visual (re)presentation of (female) bodies affects both viewers in general and the hosts specifically. Neither dismissing pornography completely, nor glorifying the whole industry as a way for women to exert their sexual agency, the podcast provides a platform for the negotiation of female pleasure that advocates for a more nuanced consideration of porn, highlighting both voices of viewers and feminist performers that do not let themselves be taken in by the “danger and choice” binary. Instead, Laura and Rachel recognise the dangers of pornography without ignoring that performers have agency to act and negotiate their performances, roles and working conditions in more feminist productions.

34 I want to conclude by pointing out that *Girls on Porn* demonstrates how the podcast medium can be valuable for feminist endeavours, which can profit from what Doane et al. have noted as the productive intersection between podcasts and public scholarships (119). Like Tiffe

⁸ The *Girls on Porn* website www.girlsonporn.com provides short bios for the two hosts and features a handful of professional photographs. This information is not accessible on podcast aggregate sites, however, nor via any connected RSS feeds.

and Hoffmann they highlight how audio media can decentre dominant voices by foregrounding “perspectives of nearly all individuals in the story” (Doane et al. 120), in the case of *Girls on Porn* the consumers and performers implicated in the porn industry. According to *Apple Podcasts* reviewer ChamberlainsHinge, the goal of the podcast seems to have an impact that mirrors but also surpasses university teaching, specifically because of its engaged and intimate nature:

The best description is that it's like sitting in *the most interesting grad seminar* of your life with breaks for laughing until your crying. . . . I also love that *the hosts don't keep themselves at a remove* from the porn they are reviewing. They can step back and critique the hell out of it in a thousand smart ways but they also come back to---did this turn me on? why or why not? I think for women in particular it's wonderful to hear them talk about female desire *without shame*. Guys have been talking about jerking off forever, but there's still this stigma around women owning their own sexuality. Women talking openly about desire is a better world and kudos to the hosts for contributing to it. (“Perfect and Fun”, emphasis added)

While specific podcast audiences are difficult to trace and online reviews are predominantly anonymous (both male and female coded usernames suggest a mixed demographic of listeners, however), we can note an overwhelmingly positive response to the podcast online. On *Apple Podcasts*, for instance, the show has been rated 4.5 out of 5 stars, with 409 ratings in total, and the podcast’s *Twitter* account has currently 757 followers. The minority of non-five-star ratings, interestingly, sound childish and highlight a dissatisfaction with the focus on female sexuality: “Kind of stupid, like the two hosts. Not useful or funny” (BiffBifkin); “Demonizes male sexuality” (Cheet577); “It’s a valid point that the straight cis male point of view is the clear majority of porn content, and pointing out how unfair that is important, but does it need to be 90% of the content of this podcast? Why not suggest more diverse content? I get it, porn is eww, but listening to how eww it is for an hour gets boring” (Jdortch).

35 As Smith and Attwood note: “One of the key ways in which public debates about pornography are framed is around pro/positive and anti/negative views, drawing on a general calculation of sex as a good or bad thing, as liberating or empowering, or as dangerous or oppressive” (11). While Laura and Rachel are not feminist scholars in their own right, even though they often refer to academic research on pornography (e.g. on ep. “Passion with Betsy Kenney”), their choice of aural production and distribution medium provides affordances that are valuable for feminist discussions about pornography that seek to complicate simplistic binaries beyond academia into public discourse. These affordances include a lack of censorship, the foregrounding of diverse voices, the mediation of objectifying visuals, intimate parasocial relationships with the listeners and a protective “cloak of invisibility” for the hosts. In this light, *Girls on Porn* might help to inspire more critical feminist outreach through the podcast

medium which takes its cue from the hosts' personal, involved approach to the topic of pornography.

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Within the Wires' Intimate Fan-based Publics

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Abstract

As intimacy emerges as a key concept in podcast research, it becomes increasingly urgent to consider the multifaceted ways in which it interacts with the medium. This article advances research on podcasting intimacy by understanding intimacy as undergoing a continual process of culturally contingent negotiation and examining how podcasting participates in that negotiation. Instead of treating intimacy as an inherent part of podcasting, it demonstrates how podcasts can create intimacy and use it to form connections among members of a fan public. To do so, this article uses the first season of *Within the Wires* (2016) to show how narrative repetition constructs fan-based intimate publics. *Within the Wires* is an alternate reality fiction podcast whose first season takes the form of relaxation tapes. Throughout the podcast, the narrator repeats specific lines, phrases, and memories that the listener comes to recognize. By retooling Roland Barthes and Marianne Hirsch's work on recognition and community building in photography for use in sound research, this article develops a theoretical framework for understanding the temporalities of recognition in podcasting. Using this framework, the article posits that *Within the Wires* uses non-narrative repetition alongside its aural aesthetics to create an intimate public through recognition. The podcast extends that recognition into its monetizing paratexts, making it possible for listeners to recognize themselves and others as fans. The first section of this paper defines recognition and its relationship to time, the second considers how recognition works within the show's fandom, the third looks at recognition within *Within the Wires'* monetizing paratexts, and the final tracks how the podcast finds horror in the breakdown of this system. The article argues that *Within the Wires* presents intimacy and creates fan-based intimate publics through the experience of recognition.

Introduction

1 Richard Berry's "Podcasting: Considering the evolution of the medium and its association with the word 'radio'" claims that podcasting's "hyper-intimacy" is key to its unique mediality. It is then perhaps no surprise that much of the early scholarship on podcasting has revolved around this intimacy: from the physical closeness of earbuds (Madsen) to the importance of listening routines (Weldon), both academic and popular discourses have discussed podcasting in terms of its ability to connect people through its intimate closeness. These discussions do not present themselves in any more of a vacuum than podcasting itself does, however. Both intimacy and podcasting can be seen as cultural constructs developed through public discourse.¹ When defining podcasting in terms of its intimacy, these discourses draw on cultural definitions of what it means to be close to others and how media can create that closeness. For podcasting to be intimate, it must do intimacy: intimacy in podcasting is not a passive quality but an active process of creation and cultural negotiation. In order for a podcast to be intimate,

¹ This observation draws on Andrew Dubber's argument in *Radio in the Digital Age* that radio is best defined through "discursive frame[s] that appear to remain constant throughout the development of radio over time" instead of defined solely by its technologies (17).

a show and its listeners must work to create intimacy by forming connections with others and describing those connections in terms of their close proximity.

2 *Within the Wires* centralizes the process of creating intimacy within its storytelling. It is a serialized narrative fiction podcast from the Night Vale Presents network written by Jeffrey Cranor and Janina Matthewson and with music by Mary Epworth. Jeffrey Cranor is a co-founder of Night Vale Presents, a position which he, answering a fan question at the London Podcast Festival, said provides him with the opportunity to “greenlight [his] own stuff,” including *Within the Wires* (“Night Vale Presents: Within the Wires”). Where the podcast *Welcome to Night Vale* largely sticks to the idiom of a small-town radio station, *Within the Wires* explores the storytelling possibilities of a variety of aural media in building its fictional universe. The first season is told through relaxation tapes, the second with museum audio guides, the third through dictations to a secretary, the fourth with tape recorded letters, and an extra paywalled series through blackbox recordings. Over the course of the four main seasons, listeners learn more about the world and the relationships between a few of those who inhabit it. For the purposes of this study, I will focus on the first season, in which the relaxation tapes slowly reveal that the imagined listener is captive in some kind of research facility. As the season progresses, the relationship between the narrator and listener character becomes closer and more complicated. *Within the Wires* builds this relationship, and the storyworld in general, through the use of textual repetition.

3 This article analyzes the role of that repetition, arguing that it binds with the show’s aesthetic intimacy to create an intimate public through recognition. The podcast extends that recognition into its monetizing paratexts, making it possible for listeners to recognize themselves and others as listeners. The first subsection defines recognition and its relationship to time. Drawing on Roland Barthes’ and Marianne Hirsch’s work on photography, it argues that recognition is the simultaneous experience of multiple moments of time; listeners recognize a reference because they remember hearing it before. Repetition, therefore, creates a kind of recognition that is not completely tied to narrative unfolding and works within the show’s fandom to build fan-based intimate publics. The second section extends analysis of these repetitions into the show’s use of monetizing paratexts and argues that *Within the Wires*’ paratexts work as a site of repetition more than as an extension of the narrative. The third part, “Intimacy,” specifically examines how *Within the Wires* uses the aesthetics of the narrator’s voice alongside storytelling moments that relate physical and emotional closeness to intimacy, while the final section explores how that closeness turns into horror when it is not recognizable. Ultimately, *Within the Wires* presents intimacy and creates intimate fan-based publics through

the experience of recognition.

4 *Within the Wires* serves as a good case study in learning about the dynamics of recognition because of its self-reflection, but not necessary because it is more intimate than any other podcast or is doing something no other podcasts do.² Comedic callbacks are also a form of repetition that can work in similar ways and there are forms of friendship-based intimacy that can be just as powerful as *Within the Wires*' romantic overtones. While each podcast has its specific mixture of ways in which it defines itself as intimate, what relationships and historical constructs it draws from, and what spatial and temporal aspects of closeness it emphasizes, these individual forms of intimacy are, together, a negotiation of the closeness of podcasting mediation that is continually being reshaped and redefined.

Recognition

5 *Within the Wires* creates recognition by repeating lines and moments within its narrative. These repetitions are an important part of the show's storytelling and make it possible for listeners to experience what Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* calls the "prick" of recognition (47). This prick, in turn, is an important part in building an intimate public out of *Within the Wires*' listeners. By experiencing recognition within the show, listeners can imagine others listening to the same podcast, feeling recognition as they do. They can also imagine themselves as recognizable as listeners, or fans, of the show. By making recognition such a central part of their narrative structure, *Within the Wires* invites this kind of participation with its show.

6 According to Barthes, recognition is the simultaneous experience of multiple moments of time. In a picture of his mother as a little girl, he reads "at the same time *This will be* and *this has been*; I observe with horror and anterior future of which death is the stake. By giving me the absolute past of the pose (aorist), the photograph tells me death in the future. What pricks me is the discovery of this equivalence" (96). The instant in time the picture represents does not stand on its own. Instead, it is deeply steeped in multiple moments of time that Barthes describes as the conflation of two time references: when the photo was taken (the *this has been*) and the moment he recognizes it (the *this will be*). The photo's *this will be* comes from his memory of his mother; the future of the girl in the photo, but Barthes' past. Although the picture exists in these moments, and pricks Barthes with the recognition of these times, it does not tell

² Podcasts express intimacy in a lot of different ways. Sarah Murray's "Coming-of-age in a coming-of-age: the collective individualism of podcasting's intimate soundwork," Ania Mauruschat's "Poetics of Intimacy: Podcasting's Power to Affect," Lukasz Swiatek's "The Podcast as an Intimate Bridging Medium" and Wanning Sun and Wei Lei's "In Search of Intimacy in China: The Emergence of Advice Media for the Privatized Self" examine different kinds of podcast intimacy using different kinds of podcasts.

a story that connects them. Instead, Barthes experiences them simultaneously, outside of a developing narrative. For Barthes, it is this simultaneity that pricks him with recognition.

7 This lack of narrative connection becomes increasingly important when taken out of photography and into media that can only be understood progressively through time. Barthes compares the pricks of recognition, or the *punctum*, he experiences in photography to a haiku, an art form that, like photography, focuses on describing a single moment: “The notation of a haiku, too, is undevelopable: everything is given, without provoking the desire for or even the possibility of rhetorical expansion. In both cases we might (we must) speak of an *intense immobility* [sic]: linked to a detail” (49). Here Barthes speaks of the immobility of recognition: not only do readers experience this recognition as immobile, he argues, they have no real desire to connect it to a narrative through “rhetorical expansion” (49). Although Barthes claims that the *punctum* is particularly suited to photography because the viewer can experience the entire artwork in a single moment, his example here illustrates the limitations of that point of view (49). Readers consume haikus progressively through time just as listeners consume sound through time. I posit that the haiku remains immobile not because readers experience it in its entirety in an instant, but because the moment of recognition is instantaneous. Barthes’ use of a haiku to illustrate his point on recognition reveals that his intense immobility is not exclusive to photography and can exist in media with different relationships to time.

8 *Within the Wires* reflects on the temporality of recognition in “Season 1, Cassette #6: for Oleta,” when the narrator talks about seeing someone she once knew in a park:

The memories of you did not return to me; suddenly they had never left at all, although they had not been there the moment before. I saw you, outside on an autumn day, and there you were. In my mind, iterated many times. (“Season 1, Cassette #6: for Oleta”)

In this example, the narrator’s memories of the listener character are “iterated many times,” each instance on top of the other. The memories come back “suddenly” because “they had never left at all,” “there you were, in my mind, iterated many times” (“Season 1, Cassette #6: for Oleta”). This is an instantaneous experience of past and present moments causing the narrator to recognize the other character. Like Barthes’ haiku, this temporality is intensely immobile and decidedly non-narrative. It describes a single moment of time undevelopable through narrative expansion: there is no unfolding story about how the narrator met the character, or what their lives have been like since. Everything exists in that single moment. The listener, in turn, can recognize the phrase “iterated many times” because she heard it before in previous episodes. Just like the narrator experiences recognition when she sees the other

character, the listener experiences recognition of the phrase.

9 Such experiences of recognition are important for building communities. Lauren Berlant's *The Female Complaint* argues that the "commodity world" surrounding intimate publics "trains women to expect to be recognizable by other members of this intimate public" by sharing what it presents to be generic stories that many within its group can relate to (5). Listeners, in this case women, recognize those stories in their own lives and feel that others can also recognize them as a member of this public. These affective publics, for Berlant, form "a kind of nebulous *communitas*" (Preface). While Berlant emphasizes the role of narrative arcs in creating this sense of belonging, non-narrative moments of recognition can fulfill a similar function. In *Family Frames*, for example, Marianne Hirsch uses Barthes' definition and the "anti-narrative wound of the *punctum*" to explore how family photo albums solidify bonds within families (54, 5). Hirsch and Valerie Smith emphasize the role of different forms of memory in creating recognition, extending her work on families to different kinds of communities. When reading a Lori Novak's self-portrait at Ellis Island, for example, she argues that the photo "shows memory to be both public and private, both individual (it is a self-portrait) and cultural (the self is shaped by, and thus conveys or represents, its group history and identity)" (2). Hirsch implicitly links these memories to the temporalities of Barthes' recognition, stating that the "present is thus composed of numerous layered temporalities that come together in Novak's projection" (2). Moments of recognition, then, do not need to work within an unfolding narrative about how a family or group has grown and evolved over the years. Instead, they can rely on a connection achieved during the intense immobility of non-narrative recognition.

10 Textual repetition in *Within the Wires* can create similarly binding moments of recognition. The community-building affordances of such moments make the show well suited to the creation of an intimate fan-based public. In *Fans: The Mirror of Consumption*, Cornel Sandvoss defines fandom itself as "the regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text" (8). By focusing a narrative around serialized repetition and locating the bulk of the show's affective weight within that repetition, *Within the Wires* emphasizes the regularity and emotionality Sandvoss uses to define fan engagement with media.

11 Within serial culture, recognition does not have to rely on the culturally ubiquitous stories Berlant studies, but can instead stem from the repetition of specific moments from one episode to the next. Textual repetition, either serialized or within a single episode, can create recognition because listeners experience multiple moments of time simultaneously. Jason Mittell's *Complex TV* relates temporalities similar to those of Barthes' recognition to seriality, stating that

the feeling of being surprised through the act of remembering is quite pleasurable, rewarding a viewer's knowledge base while provoking the flood of recognition stemming from the activation of such memories. Such pleasures are hard to imagine working in non-serialized formats. (Mittell 191)

While non-serial formats can prompt recognition, serial storytelling is well-suited for creating recognition by repeating information from previous episodes. These moments, be they the reflective ones of *Within the Wires* or the ubiquitous comedic callback, carry with them the ability to build fan-based publics around recognition.

12 *Within the Wires* creates such moments of recognition within its story world by repeating specific words and elements. In this clip from "Season 1, Cassette #1: Stress, Shoulders," for example, the narrator repeats the imagery and phrase "iterated many times":

Close your eyes.

You are in a forest. The forest is large, and you are small. The forest is immense, and you are tiny. You are in midair, and you see several things at once. To be more specific, you see the same thing, iterated many times.

You are an insect, with complex eyes and simple desires. You are erratic and frenetic. What little wind winds its way through leaves lifts and twists you to new directions.

You are naked. You are alone. You are fine. You feel fine.

You cannot see your own nakedness, for you cannot move your head to look down. Never look down!

You see every sight iterated many times, but you do not see yourself. You are uncertain if it will rain. You are uncertain how you are floating, or flying.

You see a child. She is iterated many times. ("Season 1, Cassette #1: Stress, Shoulders")

The repetition of the phrase "iterated many times" creates recognition in this passage. The different contexts of the phrase stack on top of each other, adding meanings and memories to later repetitions of the phrase. These repetitions also occur in later episodes, adding a serial component to the podcast's repetitions that further underlines the show's regularity for fan consumption.

13 This dynamic of repetition and recognition also extends into the *Within the Wires*' online fan community. The following exchange from the reddit of the show's first episode demonstrates how the repetition of the phrase "iterated many times" works within the podcast's fan community: "the repeated 'iterated many times' was a way to have 'iterated many times' iterated many times" ("Discussion: Relaxation Cassette #1"). Repetition of the phrase "iterated many times" here is most likely a joke. This joke not only adds to an insider feeling, it makes it so that later, when the podcast repeats the phrase, the listener may remember the joke along with other repetitions. This repetition, then, solidifies the relationship between fans and text.

14 Because *Within the Wires* is so dense with repetition, it leaves itself open to these kinds of moments. These moments create recognition within the podcast that extend into its fan community: they invite fans to recognize the podcast, themselves as fans, and imagine other fans able to recognize the reference, too. Through this use of repetition, then, the podcast forms the basis for the recognition needed in creating a fan-based intimate public around its content.

Monetized Repetition

15 *Within the Wires* monetizes its free-to-listen podcast by selling paratexts. These paratexts include extra content behind a paywall, posters, live performances and, to some extent, t-shirts. These products work well within the show's aesthetics of repetition because they offer listeners more time to spend with and enjoy their content without dealing with the pitfalls of content that focuses on a story with a single forward-moving plot. Instead, repetition-based paratexts give fans the chance to experience recognition that is not absolutely necessary, but nevertheless enjoyable for engaged listeners and invites them to integrate the show into different parts of their life.

16 This poster, for example, is a repetition of key themes in the text that allows listeners to experience recognition within their physical environment.



Fig. 1. Hayworth, Jessica. "Child and Damsel Art Print," *Within the Wires*, Topatoco, <https://topatoco.com/collections/within-the-wires/products/wtw-damsel-art-print>. Accessed 3 April 2020.

On one hand, the poster can be seen as encouraging forensic fandom. It reveals that the oft-repeated fly is a “damsselfly,” a gender clue that could inspire interpretations on the human character the fly represents. The audience does not need this knowledge to experience the text, though, and the show’s poetic aesthetics are not entirely driven by a solvable mystery with a concluding payoff.

17 This type of storytelling does not easily fit Mittell’s categorizations of “what is” and “what if” paratexts because it emphasizes character relationships over a strong unfolding plot. According to Mittell,

‘What Is’ transmedia seeks to extend the fiction canonically, explaining the universe with coordinated precision and hopefully expanding viewers’ understanding and appreciation of the storyworld. This narrative model encourages forensic fandom with the promise of eventual revelations once all the pieces are put together. (Mittell 314)

Within the Wires paratexts do extend the storyworld, but they do not provide revelations to figure out a mystery about how the world works. Mittell’s “What Is” texts also decentralize a show’s characters. “The majority of *Lost*’s transmedia extensions,” Mittell explains, “prioritize storyworld expansion and exploration instead of building on the program’s emotional arcs and character relationships” (Mittell 306). The “Child and Damsselfly” poster does both of these things: it expands the storyworld and builds on the emotional repetition of the child and the damsselfly, which is itself an important character relationship. It also adds a relationship between the subjects of the painting and the painter Claudia Atieno, who is a character from the podcast’s second season. By centering itself so fully on the characters, the poster does not entirely fit into a “What Is” paratext.

18 The poster also does not fall easily into Mittell’s “What If?” paratext, which “poses hypothetical possibilities rather than canonical certainties, inviting viewers to imagine alternative stories and approaches to storytelling that are distinctly not to be treated as potential canon” (Mittell 315). There is nothing explicitly hypothetical about the poster at all. At the same time, though, its similarities to “What If?” paratexts lie in its character exploration. In so doing, it falls under the umbrella of centripetal transmedia, which, according to Mittell, create “extensions that coordinate character identities and constant tone with the series points to a strength[...] by downplaying plot, the extensions work by allowing viewers to spend time with the characters without encouraging the forensic attention to story as with most canonic extensions” (312). By providing more time with characters without specifically feeding into forensic fandom, the poster is similar to “What If?” paratexts, but is not hypothetical.

19 The problem with using either of these forms is that they both rely on a strongly forward

moving plot, where *Within the Wires* relies on character-centered repetition. The pleasure from these paratexts stems instead from the affective experience of recognition they provide. The prick of recognition the poster provokes is yet another repetition of a poignant moment in the text. The podcast's non-linear storytelling and focus on character relationships over plot makes it easy to incorporate such paratexts into its storytelling. This seamless incorporation is important to *Within the Wires* in part because it earns money directly from its paratexts, unlike the television that Mittell studies.

20 Instead, merchandise like this poster encourage listener-fans to extend the storyworld into their lived environments. In this sense, they work to "recapture an emotional moment" in the show as Lancasters' *Babylon 5* fans do when participating in show-themed role-play (qtd. in Sandvoss 46). In *Within the Wires*, this moment is not just recaptured, but built upon, adding layers of past experience to the recognition elicited by the consistent repetition within the podcast.

21 Live performances offer another site for repetition and recognition. During a show at the 2018 London Podcast Festival, writer Jeffery Cranor introduced the podcast thusly: "Just like, hands in the dark, who has never listened to *Within the Wires* before? Whoah, hey all. That's amazing. [With surprise, nervous laughter] Well, welcome to it. [Nervous Laughter]" ("Night Vale Presents: Within the Wires"). Even though only a handful of hands went up, Cranor's uneasy response demonstrates two things: the performance was meant as a repetition of elements of the show for an audience who had heard them before and, secondly, it served as a site of recognition where fans could recognize others in their intimate fan public and feel recognized as fans themselves.

22 During the performance, listeners followed the show's relaxation tape inspired breathing exercises alongside each other and responded to prompts in unison.

Matthewson: Say aloud the following: my shoulders are stone

Audience: [hesitant at first] My shoulders are stone

Matthewson: My shoulders are sod

Audience: [not hesitant] My shoulders are sod

Matthewson: Hold your shoulders up beside your ears, tense and angry [almost the entire audience does this] Lower your shoulders [almost the entire audience does this] Let them slip back down like beads of water on the side of a chilled glass. Let your right shoulder fall away. Say aloud: My right shoulder slides down my ribs to my waist. It is free now, but separate from my body it is meaningless [laughter begins] it is just a shoulder out of context lying upon the ground, my shoulder is useless and alone. Say all of that aloud [light laughter, music stops for a moment of silence, group laughter, some people start trying to say it but not in chorus, light laughter] Good. [Almost breaks character, a more joyful tone, and group laughter] Now say aloud: my left shoulder is in its place,

it does not miss my right shoulder because it did not know my right shoulder had ever existed and now it is separate and alone lying upon the ground and it is not missed in the way a brother or sister is not missed because after age ten there are no brothers or sisters and before age 10 nothing can be remembered. Say all of that aloud. [Light giggle] Great [no pause at all, laughter]. (“Night Vale Presents: Within the Wires”)

Not only is this part of the performance a repetition from the show’s first episode, which most of the audience had already heard, it is a repetition that recasts their reactions as part of an intimate listening public. The choral response to relaxation tape prompts sonically binds the voices of audience members together, performing an intimate closeness between members of the fan public. The podcast then plays with the intimate closeness of these repetitions by asking the audience to repeat texts so long it is impossible them to respond. In setting up moments of recognition, then taking them away, *Within the Wires* is playing with the power of repetition to form bonds between people in its live audience just as it does in its podcast. The social awkwardness that leads to the podcast’s horror is here cause for humor.

23 Importantly, both of these examples are monetizing paratexts. It is possible to listen to the podcast and understand it without these texts; they are not valuable because they provide additional, necessary information. Listeners do spend money on them, though, so they are adding value. The valuable experience the paratexts provide is one of recognition among members of an intimate fan-based public. This repetition can take many different forms, but it generally fulfills the purpose of creating moments of recognition that connect the listener to its intimate fan public. Posters and live shows are two examples of these, but T-shirts and social media also give listeners the opportunity to be recognized by others. Even if they are not recognized, the feeling that one could be is a key part of participation in an intimate public.

Intimacy

24 *Within the Wires* connects recognition to an aesthetics of intimacy by associating it with emotionally close personal relationships and physical closeness along the lines of Horton and Wohl’s concept of “extreme parasociability.” In doing so, it connects members of its fan-based listening public through mutual, intimate recognition of narrative repetition. The following example demonstrates how the text relates to physical and emotional closeness:

You are holding hands with this girl. You are looking into her eyes, which are so different to yours. You are looking at her face, which is so different to yours, and you are seeing yourself iterated twice in two blue pools. This girl knows you. This girl sees you, properly, completely. Maybe she still sees you today,

right now. You are breathing together. She is breathing out into you, and into herself that which you are breathing out. (“Season 1, Cassette #4: Sadness, Lungs”)

This is an intimate moment, in part, because “you” are physically close to the girl. “You” hold hands, look into her eyes, and share her breath. The breath breaks down the binary between the two bodies as it traverses between them. There’s also an emotional closeness here: she sees you; you tell her you will never forget her. This is someone you know very well.

25 In understanding the *Within the Wires*’ intimacy, it is important to note that these moments, not the story, carry the podcast’s affective weight and points to an aesthetics of Horton and Wohl’s “extreme para-sociability.” In their insightful, but dated, 1956 article “Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction: Observations on Intimacy at a Distance,” Horton and Wohl describe parasocial interaction as both “intimacy at a distance” and “the simulacrum of conversational give and take.” In extreme parasocial interaction, personae adopt types of interaction associated with very close relationships. As an example, they use the radio program *The Lonesome Gal*, explaining

The outline of the program was simplicity itself... She was exactly as represented, apparently a lonesome girl, but without a name or a history. Her entire performance consisted of an unbroken monologue unembarrassed by plot, climax, or denouement... The Lonesome Gal simply spoke in a throaty, unctuous voice whose suggestive sexiness belied the seeming modesty of her words.

From the first, the Lonesome Gal took a strongly intimate line, almost as if she were addressing a lover in the utter privacy of some hidden rendezvous:

‘Darling, you look so tired, and a little put out about something this evening. . . . You are worried, I feel it Lover, you need rest . . . rest and someone who understands you. Come, lie down on the couch, relax, I want to stroke your hair gently ... I am with you now, always with you. You are never alone, you must never forget that you mean everything to me, that I live only for you, your Lonesome Gal.’

The similarities between *The Lonesome Gal* and season one of *Within the Wires* are manifold: low feminine voices, suggested eroticism, an unbroken monologue, a voice without name or history (at the beginning, at least). They’re also similar, from this clip, in how they directly address the listener: they tell her what to do (lay down, relax) and that she will never be alone. They also both allude to physical proximity, even touch. The podcast clearly incorporates elements of this “extreme” intimacy into its aesthetics.

26 This intimacy binds itself to the references in the show. When the podcast repeats references, it does so in an intimate environment. Some of these references refer to specifically close moments. Others are rendered intimate through the show’s general aesthetic. What is

interesting, though, is that the intimacy of this “prick” includes times when listeners recognize themselves and each other. It is embedded in one of those layers of recognition, creating a shared intimate past among listeners of the show. In this way, the fan public surrounding *Within the Wires* can be classified as specifically intimate.

Horror

27 *Within the Wires*, often classified in popular reviews as “horror” and “creepy” (Romano, Grant), finds horror in its uncomfortable intimacy. In a Q&A session during the London Podcast Festival, Jeffery Cranor explains his inspiration for the podcast as the uncomfortable intimacy of certain kinds of audio:

I ordered a whole bunch of really old relaxation cassettes and autogenic exercise cassettes on eBay, um, and they’re really, really upsetting to listen to. Like, I don’t know, just think about somebody you kind of, like think about a co-worker you kind of know and just see if you can sit and stare them directly in the eyes quietly for like thirty straight seconds, like it’s that level of discomfort, like, the type of like intimacy these tapes want to have with you (Cranor, Epworth, and Matthewson “Night Vale Presents: Within the Wires”).

Instead of intimacy and discomfort being opposites, Cranor explores here the discomfort of an intimacy that lacks deep personal connection.

28 Within the podcast, this discomfort occurs, in part, when the narrator demands that the listener recognize something she is incapable of recognizing. In continuing the previous excerpt from “Season 1, Cassette #4: Sadness, Lungs,” the comforting intimacy of sharing breaths transitions into something more terrifying:

You are breathing together. She is breathing out into you, and into herself that which you are breathing out. You are telling her you will never forget her. You are not imagining how you could ever forget her. She is not imagining how you could ever forget her! Did you forget her? What have you done with your life? (“Season 1, Cassette #4: Sadness, Lungs”)

29 In this clip, it sounds like the narrator is the girl and she is upset “you” do not recognize her. The breakdown of the system of recognition occurs between the past and present. The listener cannot recognize the girl because she cannot experience her past memories of the girl. The podcast gives the listener what should be the “present” in a moment of recognition, but does not supply enough of a “past” to create the recognition. The horror comes from the failure of this moment. Later in the episode, this breakdown of recognition transforms the intimacy of sharing breaths into the creepiness of sharing breaths with someone who you do not know, but who knows you, who you cannot see, but who sees you. Without recognition, intimacy is scary.

30 These moments come across as particularly unexpected because *Within the Wires* often gives its audience past moments for recognition. Even though the contours of horror are continually changing, Kendall R. Phillips notes in *Projected Fears* that this kind of “violation of an audience’s expectations contributes to their experience of terror” (5). When speaking of influential horror films, Phillips writes that “these films connected to existing cultural drifts and directions in such peculiarly poignant ways as to be recognized as somehow ‘true’” (5). As *Within the Wires* continues, the truth in its script slowly reveals itself. In the last episode of the first season, the narrator tells the listener character she has escaped the facility she has been confined to and has fled to a seaside cottage. The episode, like the rest of the show, reflects on its mediality: the relaxation tape format highlights the centrality of the podcast’s auralty while the narrator explains how she is covering up the listener character’s escape by destroying all recorded traces of the event:

Once I have cleaned all the footage of all the rooms and corridors I have been in, once I have replaced certain key tapes with generic footage, old footage that could come from any day, any normal day when nothing really happened, and once I have destroyed every cassette I have created, and once I have made sure that any details about me the Institute has on file are...inaccurate, then I will be able to leave. (“Season 1, Cassette #10: Horopito”)

These recordings as well as the narrator’s ability to manipulate them and, by extension, manipulate what appears to be the truth of the situation, serve as a reminder of the fallibility of media and puts into question the narrator’s trustworthiness. The listener’s entire experience of the text and its associated storyworld to this point has been told through this unreliable narrator. Even the listener character’s understanding of the situation is formed through the narrator’s attempts to reconstruct her memory. The listener character needs to decide whether to stay in the cottage and trust the narrator, or to leave into an unknown world. Anticipating this need, the narrator says:

I like to envision how you spend your days, because it stops me from picturing what I am afraid of – that you are not there at all. That you have taken your freedom and used it to go elsewhere, somewhere other than this cottage by a sea, so far away from where you lived, from where you have ever been. That you have decided you cannot trust me, and do not want to know me properly again. That you have decided to find your own way, where I cannot follow. I envision myself understanding why you would do this. (“Season 1, Cassette #10: Horopito”)

The podcast thus confronts the listener with the unreliability of its own intimacy by leaving its ending ambiguous. The season’s direct address leads to a slippage between the listener and the character of the listener. Both must decide here whether or not to trust the narrator. It is unclear

if their relationship was really close or if the narrator manipulated the listener character's memories the same way she manipulated the past when covering up the escape. This uncomfortable lack of trust does not make the podcast less intimate, it is just a reminder that intimacy can be forced and "upsetting" (Cranor, Epworth, and Matthewson, "Night Vale Presents: Within the Wires"). In framing its horror around the failure of recognition, *Within the Wires* creates discomfort from the same intimacy it works to create.

Conclusion

31 Philips observes that "an influential horror film does not necessarily create a certain pattern of anxiety or fear within a culture. Instead, elements within the film resonate—connect in some sympathetic manner—to trends within broader culture" (6). In centering its storytelling on forms of mediated intimacy, *Within the Wires* creates, critiques, and plays with broader cultural concern over the role of media in connecting members of society. At the same time, it uses its own storytelling techniques to build parasocial and fan-based intimate publics around its podcast. These techniques include its use of repetition to create moments of recognition, which occurs within each episode of the podcast and extends through the show's serialization and paratexts. This recognition does not rely on the narrative unfolding of specific plotlines, but on the repetition of key words, phrases, and sounds. The poignancy of these repetitions is key to the podcast's aesthetics and by centering them within the text, *Within the Wires* creates an intimate fan public based on listening and recognition. One of the ways in which the podcast makes money, selling paratexts, earns revenue by creating different contexts for repetition that listeners can incorporate into different aspects of their lives. Live events, T-shirts, and other merchandise invite listeners to feel recognizable as a member of the show's listening public. These forms of monetization work within the podcast's aesthetics: the show presents them as intimate, close, and recognizable. *Within the Wires'* use of voice and parasociability further codes this recognition in terms intimacy. At the same time, the podcast uses horror to highlight the strength of the bonds it has formed by questioning how much their mediation makes them untrustworthy or potentially manipulative. In doing so, *Within the Wires* speaks to both the power of podcasting to build communities and to larger cultural anxiety about what it means to be intimate and the extent to which media in general, and podcasting specifically, create intimacy.

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**Crossing Both Ways: Sarah Jones, *The Moth Radio Hour*,
and the Disruptive Potential of Voice**

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Abstract

This paper examines an episode of popular storytelling podcast *The Moth*, titled “A Walk on the West Side” (2014), in order to explicate and uncover how gender, race, and class might attach to certain voices. In this episode, Jones (a stage performer, writer, and gifted impressionist) first relates her memories of being typecast as black female stereotypes; she then tells the story of being pulled over by LAPD a few days later, under suspicion of sex work. Ultimately, Jones baffles the cops who detain her by affecting a flawless British accent, disrupting their assumptions. Her story—told on the podcast in a myriad of different voices—literally speaks class, race, and gender into being, only to challenge the fixity of these signs, showcasing the simultaneously disruptive and productive potential of speech.

Introduction

1 This article explores a short anecdote performed by solo dramatist and actor Sarah Jones, released as a part of *The Moth Radio Hour* podcast. Her story, retroactively titled “A Walk on the West Side,” follows the regular format other segments of *The Moth Radio Hour* for the most part. Like most of the podcast’s segments, her story is nonfiction, personal, and brief; it is initially recorded in front of a live audience, and it is a monologue. Like other *The Moth Radio Hour* segments, the story also denotes a significant moment in the performer’s life—in this case, a trip to Los Angeles in the late nineties, where Jones was racially profiled by both LA police and by the MTV writers who had hired her. “A Walk on the West Side,” however, differs from most *The Moth Radio Hour* stories in one important respect: Jones is a talented vocal impressionist, and as such she uses several different voices—each attached, in their own way, to very different racial, gender, and regional identities—throughout her story.

2 Though the plot of “A Walk on the West Side” is not particularly subversive on its surface, I argue that the combination of Jones’s radical polyvocality (that is, her ability to constantly shift vocal registers, and therefore to manipulate and confuse her audience) and the second life of this story (that is, its eventual shift from live storytelling performance, to pre-recorded podcast) does something much more radical than its initial premise might allow. Offering a palatable, liberal vision of respectability, representation, and inclusion, Jones allows her audience to consume her story and laugh at the stereotypes she herself uses, albeit to different purposes than the policemen

and MTV writers she rebukes. But the switch from live embodied performance to podcast allows it do something different and potentially more radical. Ultimately, I aim to prove that something changes in the shift from live performance to podcast, tracking Jones's story in order to interrogate its dual political energies. Contrasting these two formats highlights the unique ability of the latter to disrupt the very structures that Jones's comedic performance erects and relies on.

Hailing and “Multicultural” Liberal Appeal

3 On May 21, 2009, Sarah Jones took the stage at one of The Moth's regular live events. She was hardly the first to do so: The Moth, a New York City-based group whose professed goal is “to promote the art and craft of storytelling and to honor and celebrate the diversity and commonality of human experience,” (*TheMoth.org*), has been organizing storytelling events for over two decades. Since its founding in 1997, it has grown into a small movement, running over 500 happenings each year in major cities across the globe. A live Moth event is usually recorded, takes place in front of an audience, and might feature any number of performers ranging from unknown everymen to prominent names from page and stage. Jones, herself a notable luminary of the NYC theater scene, told her story at one of The Moth's “Mainstage” events. Unlike the Moth's more democratic “StorySlam” events (open-mic battles in which competitors each tell stories up to five minutes in length), Mainstage events feature five pre-selected performers in the hopes of creating “a community where entertainment and enlightenment merge” (*TheMoth.org*) in front of a ticketed audience.

4 Eventually, The Moth's widespread meet-ups inspired the popular and Peabody-award-winning public radio show *The Moth Radio Hour* produced by Jay Allison. Like many NPR programs, *The Moth Radio Hour* is now a successful weekly podcast with a wide audience, boasting over 500,000 weekly downloads, and 61 million individual episode downloads as of 2018 (*TheMoth.org*). When Jones's story, retrospectively titled “A Walk on the West Side,” showed up on *The Moth Radio Hour* RSS feed a little over a year after her initial performance, it was one of three stories specifically curated for the podcast; in this case, it was one of three selected for an episode titled “Monkeys, Calzones, and Jaywalkers.”

5 Jones's fame stems primarily for her acclaimed one-woman shows, which have enjoyed a steady run on Broadway since her Tony win in 2004. In addition to a Tony, her performances have garnered her an Obie, a Van Lier Literary Fellowship, a Helen Hayes Award, two Drama Desk

nominations, grants from the Lincoln Center Theater and the Ford Foundation, a “Best One Person Show” award at the HBO Aspen Comedy Arts Festival, as well as features in *Mother Jones*, *Nation*, *Vanity Fair*, *Vibe*, *Ms. Magazine* and the *Utne Reader* (Hatch 322). In each of her solo productions, Jones showcases her imitative talents. In her first production, *Surface Transit* (1998), Jones plays a heterogeneous array of people inspired by her childhood neighborhood in Queens; her second, *Women Can’t Wait!* (2002), portrays eight different women from eight different countries. In her first Broadway production, *Bridge & Tunnel* (2004), Jones casts herself as a range of diverse characters, all U.S. immigrants, whose lives converge around a poetry reading. Following her Tony win for *Bridge & Tunnel*, she went on to produce and star in *The Right to Care* (2005), an informative piece about ethnic, class, racial, and gender disparities in healthcare, and *Sell/Buy/Date* (2018) another solo performance about “the real-life experiences of people affected by the sex industry.” Her latest piece, *The Foundation* (2019), takes up the subject of philanthropy—in it, Jones plays several different characters debating how to spend a charitable budget. Described variously throughout her career as a “poet,” “playwright,” “performer,” “political activist,” and “hip-hop theater artist,” Jones summarily garners praise and critical attention for her avowed “shape-shifting ability to portray people of every age, gender and race” (Hurwitt). Though it follows a very different format and genre than Jones’s professional work, “A Walk on the West Side” also showcases Jones’s ability to switch personas through the clever deployment of different and masterfully mimicked accents, vocal registers, dialects, and attitudes.

6 In her twelve minutes on the Moth Mainstage, Jones relates a personal anecdote to the audience. True to regular Moth format, she does not read from a script, nor has she memorized lines. She just talks. The result is a performance that is charming, enthusiastic, and spontaneous; Jones’s stage presence is easy and unnerved, and her story is peppered with the “you know”s, “like”s, and “um”s typical of someone casually relating a story to a close friend. All in all, Jones doesn’t stray far from the conventions of a standard Moth performance, but for one important element: her performance is polyvocal.

7 Jones employs her talents in different ways and to different ends throughout her Moth performance. Sometimes, her accents signal a person different than herself, the Jones narrating the story. This is not itself remarkable—to be sure, many good storytellers change voices to indicate when parts of their story are in quotes or should be taken as lines of dialogue separate from the speaker’s narration. But two other types of more interesting polyvocality also appear in “A Walk

on the West Side.” Sometimes, Jones slips into a new voice without warning, throwing her audience for a loop (and, judging by their background laughter, summarily delighting them). And sometimes—most often, in fact—Jones changes voices because she herself, in the story she is recounting, switches voices. As a vocal impressionist telling a story about her life as a vocal impressionist, Jones must employ vocal impression. Her character, “Sarah Jones,” has not one identifiable voice, but many. In other words, because Jones is telling a story that is about, in many ways, the protagonist’s ability to codeswitch, she must change voices not only to create a mood or mark difference, but simply to convey information essential to the plot.

8 In “A Walk on the West Side,” Jones tells a story about being racially profiled while she is in Los Angeles during her first (and last) television film shoot. Jones begins *in media res*: she and her friend Julissa are approached by police at a West Hollywood intersection. She then quickly doubles back, rewinding to provide some context for the scene. Jones offers an overview of her theatrical work, citing her influences and explaining that her solo shows rely on an ability to channel the voices and personas of a multicultural cast of characters. While she does so, Jones laments the paucity of roles for black women that aren’t based on stereotype. She explains that she had flown out to Los Angeles from New York City after a successful casting call with MTV, having finally found a job offer that excited her: a hip-hop sketch show in which she would be able to flex her talent for impressions.

9 After this expository detour, Jones returns her audience to the Hollywood street corner, where she resumes the original story. The day before the MTV shoot, Jones’s friend Julissa leads her around on a walking tour of Los Angeles. As the women move to cross the street, two white policemen stop them and insinuate that they are both sex workers; Jones, outraged and in shock, begins yelling at them in a posh British accent. Flabbergasted, the cops panic, say they have made a mistake, and let Jones and Julissa go on their way. Jones follows this climactic scene with a sobering coda: the next day, she finds out that MTV has cast her as “a ho with multiple personalities” (9:36-38), confirming her belief that there are few if any viable options for a black female performer who wants to play diverse roles. Disappointed and angry, she refuses to film the scene and returns to New York—where, happily, she ends up producing the show that eventually leads her to Broadway renown.

10 On the level of plot alone, Jones’s anecdote describes a scene in which the law, entertainment media, race, gender, sexuality, class, and national/regional identity all converge. In

short: this anecdote is all about American subject formation. Nowhere is this clearer than in the pivotal scene of “A Walk on the West Side,” in which Jones and her friend Julissa are pulled over by police. In his 1968 opus *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, Althusser describes a process of political and social subject formation known commonly as interpellation. His work presents a new theory of how the state and its attending apparatuses create subjects. In this top-down model, which breaks from more traditional Marxist models, the state directly addresses its subjects; those addressed, acknowledging the hail, are thus transformed into subjects of the state. Jones and Julissa’s encounter with police almost perfectly echoes Louis Althusser’s most well-known example of interpellation. In this example, Althusser, too, describes a scene of police encounter:

I shall then suggest that ideology ‘acts’ or ‘functions’ in such a way that it ‘recruits’ subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or ‘transforms’ the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called interpellation or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: “Hey, you there!”

Assuming that the theoretical scene I have imagined takes place in the street, the hailed individual will turn round. By this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion, he becomes a subject. Why? Because he has recognized that the hail was ‘really’ addressed to him, and that ‘it was really him who was hailed’ (and not someone else). Experience shows that the practical telecommunication of hailings is such that they hardly ever miss their man: verbal call or whistle, the one hailed always recognizes that it is really him who is being hailed. And yet it is a strange phenomenon, and one which cannot be explained solely by ‘guilt feelings’, despite the large numbers who ‘have something on their consciences.’ (264)

Jones and Julissa, hailed by the police, are interpellated as criminal by the mere fact of their presence and outward appearance (Jones: “And so they had sort of put it together that we fit the description of some prostitutes”). In this way, their encounter also recalls Franz Fanon’s famous encounter with a young white child in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967):

Look a Negro ... Mama, see the Negro! I'm frightened ... I could no longer laugh, because I already know there were legends, stories, history and above all *historicity* ... Then assailed at various points, the corporal schema crumbled its place taken by a racial epidermal schema... It was no longer a question of being aware of my body in the third person but in a triple person... I was responsible for my body, for my race, for my ancestors. (xvii)

Previous to being hailed, Fanon can potentially exist outside of history and the schemas of racist and colonial violence that accompany it. Once named, his identity is flattened, fixed, and able to

be controlled. Jones's own hailing is deeply intersectional, illustrating the myriad ways the police use visual markers to differentiate between "criminal" bodies and, by extension, arrestable persons. Visually marked as "a couple of brown girls" (6:09-6:11), the women are pulled into a semantic system of race ("What are we doing? Walking while black, maybe, or walking while Mexican—Julissa's Mexican" [4:52-4:58]), gender ("we were dressed far less provocatively than, I dare say, most of the women that I had seen since I landed at LAX" [5:59-6:05]), and class ("and you know, we were walking! And it is LA, nobody walks!" [6:11-6:13]) that aligns them with criminal sexuality and illicit labor ("you girls working tonight?" [5:44-5:47]).

11 Jones's "disgust" at the specific charge lobbed at her and her companion—sex work—reveals the limited political imagination of her story. Certainly, much of this rage is informed by Jones's repeated struggles with casting directors who continually cast black women as, in her words, "bitches and hos." Jones is, on the one hand, drawing a savvy connection, laying out for her audience how systems of media representation and law enforcement inform each other. On the other hand, Jones here still adheres to a moral code that marks some sexualities as deviant and therefore policeable. Vocalizing her offense, Jones draws the same line as her LAPD antagonists: the insult is not that sex work is considered criminal; it is that she and Julissa are assumed to be prostitutes. Though she might not intend to, Jones enforces a politics of respectability (although Jones's views on this topic have changed in the years since this story aired, at least if her later production *Sell/Buy/Date* is any indication of her political stance on sex work). This politics ultimately upholds systems of judgement that still take being "dressed...provocatively" as legitimate cause for police suspicion. In other words, Jones questions the efficacy of the deployment of these rubrics, rather than the rubrics themselves.

12 One finds a similar liberal politics in the way Jones introduces herself and her work. At the start of her story, attempting to explain her solo career, Jones tells her audience:

I did a show on Broadway called *Bridge & Tunnel*, and if you don't know it: I did characters, a lot of multicultural characters. That's what I do in my work, kind of like Whoopi Goldberg or Lilly Tomlin or Tracy Ellman; these are some of the people who really inspired me as a kid, because I just really admired their ability to transcend physical type and portray anyone they wanted—Meryl Streep, also a huge influence on me. (00:17-00:36)

For the first time, but not the last, Jones here invokes "multiculturalism," a political buzzword with a long history in the US. As Hazel Carby points out, though it is true that the rhetoric of

multicultural inclusivity has at times been employed for real material gain, appeals to multiculturalism often end up obscuring issues of systemic or material oppression (12). This often takes place in the service of what David Savran, in his discussion of the multicultural Broadway smash *Angels in America* (1992), usefully labels “liberal pluralism”:

Unable to support substantive changes in economic policy that might in fact produce a more equitable and less segregated society, [multiculturalism] instead promotes a rhetoric of pluralism and moderation. Reformist in method, it endeavors to fine tune the status quo while at the same time acknowledging (and even celebrating) the diversity of American culture. For the liberal pluralist, America is less a melting pot than a smorgasbord. He or she takes pride in the ability to consume cultural difference—now understood as a commodity, a source of boundless pleasure, an expression of an exoticized Other. And yet, for him or her, access to and participation in so-called minority cultures is entirely consumerist. . . . Liberal pluralism thus does far more than tolerate dissent. It actively enlists its aid in reaffirming a fundamentally conservative hegemony. (220)

In describing her performances and characters as “multicultural,” Jones appeals to her audience’s liberal pluralist sensibilities, arguing for an acceptable, even desirable, diversity, but again not necessarily critiquing the systems that produce drastic disparities and exclusion in the first place. Jones’s shout-out to Goldberg, Tomlin, Ellman, and Streep relays a similar message. Her dream team is diverse in some ways (the women she names are both black and white, British and American), and homogenous in others (they are all rich, famous, and powerful women at the top of their game). This balance means that Jones’s list, like her story’s politics, can be easily accepted by her upper-middle-class, center-left audience of public radio listeners—it does not directly threaten their modes of understanding, judging, or maintaining power.

Polyvocality, Intersectionality, and Subversion

13 With every vocal impression, Jones both exploits and exposes her audience’s linguistic biases. About a minute into her story, Jones shows off her talent for impressions for the first time, seamlessly switching between her perky, higher-pitched starting voice into a very different register. She does so while describing the circumstances that led her to fly to LA (from here onward, italics indicate the moments where Jones changes her voice):

A couple of weeks earlier I had gotten word that MTV wanted me to star in a sketch comedy show they were doing, and I was really over-the-top excited about this, it was huge, it was a really big deal for me, I was like, “Oh my god, this is AMAZING!” Okay, well, it was the nineties, the late nineties, and it was a hip-hop sketch show, so I was probably more

like, “*Yo, this is gonna be dope, this is gonna be fresh,*” it was probably more like that, but the point was this was MTV, this was a very big deal. (1:13-1:40)

Dropping her voice to a much lower register, slowing her speaking pace, and employing specific jargon (“Yo,” “dope,” “fresh”) that set her speech squarely in the world of “late nineties hip-hop,” Jones affects the black male bravado of the artists with whom she will be working (“it was gonna be like, you know, rapper-slash-actor types, Mos Def and people like that... all of that machismo” [8:41-8:45]). Here, Jones offers the audience a teaser of what she is capable of, containing the impression in quotes. Setting the “black” voice up as performative codeswitching based on circumstance—i.e., being hired as a writer/actress on a hip-hop show—Jones differentiates her ‘original’ speaking voice as oppositional to the stereotypical swagger she performs. Not “Oh my god, this is amazing!” (high, feminine register) but “Yo, this is gonna be dope; this is gonna be fresh” (low, masculine register). Jones also demonstrates a keen awareness of her own racial performance, couched in a self-deprecating acknowledgement of her ‘hip-hop voice’ as façade. This sets up one voice (her starting voice) as an origin point or true voice, and the other voices as moments of disruption or deviance. Her audience appreciates it, and reacts with laughter: the joke, after all, plays into and with what psychologist John Baugh calls “linguistic profiling,” judgement and discrimination based on the sound of a voice; in his words, “the auditory equivalent of ‘racial profiling’” (155). Even as Jones tropes these linguistic stereotypes, though, she cannot entirely separate herself from them: in the context of her story, she is not quoting others, she is quoting herself—more accurately she is offering a humorous corrective to a previous impression of herself. As such, even in this short moment, Jones also potentially highlights the messy ambiguities of identity as it is linked to performance.

14 Very soon afterward, Jones again shifts her voice, this time while describing the experience of her higher education:

but the point was this was MTV, this was a very big deal, and this was a very gratifying thing in particular because I had been trying to get something like this, you know auditioning and things, ever since I had come home from Bryn Mawr college where I had dropped out—well, *one doesn't 'drop out' of Bryn Mawr College, rather one, I would say, one defers indefinitely, uh, in order to embark on a journey of, uh, non-linear, lifelong learning*—so, that’s what I was doing, and had I found my way back to new York, where I was stumbling around and I stumbled into the writing and performing scene. (1:40-2:11)

This time, Jones’s accent switches to a languid, lilting affair commonly associated with New England bluebloods—the very same set who might, for example, send their children and money

to Bryn Mawr. Jones speaks in a vaguely transatlantic accent, invoking a long history of American speech patterns marked by class divide and aspiration (Fallows). Here, Jones's voice is class critique, and her joke once again elicits a knowing audience laugh. The joke is clearly on the college's wealthy patrons, whose refusal to say the phrase "drop out" reference longstanding stereotypes of repressed rich WASPs. But yet again, it is hard to tell where Jones ends and the 'other' begins. Not only is this switch unconfined to quotes, instead operating more like free and indirect discourse; it also implicates her in its narrative message. The joke is once again partly on her, for attending Bryn Mawr in the first place.

15 In some ways, these first two impressions, at once Jones and not-Jones, provide signposts for some kind of middle-of-the-road: a real narrator that the audience can trust, associated with the body of the 'Sarah Jones' up on stage. Read this way, Jones's vocal strategies align with her story's centrist politics. Having demonstrated that she is not quite hip-hop MTV, but not quite Bryn Mawr either, Jones can establish her first speaking voice as appropriately 'neutral' middle-ground. As if offering an explanation for this strategy, Jones then goes on to explain her frustration with typecasting:

Now the only problem was, a lot of people in casting didn't know what to do about me and all my multicultural cast of characters; they really would have preferred it if I could do, um, celebrity impressions, or at the very least they'd hope that I could stick to urban characters. Urban, um, from the 'hood.' Rather than the multicultural range I was doing. And that really didn't work for me because part of the reason I had started writing in the first place was I was frustrated with the dearth of well-rounded images on television for someone like myself. It's fair to say that I felt like there was some stuff on TV that was demeaning, one-dimensional, stereotypes of, you know, ethnic people, and then you know, the limited roles for women, and then on top of that if you're a black girl, it was like, *giiirl, you better learn how to talk like this, oh and you better get yo'self a chiropractor girl so you can go play "Neck-Rollin' Bitch Numba One" and "Neck-Rollin' Ho Numba Two," and not injure yo' neck!* (2:27-3:18)

It is here, at minute 3:08, that Jones first 'comes out' as a "black girl." Significantly, she does this via a chain of ever-more-specific, ever-less-euphemistic terms, mocking the coded language used by many a casting director: first "urban," then "hood," then "ethnic," then finally "black." And it is at this moment, immediately after her own self-naming, that Jones shifts vocal registers for a third time. Here, Jones speaks in exaggerated version of AAVE (African American Vernacular English), smacking her lips and punching her words as she does so. She and the audience laugh.

16 But Jones's laughter now is decidedly less comfortable than that of her appreciative spectators. Her discomfort is perhaps born of the fact that, in this instance, it is genuinely unclear what in particular her audience finds funny: the stereotype itself, or its hyperbolic critique. In calling out the entertainment industry for its refusal to cast black women or anything other than "bitches and hos", Jones references two historically recurring stereotypes of black women that have long haunted the US cultural imaginary: what Carolyn West and others have called the "Sapphire" and "Jezebel" stereotypes, respectively. While the "Jezebel" figure is primarily characterized as "sexually promiscuous and immoral" (294), the "Sapphire" stereotype embodies the "hostile, nagging Black woman" (296). Caught between a rock and a hard place—between playing a bitch/Sapphire or a ho/Jezebel—Jones both demands and enacts alternative options. But the question remains: is Jones exploiting, or subverting here?

17 At this point, again as if to answer these nagging questions, Jones shifts strategies once again. Here, Jones showcases three voices: 1) her beginning, 'neutral' voice, 2) her "Jewish grandma" voice, and 3) her "Indian" voice:

I felt like this was a whole different thing like, with MTV, they had come to me and they had said "Wow, we really love your characters, and we know you have these urban characters and that's great but we know you have this other stuff you have this whole range—is it true you do a Jewish grandmother? We'd love to see that! And I thought, *"Wow, this is wonderful! Thank you so much! Finally, somebody cares about me! You know, finally!"* and I said *"This is fantastic, you know I would love to be in your program, I'm so flattered,"* and, um, it was wonderful, we had a lovely audition together, and they, you know, they really let me play, they wanted to meet all my different characters, you know they wanted to meet my French character and my Russian character, Indian, you know anything that *was unexpected, they wanted to hear that, right? They just did not want to hear the same thing that you are typically going to hear, they wanted something fresh and new, and I was very excited about that because that's what I was trying to give them. So it was kind of like this really thrilling thing that was happening to me and I was like "Wow, that was awesome,"* so then, now I found myself in LA. (3:28-4:23)

Again, Jones plays to and against the audience's linguistic biases. She assumes that when audiences hear her lapse into a new, distinctive prosody, they will understand that by "Jewish," Jones actually references a much more specific identity associated with the speech pattern (Nozowitz). In this case, "Jewish grandma" comes to stand in for a myriad of other identifications beyond ethnicity, including gender (female), race (white), age (senior), class (working/middle), and region (the New York metropole). The signifier "Jewish grandma" is, again, deeply intersectional, and as such its political purchase is ambiguous. Does the shorthand term "Jewish

grandma” collapse these myriad intersections of identity, eschewing a multipronged analysis of complicated subjecthood in favor of an easy stereotype? Or does it instead allow for an analysis of these many intersections, containing them cleverly in one sonic demonstration, with faith that her audience will get it? Similarly, Jones presumes that audiences will know that by “Indian,” she means “Indian immigrant”; in fact Jones’s Indian accent exemplifies what Shilpa S. Davé helpfully terms “brown voice,” a “specific racializing trait among South Asian Americans in Hollywood productions, which simultaneously connotes both foreignness and familiarity because the accent is identified with an English-speaking identity and hence offers some cultural privileges of assimilating into American culture” (41). Tellingly, this impression elicits one of the biggest laughs of the evening—a laugh, notably, quite unlike the slightly uncomfortable scattered giggles elicited by the “Jewish grandma” voice. Outside of the academy, too, brown voice made headlines after Indian-American comedian Aziz Ansari stated in several public interviews that he refused to do “the Indian accent,” despite being repeatedly asked by casting directors (Saad). Somewhat oddly, Jones’s own refusal to play into stereotypes of black women does not seem to extend to other categories of person. And yet once again her framing complicates the issue of self and other in a way that also subverts, or at least muddies, stereotype. These next two vocal impressions are decidedly different than her first three, in that they are not contained to quotes at all. In fact, Jones transitions between these voices without referring to the switch, obliquely naming the accent while still blurring the divide between the speaking narrator and the “characters” she can “do.”

18 The subversive elements already present in the three impressions described above comes to a head in Jones’s final vocal impression, which is yet again slightly different in that it is part of the actual narrative climax of her story. After a long detour through her past, Jones brings her audience back to the Los Angeles street corner:

I remember thinking, I was so incensed, “This is disgusting! Like how can they think they can treat people like this? How could you think you could treat someone this way, how could you do this?” and that’s what was going through my mind. But what actually came out of my mouth was *“This is disgusting! Who do you think you are? How do you think you can get away with this? This is outrageous! I’m gonna get on the line straight away to my agent!”* and *this is the accent that was coming out of my mouth. Okay, but wait wait wait, so, what’s important about this, okay, is the fact that, if you know my work and you know my characters they really all come from my childhood, okay, I come from a multiracial, multicultural family and we, you know, my neighbors my friends all these diverse people, that’s where my accents come from that’s where my people come from, and long before I brought them onstage, you know, these were all people whose accents I sometimes found I would use in a given situation if I thought it could be helpful. And, I*

will tell you, that you know a British accent has a certain impact on people! It stops them; it arrests them, if you will. (6:25-7:31)

In Jones's run-in with the LAPD, her British accent exposes the policemen's inherent racism. Britishness, associated with both whiteness and the ruling class, disrupts the cops' previous read of Jones and African American and therefore lower-class/criminal/sexually deviant.

Power, Authenticity, Voice

19 In the story's retelling, though, Jones's British accent also serves another purpose. As in the above examples, the accent continues long after Jones is ostensibly 'quoting' herself—her exterior outburst, at first clearly delineated from the monologue in her "mind," soon becomes indistinguishable from her interior monologue, as she continues to tell the audience her personal family history in the same British accent. This is important because Jones's personal history grants her credibility (consider, for example, the *Encyclopedia of African-American Writing* [2009]'s biographical explanation for her supernatural imitative abilities: "Because Sarah Jones's father was a medical doctor in the military, she and her family moved often. To adapt, she quickly picked up the local speech patterns and gestures" [Hatch, 322]). In an ironic display of vocal promiscuity, Jones cleverly relates her personal bona fides—the very multicultural backstory which bolsters her own 'authenticity'—in a voice that is not 'her own.' The result is a shrewd rejection of authenticity, followed by the admission that sometimes a voice can be "helpful," in that it grants Jones power that would normally be reserved for white people (the power, for example, to "arrest").

20 Given Jones's claim to the 'reality' of her characters, it is surprising that one pioneering performer is conspicuously missing from Jones's list of influences. In terms of approach, Jones's dramatic *oeuvre* perhaps most closely resembles that of Anna Deavere Smith, whose one-woman shows ushered in a renaissance of American "verbatim theatre," a sub-genre of documentary theater characterized by a strict adherence to the words of actual people as they related them to the playwright in interviews, ethnographies, etc. Of her productions, the most famous of which is *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* (1994), a solo act that tells the story of the Los Angeles uprisings in the wake of the Rodney King trial. In each performance of *Twilight*, Smith acts as a mouthpiece for the testimony of various "real" subjects, relaying word-for-word renditions of responses from a diverse range of actual interviewees, all with different backgrounds and perspectives. In the course of the evening, Smith plays a white truck driver, a Korean liquor store owner, the former

head of the Black Panther Party, a Panamanian shooting victim, a partially dead Mexican sculptor, a white Hollywood agent, several jurors in the Rodney King trial, two ex-gang members, and the chief of the LAPD, among several others. Throughout the performance, the solo performer of *Twilight* must rely on their own acting chops to convey a variety of personalities.

21 Like Smith, Jones's polyvocal performances also raise questions of the authenticity of the voice, the ethics of mimicry, and the ways sonic expectation attaches to certain bodies. Like Smith, Jones places her racial drama in 1990s Los Angeles. The notable difference between the two artists—that is, the fact that Jones's theatrical performance makes no claim to documentary—might allow Jones to sidestep these questions of authenticity. But the existence of “A Walk on the West Side,” a work of *non-fiction*, raises an interesting question: what happens to these debates when Jones speaks ‘as herself’ (that is, when she tells a story about something she actually experienced), and still employs the same stylistic strategies of vocal impression and codeswitching that she did when speaking “as others”?

22 While Jones's Broadway and off-Broadway performances are primarily fiction, their realist themes and formal similarities to Smith's one-woman documentary theater mean that they are nonetheless still haunted by the same questions of reality, fidelity, and testimony evoked by a piece like *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*. As Rosemary Weatherston brilliantly lays out in her article “‘The True Words of Real People’: Documenting the Myth of the Real in Anna Deavere Smith's *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*,” Smith's work has the dual capacity to shatter an audience's preconceived notions of “the relations between speech rhythms and the construction of individual identity,” while at the same time enforcing paradigms of “informant/informee” that largely shape US ideas of identity and difference (194). Praised as a “living documentary” by virtue of her expert acting abilities (marked primarily by an obsessive attention to realist modes of speech), Smith becomes a credible source of difference and the ‘truth’ of difference. Weatherston writes that, consistently, audience and critical responses to Smith's work declared an “astonished and heartfelt conviction that Smith—a light-skinned, African American woman—had been able objectively and accurately to recreate the singular experiences and subjectivities of an entire spectrum of men, women, Jews, Blacks, rich, poor, young, old, scholars, housewives, and street rappers” (192). Jones adopts many of Smith's same principals and techniques in her own (mostly fictional) solo shows, employing different accents, comportments, dialects, and vocal ranges to signal each different character. Like Smith, Jones has largely avoided criticism of her method as potentially

“an oppressive form of appropriation” (193), instead garnering praise for her ‘multicultural’ solo shows.

23 Despite its route through the ugly world of blatant police harassment and racism in entertainment media, “A Walk on the West Side” ends on a note of triumph. In the last minute of her performance, Jones closes with the following:

And so I left. I went back to New York, I went back to the theater, and I kept writing and performing the stuff that I thought was compelling, and, you know, I wondered a lot whether I had really made a mistake. And I have to say that, one thing that helped was eventually I met Whoopi—not only met, but got to work alongside—Whoopi, and Tracy, and Lilly... and as for Meryl... I was at a benefit performing one night and she saw me, and she was so generous with me, she said, “I’d like to help you,” and she agreed to put her name on my show, and help *Bridge & Tunnel* get to off-Broadway, and then to Broadway, and win a Tony. And you know I look at all of that and I think: I don’t know if that happens in LA, but that is the kind of thing that happens in New York City, where jaywalking is considered high art. Thank you. (10:55-11:52)

As she returns to the right coast and the right city, racism seems contained to the bad place of Los Angeles, replaced by a rosy, New York metropolitan multiculturalism in which creative works like hers are possible. Her feel-good conclusion is smart storytelling, in that it gives her imagined audience of liberal-leaning public radio listeners a happy ending. But the all-too-neat conclusion of “A Walk on the West Side” obscures the much more radical potential at the heart of Jones’s performance.

24 Key to this potential is Jones’s bizarre and brilliant entanglement of medium and message. Voice, it turns out, is the subject of the story itself: when the story is told via the voice, things are bound to get messy. As the start of this article makes clear, the power of Jones’s solo stage work often relies on her uncanny ability to present one way and sound another, subverting audience expectations (and, in turn, revealing audience prejudice). In other words, by mimicking a range of accents while remaining one embodied person, Jones draws attention to a disconnect between the audience’s assumptions about aesthetic markers of race, gender, sexuality, or class, and those same identity categories’ sonic markers. Once her performance moves from the stage to *The Moth Radio Hour*, however, the trick needs tweaking: without a body to “present,” the voice in Jones’s story works much like the voice in one of Baugh’s experiments, in that it serves as the primary marker of race, class, gender, or sexuality.

25 As is the case with all the stories that make it to *The Moth Radio Hour*’s handpicked weekly selection, Jones’s story arrived in listener’s earbuds stripped of its initial milieu. On the most

obvious level, in its podcast form, *The Moth* is no longer being delivered live, a key distinction between podcasts and much of talk radio. If performance asserts “embodiment and interconnection in time, space, and place,” with artists representing themselves “in the process of *being and doing*, and these acts take place in a cultural context for a public to witness” (Stiles 75), the recording of Jones’s stage performance fails to fit the definition of “performance” as it is understood in art criticism and other disciplines. These critical understandings of performance tend to focus on the interaction between the body/action of the artist, and her interpreting audience. In the words of Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson:

Performing the body in (or as) the work of art, as so many artists have done over the last three-and-half decades, exposes the fact that interpretation does not come ‘naturally’ at the moment of making contact with the artwork (any more than the artist ‘naturally’ injects her intentions or emotional affect into the forms of the work in a finalized or determinable way at the moment of creation). At the same time, such a performance of the body of the artist also points to the fact that the interaction among subjects, as mediated through the artwork (which in this case ‘is’ the artist), is hardly unaffected by the work’s institutional and discursive stagings and more broadly construed social and political situations. (3)

In other words, theories of performance emphasize immediacy and embodiment, both of which are more or less absent from the podcast medium. While vestiges of the original context such as audience reactions (laughter, applause, interested chatter, etc.) certainly remain, *The Moth Radio Hour* listeners lack access to any of the physical trappings that accompany a live show: a stage, a seat, a venue, other audience members, and—most importantly for the purposes of this article—the body of the performer herself.

26 Because there is no body to offer “clues” as to Jones’s identity (race, gender, etc.), the assumed connection between identity and a set of physically visible markers is thrown into question. Unbound by a bodily referent, the speaker’s voice gains primary authority when it comes to signifying identity. Without a body to which it can attach, the voice must not only provide explicit narrative context on the level of spoken word relaying the plot of the story; it must also, importantly, provide implicit extra-narrative context clues as to the identity and position of the narrator. As we have seen, these clues can take the form of dialect, intonation, inflection, and a myriad of other vocal markers. Searching for auditory clues on which to found their mental ‘picture’ of Jones, audience members are forced to linguistically profile her. But what happens when the listener is given many different clues, and those clues are constantly changing?

Conclusion

27 The podcast format, distinguished by its absence of the usual visual cues by which the audience might make assumptions about Jones's identity, allows her to cleverly manipulate her audience. I assert that the absence of a speaking body in the podcast medium, in combination with Jones's shifting accents, ultimately disrupts the idea of an 'original' or 'authentic' voice for Jones. Indeed, as I have shown above, the 'neutrality' her original speaking voice has been *carefully constructed* as a middle ground via its opposition to a myriad of named 'Other' voices. As such, it is not 'neutral' at all. To put it bluntly: by many accounts, in the beginning of her story, Jones 'sounds white' (Farhi). To many podcast listeners unfamiliar with Jones and her work, the speaking voice she presents to might not read as attached to the "black girl" she later confesses herself to be, a quarter of the way through her story. In this way, Jones's podcast audience may well accidentally enact a scene complementary to, not identical with, the climactic scene of her story. On the Hollywood street corner, white policemen interpellate Jones as "criminal" based on her physical appearance, only to have their racist assumptions called out by an accent whose sound challenges their rubrics of identity. In their private listening headphones, podcast consumers might well interpellate Jones as non-black based on the sound of her voice, only to have their racist assumptions called out not by Jones's physical appearance, but by both her coming out as a "black girl" at minute 3:08, and by her repeated codeswitching. Certainly, Jones's ability to *change* her voice confuses the audience (in other words: with each shift in accent, the audience has the rug pulled out from underneath them, again and again) but that is not the most significant aspect of her performance. Rather, is the absence of an *original* and fully legible voice, that gives her performance a radical potential. The audience has tried to hail her, and she has escaped.

28 Jones's performances (on the stage, but even more obviously in our earbuds) make clear that any discussion of race, gender, sexuality, or class that conceives of these identity categories as solely visual constructions is severely limited in its scope. More importantly, the fact that Jones repeatedly flaunts her mastery of these markers—that the entire point of her story is, in some ways, that she can bend them to her will—wrests interpolative power from her unseeing audience. Her surface narrative—steeped in the language of liberal and representational politics—cannot fully tame the more radical, destabilizing implication of her own vocal promiscuity: namely, that the rubrics that her audiences uses to construct the identities she references (be they "Neck-Rolling Ho Numba One" or "Jewish grandma") are unstable and unfounded to begin with.

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Defined by Distance: The Road Trip and Queer Love in *Alice Isn't Dead*

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Abstract

From a feminist media studies and cultural studies perspective, the contribution explores the fascinating, yet overlooked podcast series *Alice Isn't Dead* (2016-8). The podcast thematically centers around the complex relationship of culture and distance and develops different understandings of culture, as well as the experience of distance in a geographical, socio-economic (class mobility), or interpersonal-romantic sense. Tracing these conceptions and their attempts to define a collective US-American identity *differently*, the contribution focuses on the podcast's narration in the form of radio monologues by its protagonist, the exceptional trucker character Keisha, its take on the road trip and (female) mobility, as well as its representation of a queer love story. With an eye for the intersectional effects of gender, race, and sexual orientation, these readings mobilize a variety of cultural artifacts to explore the particular affordances of serialized fictional podcast storytelling. Of particular interest to the contribution are the intertextual echoes of tropes and themes of the road trip narrative and the road movie, as well as the podcast's ending as a turn toward homonormativity that is inconsistent with the queer temporalities and the capitalist critique developed by the podcast during its three seasons.

“Bitter cold and thin air. It hurts a little to breathe, and every time I do, the breath comes out visible. It's offseason, I think. Or maybe not many people come to this [northern] part of the Canyon. A great acreage of sheer nothing, a vast quantity of air. If we are a country made up more of distance than culture, then no wonder this is our most defining sight. We come to see the beating heart at the center of America, and it is a hole in the Earth. And then we take a picture of it, so that we can own a little bit of that distance.” (“North Rim, Arizona”)

Introduction

1 After the mysterious disappearance of her wife, Alice, the initially unnamed protagonist Keisha of the fictional horror podcast *Alice Isn't Dead* (2016-8, short: *AID*) takes a job as a truck driver to search for her. During an extensive road trip across the US and its quintessential cultural spaces (gas stations, parking lots, motels, or factories rather than touristic sites), Keisha encounters surreal spaces, ghostly presences, and dangerous monsters, which help her understand the ‘weirdness’ of the American experience in the 21st century, as well as her need for and love of her wife. She relates her experiences and thoughts through the truck's CB radio broadcasting system, addressing them to Alice. In this bonus episode released in-between the first and second season,

Keisha again turns to her truck's CB radio to describe to Alice her experience of visiting one of the US's most iconic sights, the Grand Canyon.

2 The Grand Canyon, the Niagara Falls, Northern California's redwoods, or Oregon's Crater Lake, etc., are "awe-inspiring manifestations of nature in America," Klaus Benesch writes, which "were often used as a foil for projecting utopian visions and idealizations of the nation's exceptional place among the nations of the world" (18). Less taken with the spectacular sight of the canyon, Keisha is instead fascinated by exactly this, its cultural function for national identity-building: this 'heart' of the US is nothing more than a 'hole in the earth,' a magnificent nothingness onto whose expansive emptiness visitors can project their own visions, identities, desires.

3 The podcast borrows heavily from the road movie, as this article will explore, yet as auditory media offers listeners a self-aware spin on the tropes of the cinematic genre. For example, Keisha's contemplative visit at a freezing Grand Canyon evokes different sentiments than the finale of one of the most memorable road movies set at the same location, *Thelma & Louise* (1991). In the last minutes of the film, Thelma and Louise refuse to surrender to the armada of police that corners them at the Grand Canyon and spectacularly commit suicide by driving their convertible over the cliff. Rather than such a grand declaration of female rebellion, Keisha's contemplative experience recalls French feminist philosopher Simone De Beauvoir's travel to the Grand Canyon in the 1950s. De Beauvoir's travel journal highlights her anticipation before visiting the natural sight, how its beauty overwhelms but remains curiously inaccessible to her: "I'd like something to happen. I look – that's all – and nothing happens. It's the same story every time, [...] things are here, and I am here, and we come face to face. But in the end, I'm always the one who gets up and goes away" (179).

4 Just like the US-American tourists that Keisha speaks of – and that she counts herself among ("we"), this passage of De Beauvoir's projects the desire to overcome the Grand Canyon's daunting expansiveness, either by hoping for "something to happen" or by photographing it 'to own its distance.' Both behaviors evoke 'culture' in the widest sense as a reaction to an overwhelming experience of distance. Aside from this bonus episode, at least four other episodes of *AID* address Keisha's understanding that the US is "a country defined as much by distance as by culture" (1.8; 1.10; 3.4; 3.6). Using this comment as a guiding idea, this article explores the relationship between US-American culture (such as a podcast) and distance. I argue that through two different conceptions of culture the podcast develops its own take on how to counter the challenge of distance: first, the regionally specific, quirky, and unexpected 'good culture' of weird

roadside attractions (and indie podcast series?) accepts and endorses distance, while, ‘bad’ capitalist, generic franchise consumer culture seeks to overwrite distance with disastrous effects. The article utilizes the notion of distance both in the implied geographical as well as an emotional, romantic sense for a cultural studies and gender studies inquiry in the podcast’s narrative and communicative forms, its depiction of the road trip and automobile travel, as well as queer love and domesticity.

Podcast Communications and Unlikely Protagonists: On Loosing, Finding, and Speaking to Alice

5 Podcasts are uniquely connected to the mobility of their listeners: frequently, listeners of *AID* mention on its Facebook page or the hashtag #Aliceisntdead that they catch up on episodes during their commute.¹ During each season, episodes were released weekly – allowing for ‘gaps’ between episodes and seasons that encourage listeners to speculate and respond in the kind of recursive feedback-loop typical of serial storytelling (see contributions to Kelleter; Sulimma, *Gender and Seriality*). Journalistic and academic discussions of *AID* have connected the show with the “booming market” for serialized podcasts in general (Barone), fictional horror podcasts specifically (Hancock 31), and queer representations in podcasts (Bainbridge 180-2; Capewell).

6 The podcast series is written by Joseph Fink known from the successful comedy-horror podcast *Welcome to Night Vale* (2012-). Framed by prefaced by introductions and credits spoken by author figure Fink, the major ‘voice’ of *AID* is that of Jasika Nicole Pruitt who voices protagonist-narrator Keisha.² In the second season, Pruitt’s Keisha is joined by an antagonistic character without a name who hunts her (spoken by Roberta Colindrez), and in the third season by Alice herself (spoken by Erica Livingston).³ Aside from these voice actors, *AID*’s accompanying eerie and complex soundscape is created by composer Disparition/Joe Bernstein.

¹ While “post-*Serial* fictions are built for less taxing mobility,” Hancock and McMurty find that there is also a rise in non-commuting related “domestic and shared listening” (90), making any speculation on the listening practices of *AID*’s audience difficult.

² Among the paratextual accompaniments spoken by Fink are the surreal and themselves serialized sequences at the end of each episode. In the different seasons, Fink reads variations of the jokes “Why did the chicken cross the road?” (season one), and “Knock-Knock/Who’s there?” (season two), as well as quotes from George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1871/2; season three). The metatextual and serialized pleasure that these puny endings offer listeners would warrant an entire article itself, so for now, it suffices to say that these endings in complex ways correspond to the episodes they succeed.

³ While Alice also uses the truck’s CB radio, the podcast does not give any fictional justification for why listeners can hear the ‘hunter’s voice.

7 Even though *AID* shares a broadcasting-inspired narration and spooky atmosphere with its podcast sibling, *Night Vale* has a more humorous tone, is mostly episodic, and set in one fictional South-Western desert community. Whereas *AID*'s tone is more 'serious,' its story is serialized, and set across the United States. During her travels Keisha visits 28 of the 50 States of the US; and it comes as little surprise that a map figures prominently among the podcast's merchandise (see fig. 1). Often her radio monologues check in from the borders of states, demonstrating the road travel narrative's fascination for geographical and social borders (Laderman 27).

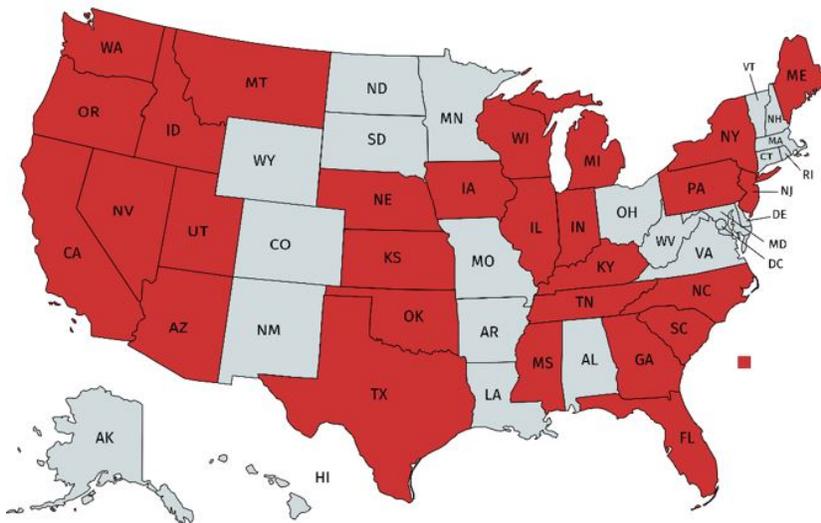


Fig. 1.: Listeners of the podcast can buy the above map of Keisha's road trip as merchandise. The lower map highlights the extent of her travels in 28 different states of the US.

8 *AID* is a story about the beauty and strangeness of travel – and by extension the beauty and strangeness of the US. But it also is, on a smaller scale, a story about one woman's heartbreak, and ultimately, a love story. After her wife disappeared without explanation, Keisha mourns her until

she spots Alice on the evening news, in a crowd assembled around a traffic accident. She keeps discovering such appearances: “I made a list of every place I saw you on the news, and that list became a map of America” (1.2). Because Alice seems to be all over the United States, Keisha begins traveling the country as a trucker for Bay & Creek Shipping, the ominous company that Alice is somehow connected to. Plot-wise, her travels in the first season are motivated by finding Alice and fighting their mutual enemy, the Thistle men.⁴ In the second season, Keisha searches for information to understand the complex war that she and Alice are inexplicably mixed up in and tries to shake off a threat pursuing her, the ‘hunter.’ Meanwhile, in the third season, the reunited couple, Keisha and Alice, want to expose the sinister doings of the different institutions and actors mixed up in the ‘war’ to the public.

9 In its combination of the eclectic name Alice and the negative verb form, the podcast’s name may recall Teresa De Lauretis’s classic in feminist film theory to the feminist media studies scholar: *Alice Doesn’t: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (1984). De Lauretis’ opening to the book carries weight for the podcast’s name:

The images or references suggested by the name ‘Alice’ are many and will probably vary with each reader. Whether you think of *Alice in Wonderland* or *Radio Alice* in Bologna; of Alice B. Toklas, who ‘wrote’ an autobiography as well as other things; or of Alice James, who produced an illness while her brothers did the writing; of Alice Sheldon, who writes science fiction, but with a male pseudonym [James Tiptree Jr.] (VII).

Like the protagonist of *Alice in Wonderland* (1865), the podcast’s Alice has disappeared from her regular life. Similar to the cultural void that is the Grand Canyon, upon which any visitor can project their needs and desires, until the third season, Alice remains either the mediated ghostly presence of television news or the silent addressee of Keisha’s radio monologues. Keisha is well aware of their unequal communication: “‘we’ don’t talk. I do. You vanish. You aren’t. You are a – a gap, a nothing. And I talk into that nothing. I let my words float away, like Jackie on the waves” (1.4). Just like so many of her literary and cultural namesakes that De Lauretis mentions, Alice’s achievements, opinions, or emotions are subsumed and hidden behind those of others, most of all Keisha’s.

⁴ Keisha calls these supernatural serial killers the Thistle men because the first of their kind that she encounters wears a T-shirt with the word ‘thistle’ on it. All the members of this murderous community are cis-male, and white – Keisha mentions their unhealthy pale skin several times, making the threat they pose to woman of color Keisha one that is particularly racialized and gendered. In several scenes, Keisha’s descriptions of their attacks occur in terms that evoke sexualized violence and assault. However, despite their uniform masculinity, the Thistle men cooperate with the more diverse Bay & Creek, and the female ‘hunter’ in later seasons.

10 And yet, the podcast series does not let its eponymous character serve as a mere plot motivator for Keisha’s travels, a sort of Ms. Macguffin, who could easily be replaced with a prized object like the feature-less princess that a fairytale knight wins at the end of the story. Instead, Alice suddenly appears to try to save Keisha in the final episodes of both the first season and second season. It is her who first speaks the name of the podcast’s previously unnamed protagonist, Keisha. Through this naming, Alice claims narrative authority and the attention of the listener. While in the second season, Alice asks Keisha to let her do the mysterious work she feels a calling to, in the third season, the two lovers are reunited and Alice becomes a fully fleshed-out character. She travels with Keisha, and speaks directly to the audience, turning the listener into her confidante to confess what she is still afraid to tell Keisha. We learn, that she purposefully left to protect Keisha and now realizes that she made a mistake in underestimating her wife and the heartbreak that her leaving caused her.

11 Reflecting on how she first reacted to Alice’s disappearance, Keisha describes her attempts to cope in self-help groups: “I sat in circles and talked about you. That’s what we do now, right? As a civilization, we sit in a circle and we describe the shape of the monster that is devouring us. We hope, like a talisman, that our description will provide some shelter against it. It won’t, though. We are helpless” (1.2). And so, Keisha takes to the road and finds actual monsters. However, the listener cannot overlook that Keisha’s radio broadcast adopts the exact form of the group therapy that she deemed so fruitless: she sits (not in a circle but a truck) and talks (not to other group members but the podcast’s audience) to make sense of her circumstances. Hence, *AID*’s narrative is made up of Keisha’s attempts at communication and sense-making.

12 Communication in *AID* is fleeting, unidirectional, and can never guarantee a sender to reach their addressee. While Keisha tries to communicate with Alice through her CB radio, Alice reaches out to Keisha through her appearances on the news, and, in the episode “Signs & Wonders” (1.5), through cryptic billboards on the side of the highway. Punctuated by the sound of the radio switch, Keisha’s CB radio monologues take the form of confession, witness account, or rambling trail of thoughts; yet, they always project a lyrical, poetic quality. Genre-wise, they are part audio diary, part epistolary fiction, part travel writing, part socio-political commentary, and part poetry.⁵ In regard to the latter, it is the contemplative cadence and purposeful way of speaking that Pruitt

⁵ Her narration tends to switch between two chronologically different strands: one that strives toward an effect of immediacy and narrative ‘live’-ness, when Keisha describes things that she sees while driving or recalls what happened right before she picked up the radio’s microphone, and the other, retrospective strand recalls her past.

adopts for her Keisha as well as the rich metaphorical range of Keisha's descriptions that creates the effect of a spoken word performance or poetry reading. This lyrical dimension of the podcast in combination with the eerie musical accompaniment lends itself particularly to affective investments of listeners.

13 A podcast can be described as an "intimate aural medium," Stacey Copeland finds, that allows for a "deep affective experience" and the possibility to challenge gendered, heteronormative presumptions due to this affective pull (210). Tellingly, Keisha's monologues are followed not only by the podcast's listeners but a fictional audience as well – Keisha's enemies. One Thistle man mocks her for her attempts to reach Alice: "I'm not much for talking. Not like you. 'Oh, Alice! Hi, Alice! It's me, Alice!'" (1.10). His comment unconvincingly seeks to cast Keisha as representative of not one but two tiring gendered stereotypes, the female stalker who is unhealthily invested in her romantic partner, and the gossipy 'chatterbox.' Serial podcasts allow listeners to reflect on such stereotypes and their intersectional prejudices. Such didactic potentials are especially relevant because, as I argued elsewhere, when it comes to the gendered 'doing' of voice, "essentialist notions of pitch, vocal range, speaking melody, etc. stubbornly persist ... Hence, people whose voices do not fall in the surprisingly narrow realm of gender conformity that is constructed *through* voice are objected to constant misgendering, e.g. on the phone" (Sulimma, "Mute White Woman", 328).

14 To remain with gendered or racialized stereotypes, as a queer femme woman of color, Keisha is an unusual representation of a professional trucker – and an unusual protagonist of a road trip story. Unlike the podcast, the novel based on *AID* quickly establishes its protagonist as a woman of color when a stranger tells Keisha, "Honey, you don't look like the trucker type," and the omniscient narrator explains: "She wasn't big, she wasn't white, she wasn't male. Her hands shook as a rule, and her voice was soft when she spoke at all. But she drove a truck" (12).⁶ The podcast is more subtle about such intersectional prejudice: after Keisha describes a man in a diner as a trucker based on his looks, she immediately second-guesses such assumptions implying that she should best know not to judge a book by its cover: "He looked like a truck driver... What does a truck driver look like?!?" (1.1). But it is not only looking the part, Keisha also expresses how

⁶ After the podcast's conclusion, its producer and 'creator' Joseph Fink published the novel *Alice Isn't Dead* (2018) as a retelling of the podcast.

insecure she feels about driving the large vehicle, its noise and height, or the pains of sitting still for long periods of time.

15 This unease – at driving and traveling – initially serves Keisha to distinguish herself from Alice, “You were always the driver then. I didn’t like driving. I do now. Or maybe I’ve just convinced myself I do” (2.3). In her reading of female mobility in novels of the 1950s, Julia Leyda finds that “the power to drive fast, to escape a bad situation, to control the direction of her life, makes the automobile a potent symbol of freedom for women” (133). Even though alienating at first, the truck similarly becomes a powerful instrument for Keisha during the course of the podcast. Keisha employs the truck as a coping mechanism to deal with her anxiety (the pleasures of navigating the massive vehicle just as much as communicating through its radio system), and also as a practical tool to aid her search for Alice. With its truck inversed into a skull, the podcast’s memorable logo highlights the dangers of the road and the truck’s relevance for the podcast’s narration, themes, and characterization (see Fig. 2).



Fig. 2: The Podcast’s logo visually underscores its punny refusal to ‘bury your gays’ – and yet its insular version of a queer happy end seems incompatible with its road trip’s queer temporalities and its ideal of political organizing.

16 Central to Keisha’s characterization – and what aside from her gender, race, and sexual orientation marks her as such an exceptional protagonist for a road trip narrative – are her fears and constant anxiety. “I liked being home. It was the only place I felt safe” (1.8), she confesses, but also stresses that “home isn’t a place, home was a person. I can’t go home” (1.3). Having long struggled with her mental health, the loss of Alice hits Keisha not only as the betrayal of a romantic partner but as the loss of mental grounding. However terrified Keisha is in her everyday life, in several life-threatening scenes, she can calmly respond to the homicidal boasts of monstrous antagonists such as the Thistle men or the ‘hunter’ because of her fears: “A dark closet makes me afraid. The wind. Don’t feel proud because you joined their ranks. I’m used to fear” (2.10). The horrific enemies and frightening spaces that Keisha faces would scare anyone, yet, it is because her fear is habitual, a feeling she is very experienced with, that Keisha is able to take these monsters head-on.⁷

17 *AID* never has Keisha connect her anxiety to the discrimination or harassment she may have experienced due to her gender, sexual orientation, or race. There is something deeply rewarding to listeners to have a queer woman of color travel all over the United States by herself without any explicit experiences of racism, misogyny, or homophobia – but maybe even more unlikely than the supernatural elements of *AID*’s storylines. And yet, even though the podcast never explores how Keisha’s intersectional identity affects her mental health struggles and requires her to develop her resilience to weather everyday life, there are instances in which such readings particularly suggest themselves. When Keisha angrily anticipates and discredits the explanation that Alice will later give to justify her leaving, she says: “You think safety is an option that’s *available* to me? I haven’t been safe since I was born into this country, this angry, seething, stupid, could-be-so-much-more-than-it-is country! And *you*’re gonna keep me safe?!?” (1.5). Keisha’s statement may refer to the lack of security that a person of color and especially a queer person of color in the US will feel in the face of the institutionalized racism, homophobia, and sexism rampant in the United States (and many other countries, including Germany) sadly even in 2020.

⁷ The first season finale especially brings this point across when Keisha’s fear becomes a kind of superpower. Giving in to her anxiety gives her the strength to physically overpower and kill a Thistle man with her bare hands: “Anxiety like electricity. And I knew, in that moment, that anxiety is just an energy. It is an uncontrollable near-infinite energy, surging within me. And for once I stopped trying to contain it” (1.10).

‘A Road Movie to Listen to’: The Politics of a Podcast Road Trip

18 *AID* is a story about a road trip through the US – as its beginning makes unmistakably clear: “this is not a story. It’s a road trip. Which...same difference. In a good one, the start is exciting, and the finish is satisfying, and we end up somewhere else...somewhere a long way away from where we started” (1.1). The road trip by car is a quintessential US-American cultural phenomenon that stands in the tradition of a wide range of media representations from Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1957), *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (the novel: 1971; film: 1998), Britney Spear’s *Crossroads* (2002), or the most recent *Queen & Slim* (2019).

19 Scholars have found travel occupying the US-American literary and cultural production in profound ways. For Elsa Court, mobility constitutes “the foundation of American literature, which posits that the only way to define such a vast country is through inland movement” (3). And, Julia Leyda points out how “American national identity has always concerned itself with movement – into the wilderness, across the continent, into middle and upper classes, into outer space” (18). Leyda especially understands movement here in both the geographic and a social-economic movement of class belonging. Even though *AID* seems only concerned with geographical distance, and possibly the emotional distance between two partners in a romantic relationship, as the series progresses, it increasingly addresses the injustices of the kind of social-economic movement that Leyda has in mind here.

20 The graphic novel *Are You Listening* (2019) by Tillie Walden depicts a queer road trip across Texas by two female characters, mechanic Lou and teenager Bea.⁸ In many ways this coming-of-age narrative is the exact opposite of *AID*; after all, the comic book’s pleasures are exclusively visual. Yet, both the podcast and the comic offer a queer version of the road trip narrative that excels at balancing different modes: the fantastical, vast distances and landscapes with the small, intimate experiences of their troubled protagonists. Just as Keisha fights the Thistle men, Lou and Bea are chased by creepy cismale agents of the Office of Road Inquiry. In both stories, men represent official institutions that pose a danger to queer women. While Keisha battles her anxiety, Lou is often paralyzed by her anger; and just like Keisha struggles with Alice’s disappearance, Lou and Bea are haunted by traumatic past events.

⁸ On her travels Keisha is mostly alone, but sometimes accompanied by a teenage sidekick, Sylvia, who seeks and revenge on the Thistle men for murdering her mother.

21 Walden opens the graphic novel with a beautiful, abstract rendering of a map of Texas overlaid by the first stanza of Adrienne Rich’s “Itinerary” (1951): “The guidebooks play deception; oceans are a property of mind. All maps are fiction, all travelers come to separate frontiers” (see fig. 3). The poem taps into a rich cultural history that occupies postcolonial studies, the notion of maps and frontiers as cultural constructions steeped in colonial dynamics. While they may follow the US-American myth of colonialist pioneers, neither Keisha nor the protagonists of Walden’s comic are willing to cast their travels in the terms of expansion, frontier, and discovery. Keisha knowingly disbands with such images when she states “I’m not a frontier tracker and the highway isn’t signs and twigs, it’s a truck on a road. We don’t leave tracks.” (2.3). The frontiers that Rich addresses are not necessarily spatial but deeply personal, they are different for every traveler. The distances that these queer characters travel and the spaces that they cross are often deserted. However, these spaces are no version of a postindustrial Terra Nullius: their vastness does not promise opportunities or potentials, but reeks of loss, mourning, and strange preternatural forces.

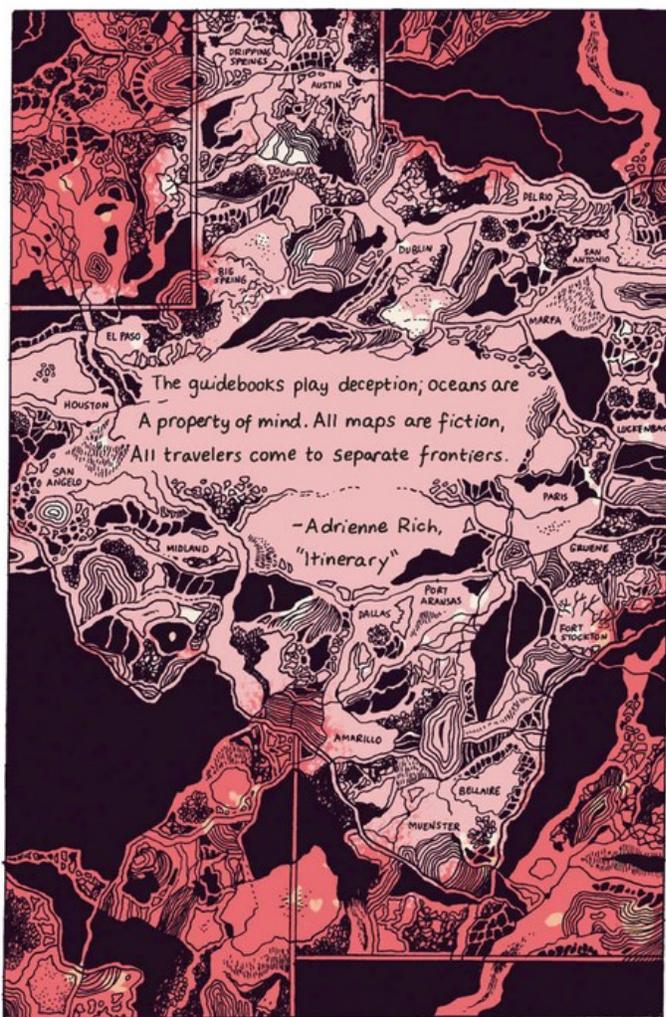


Fig. 3: The first page of Walden’s *Are You Listening* beautifully illustrates the road trip of its queer protagonists with the lines from a poem by Adrienne Rich. Both Rich’s poem as well as Walden’s comic book offer resonant context for *AID*.

22 In several interviews, Joseph Fink has stated his love for overlooked weird or obscure roadside attractions to serve as an inspiration for Keisha’s travels (Barone). Some examples of such roadside attractions that Keisha stumbles upon and that listeners could also visit are the desert ballet of Marta Becket in Death Valley Junction (2.6), the “monastery” at Crystal Springs Rest Area on I280 (2.7), or the vortexes in Sedona, Arizona (1.7). Aside from the spooky and supernatural, the road trip of *AID* often takes the form of the quirky, random, and endearingly strange. “America has weird things in it. It has so many miles, so much space to put the weirdness in” (1.10).

23 The sense of vast emptiness of the US that *AID* so astutely chronicles – and that makes weird roadside attractions so unique and special – should not be necessarily be understood only as landscape devoid of human habitation. As any moviegoer will recall, the road movie has a distinct iconography of expansive landscapes, spectacular vistas, and encompassing horizons. Keisha’s descriptions reference such visual imagery, yet just as often mention empty parking lots, deserted farmhouses, or postindustrial factories. It is especially her experience of commercial highway service areas, suburban malls, and sideway commerce associated with drive-in culture that project feelings of isolation, disorientation, or a kind of postindustrial melancholy coupled with the sense that something is wrong: “We must have decided this, right, at some point? That we wanted it all to look the same? And I can understand that decision. We all like to feel somewhere familiar. . . . But we have paid a price for this” (2.4). Thus, Keisha implies that there has been some kind of consensus or contract, that she does not exclude herself from,⁹ but whose outcome was never intended to take on this shape. So what does the podcast refer to here? Neoliberal privatization, automobility, consumerist capitalism? My guess is all of these and much more. *AID* seems to suggest that one way the US responded to the disorienting emptiness of its distance was to fill it with franchises, with consumer sameness, negating all those special and unique experiences that Keisha cherishes in the weird roadside attractions.

24 Such sameness, that is the capitalist and consumerist product conformity of global franchises, becomes a way to feel at home anywhere, to create a comforting illusion to cope with the massive vastness of the US. By highlighting on the homogeneity of consumer culture, *AID* differentiates capitalist ‘bad culture’ from the quirky, regionally specific roadside attractions Keisha cherishes. Commercialized culture thus is not only an addition (“distance and culture”) but

⁹ In general, Keisha never excludes herself from any harsh observations about the US; she is careful not to be judgmental of other’s circumstances, for example, to not judge people living in rural surroundings when she lives in the urban Bay Area in California. “Oh, god, am I being condescending? I am, aren’t I? Shit” (1.3).

an assumed antidote to distance, at the cost of losing regional specificity. In other words, while the consumer culture of franchises presents itself as an antidote to distance by emphasizing generic ‘sameness,’ it seeks to displace the distance that is so formative to a collective US-American identity. Meanwhile, the weird sites that Keisha visits during her travels embrace and even depend on distance, they have to be found in order to be appreciated. The antagonistic Thistle men allude to this understanding of Keisha’s when one of them repeats her exact words to legitimize their existence in the first season finale.

‘America,’ he said. ‘A country defined as much by distance as culture. America embraces its distances. Empty spaces and road trips, but there is always a price. *We are* that price. We are creatures of the road. We feed on distance, on road trips, on emptiness, bodies by the side of the highway.’

The Thistle men may benefit from the country’s vastness but it is commercial uniformity that hides their gruesome deeds. The Thistle men are themselves characterized by such uniformity, they appear as interchangeable and without any defining individualistic characteristics. Keisha responds with anger to their above statement “Don’t try to make poetry out of the blood on your hands.” While through her radio monologues Keisha may make poetry out of her travels, fears, and pain, she does not want the murder and exploitation of her enemies to resemble her own words.

25 To both Keisha and the podcast’s listeners, the larger mystery, which extends beyond the series’ seasons, remains hard to grasp until the final season. Initially, Keisha zooms in on the ‘big bad’ of the first season, these Thistle men, a community of supernatural, cannibalistic serial killers, who also have close ties to and the support of the government. At first, it appears as if Keisha’s (and Alice’s) employer, the trucking company Bay & Creek is also a military organization fighting the Thistle men. However, the ‘hunter’ reveals that the nature of this battle is a grotesque kind of checks and balances, a hidden scheme of massive institutional proportions in which seeming opponents participate in an orchestrated battle play that they all benefit from. “While having two sides is convenient, it turns out, it’s not absolutely necessary,” she explains, “War is a very useful thing, Keisha. It allows for a lot of messiness, a lot of freedom, and we are a country that enjoys messiness and freedom” (2.10). Keisha and Alice had considered themselves chess pieces caught between the battle lines but now decide that they need to upend the game altogether. They become vigilante terrorists, the “derelict bombers,” who blow up their enemies’ warehouses hidden among ruins; contact a journalist for a tell-all-story, and are disappointed when this story is released but ignored by the general public.

26 It is at this point that *AID* leaves the road trip genre and becomes a lesson in community organizing. During her travels, Keisha had frequently encountered the name Praxis as a mythical force against the evils they are battling. While she had hoped that finding Praxis would allow her to join an effective, powerful institution, she comes to realize that they have to create Praxis themselves in a laborious, slow process of grassroots organizing. Keisha and Alice already are connected to a “whisper network of weirdos and freaks and outsiders” (3.2) which they utilize to create the structures at a local level that will become a national movement, Praxis. Keisha and Alice start meetings where they let others do what Keisha has been doing all along: narrate their experiences and share their own stories: “A thing seen on the roads that didn’t fit into the narrative this country had made for itself. There is a power in telling your own stories. The ones we knew were true, the ones we hadn’t realized anyone else would believe” (3.7). It is from these gradually expanding meetings that they build a kind of citizen army which in the penultimate episode faces off against the combined forces of Thistle and Bay & Creek, successfully overthrowing them in a violent battle. Among the people fighting alongside Keisha and Alice are most of the minor characters that Keisha had encountered in the three seasons of the podcast. Hence, it is no secret superhero team-up but her past connections and encounters that are revealed as the antidote against evil.

27 Keisha and Alice’s insights into organizing Praxis sounds like a manual for how to start a movement: “It is an overwhelming goal to organize a country, but it starts with the people around you” (3.7); “The only way to overthrow power is by driving in the thinnest edge of the wedge and then methodically and constantly tapping it in for years” (3.8). This is especially interesting when comparing Keisha and Alice’s aspirations to change society through the people living in it with the road trip genre’s refusal to allow for a re-integration into mainstream society, its stories of individual rebellion and societal exit rather than the reform to strenuously transform society.¹⁰ On the surface, their organizing follows the goal of forming a kind of army to battle their supernatural enemy, the coalition of Thistle and Bay & Creek with the support of the conspicuously absent US-American government. But at a closer look, what Keisha and her ‘comrades’ are battling is not supernatural, but similarly ungraspable and interwoven with the Government: a capitalist

¹⁰ Especially at the core of the US-American road movie is its protagonists’ desire to leave behind their previous lives, including the conformity and norms of mainstream society. Such stories are about (often youthful) rebellion with countercultural potentials.

combination of commodification, privatization, and institutions. Keisha formulates her version of labor and class criticism:

“We are a country defined more by distance than by culture. But that distance is defined by the people in it. We give context to our miles. We are the fine parts that make up the heavy machine that heaves global events forward . . . I thought about millions of hands and what they could do if they all reached the same direction and grasped” (3.6).

This ‘power to the people’-rhetoric is very clear on who it seeks to mobilize, the millions of hands involved in manual labor, but aside from the supernatural figurehead of Thistle, it is vague on who to organize against, who it is that does the exploiting here. And so, Praxis defeats their supernatural foes and allows the survivors to return to their previous lives.

The Serialized Queer Love Story’s Rock and a Hard Place: Emotional Pay-Off vs. Homonormativity

28 Even in an increasingly globalized world, it takes time to travel distances, and *AID* demonstrates how to experience the US-American vastness requires an investment of time resulting in a curious experience of temporality. To *The Huffington Post*’s Jillian Capewell, the podcast transmits an “uncanny feeling of timelessness, hours spent without seeing another house or vehicle, only to eventually stumble around a gas station snack aisle at an unknown hour trying to figure out which state you’re in.” The experience of timelessness and loss of orientation caused by travel can productively be connected to queer studies’ scholarship on queer temporality. As an introduction to the notion of queer time, Jack Halberstam describes it as a break with “reproductive temporality” (4) that is:

about the potentiality of a life unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing. . . . Queer subcultures produce alternative temporalities by allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience – namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death. (2)

AID’s queer road trip offers listeners the possibility of such a break with linear temporality geared toward reproduction as a kind of social productivity. Instead, the time Keisha spends on the road is almost opposed to normative conceptions of time. This is why the ending of the podcast seems surprising in its neat resolution and return to such normative temporalities.

29 In an on-the-nose-symbolism for the potentials of deserted and decaying places, in episode 3.7, Keisha and Alice find out that through the old speaker systems left in abandoned fast-food chain restaurants they can listen to themselves in a parallel universe in which Alice never left and

they never got involved with Thistle, Bay & Creek, or governmental conspiracies. Metatextually mirroring the podcast listener of *AID*, they become absorbed in these alternative stories, but realize “in that other world, the two of us weren’t doing anything about it. We were letting it happen, so that we could live our quiet lives. In that world, we too were part of the monster” (3.7). Breaking down the barriers between the listeners and the characters, this realization fuels their activism and ideally seeks to mobilize viewers as well. Yet, in the last episode of the podcast, Keisha and Alice return to this ‘quiet life’ in the hope of having defeated Thistle and Co., of having saved the world. So if their battle is a thinly veiled symbol for labor and class critique, what does their life after ‘the end of capitalism’ look like?

30 Their alternating monologues describe the progression of their home life in gorgeously intimate details. Mostly these are simple, domestic activities, comforts that tend to be missed when one is traveling: cooking dinner after work, taking a shower, laying on the couch together, sleeping next to another, making each other coffee, developing new hobbies, but also raising their daughter together, and letting the past, painful adventures slowly reside into the background. Their description of their relationship and home life takes the format and style of the 1960’s comic strip “Love Is...” by Kim Casali, featuring a naked, cute-ified heterosexual couple in everyday situations that express their care, devotion, and attraction to another. There is great empowerment for queer listeners to be found in the moving depiction of Keisha and Alice’s romance along such terms. For example, accompanied by the clicking sounds of a tape recorder, the lovers say

Alice: Love is each of us showering before bed, one after the other. We can’t shower at the same time, because we like very different temperatures of water, and that’s love too. I brush my teeth and she pees. The fog in the mirror gives way to a portrait of the two of us preparing to sleep. It’s a portrait of love, and we look at it every night.

Keisha: Love is the hours we spend under a blanket on the couch, and love is also the hours we spend apart, earning a living so that we can return to the couch, once more lie down together. Love is the beat of the heart and the passage of air and it’s the circulation of fluids and it’s the equilibrium of all the functions that sustain us.

In this way, the podcast begins and ends as a queer love story that is disrupted through a road trip with supernatural horror elements and a lesson in community organization. *AID* refutes the “bury your gays”-trope of film and television,¹¹ and if one considers the reference to life and death in the podcast’s name, it does so in a self-aware and even punny manner. As Jessica Seymour’s

¹¹ The website *TV Tropes* has compiled an extensive list of this prevalent plot development for queer characters in audiovisual media: <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/BuryYourGays>.

contribution to this issue of *Gender Forum* demonstrates, there is a great wealth of queer representations in fictional podcasts (also: Bainbridge; Copeland) compared to other media formats. While I definitely share such sentiments and find this ending of Keisha and Alice’s story beautifully rendered, this queer listener could not but find such an ending a tad disappointing as is so often the case with the conclusions of serial narratives in any media.¹²

31 Without wanting to diminish the emotional payoff of the podcast’s ending for many listeners, I find *AID*’s final departure from the queer temporalities of the road trip – which it had spent three seasons exploring — to be in favor of an idealized conception of marriage as a life-long commitment and the foundation for nuclear family-building to conform with norms upheld in neoliberal and conservative agendas. While often assumed to only apply to heterosexual lifestyles, such ideals can also be homonormative. With the notion of homonormativity, Lisa Duggan describes a neoliberal “politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demoralized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (179).¹³ Overall, the podcast failed to deliver on its progressive promise of institutional critique, even though it did deliver the rare, exceptional ending to a queer love story as a happy ending. For all its solicitous criticism of living in the US, of its institutions, of capitalism, consumerism, and the exploitation of manual labor, *AID* never extends such criticism to marriage as an institution and the nuclear family. In the end, Keisha and Alice’s domestic bliss seems like a traditional Hollywood romantic ending – which yes, is exceptional for queer couples – but still conforms to normative conceptions of romance, family, and generational reproduction that compromise a form of living sanctioned by exactly those capitalist and consumerist systems that Keisha and Alice appeared to battle.

32 However, Keisha and Alice’s daughter is named after their road trip and battle companion, the teenager Sylvia who had become a mysterious, supernatural force for good by the end of the third season, an oracle. While the series explains little about these figures, listeners do learn that the identity-less oracles experience time simultaneously rather than linear. Any such character

¹² Because serial storytelling strives toward narrative continuation rather than closure, it is difficult to end a serial story in a manner that is satisfying to all audiences. As television scholar Jason Mittell puts it, “the final moments of any finale are clearly atypical, as a conclusion always begs further reflection, contemplation, and, in the case of such ambiguity, analytical interpretation” (337).

¹³ Duggan does importantly differentiate and not equate heteronormativity and homonormativity: “I don’t mean the terms to be parallel; there is no structure for gay life, no matter how conservative or normalizing, that might compare with the institutions promoting and sustaining heterosexual coupling” (191).

stands out in serial storytelling which aspires toward linear progression but for coherence has to recursively has to manage what has been told before (see Kelleter). The oracle that was previously called Sylvia is in this regard perhaps the figure that best embodies the potentials and disruptions of queer temporality. That Keisha and Alice name their child Sylvia, the result of their nuclear family and return to homonormative domesticity, may undermine the podcast's surprisingly conservative happy end to some extent.

Conclusion

33 Even in an increasingly globalized and highly mediated world with aeromobile travel replacing long-distance car drives and internet users being able to glimpse photographic impressions of most places, for *AID*, the distance of the US remains and can be shrunk neither by planes nor Google Maps. All attempts to fill this vastness with neoliberal corporations and consumerist sameness are dangerous undertakings, and should to be countered by grassroots communities of travelers and workers, the people who have learned to appreciate regional weirdness.

34 This article evoked a multitude of cultural artifacts and feminist writing to explore the podcast series *AID*, Simone De Beauvoir's travel writing, the queer graphic novel *Are You Listening*, *Thelma & Louise*, Teresa De Lauretis's scholarship, Adrienne Rich's poetry, the "Love Is..."-comic strip. Putting such materials into conversation with *AID* has helped me understand the podcast's exceptional take on gender, traveling, and storytelling about and as political organization. I have analytically utilized my frustrations with the podcast's ending, which arguably has a great emotional pay-off, even though this pay-off to me diminishes the larger socio-political lessons and revolutionary aspirations – its version of capitalist critique and political organizing – and the queer temporalities of travel that the rest of the series had explored in such nuance.

35 Keisha's final monologue metatextually reflects the affective and temporal difference between the series overall and its final episode: "This is where our road trip ends, I guess. The two of us in our living room on a day, any day. Nothing big happens on this day. ... I never forgot how lucky I was. I wouldn't have lived any other life" (3.10). But again, it would have been important to hear from another life of hers, one in which Keisha and Alice were able to maintain their activism and community organizing. A life lived to counter the perilous effect of neoliberal capitalism beyond a single spectacular battle; a life in which the happy end to a queer love story did not have to be insular, quiet, and incompatible with activism and community. Allowing its protagonist Keisha rest and happiness, the podcast fortunately does not give in to the seductive illusion that

ending systemic evils such as neoliberal class injustices is a quick task. The last word (or the last fictional word, aside from author figure Fink) is that of the supernatural ‘hunter’ who remains watching Keisha and foreshadows that the war will continue beyond Keisha’s life span. “Keisha and Alice. They never saw me again. The cycle I live by is much longer than any one person’s life could ever encompass. So they died, with their happy ending. For them it was permanent. As permanent as the Earth. As permanent as the moon. Oh, Alice. I wanna start by saying... [evil laugh] Shit!” Her last line is another mocking jab at Keisha’s radio monologues and her devotion to Alice. I just wish our favorite anxious trucker would have had the chance to respond.

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Bury and Unbury Your Gays in *The Adventure Zone*

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Abstract

In contemporary mainstream media there is a tendency to represent LGBTQ+ characters stereotypically, or even kill them off. This trope is called ‘bury your gays’ and it has done much to discredit and delegitimise representation. Even though the percentage of queer representation in mainstream media has improved, a viewer could be forgiven for thinking that, overall, popular culture does not think highly of the LGBTQ+ community for continuing to perpetuate these narrative arcs. The McElroy family’s popular actual-play podcast *The Adventure Zone (TAZ)* initially portrayed queer characters in the ‘bury your gays’ trope by killing off a canon lesbian couple in their first season. As four self-proclaimed ‘straight, cis, white dudes’, the family initially performed their characters by reflecting what they had seen in mainstream fiction. After engaging with their audience and learning why this was upsetting, they changed the story to reverse the trope; *unburying* their gays by bringing the characters back to life. Since then, they have consistently introduced more queer characters and, in their latest season, have also introduced nonbinary characters. By tracking the introduction and development of queer representation in *TAZ* podcast episodes – both the game episodes and the meta-episodes bookending each season – the McElroys’ education and integration of this new information into narratives is demonstrable. The representation of queer characters in *TAZ* shows that podcasts are not just a platform for LGBTQ+ creators to educate their audience; they can also act as a participatory storytelling medium in which *creators* can be educated in gender and sexuality by their audience.

Introduction

1 Contemporary mainstream Western media has begun to reflect a stronger awareness of the LGBTQ+ community, and steps have been taken to develop characters and stories that include diverse characters in canon. GLAAD’s ‘Where We Are On TV’ report found that during the 2016-2017 TV season, 43 characters identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or queer. There were eight-hundred-and-ninety-five main characters on scripted primetime broadcast shows, meaning that LGBTQ+ characters made up about 4.8 per cent. This is the highest percentage of LGBTQ+ characters in mainstream Western media recorded and the percentage in non-mainstream media – such as podcasts, YouTube series, and comics – could be much higher.

2 Despite this uptake in LGBTQ+ representation, viewers have begun to question whether the representation that LGBTQ+ people receive in mainstream Western media is *good* representation. There is a trend, for example, to kill off LGBTQ+ characters in mainstream media. Consider, for example, ‘Seeing Red’ in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, which introduced a lesbian couple only to kill one of the pair to trigger the emotional breakdown of the other. Or, *The 100*, in which an eagerly-anticipated lesbian pairing became canon, only to have one of the women die within ten episodes of showrunners making the relationship official. Or,

Brokeback Mountain (2005), a film about gay men in which one of the pair is murdered in a hate crime. Even though the number of LGBTQ+ representative characters has improved, and there are a few counter examples where LGBTQ+ characters survive their series, a viewer could be forgiven for thinking that, overall, mainstream Western media is not in favour of long, happy lives for LGBTQ+ characters.

3 It is arguable that the genre of these texts – fantasy, science fiction, drama – makes death or harm likely. If there were no danger for the characters, then there may be no suspense for the audience. But LGBTQ+ characters are less common and therefore disproportionately killed in these texts.

4 Podcasts, as a user-driven medium, are an important space for LGBTQ+ people to explore issues related to their experience, as well as potentially educate outside of the community. The ‘bury your gays’ trope has received its share of examination and criticism in the podcast space, from recent podcasts such as: *Lez Hangout* (Brigida and Holmes), *Strap Chat* (Smith), *Gay as in Stupid* (Aaron and Isaac), *Deep Down Underground in the Closet* (Juarez), and *Stuff Mom Never Told You* (Reese and McVey). These podcasts that explore and critique media are not, however, the only way that the LGBTQ+ community can educate the audience on more inclusive media-representation.

5 *The Adventure Zone (TAZ)* is an actual-play Dungeons & Dragons podcast hosted by four members of the McElroy family: Justin, Travis, Griffin (brothers), and Clint (father). Actual play podcasts are podcasts that record the audio of roleplaying games and present them as whole narratives. In Dungeons & Dragons, players collaborate with a dungeon master (DM) to roleplay a series of adventures, usually referred to as a ‘campaign’. A campaign ends when the players defeat the final ‘boss’, or most powerful enemy, and the DM concludes the story. Players are generally expected to play the same character for the duration of a campaign, though they can create a new one if their character is killed or chooses to leave the party. There are two types of character in Dungeons & Dragons: PCs (player-characters), which the players control, and NPCs, which are side characters played by the DM.

6 In *TAZ*, each season is one campaign; the family plays different characters in each campaign, and the campaigns are set in different environments/genres. The campaigns are divided into mini-arcs where the players work towards defeating a minor villain, taking damage and earning experience points that they can use to increase their characters’ power or proficiency. At the end of each mini-arc, there is a level-up episode where the family roleplays their characters interacting with NPCs and buying new items to use in their adventures. As of writing, there have been two complete seasons – ‘Balance’ (epic fantasy/scifi) and ‘Amnesty’

(contemporary/paranormal) – with Griffin as DM. The latest campaign, ‘Graduation’ (fantasy/boarding school) is currently running with Travis as DM.

7 The McElroy family’s popular show initially fell into the ‘bury your gays’ trope by killing off a canon lesbian couple in its first season, ‘Balance’. Hurley and Sloane, or the Ram and the Raven, are killed during a high-fantasy battle at the end of the ‘Petals to the Metal’ mini-arc. Griffin, the campaign’s dungeon master and main writer, said during a reflective meta-episode prior to the final arc in the season, “Oh, it’s the first, like, romance in the show, and I’ll give it a tragic ending... that’s how most, uh, like, gay and lesbian relationships in media end, is with tragic endings, which I didn’t realize” (The The Adventure Zone Zone: Balance Finale Edition). As four self-proclaimed ‘straight, cis, white dudes’, the McElroys were unaware of how their apparent adherence to fantasy/drama narrative tropes (the tragic lovers’ ending) could negatively affect their LGBTQ+ audience. After receiving criticism from their audience, the Griffin McElroy incorporated his new awareness into the rest of the narrative by *unburying* Hurley and Sloan in the final arc (*TAZ: Balance* 68).

8 Since then, the McElroys have consistently introduced more queer characters in active and meaningful roles. The increase in LGBTQ+ characters, and the more thoughtful approach to narrative tropes and traditions, has demonstrated their own gradual education in LGBTQ+ issues and identities – from the ‘standard’ lesbian and gay characters, to bisexuality, to nonbinary representation and pronoun-use. The gradual improvement in *TAZ*’s representation of queer characters demonstrates that podcasts are not just a platform to *educate* others; podcasts creators can be educated in gender and sexuality by their audience and then model their new storytelling behaviours for others.

9 This paper will employ a close analysis of *TAZ* story-telling and meta-episodes in the official seasons of ‘Balance’, ‘Amnesty’, and ‘Graduation’. The McElroys have uploaded several ‘Pilot’ seasons where they audition different dungeon masters, characters, and genres, but these pilots have been excluded from this paper’s dataset because there is not as much space to expand on the LGBTQ+ representation that may have been hinted at but not explored. Full seasons allow characters to complete arcs and therefore gives the creators more space to explore sexuality and gender in a meaningful and ‘organic’ way. Meta-episodes are included because these episodes are uploaded to the main channel and act as reflections on the preceding arcs, allowing an insight into the motivations behind key character choices. Interactions on social media (twitter, Instagram, tumblr, etc) have been excluded because this article is only focused on how the *podcast* demonstrates learning; other social media is outside of the scope of the article.

10 Before beginning the analysis, a note on representation. This article takes as a given that positive representation of LGBTQ+ characters is important and impactful. Although some may make the argument that the representation of alternative identities is unnecessary or pandering, Stuart Hall notes that:

precisely because identities are constructed within, not outside, discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices. (Hall 4)

11 Television is one discourse in which identity can be explored and addressed; podcasts are another. Seeing these discourses play out allows audiences to explore and understand their own identities through the vicarious experience (Waggoner 2). A lack of representation can make viewers feel isolated and leave them without a discourse to contextualise their experience or, when the representation is poorly executed, may contribute to negative self-perception (Chassitty and Heather). Savvy audiences who understand their identities and how representation *should* be in these discourses can hold creators accountable in these cases.

Sloan and Hurley – the Gays Are Buried

12 Earlier, this article briefly mentioned *The 100* as a source of much anger and disappointment after a character was killed off after beginning a queer relationship. This episode popularised the ‘bury your gays’ trope as a hashtag on twitter, where fans initially congregated to protest the show (Waggoner 10; Cameron 2), though this was by no means the first instance of a queer character dying to serve a narrative. Hulan identifies the trope as a *literary* trope “which originated in the late 19th century, gained traction in the early 20th century, and which persists in modern media” (Hulan 17). Although it began as a literary trope, it is applicable to other media.

13 The trope has several key features, including: buried characters must be among the only LGBTQ+ representation in the piece of media; buried characters must be LGBTQ+ in canon (though they can often die within moments of their relationship being confirmed); buried characters’ death must motivate the surviving characters (Hulan 17). Other features can include: the buried character’s surviving lover entering a heterosexual relationship after an appropriate grieving period; the buried character’s death follows a ‘queerbaiting’ campaign (creators implying or celebrating LGBTQ+ relationships/characters in order to draw a larger audience); the buried character’s death has limited plot relevance, or dies in a way that could have been avoided in-world (Cameron; Bridges).

14 In *TAZ* ‘Balance’, during the third mini-arc “Petals to the Metal”, Griffin introduced a lesbian couple: Sloane and Hurley, a pair of battlewagon racers. Sloane is under the thrall of a powerful magical relic, and the PCs’ goal for the arc was to save her and retrieve the relic. Ultimately, however, Hurley sacrifices herself to break the relic’s hold on Sloane. The grieving Sloane then uses the relic to transform the pair of them into a cherry blossom tree. It is a tragic ending for the first canon LGBTQ+ couple in the series

15 The important thing to note here is that a Dungeons & Dragons campaign is usually predicated on the PCs altering the outcome of a story. But Griffin, the DM, was responsible for Hurley’s death. In the scenes preceding her sacrifice, Griffin demonstrates that she will be going to save Sloane and gives the PCs an opportunity to abandon her:

Griffin: She climbs into the driver’s seat and straps herself in.

Travis (as Magnus): Woah!

Griffin: And she leans out the window and says:

Griffin (as Hurley): I’ve asked you boys for too much already, I can’t- I can’t ask you to risk your lives again, but . . . (*TAZ: Balance* 27)

16 The listener can infer that Hurley would have tried to save Sloane regardless of whether the PCs helped her. Later, Griffin shows Hurley making the active decision to sacrifice herself by removing the PCs from the scene entirely:

Griffin: And as she backs up, you see that she’s no longer wearing her safety harness. In fact, you are. And she claps her hands together and points them at the three of you. And you are blasted backwards by a wave of force. (*TAZ: Balance* 27)

17 Technically – according to the rules of Dungeons & Dragons – the PCs should have had an opportunity to resist Hurley’s attack. By narrating Hurley’s action as a given, Griffin limited how his PCs could influence the intended outcome.

18 Finally, when Justin’s character Taako tries to find a way to heal Hurley, speaking to his fellow PCs in-character, Griffin steers the narrative away:

Justin (as Taako): Don’t you have any magics, you’re a cleric for cryin’ out loud!

Clint (as Merle): Me?!

Griffin: Sloane looks sadly at you and says:

Griffin (as Sloane): This is- The venom of silverpoint is... there’s nothing we can do for her.

Justin (as Taako): Horseshit!

Griffin (as Sloane): Well, there’s-

Justin (as Taako): HOOOORSSEEEE SHIT!

Griffin (Sloane): There’s one thing I can do for her. (*TAZ: Balance* 27)

19 This dialogue immediately precedes Sloane transforming herself and Hurley into a cherry tree. Griffin describes their bodies as completely joining the tree, “at its base, you see

these roots and knots that are forming two vaguely humanoid shapes. One is a sort-of a shorter figure lying in the embrace of a taller figure” (*TAZ: Balance* 27). Their romance, then, is solidified in their final moments. The implication is that they will remain this way for as long as the tree stands.

20 In retrospect, Griffin noted during “The The Adventure Zone Zone 2017” meta-episode that he mishandled Sloane and Hurley’s deaths: “I definitely fucked up... that’s how most, uh, like, gay and lesbian relationships in media end, is with tragic endings, which I didn’t realize.”

Roswell – They/Them Pronouns

21 As the *TAZ* series has progressed, the development of LGBTQ+ representation has improved. Importantly, it was not limited to sexuality representation; nonbinary characters were introduced, notably Roswell, the earth elemental in the ‘Eleventh Hour’ arc. Although Roswell was initially referred to with he/him pronouns, Griffin explicitly states that Roswell uses they/them pronouns during narration in the third episode of the arc: “Roswell walks in and sits down on their chair, which kind of creaks and moans under their weight. I’m trying to stick with the “they” pronoun for Roswell” (*TAZ: Balance* 43).

22 When Griffin introduced Roswell, the initial conversation was not whether Roswell identified as male or female, but whether the earth elemental identified as an armour-clad body or as the bird that seemed to ride the body and speak to the PCs.

Griffin (as the Bird): Uh, I’m called Roswell.

Justin (as Taako): Ooh, great. Roswell, are you— is Roswell the name of you, the bird, or the big fella that you’re riding on?

Griffin (as Roswell): I don’t see why it’s important that you distinguish between the two.

Justin (as Taako): Okay, well, that’s fine, I’m not into labels either. (*TAZ: Balance* 43)

23 This tongue-in-cheek discussion about labels is the furthest that the characters go to question Roswell’s gender identity in-game. For the characters, Roswell’s gender identity is not something to be questioned. This normalising of non-binary identity proves to be quite powerful in the sense that it establishes the expectation for this behaviour going forward.

24 The Western conception of gender imagines it as a spectrum of behaviours and attributes that usually fall between ‘male’ and ‘female’, which is where the subsequent conception of the binary comes from. Binary gender, however, fails to represent the wide range of human experiences of gender. Tracey Yeadon-Lee writes that:

The term non-binary gender operates as an umbrella term to refer to a range of identities and expressions of gender that do not within the sex/gender binary, and which typically

involve identifying as either a blend of both genders or as neither. Non-binary gender identities thus vary in experience and kind. (Yeadon-Lee 4)

25 While identities and identifications vary, there are some that are widely known and often used as stepping points for non-binary identifying individuals to explore themselves. Jessica Clarke explores this in some detail:

Examples of gender hybridity - combining gender roles into non-traditional configurations - might include bigender, pangender, and androgynous identities... Examples of gender rejection - refusal to adopt traditional gender categories - might include agender, genderless, gender neutral, or uni-sex identities. (Clarke 906)

26 Importantly, Clarke also notes that genders beyond the male/female dichotomy have existed outside of western culture. These might include Two-Spirit (First-Nations) or Mahuwahine (Hawaiian) (Clarke 907). Other gender identities beyond the dichotomy include the Hijaras (South Asian) (Agrawal), the Mahu Vahine (Tahitian), and the Whakawahine (Maori) (New Zealand Aids Foundation). While the concept of nonbinary gender is certainly nothing new, it is typically considered out of the norm in mainstream Western society.

27 There is little explicit representation of non-binary identity in Western popular media. Attempts to portray non-binary characters have been hit and miss. In 2016, *Zoolander* cast Benedict Cumberbatch to play the non-binary identifying All, and received criticism from critics for the portrayal (Child). One critic argued: “Giggling like schoolboys over whether a non-gender-conforming character has a penis or a vagina... is exhaustingly retrograde” (Fallon).

28 While the non-binary identity is occasionally offered up as an opportunity for jokes, popular culture does take it seriously in some cases. The 2017 American film *They* explores the experience of a young non-binary person trying to negotiate the medical system. In the film, 13-year-old J must choose a gender in order to stop taking the puberty blockers which are damaging J’s bone health. The film’s conclusion is left ambiguous, so the audience is left unable to determine if this representation is ideal.

29 Some representation eschews the need to identify non-binary individuals at all. They simply exist, and their existence is not questioned. The Adjudicator in *John Wick: Chapter 3 – Parabellum* is played by non-binary actor Asia Kate Dillon, and their gender is not mentioned in the film. Similarly, the *Good Omens* (YEAR) mini-series portrays one of the main characters, Crowley, as male and female presenting, with no explanation or apparent confusion from other characters.

30 Although explicit representation is certainly favourable, since it allows for more explicit identification among audience members, there is something to be said for representation that takes non-binary identity as a matter of course, which is what we see in *The Adventure Zone*.

Taako and Lup – The Twins’ Gender and Sexual Identity

31 There are two main ways that a creator can approach introducing LGBTQ+ characters: they either state at the outset that the characters are LGBTQ+, or they introduce the characters first and confirm their identities later.

32 In the first instance, establishing the character’s sexual/gender identity early can help to confirm the representation for audiences. Explicit representation, as discussed previously, is important for the audience to recognise and engage with the character critically. But establishing the character’s sexual identity early could also make the character *only* about their identity, which can limit the dimensionality of the character and frustrate audiences who want their representation to be more nuanced.

33 In the second instance, confirming the character’s identity later in their arc can make certain that the character’s personality and characteristics are separate from their sexuality/gender. Audiences learn about characters in the beginning of their arc, and when the character’s LGBTQ+ identity is confirmed it adds an additional layer. This was the case when Roza Diaz from *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* came out as bisexual in ‘99’, and when Cyrus Goodman from *Andi Mack* came out as gay in ‘Hey, Who Wants Pizza?’. The negative side of this is that, sometimes, conservative audiences will react harshly when they realise that the character they like identifies in a way that they do not approve of.

34 The McElroys used both methods when they performed the twin half-elves, Taako (gay, male-identifying) and Lup (transgender).

35 Taako was not *introduced* as a gay character (though Justin has said in interviews that he intended Taako to be gay from the beginning (Cléa) his sexuality was confirmed during episode 50 when he went on a date with Kraavitz, the Grim Reaper (*TAZ: Balance* 50). When questioned about his performance, Justin (the eldest brother) was quite open about his reasoning:

Justin: Can I be honest? Uh, a lot of it deals with the fact that in, uh, almost all character creation generators, um, I can’t make an overweight character. And I don’t feel like, if I’m gonna try to represent mys-- if I’m gonna try to recreate myself-- [crosstalk] on the screen, I don’t wanna create like an idealized fake-ass version of myself... So I’d rather

just like, play a beautiful black woman, who, like, who's great at shooting guns at people-- like that sounds amazing too. (The The Adventure Zone Zone)

36 From this response, we can infer that he chose to play a gay man because he is not a gay man himself. It was not, as far as we can tell, the result of a desire to increase LGBTQ+ representation. Taako's sexuality was confirmed *after* the audience learned about his character and personality. His sexual identity was not the core of Justin's portrayal, which led to a much more interesting and nuanced character, and he was able to learn about portraying LGBTQ+ characters after seeing Griffin handle the 'Petals to the Metal' arc.

37 To contrast, when Griffin introduced Taako's sister Lup (whom he had forgotten) at the beginning of the 'Stolen Century' arc, Griffin openly confirmed her identity as a trans woman: "Lup was assigned male at birth, but at, like, a fairly young age she transitioned, and identified as a female elf" (*TAZ: Balance* 60). This is, in fact, the only time during the series when Lup's identity is mentioned. She is not referred to as trans at any other point; she is treated as a woman by the other characters, referred to with she/her pronouns at all times, and she begins a relationship with a cis man who does not, at any point, seem to care about the gender she was assigned at birth.

38 During the meta-episode that followed, Griffin laid out the steps that he took to try and make the character as respectfully as possible.

Griffin: As— as for Lup being a trans woman, I knew pretty early on, um, I kind of struggled with it because I wanted to— it was really important to me that I tried to do a good job of that. And because I know that that particular form of representation uh, is— there have been a lot of examples of that sort of not— not being so great, and I did not want to be just another sort of bullet point on a very long list of— of you know bad trans representation in fiction... so Travis actually put out a tweet saying like we wanna have you know, trans characters on the show uh, will you please message us and tell us like, what is important to you in how we handle that... I read a few uh, things uh, online from uh some trans authors who were talking about like, here's how to have a good trans character on the show, here's like a bunch of shitty pitfalls to avoid. Um, and so I tried to be like, really, really, really, thoughtful about that stuff in, uh creating Lup. (The The Adventure Zone Zone: Balance Finale Edition).

39 Griffin's handling of Lup shows a growth from his initial attempt to introduce LGBTQ+ characters back in 'Petals to the Metal'; first, he polled (via Travis) real-world transgender people to see what was important to the audience, and second, he read about transgender representation in story to see what problematic tropes he ought to avoid. By including LGBTQ+ people in the development of the character, Griffin's portrayal of Lup was significantly more sensitive and nuanced.

40 What is particularly interesting about Lup's portrayal was the fact that, if her creator had not explicitly stated her trans identity at the outset, there would be very little evidence for the audience to confirm her identity on their own. Introducing her as explicitly trans, only to continue without reminders or affirmations, reinforces the narrative's story world as one of acceptance. Similarly, to Roswell in 'The Eleventh Hour' arc, Lup's identity is not questioned. She exists, she is transgender, but that is not the most interesting thing about her.

Sloan and Hurley – The Gays Are Resurrected

41 From this author's perspective, the culmination of the McElroy's LGBTQ+ education, and DM Griffin's coup de gras, was Sloan and Hurley's resurrection during the three-part series finale.

Griffin: Mavis had read about dryads, but she never expected to meet one in her lifetime. Now she could say she had met two. And Hurley leans down, her smiling face beaming beneath a canopy of cherry blossoms, and she says,

Griffin (as Hurley): You're safe now.

Griffin: And then she looks at Sloane, and she says,

Griffin (as Hurley): We're all safe now. (*TAZ: Balance* 68)

42 Dryads, in the *Dungeons & Dragons* lore, are fey protectors of forests and trees. Turning Sloane and Hurley into dryads justifies their 'death' at the end of 'Petals to the Metal', when they turned into a cherry blossom tree together, and demonstrates that their respective stories did not end on that day. This resurrection is a final subversion of the 'bury your gays' trope; they were *unburied*, brought back to life as protectors of other young women.

Amnesty & Graduation – LGBTQ+ as a Matter of Course

43 Over the next several seasons, the McElroys consistently demonstrate a strong willingness to introduce LGBTQ+ representation. In *The Adventure Zone's* second season, 'Amnesty', the players rolled new characters and Griffin remained the DM. Travis's character, Aubrey Little, is initially introduced as an awkward, bisexual magician with fire powers. Travis states during a meta-episode that followed her introduction that Aubrey's sexuality is based not in an explicit desire to develop LGBTQ+ representation, but in the fact that the real-life people she was based on were bisexual.

'I based Aubrey on four people, right? She's named after Aubrey Plaza, and she is pierced and tattooed like my friends Verona, Tybee and Kate, right, and so all four of those people are bisexual. And so it was just kind of in my head when I— it wasn't even really a decision that I made, but as I was picturing Aubrey and basing her off of these four people, that she just was bisexual.' (The *The Adventure Zone Zone: Experiments Post-Mortem*).

44 So Travis’s awareness of bisexual people was a deciding factor in his decision to design and play a bisexual character. While they are playing, the first indication of Aubrey’s sexuality comes when she meets NPC Dani, a vampire, and has to perform a fire trick in front of her.

Travis: This is very important, and I know you’re gonna try to dismiss it at first. Is Dani cute?

Griffin: Uh, yeah? Yeah, I think, I mean does Aubrey find her cute? I feel like that would be, I don’t know what—

Travis: Yes, she does, that’s why I asked. ‘Cause I want to know if Aubrey’s nervous or not performing in front of Dani.

Griffin: Okay, then yes, absolutely... I think that’s really rad. I also think if we make that canon that your emotional state sort of affects your magic, you can use that in some cool ways, and I’m also gonna use that in some cool, maybe bad for you, ways.

Travis: [crosstalk] Oh, absolutely. That’s why I picked Fire and Blast and all of that, cuz I think Aubrey is very emotional, very reactive, and I want that to be part of it, you know what I mean? (*TAZ: Amnesty 2*)

45 By establishing that Aubrey’s sexuality could potentially affect her spellcasting, Griffin and Travis are working together to introduce a narrative reason why her sexuality is plot relevant. They continue the strategy of introducing her sexual preferences in an understated manner, but by making it plot relevant they are also demonstrating their growing ability to effectively incorporate LGBTQ+ characters into their narratives.

46 ‘Amnesty’’s LGBTQ+ representation is comparatively less developed than ‘Balance’’s representation. This is likely to do with the fact that ‘Amnesty’ only ran for twenty-eight episodes, while ‘Balance’ ran for 69, so ‘Amnesty’ did not have as much narrative space to develop characters’ sexual and gender identities. That being said, important characters like Aubrey and Hollis (non-binary, they/them pronouns) are included and narratively significant. Finally, ‘Graduation’ – the third season of *The Adventure Zone* – is the first season in which Griffin is a PC and Travis is the DM. The season is not complete yet, but Travis’s DM style has already demonstrated an awareness of the lessons learned from Griffin and the lessons that the McElroys learned during the ‘Balance’ arc.

47 In particular, Travis uses implicit introductions by mentioning clues to a character’s sexual or gender identity in passing. For example, he establishes that NPCs Jimson and Crushman are married by showing Crushman refer to Jimson as his husband. Similarly, Travis does not state at the outset when characters are nonbinary – instead, he assumes that the audience will understand when he introduces characters as nonbinary during narration by using they/them pronouns when he describes their actions:

Travis: And uh, Mimi says...

Travis (as Mimi): Oh, no, hold on! Wait, let me show ya!

Travis: And uh, they reach into their hat. Y'know, it's like a standard gnome affair. And they reach far deeper in than you would've expected. Uh, and they pull out a, like, four foot long pair of mechanical arms.

[...]

Travis: And they say...

Travis (as Festo): [high pitched and silly] Hellooo! Me'a Festooo! (*TAZ: Graduation 2*, my emphasis)

48 Travis certainly 'hit the ground running' with *Graduation*. He begins introducing the LGBTQ+ characters within the first two episodes, and has since continued to maintain the pronoun-usage and implicit introductions that imply normalisation of LGBTQ+ identities in-world. It will be interesting to see how he continues to DM the season and how this representation will continue to grow.

Conclusion

49 In contemporary mainstream media, LGBTQ+ identifying characters have had a long and fraught history. The 'bury your gays' trope remains a harmful element of storytelling that can be used to discredit and delegitimise representation. Podcasts, as a user-driven medium, can be a useful space for LGBTQ+ people to explore their experiences, as well as the ways in which traditional media handle (or mishandle) representations of that experience.

50 As four self-proclaimed 'straight, cis, white dudes', the McElroy family's actual-play D&D podcast could have been a space where harmful representation would be perpetuated. They could have ignored the audience's criticisms of their initial missteps; they could have continued to make the podcast with canonically straight cis characters that represented them. Instead, the McElroys demonstrated a willingness to listen to their audience that ultimately shaped how they approached storytelling. They learned to introduce more nonbinary gender representation in the pronouns that they used for narration, and they consistently demonstrate a willingness to portray LGBTQ+ characters either as PCs or as NPCs.

51 The McElroys' education and informed storytelling style demonstrates a willingness to listen to marginalised audiences, and this has led to a much stronger approach to representation. The representation of queer characters in *TAZ* shows that podcasts are not just a platform for LGBTQ+ creators to educate their audience; they can also act as a participatory storytelling medium in which *creators* can be educated in gender and sexuality by their audience.

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Women on Twitch Turkey: Affective Communities and Female Solidarity Under Patriarchy and Postfeminism

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Abstract

This article examines the experiences of female streamers and podcasters on Twitch Turkey primarily through in-depth interviews conducted with 35 respondents. Despite the platform's growth as one of the most widely visited social media sites and the biggest online game streaming platform, there is limited research as to how gender identities and geographical location shape streamers' experiences and usage of the platform. We argue that female streamer's use of Twitch Turkey is marked by combined patriarchal pressures and neoliberal, postfeminist thrust for aggressive competitiveness. Sexual harassment is the major problem for women, and pervasive patriarchal relations of domination affect all female streamers' usage of the platform, who often find themselves scrutinized and criticized for their body images, clothing, and gaming performances. In exerting control over their behavior, patriarchy, however, affects women in different ways based on their cultural preferences and personal habits. We also argue that Twitch Turkey tends to push women to adopt postfeminist subjectivities to rigorously compete with each other for limited viewership, sponsorship, and income opportunities. However, these pressures and constraints are resisted and re-negotiated especially through the formation of female solidarities and affective communities in online streaming.

Introduction

1 In recent years Twitch has emerged as one of the most widely visited social media sites and the most popular game streaming platform in the world (Sjöblom et. al. 2019; Anderson 2017; Deng et. al. 2015; Chen and Lin 2018; Churchill and Xu 2018). Reaching 15 million daily visitors by 2018, Twitch viewership has attained comparable numbers to TV networks in the US (Sjöblom et al. 2019). Twitch became the fourth largest website in the US regarding the peak internet traffic (Deng et. al, 1) and used “the eighth most internet bandwidth out of all websites” by 2014 (Anderson 2014, 1). Similarly, its popularity has witnessed a surge in Turkey, and about 24% of 53 million internet users in Turkey have visited Twitch in 2020 (Bayrak 2020). Twitch serves as a streaming and video podcasting platform, allowing its users to live stream, as well as posting recorded videos that remain accessible for later viewing. Even though it is initially designed for gamers, its uses are not limited to video games, and streamers can create different types of video content based on their personal preferences. With its diverse usages, Twitch can be conceived as

a platform that fosters and combines “digital intimacy, celebrity, community, content creation, media production and consumption, and video games” (Johnson and Woodcock 2019, 338).

2 The rising audience appeal of Twitch has led to an increasing scholarly interest in the platform (Sjöblom et al. 2019; Johnson and Woodcock 2019; Heaven 2014; Hilvert-Bruce et al. 2018), but only a few of these works examine how gender identities shape the platform’s streaming culture (Todd and Melancon 2017; Taylor 2018; Nakandala et. al. 2017; Chen and Lin 2018). Previous academic studies often focus on the use of Twitch in Northern American and Western European contexts. Since regional factors play a significant role in shaping the way streamers make use of online platforms, we turn our attention to Turkey, a less explored socio-political and cultural context. With an average of over 1200 active channels streaming in the Turkish language in a week, Turkish is the 11th most spoken language on Twitch.¹ In Turkey, there have been journalistic accounts of Twitch that have focused on the experiences of female streamers², yet, an academic study is lacking despite women’s increasing involvement in the platform. We believe these journalistic studies fail to unveil the breadth of women’s experiences, as well as the socio-cultural implications of online streaming, which is a further reason for us to examine the platform’s usages.

3 Based on 35 in-depth interviews, this study addresses these lacunas in the academic literature by exploring the ways female streamers on Twitch Turkey experience and make use of the platform. Twitch Turkey serves as a tool of social connection, personal experimentation, and financial gain; however, we argue that the male-dominated environment of the platform also means crystallization of online harassment and patriarchal pressure, and Twitch Turkey tends to promote neoliberal, postfeminist hyper-competition among streamers. Yet, in countering the patriarchal pressures and the prevalence of postfeminist notions of competitive empowerment, the platform also leads to the formation of affective community-building practices and to deliver messages that emphasize the significance of female support networks.

4 The academic literature highlights that online spaces have become new sites of misogyny and sexual harassment (Megarry 2014; Henry and Powell 2015; Poole 2013; Banet-Weiser and Miltner 2016), while also serving as significant tools for feminist activism, often presenting

¹ This statistical data is obtained from the website: <https://twitchtracker.com/languages>

² For instance, see *BBC News Türkçe*, “Twitch Dünyasında Kadın Gamer Olmak.” (To Be a Female Gamer in the World of Twitch). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m4AsBgy6D18>

inventive ways to resist gendered discrimination (Tambe 2018; Salter 2013; Bowles Eagle 2015, Rentschler 2014). Additionally, they are also seen as postfeminist spaces of competitive, self-centered empowerment, corresponding to the neoliberal emphasis on hyper-individualism (Barnard 2016; Tildenberg and Cruz 2015; Caldeira, De Ridder and Bauwel 2018). Defined as a complex combination of feminist desires for women's empowerment and a re-emphasis on patriarchal notions of femininity in the context of neoliberalism, postfeminism promotes competitiveness and self-reliance, as well as a passage from sexual objectification to sexual subjectification, and empowerment through a renewed emphasis on femininity, construed as bodily property (Taylor 2011, 8; Gill 2007, 5; Genz and Brabon 2009, 177). It is often argued that postfeminism entails a simultaneous negation of patriarchal discourses and their reproduction (McRobbie 2009, 6; Gill 2007, 5; Genz and Brabon 2009, 177).

5 We argue that as a neoliberal capitalist enterprise (Johnson and Woodcock 2019, 344; Johnson et al. 2019), Twitch Turkey tends to promote postfeminist notions of hyper-individualistic empowerment where women have to compete with each other for the limited supply of viewers, donations, and sponsorship deals. We suggest that the formation of postfeminist subjectivities in the context of Twitch Turkey lend themselves with greater ease to patriarchal expectations and demands, rather than invalidating them. However, our interviews indicate that there is also a strong tendency among female streamers to denounce the aggressive competitive empowerment that at times pervade the platform by developing affective communities and female support networks. Our research thus expands the discussions on gendered use of online platforms by describing how heightened patriarchy and postfeminism may culminate in denunciations of patriarchal discrimination and neoliberal aggressive competition, bringing to the fore the significance of female solidarity and affective community-building practices in online streaming.

Literature Review and Theoretical Underpinnings

6 The academic literature on women's use of social media platforms tends to show substantial variation depending on the affordances of specific platforms. Studies on Twitter and Facebook typically indicate that these online spaces are the new face and vitalizing component of feminist activism and resistance in the 21st century (Salter 2013; Bowles Eagle 2015; Rentschler 2014), as demonstrated clearly in the initial spread of Metoo# movement through Twitter (Tambe 2018). Instagram, however, due to the platform's affordances as primarily an image-sharing site,

is often conceptualized as undertaking the dual work of both challenging and reproducing hegemonic standards in regard to the representation of women (Caldeira et al. 2018, 25). Accordingly, women's online images can serve to both resistive and hegemonic purposes, and even the same images can simultaneously have empowering and disempowering effects for giving a sense of affective uplifting to the individual sharing the pictures, while at the same time reifying oppressive norms (Barnard 2016, 47; Caldeira et al. 2018, 28). Despite hopeful promises of empowerment, it also frequently stressed that social media platforms are also the major grounds of misogyny and sexual harassment (Banet-Weiser and Miltner 2015).

7 It is argued that despite the existence of many video hosting and streaming websites, Twitch.tv has partially gained worldwide popularity due to its features that allow the creation of intimate social bonding and “participatory communities” (Anderson 2017; Hamilton et al 2014; Sjöblom and Hamari 2017, 993). Accordingly, it is primarily through Twitch that the video game industry, which is often “considered inhuman, robotic, or purely digital,” went through a “corporeal turn,” bringing to the fore social relationships and interactions (Anderson 2017). Twitch is also considered as an essentially a neoliberal platform and a site that encourage the formation of neoliberal subjectivities among its users (Johnson and Woodcock 2019, 344; Johnson et al. 2019). As the statistical data from the US indicates, the top 1% of streaming channels collect 70% of all viewers (Deng et al. 2015), replicating the operation of neoliberal capitalism that gathers the wealth in the hands of a small minority. As a neoliberal capitalist enterprise, Twitch tends to stimulate a postfeminist atmosphere of hyper-competition among women for a limited number of viewers. Postfeminism promotes competitiveness and self-reliance, endorsing the idea that women can attain personal success chiefly through their individual efforts (Gill and Scharff 2011; Evans and Riley 2015). Akin to neoliberal ideology, in postfeminism individual agency takes precedence over any type of collective action and bonding among women (Kauppinen 2013; Gill 2017, 611).

8 Postfeminist media culture encourages planning, close self-regulation, and “self-reinvention,” to the point that the self becomes an object of continual monitoring and self-evaluation (Gill 2007, 160–161; Gill and Scharff 2011). This postfeminist emphasis on self-actualization and re-invention is criticized for generating novel sites of performance anxiety for women (Tayler 2011, 29). Postfeminism entails a re-embrace of conventional notions of femininity, sexual subjectification, and a renewed emphasis on the body as an inherent source of female power (Taylor 2011, 8). A key characteristic of postfeminism is that it typically works from

inside patriarchal relations of dominations for women to gain power individually, rather than aiming for collective achievement or larger societal change (Schwan 2016, 476). Our interviews indicate that women are often pushed to become competitive to attain greater popularity on Twitch Turkey. However, our research also points out that women invent alternative ways of using online streaming to defy patriarchal expectations and market-based competition, stressing female solidarity, and the significance of building affective communities.

Methodology

9 Our research relies primarily on semi-structured interviews. We carried out online interviews with 35 Twitch streamers over a period of four weeks. Our study partially relied on snowball sampling; some of our initial interviewees introduced us to their female streamer friends, who, in turn, led us to their female streamer friends on the platform. However, to avoid communicating only with a network of friends, we got into touch with several streamers by directly accessing them through Twitch. The infrastructure of the platform allows us to search for and produce a comprehensive list of streamers broadcasting in the Turkish language, on the condition that they broadcast at the moment when we view the site. Furthermore, through the website <https://twitchtracker.com/>, we can also find all Twitch users who stream in Turkish listed according to their average audience numbers. Most streamers have an email address in their personal pages, and it is typically through email that we first contacted them.

10 Existing scholarship on online streaming is criticized for exclusively or primarily focusing on top broadcasters, as a result, not reflecting the experiences of the majority of streamers that populate these online platforms (Lottridge 2017, 3). This can be seen as a major problem in the study of streaming on Twitch precisely because top broadcasters typically constitute a small fraction of the Twitch community of streamers (Deng et al. 2015). Not to fall in line with this criticism, we have tried to choose broadcasters with various degrees of online popularity, which we believe can demonstrate a greater range of streaming experiences. The two basic measures of popularity are the number of streamers' general followers and the number of their actual viewers. Followers are those people who have an interest in the streamer, but they do not necessarily watch the live streaming sessions. Streamers often upload partially or fully their streaming content to Twitch, thus letting viewers watch their clips at a later time. Still, as our interviewees indicate, the main indicator of a streamer's popularity on Twitch is the actual number of viewers who watch

their live streams, showcasing their current audience appeal. This information is immediately accessible on Twitch during streaming sessions and the website <https://twitchtracker.com/> provides an extensive list, documenting how many people watch the sessions of a particular streamer in any given hour, day, week, and month. In our selection, we tried to mix higher levels of audience popularity with its medium and lower levels. As such, a portion of our interviewees is watched by a daily average of several thousand people, whereas our other interviewees are watched by several hundred people and an average of fewer than 100 people.

11 We also took into account several demographic traits in our selection process, such as the geographical location and age of our interviewees. We tried to ensure our interviewees are geographically dispersed and cover different age groups. Majority of streamers are located in three major Turkish cities, Istanbul, Izmir, and Ankara, but we also interviewed streamers from 5 additional Turkish cities, and two streamers who currently reside outside of Turkey. The majority of streamers are in their early twenties; the youngest interviewee is 18 and there are a number of broadcasters in their late twenties and early thirties. The majority are currently university students, few of them finished their college education, and a number of them have never attended university or quit school. Some are currently working in full-time or part-time jobs, some of them earn their living exclusively through their Twitch streams, and for others, Twitch is merely a hobby without expectation of any notable financial return.

12 Based on the semi-structured research design, we asked all our interviews the same set twenty-five questions, though depending on the nature of the conversation we made additional queries for them to further elaborate their experiences. These initial questions can be found in the Appendix. A number of interviewees asked us to send a written copy of the questions, and we provided them in advance, otherwise, the majority of interviewees were given a basic outline of the project before the online meeting. All interviews were carried out in Turkish, which is the first language of all our interlocutors, and, after transcription, we have opted to translate to English only what we believe are the most significant parts of the several hours of interviews. Even though the high majority of our interlocutors gave us permission to use their real names and usernames in quoting them, we have decided to use pseudonyms for all of them to ensure their privacy.

13 We should also briefly mention our positionality as researchers with regard to our research subjects. Deniz Zorlu is primarily interested in media studies, cultural studies, and gender studies, and Nazli Ozkan is a media anthropologist interested in the use of digital platforms in Turkey.

Thus, this study allowed us to combine our strengths in academic research. The project took off as online gaming and streaming communities have been a topic of academic interest for Zorlu, and Özkan became part of the study due to her interest in digital media. Naturally, not all the people we contacted replied or accepted our request for an interview. We also noticed that some established names who earn considerable income directly through Twitch and their sponsorship deals were hesitant to take part in our research. Yet, we also saw that many of our interviewees were more enthusiastic to talk about their experiences on Twitch than we expected, and they verbally expressed their thankfulness for carrying out this study. We hope that our research can perhaps play a role in voicing their concerns and making the platform a more welcoming digital place for female streamers.

Myriad Faces of Patriarchy and Misogyny

14 Our study demonstrates that sexual harassment and bullying of female streamers on Twitch Turkey is widespread. The high majority of our interviewees indicated that they have frequently encountered sexual harassment and emotionally scarring behavior from Twitch audiences. Many stressed that they have seen harassment in each one of their streaming sessions, and that sexual harassment is the number one problem for women on Twitch (Peri, Tülin, Evren, Yağmur). For some, online harassment spread to the real world as they encountered men who followed them at their schools and showed up in front of their houses (Aygül), while some others have their house addresses and phone numbers shared online to intimidate them (Yağmur, Tuba). Some of the women either contemplated quitting, temporarily stopped, or are planning to stop streaming in the future, as a result of sexual harassment and online bullying (Oya, Ayşen, Alara). Some also suggested that there were times when online harassment made them feel insecure when they went out into the street (Tuba).

15 Most of them do not hesitate to classify these verbal attacks and harassments as psychological violence, indicating that even though they are strong or grew resilient in time, harassment and degrading remarks inevitably affect them. Several interviewees believe Twitch Turkey can do more to curb sexual harassment and bullying, like permanently banning IP addresses, instead of just banning the user, who can return simply by logging in with a different username (Ebru, Kıymet, Elif, Canay). Many also claim that this is not really about Twitch, and there is not much the platform can do, as this is a reflection of a general societal problem that

cannot be fixed without larger socio-cultural change (Mehtap, Duygu). Most women stated that twitch.tv can be seen as a microcosmos to the real-world problems women daily encounter and parallel street harassment, while also emphasizing that harassment on Twitch often get worse as the shield of anonymity prevents people from facing any real consequence for their actions (Neşe, Peri, Elif, Yağmur, Dilara, Canay, Meltem). Some indicated that they would not have let people talk to them in the real world in the way they often do on Twitch (Elif). Yet, others suggest that they are often more afraid in the streets especially at night, as there is then the danger of physical harm, unlike what happens in the online world (Arya). Some also suggest that, even though it is not fully adequate, the ability to ban harassers gives women some ground, as opposed to street harassment where a ban button is not available, and it is easier to raise your voice against online harassment (Derya, Sare, Dilara).

16 Women also frequently encounter bullying for their body-images, facial features, hair, make-up, clothing, and gaming performances. Women's physical appearance and their outfit are constantly scrutinized, as if they are under a microscope for examination, as one streamer says (Neşe). Multiple women noted that they recurrently received degrading and ridiculing remarks about their facial features, such as the size of their nose, their body weight, their teeth, or their make-up (Yağmur, Ayşen, Arya, Meltem). Audiences and sometimes even moderators can indulge in controlling behavior towards women, expecting them to be smiling and pleasing at all times, and get upset when their requests are not followed (Laçın, Canay, Gamze, Sare). Yet, to talk about harassment and the difficulties of being a woman on Twitch carries the risk of stigmatization and accusation of being a man-hater (Tülin) or seeking popularity by creating trouble (Elif). Many also stress that women also engage in toxic behavior and utter sexist slurs towards other women (Tuba, Rengin, Yağmur, Gamze, Sare).

17 Even though nearly all interviewed women are victimized by sexual harassment and bullying, our research, nonetheless, demonstrates that patriarchal pressures and oppression often take myriad forms, and women experience their effects in non-uniformed and contrasting ways. Some of our interviewees indicated that they behave deliberately in a masculine demeanor to evade online harassment (Kıymet). They argued that adjusting their online behavior towards what they deem as masculine demeanor, like using swears words and slangs too frequently, allow them to pre-emptively block unwanted advances, as well as facilitating their general acceptance by the male audiences as one of their own (Kıymet).

18 Another group of broadcasters, in contrast, said that they felt the pressure to conform themselves to feminine standards of beauty as their online behavior is slated for being too masculine. One of our interviewees indicated that she often wears red lipsticks to project a feminine image even though she does not like it and virtually never puts on red lipsticks in her offscreen life (Mehtap). She adds that she counter-balances her red lipsticks with a reverse cap, thus, not allowing her self-image to be completely determined by audience expectations and desires. This can be seen as an example of a frequently occurring phenomenon under conditions of patriarchal control, where women develop ways to negotiate and re-negotiate patriarchal demands.

19 Multiple women noted that they don't feel comfortable and can't wear certain outfits, such as tank tops, skirts, and shorts, as they almost immediately receive harassing messages (Evren, Çilem, Neşe, Dilara). Several interviewees indicate that even at the height of summer and even though they like tank tops, they still have to modestly dress a shirt to evade harassment (Evren, Meltem, Tülin). Others mention that they can immediately be accused of "using their femininity" to attract audiences for clothes they enjoy wearing in their everyday lives (Yağmur). Several other women also indicate that they do not want to be perceived as someone who advances their fame through sexualized imagery; thus, they are very careful about what they wear, which, we believe, can be seen as an additional layer of cultural pressure constraining women's choices. Women also regularly encounter the pressure to appear sexy or in alignment with mainstream beauty standards and are chastised for not being so (Mehtap). Hence, as many streamers concur, on Twitch Turkey many women often encounter the dual pressure of being conventionally attractive without appearing too sexual, trying to maintain an impossible balance as if walking on a tight rope.

20 In her study on Twitch streamers in the US, T. L. Taylor (2018) observes that the platform closely regulates its users' attire in a gendered manner. A similarly gendered dress control is also at work on Twitch Turkey, where woman users can be banned because of their choice of attire. Despite such international resonances in gendered dress policy, some of our interviewees suggested that Twitch surveils women in Turkey more strictly than in other countries. According to Yağmur, "on Twitch global, women can show up in their underwear and nothing happens" but once she "wore a sports bra and got banned for three days." Rengin also concurs with Yağmur, indicating that women's clothing is a bigger issue on Twitch Turkey.

21 Our only interviewee who wears Hijab claims that she faces much more pressure and harassment because of her attire compared to other Turkish female broadcasters (Burcu). She asserts that many people believe she is out of place in a gaming and streaming platform because of her chosen outfit. She argues that other Turkish women laugh aloud, yell and dance in front of the camera freely, but it immediately becomes an issue and gets condemned if she briefly raises her voice, as people expect her to behave in an unassertive and docile manner as a natural accompaniment to her Hijab. Another woman, who started her streams wearing Hijab, indicated that she was verbally attacked for wearing it (Kıymet); later, when she decided not to wear Hijab anymore both in her offscreen life and in her streams, she faced the accusations of faking a conservative identity to pull the audiences, this time being effectively chastised for not wearing Hijab. Hence, our research indicates that online sexual harassment and bullying primarily and persistently affect women. However, even though patriarchy has a controlling and restrictive effect for all women streamers, their online practices affect their lives in myriad and changing ways.

Twitch, Postfeminism, and Beyond

22 In recent years, there has been an increasing mainstream media attention to female streamers in Turkey, which often focuses on their physical beauty, rather than streaming content. Many female Twitch celebrities have been invited to take part in television programs, and some even quit streaming after their transfer into more mainstream media productions. Some of our interviewees indicate that their priority is to have a career in online or mainstream broadcast media, they have not played video games before joining Twitch, they use Twitch in coordination with their various other social media sites without attributing any specific value to it, or they started Twitch streaming because their previous streaming activities in different platforms have not yielded the expected results. Two different long-time streamers said in our interview that they are contacted by several aspiring young women asking for tips on how they can become popular through streaming (Mehtap, Duygu). In short, many streamers appear to perceive Twitch primarily as a step in the direction towards greater media fame. Streaming on Twitch Turkey is thus part of the culture of “micro-celebrities” or “internet celebrities” that pervade the use of online spaces (Sjöblom et al. 2019, 21; Fietkiewicz et al. 2018; Zhang and Hjorth 2019, 808).

23 As indicated before, at times streamers’ usage of the platform approximates neoliberal/postfeminist notions of hyper-individualistic and competitive empowerment that

perceives femininity primarily as a bodily property. As a notable anecdote, one streamer produced a successful music clip in August 2019 that has so far been watched about 35 million times on YouTube, and she is currently one of the most accomplished streamers on Twitch regarding the number of her daily audiences. This YouTube clip, even though this is the first appearance of the young woman in a music video, is professionally made, demonstrating the linkages between various online platforms, as well as the mainstreamization of online streaming. The clip showcases her talent as a singer and performer, but it is also worth briefly mentioning how the lyrics and the clip portray female subjectivity performance on Twitch. She says:

“I give my poses...they are in menopause. We always make fun; they are all sluts. Don't interrupt with my good moods... Avoid my imitators; I am the one who starts trends... What's your problem; are you looking for trouble? There is trouble on Twitch, her name is Ela [the singer's name]. Twitch is my job; our team is enlarged... You show your body parts; no one ever cared; you are seeking popularity; run, it takes time to catch up.” (transl. DZ and NÖ)³

24 We see her in fashionable low-cut dresses in driving and singing in several expensive sports cars and an airplane, as the lyrics describe an atmosphere of bitter rivalry specifically among female streamers. She emphasizes her youthfulness in comparison to her rivals whom she says are already “in menopause,” in a postfeminist fixation with female youth. Women are described as natural foes in an endless clash for fame and success in a postfeminist language of aggressive competitiveness and self-centeredness. The lyrics claim that women “show their body parts” to increase their popularity on Twitch, while the clip emphasizes wealth, luxury, and care-free living.

25 However, unlike the lyrics of the song that claims no one cares about it, most women on Twitch appear to consider sexualized imagery and language as contributing factors to the overall sexism that pervade the platform. Even though all of our interviewees steered clear of victim-blaming, indicating that women shouldn't be harassed or mistreated no matter how they may choose to dress or behave, the high majority are still critical of female broadcasters whom they believe play an active role in perpetuating the sexist atmosphere of the platform, by an alleged sexualized display of their bodies and the tolerance they show towards harassment in their attempt to maximize the number of their followers. Some of our interviews claim that sexualization sets

³ “Veririm poz da...onlar hep menopozda... Geçeriz dalga onlar hep yosma. Twitch benim isim, genişledi ekip . . . Derdin ne senin bela mı istiyon bela mı Bela Ya Twitch'de bela vardır onun adı Eladır Ela. Açarsın oranı buranı, kimsenin umurunda olmadı, prim pesindesin, koş yetişmek zaman alır.”

the standards of expected behavior from women (Duygu). “They expect all of us to be just like them,” said one of our interviewees in reference to male audiences whom she believes primarily watch women for the sexualized content of their broadcasts, further adding that while they have to struggle against men who treat them as sex objects, they feel like they are being betrayed by women who self-objectify for personal gain (Kader). Another interviewee said that she finds it deeply disturbing when women “smile at sexual harassment” in order not to lose audiences (Peri). A streamer said she is mortified by women who engage in sexually charged activities, like demanding people to subscribe or donate in return for twerking on camera (Ebru).

26 In a frequently encountered line of comment, many of our interviewees say they believe women change themselves drastically after they start streaming to meet gendered expectations and to attract audiences to their channel in the competitive environment of Twitch (Canay, Sare, Dilara). Women “change too much, they give compromises from who they are,” claims a streamer (Sare). In that regard, some of our interviewees stress that they firmly believe women should be able to dress the way they want and should not be criticized for it; what troubles them is that they believe many women change how they look and how they behave to conform with the expectations of a primarily male audience base (Sare). Some suggest that it is the competitive environment of the platform that pushes women to try to approximate conventional beauty standards and sexualize themselves to have a competitive advantage (Mehtap).

27 A streamer who has been intermittently on Twitch Turkey since 2014 as one of the earliest woman broadcasters in the platform claimed that she witnessed the growing sexualization of the platform. It appears to her that certain conventional markers of beauty like thinness, blondness, fair skin, and the wearing of sexy outfits often determine female streamers’ popularity (Mehtap). She says women have greater potential than just “showing off their breasts” on camera, and they are wasting it, which saddens her. Another streamer says she is frustrated that women are not applauded primarily for the quality of their streaming, as there are many excellent women gamers and broadcasters on Twitch Turkey who don’t receive the level of attention they deserve (Tuba).

28 Another interviewee says that she earned her living exclusively through her Twitch streaming for three years, claiming that women ultimately can find themselves choosing between trying to be popular or maintaining certain principles. She says that women should ask themselves whether they want to be an “idealist person or want to be successful. If you are an idealist person then you cannot be successful on Twitch” (Duygu). According to her, the more people behave in

an “ugly manner,” the more they attract the spotlight and earn money. She says nowadays on Twitch private scandals that resemble sensational tabloid newspaper stories seem more effective in attracting audiences than quality content.

29 A number of our interviewees indicate that at times competition and rivalry among women can run amok (Sare, Mehtap, Peri). “There is an enmity between us,” indicates one interviewee lamentingly referring to female streamers. She further suggests that it sometimes feels like you are a small fish in a large sea, “surrounded by sharks,” and you should watch out other streamers, including female streamers for your own good (Sare). Some also indicate that as the larger share of viewership is in the hands of male streamers, women often find themselves pitted against one another to increase their number of audiences in the smaller portion of the viewership (Peri).

30 In light of these comments and critiques, we would like to raise two parallel arguments in regard to the operation of postfeminism on Twitch Turkey. Even though postfeminism is theorized as a mixture of feminist aspirations and pre-feminist notions of femininity that both challenges and reproduce patriarchy, our research indicate that in the context of Twitch Turkey postfeminist ideals of sexualized and hypercompetitive femininity appear to lend themselves more readily to reproducing patriarchal relations of domination, rather than subverting them. However, we also observe that the hypervisibility of postfeminist femininities invites resistance and the formation of alternative female performances in online streaming. As a common theme that comes across in multiple interviews, many streamers stress that they rigorously follow certain streaming rules even if that means losing audiences and they actively reject problematic expectations from women in online streaming (Peri, Mehtap, Arya). We believe they appear to be under the double bind of both patriarchal and neoliberal/postfeminist pressure, and that they try carving out alternative spaces that oppose and re-negotiate these demands.

31 One major way to contest both patriarchy and postfeminism is to stress solidarity among women. For instance, Sare asserts that, instead of bitterly competing, “women should be able to support each other,” and she often uses her streams to inspire other women. Similarly, Elif points out the need for women to unite and support one another. Several streamers highlight their efforts to keep female audiences in their vicinity by treating them with greater sympathy, in practicing “affirmative action” in their favor. Elif emphasizes that the gendered discrimination on Twitch may now look inevitable but she believes “this situation will change with the growth of solidarity among women.” Tülin similarly states that solidarity among women is especially important in

countering sexual harassment, and she frequently uses her platform to bring to the fore the difficulties of being a woman on Twitch and Turkey. Hence, even though Twitch Turkey does not seem to be a platform for explicit feminist activism—and in fact, some women wanted to note in our interviews that they don't consider themselves feminist—a significant number of women use the streaming platform to forge female solidarity and support networks.

32 Arya is the most popular female streamer on Twitch Turkey regarding the number of her daily viewers, she also received an award for being the most successful female streamer in 2019 in a competition. In our interview, she indicated that about half of her general audience are women, which is unusual on Twitch as the numerical majority of audiences are men, and the majority of our other respondents pointed out that their streaming is primarily watched by men. A significant number of our interviewees mentioned her name spontaneously either as an inspiration or a role model, even though we didn't directly ask questions about other streamers. It is also worth mentioning that she has a YouTube channel dedicated to her, named as “Bacılar Diyarı,” or “Land of Sisterhood.”

33 One of our respondents mentioned Arya's distinctive loud laughter as a positive example that defies notions of female propriety (Mehtap), another suggested she likes that Arya is not in full alignment with mainstream beauty standards (Tuba), and many others commended that she does not present herself in a sexualized manner, while also praising what they believe her natural, noncompetitive demeanor. We believe it is precisely Arya's success as a streamer without any clear allusion to patriarchal and postfeminist expectations that earns her so much credit and admiration in the eyes of female streamers. Her achievements seem to pinpoint the possibility of attaining success for many female streamers without conforming to postfeminist stress on self-interested, sexualized, and hyper-competitive subjecthood. We argue that Arya receives remarkable support from other female streamers because she offers an alternative way to become successful in the cultural atmosphere of online streaming that many women believe leaves only limited options. In other words, her popularity especially among female streamers demonstrates that the postfeminist atmosphere promoted by Twitch Turkey is in tension with a critique of the performance of hypercompetitive femininity.

34 In addition to building female-support networks, women on Twitch also foster a sense of a collectivity in the platform by harvesting special relations with their followers that they call community or family (Taylor 2018, 90). Many streamers suggest that Twitch often means a refuge

from boredom and challenges of off-screen life, allowing them to build close friendship ties and intimate bonds with like-minded individuals (Alara, Dilara, Meltem). For some, streaming can serve as a support network in times of emotional need (Tülin), and many insist that online streaming's most desirable aspect is the ability to meet and network with people whom they otherwise won't be able to know in any other way (Duygu). For instance, one streamer suggests that even though she considers Twitch as her job and a major source of income, a major reason for her streaming is the affective link she builds with her followers and that she already starts missing her streaming community if she stops broadcasting for only two days (Aygül).

35 Several of our interviewees suggest that nurturing this community is only possible if one prefers not to be popular (Alara, Canay, Sare, Meltem, Dilara). They argue if they prioritize increasing audience numbers and revenue, they also start facing rising levels of toxic audience behavior. They state that they are very careful not to tolerate any type of problematic behavior in their channel at the expense of losing audiences. A top female streamer suggested that she left Twitch when her viewers had grown exponentially to become unmanageable but returned a couple of months later to re-connect with her loyal core audience (Alara). It is often argued that Twitch streaming gives “participants opportunities to engage more deeply” (Hamilton et al. 2014, 1318). In this case, it also appears that these alternative communities also develop in reaction to what streamers believe toxic components of the platform, and as a result of a desire to separate themselves from online toxicity. We believe these examples also showcase how heightened patriarchy and postfeminism give way to their criticism in leading up to the creation of small but alternative Twitch communities and female solidarities.

36 However, it should also be stressed that putting aside desires to increase their viewership on Twitch in order to maintain a strong ethical stance cannot be an easy choice for all women, especially since there are streamers who depend on Twitch for their livelihood. For instance, one of our interviewees indicates that her streaming identity is largely a performance that has little to do with her actual personality, and she tolerates toxic and harassing male behavior to a certain extent, but she does that as she depends on the money she gets from Twitch for her livelihood (Kıymet). Hence, even though the majority of our interviewees believe there are spaces of agency for women to resist complying with various problematic and sexist expectations, this may not always be an easy task for women whose circumstances of life make them depend on the income they garner from online streaming.

Conclusion

37 Our research indicates that, even though the content of their streams naturally showcases substantial variation, we can still notice certain parallels and resonances in the way streaming is experienced by women on Twitch Turkey. Patriarchal power structures and oppression are omnipresent in the male-dominated environment of Twitch Turkey. The majority of our interviewees indicate that sexual harassment is the biggest problem for women, while also noting that women are closely and regularly scrutinized and criticized for their dresses, body images, make-up, and gaming performances in what amounts to psychological violence. Female streamers can feel restricted in their clothing choices and online behavior to evade negative audience reactions. However, as demonstrated, women also encounter and experience patriarchal pressures in differential and nonuniform ways, depending on their cultural preferences and personal habits.

38 The majority of our interviewees are critical of streamers whom they believe self-objectify and tolerate toxic male behavior to increase their online popularity and following, as they are accused of playing a role in perpetuating the sexist atmosphere that negatively affects all women. Several interviewees claim that women often change themselves too much after their introduction to streaming on Twitch in order to appeal to the patriarchal expectations prevalent in the platform. Many of our respondents also believe that women have an agentic space to reject complying with and counter problematic expectations on Twitch Turkey. However, our research cautions us against such straightforward assertions, as some of our interviews demonstrate that women's agency against patriarchal and sexist expectations have their certain limits, especially when women depend on their Twitch streams as their sole or a major source of income.

39 We believe online streaming has a tendency to encourage the formation of neoliberal and postfeminist subjectivities, which condition women to compete with one another. Postfeminism is often considered as an amalgam of feminist desires for women's empowerment and a neoliberal emphasis on hyper-individualism, serving both to challenge and re-produce patriarchy. Our study, however, indicates that in the context of Twitch Turkey, where patriarchal dictates are arguably more stringent, self-centered and hypercompetitive models of empowerment purported by postfeminism primarily serve to re-instate patriarchal relations of domination, rather than subvert them, as women's self-interested attempts at empowerment seem to necessitate a stronger alignment with patriarchal expectations of the male-dominated platform.

40 We also argue that the hypervisibility and combined pressure of patriarchal and postfeminist expectations give rise to their denunciation, reflected in the efforts to build female solidarities and alternative Twitch communities that prioritize affective interaction that oppose the atmosphere of hyper-competition and virulent misogyny. In other words, affective communities partly emerge in response to the competitive environment promoted by postfeminism, and as a way of countering online sexism. Hence, even though Twitch Turkey does not appear to be a particularly viable platform for explicit political activism, women's streaming is often shaped by feminist-inspired deeds and the formation of female solidarities and affective communities that flourish despite, and in opposition to postfeminist aggressive competitiveness and patriarchal domination.

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Appendix

Below can be found the English translation of the research questions. In line with the semi-structured nature of our research project, and depending on the initial responses of our interlocutors, we often made follow-up queries that are not listed here to enable them to further elaborate on their experiences.

1. Are you currently living in Turkey, and if so, in which city?
2. Are you a university student, or have you already finished your degree, or are you planning to pursue a college degree in the future?
3. What are your plans for the future?
4. How long have you been playing video games? Can we say that you are an enthusiastic gamer? When did you start streaming on Twitch? When and how did you first learn about the platform?
5. How often are you streaming on Twitch on a weekly and monthly basis? On average, how many hours are you spending on Twitch in a day, week and month?
6. Which social media platform are you using the most frequently? Is it Twitch, if not, how often do you use Twitch in comparison to other social media platforms?
7. Do you use Twitch for any other purpose than gaming? What are some of the essential usages of Twitch for you?
8. Have you ever considered taking part in other media venues, such as TV and cinema, or are you exclusively interested in online streaming and gaming?
9. Can we see Twitch as a valuable source for socializing with like-minded individuals?
10. Would you agree with the statement that Twitch opens up a space allowing you to better express yourself, your feelings, and opinions?
11. Have you ever heard negative statements from people around you when they learned you are about to launch your streaming channel? What did they say? Have you heard anything that directly or indirectly indicates that this is not a suitable endeavor for you because of your gender?
12. Has your opinion of Twitch changed after you have started streaming?

13. About the demographics of your followers; on average, how old are they, and are your followers primarily women, men, or is it evenly distributed? Are they mostly the same people who follow you in other social media platforms?
14. Do you believe Twitch is a male-dominated platform?
15. What are the disadvantages of being a female streamer on Twitch?
16. Do you believe gender-based discrimination is wide-spread on Twitch Turkey? Have you felt like you are being treated in a differential manner because you are a woman? Have you ever experienced discrimination based on your gender identity?
17. Have you ever been derided for your gaming performance; do you believe women are more frequently slated in online gaming based on their gender?
18. Are there any differences between being a woman on Twitch and being a woman in off-screen spaces like school, the streets, or a coffeehouse?
19. What do you think about publicized incidents of sexual harassment and bullying against female Twitch streamers?
20. Do you believe that there is a connection between violence against women in the real world and incidences of online harassment?
21. Is there an aspect to streaming that you believe have empowered you?
22. Have your online streaming affected your off-screen life in any noticeable way? Have you undergone any positive or negative transformation in your thoughts and behavior as a result of streaming?
23. Can we argue that streaming allows women greater control over their self-representation compared to the depictions of women in Turkish popular culture, like Turkish TV series and movies?
24. Have you ever felt compelled to act, talk and dress in a particular way during your streaming? In other words, have you ever felt any direct and/or indirect societal pressure that has altered your online behavior?
25. Do you have any suggestions for women who plan to become an online streamer on Twitch?

**Soto, Christopher, editor. *Nepantla: An Anthology for Queer Poets of Color*.
Nightboat Books, 2018.**

Robert Eric Shoemaker, University of Louisville, USA

1 The Nahuatl word *nepantla*, as defined by Gloria Anzaldúa in *This Bridge We Call Home*, means *terre entre medio* or “middle ground/land between” loosely rendered (Soto I). Borrowing this word from Anzaldúa’s usage, Christopher Soto founded the literary journal *Nepantla* in association with Lambda Literary in 2013. Soto’s interest with this journal project was in increasing visibility of the diversity in queer poetry; the Nightboat Anthology *Nepantla: An Anthology for Queer Poets of Color* has the same aim and is largely an extension of the journal (I). Poets in the 200-page anthology validate the queer of color experience in all its polyvalence; there are, however, some things lacking in *Nepantla*. In Soto’s same spirit of “constructive criticism” (II), because this anthology’s poet-base is an essential, vibrant, and canonically underrepresented group, some critiques of this important anthology project should be made.

2 The general lack of organization or sectioning of the anthology confuses some themes together. *Nepantla* opens with the question of belonging in America: “I am a child of America/a step child,” Pat Parker writes (3). The poet’s churning “innards” set an unsettled tone (5), relating to the backdrop of oppression in the United States across the multiple generations of poets included in this anthology as well as to the embodiment and physicality of identity. Alongside embodied content arises a laudable variety of embodied forms, like Steffan Triplett’s erasure (14) and Rajiv Mohabir’s flowing and wet “A Boy with Baleen for Teeth” (64). Unfortunately, timely (or timeless) poems on police violence and sexual violence follow, like June Jordan’s work (12) and Jericho Brown’s (26). Rage is included as well as tenderness, as in Madison Johnson’s “Actually, Yes, Everything is About Race” (34) and the seemingly pure anger of Mark Aguhar’s list poem (100) that begins, in all caps, “FUCK YOUR WHITENESS/FUCK YOUR BEAUTY.” The anthology asks questions about the performance of queerness and color, as in Phillip B. Williams’s “Maskot #1,” which replicates a Black dialect with sass: “I sho love me some Hippy Hop references” (79, formatting preserved). *Nepantla* also forefronts the desires of the queer body, “to be craved so hard/i become marrow” (Franny Choi 114, formatting preserved) and boldly proclaims: “Lick my butt/cos I’m an angry ethnic fag/& I’m in so much pain” (Justin Chin 119). Finally, the anthology moves into a cluster of poems that engage the topic of AIDS, including Melvin Dixon’s “Heartbeats” (162).

3 *Nepantla* does not clearly alert the reader to the organization of its works or the reason as to individual poems' or writers' inclusion. Perhaps because the contributions range from poems published before 1958 all the way to 2016, the experiences represented become muddled together in specific counterproductive ways I will outline here.

4 The introduction tells us that the poet themselves is at least as important as the poem included, particularly because of Soto's stated criterion "has the poet been absolutely pivotal to development of other queer of color poets" (II). Additionally, the table of contents lists only the names of the poets and not their individual poem's title. Both of these elements indicate that, for the most part, "poets" as people are important to the anthology and the works themselves are less important. Many of the young and most lauded poets of the current generation are anthologized here, like Ocean Vuong, Tommy Pico, jayy dodd, and Rickey Laurentiis. However, there is no biographical or contextual information included in *Nepantla* in order to prioritize the poet as person or identity over the poem as work included. These poets are pivotal in the way that the introduction suggests, but many of the poems included are less individually coherent in this anthology's context. For instance, Dawn Lundy Martin's "excerpt from *Discipline*" is very partially excerpted in this anthology; without more of the original piece, the work almost lacks sense (109). The excerpting of work occurs frequently throughout *Nepantla* and, with the exception of some like George Abraham's "excerpt from *Inheritance*" (which is much longer than the others, 82), dilutes what are otherwise important poets' work, bringing up the question of editorial decision-making.

5 Some poems also reverberate uncomfortably throughout the collection. Ser Serpas's "excerpt from *Last Four Months*" declares "i dont trust/cis folks," but because the definition of queer in this anthology is so undefined and uncritical, the question of conversations between the poets and their work in the anthology is strained and unapproached, seeming to wedge Serpas into a collection with cis- poets.

6 *Nepantla* at times projects queerness onto poets who might not have used that word to describe themselves, like Langston Hughes and Audre Lorde. By refusing to define multiply and instead collapsing identity down to *queer and of color*, Soto misrepresents writers and limits this anthology to a cloudy understanding of queerness and being of color (III). Stripping away the context of the writer and including no sense of chronology or belonging in-time along with no biography and projected identities strains the connections and collapses the differences that exist between queer people of color from the Harlem Renaissance to now.

7 In many ways, *Nepantla* suffers from a lack of editorial direction; it also suffers from an expectation set by Nightboat's previous anthology *Troubling the Line: Trans and Genderqueer Poetry and Poetics*, which promoted a critical understanding and situating of every poet included. It's not that every Nightboat anthology needs to include poetics statements, headshots, and extensive biographies; what is accomplished by these elements, however—a critical and complex stance towards identity politics and poetics—is a necessity for anthologies like *Nepantla*.

8 For me, *Nepantla* reads like an unfinished anthology project clearly derived from a preexisting journal. Because the anthology resists any sense of organization, using no formal conventions of telling the reader how they might approach it, what come across are tokenized ideas of queer-of-color subjecthood; here is the police brutality voice, here is the erotic Black voice, here is the riot voice, here is the mournful Native voice. Rather than promote multiplicity, the choices made force many of these poems to read through recognizable, typed patterns. The extensive list of anthology contributors makes a grand attempt, but overall fails to anthologize in a detailed, contextualized, and productive way, these essential voices.

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Kristen Ghodsee: *Second World, Second Sex: Socialist Women's Activism and Global Solidarity*. Duke University Press, 2019

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1 In her text *Second World, Second Sex: Socialist Women's Activism and Global Solidarity during the Cold War*, Kristen Ghodsee sets out to examine two key components of the UN International Decade of Women. The first component is how Bulgarian women's activists made connections with socialist women in Zambia and exchanged knowledge with them. The second component is how Bulgarian and Zambian women's activists and Second and Third World activists for women's rights more broadly, allied with one another in the context of the UN Decade for Women. For Ghodsee, the history of Second World women's rights activists has largely been lost, and this book works partly as a recovery project.

2 After the International Year of Women (1975) and the Decade for Women, many authors writing about feminist activism gloss over the differences in women's activism, opting to use First World, middle-class, feminist politics to stand in for all women's politics. *Second World, Second Sex* shows that First World feminist accomplishments benefitted from Second World women through the exchange of ideas and competition between the two during the 20th century, improving conditions for women more broadly. Ghodsee notes communist women from the Eastern Bloc and their socialist allies from the Global South would not have called themselves "feminist" as they did not see the goals of feminism aligning with theirs (Ghodsee 15). Socialist women in the Second and Third Worlds believed that women's rights were a key part of "achieving sexual equality with men," in contrast to Western conceptualizations of feminism, which prioritized self-actualization over community-oriented goals.

3 Ghodsee interviews several Bulgarian and Zambian women in order to gain a better appreciation of how socialist women from the Second and Third World understood their activism within the larger global landscape. Ghodsee found that both Bulgarian and Zambian activists positioned themselves as socialist activists invested in the politics of their home countries and their struggles against racist, heteropatriarchy.

4 The first and second chapters focus on the activist roots of the Bulgarian women Ghodsee interviewed. The Bulgarian women who were later active in the International Year of Women recounted how they educated themselves, as many of them came from poor or agrarian backgrounds and were not able to access education, not only because of their economic status, but

also because of their gender (Ghodsee 35). Ghodsee uses archives, memoirs and interviews to reveal how many of the Bulgarian women involved in women's activism discovered socialist literature that examined women's issues and patriarchy. This autodidacticism not only created these women's foundational beliefs, but also helped them create international networks of socialist women's activism.

5 The Zambian women who Ghodsee interviewed had similar experiences to the Bulgarian women with one key difference: overwhelming racism. Chibesa Kankasa discusses her anti-colonial, anti-racist activism as an adult in colonial era Zambia (then Rhodesia), where a catalyzing experience of racism in a butcher shop solidified her decision to join and organize Black women's support for the African National Congress in Rhodesia (Ghodsee 100). Another woman Ghodsee interviewed recounted how difficult it was for her to obtain an education and the lengths she had to go to to obtain one, similar to the Bulgarian women (Ghodsee 113).

6 In the last part of Part One, Ghodsee examines how the tensions between the First World and the Second World put Zambian women and the country at large in a position where they had to choose who they would accept as influencers in their political and economic system. Ghodsee asked Zambian women why they chose to ally with the Second World rather than the First, and most argued that the values of "Zambian Humanism" and traditional African cultures aligned more closely with socialism and its ideals of cooperation rather than capitalism's competitiveness (Ghodsee 137).

7 Part Two explores the interactions between the First, Second and Third World during the International Decade for Women. Ghodsee discusses how Second and Third World participants organized themselves for the International Women's Decade by working as allies with Second World women to pass resolutions specific to their countries' agendas throughout each conference. For instance, women from the Third World, with help from their allies in the Second World, were able to pass resolutions in the Declaration of Mexico that included explicit references to Zionism and apartheid (Ghodsee 157).

8 The United States delegates found themselves voting against parts of or entire declarations because of Second and Third World women's insistence on including anti-apartheid, anti-racist, anti-Zionist and anti-capitalist language. Compromise was found only through passing two separate declarations or removing references to Zionism within the final declaration at the Nairobi conference in 1985 (Ghodsee 213).

9 Perhaps one of the most fascinating parts of *Second World, Second Sex*, is its attention to how Bulgarian women's activists were able to use government resources to bring women's activists from the Third World to the Eastern Bloc for educational courses on socialism and activism. Ghodsee shows the messiness of the interactions between women from the Eastern Bloc and the Global South, particularly Bulgarian and Zambian women. However, these interactions and their stickiness are what produce the solidarity at the conferences during the International Decade for Women.

10 *Second World, Second Sex: Socialist Women's Activism and Global Solidarity* during the Cold War is a fascinating look at the alliances women activists built across the Second and Third World during the Cold War in order to challenge capitalist hegemony and patriarchy. Ghodsee's use of oral histories and archival research shows how prior research does not present the entire story about the International Decade for Women. Ghodsee does not romanticize the authoritarianism Bulgarian and Zambian women lived through. However, the stories she captures offer hope to future generations of activists through demonstrating how women from the Third World and Second World were able to build bridges transnationally to influence women's rights globally.

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