

Chapter 3

Ur(sine)texts¹: *BEAR* Magazine, The Bear Mailing List, and Prodsusage as a Site of Identity and Community Formation

*BIGGER THAN EVER! BUCK NAKED BEARASSED MEN! MAN-TO-MAN CLASSIFIEDS!
ONE-HANDED FICTION! and much, much, MORE!*

-Printed on the back cover of *BEAR* issue 7

*Until recently, mainstream gay media have ignored the fireman that lived down the street when we were kids. The one who drove a pick-up truck, had just a bit of a belly (with hair on it), a beard, and maybe smoked a cigar. That's a true masculine image. It's the way real men are. It's a departure from what we, as gay men, have been taught to accept as a sexual icon. That is, until the mid-1980's, when, among other things, a magazine called *BEAR* started up in San Francisco.*

-Luke Mauerman, former editorial staff member at *BEAR*.²

Introduction: *BEAR* Magazine and Communication Networks

Bear culture is a particularly interesting case study for queer/media history, as it formed in the late 1980s, and is largely accredited to the publishing of *BEAR* magazine's first issue in 1987.³ Media have been the central cornerstone of the bear identity and its establishment as a queer cultural fraction formed during the height of the AIDS crisis, when in-person interaction

¹ I must thank my colleague Zachary Beare for the play on words in my title. This paper is also greatly indebted to Bud Thomas and all the staff at the ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archive in Los Angeles, who helped me in the primary source research for this project. My work with the Bear Mailing List was conducted at Cornell University's archives, where the Les Wright Papers are held, and this project, and its future, have been indelibly shaped by the staff and resources at Cornell. Finally, this paper would not have been possible without the guidance and encouragement of Dr. Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy.

² Luke Mauerman, "BEAR Magazine," in *The Bear Book: Readings in the History and Evolution of a Gay Male Subculture*, ed. Les K. Wright (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1997), 207.

³ Les K. Wright, "A Concise History of Self-Identifying Bears," in *The Bear Book: Readings in the History and Evolution of a Gay Male Subculture*, ed. Les K. Wright (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1997), 21-39.

was fraught with fear and anxiety, and homophobic discrimination was rampant. The advent of bear porn in print and on VHS signalled that bears could now get off to men who looked like them. It was also a forum for testing their ideas about what a bear was through the output of a porn company that, especially in its first few years, encouraged readers to send in personal ads with photos and descriptions of themselves, come model for the magazine, or even take part in the production of their early porn videos including *Live Bears from COA* (1988) and *BEAR Fuck Party* (1989). American bear porn was “new” media in the sense that it was taking a new approach to gay porn with a new appreciation for gay bodies largely considered ugly.

Running parallel to the iconographic and representational work of defining beardom being done in and through mediated pornography was the creation and proliferation of the Bear Mailing List (BML), an early internet listserv and new media communication network that began in the late 1980s, and that exploded in popularity in the early to mid-1990s. BML was delivered in a daily digest format to subscribers’ email accounts, and each digest was populated with messages on the various topics under discussion that subscribers would email to the list’s primary email address to be published in an upcoming digest. Posters provided their email address and screen name (which was often, but not always, their real name) as part of their messages, so that other members of BML could message them directly as well as respond to topics of general interest on the wider list. These messages would be compiled by the webmasters, volunteers who gave significant amounts of time, energy, and labour to managing this community. The moderators would discard messages that contravened the list’s community standards, add annotations to messages (the vast majority of which asked responders to contact poster’s directly if someone was seeking information, a place to stay, etc. that would benefit

them personally, rather than the whole list), and otherwise largely stay out of conversations.⁴ The moderator's most prominent power came from their community-agreed-upon ability to end conversation threads that they determined were going in circles, becoming repetitive, or had become otherwise unhelpful to the whole list. Though I observed some minor pushback to that power in my research at Cornell, where I was able to access over 10000 pages of printouts of the BML, dating from 1994 to 2000, most of the community seemed entirely on board with the role of the moderators and their execution of their jobs.

This chapter will begin with a brief overview of *BEAR* magazine and its place in bear culture (which I will use as a shorthand for "bear cultural fraction"), both to outline the central object of analysis for this chapter, but also because the issues involved in the magazine's development were also central to discourses on the BML, though the same issues were not always taken up explicitly as or about pornography. After that I will conduct an in-depth analysis of the first 7 issues of *BEAR* magazine, including its images as well as its personals section. To supplement and add further texture to this analysis, the section on *BEAR* will also include examples from the magazine's VHS porn productions that illustrate the points about bear community, identity, and cultural labour that I am making. Finally, I also draw on a cross-section of BML from an approximately one-year period from late summer 1999 until the summer of 2000 to discuss how the BML, via digital media studies, offers the ability to draw some

⁴ Upon consulting with the archival staff at Cornell, and based on my own positions on digital privacy, I will not be including any identifying information, be it emails, names, or screen names, for anyone involved with the BML, including the moderators. Technically, by posting to an internet listserv that anyone could sign up for, a "public" digital space, the users did, to some extent, know their identities were not fully protected. However, as digital media theorist danah boyd reminds us in "Facebook's Privacy Trainwreck: Exposure, Invasion, and Social Convergence," many users of social media (in which I am including BML, though it predates what we usually describe as "social media" by years) care far more about how they perceive their information spreads than what they technically or legally agreed to. Just as when people felt like their privacy was violated when Facebook introduced the now ubiquitous newsfeed feature, despite signing Facebook's terms of agreement, it was the perception that people who didn't know them well could suddenly see anything, or even everything, that they post online, so I would not want to contribute to BML users feeling uncomfortable should they discover their name in an unexpected place, even scholarly work. danah boyd, "Facebook's Privacy Trainwreck: Exposure, Invasion, and Social Convergence," *Convergence* 14 no. 1 (2008): 13-20.

conclusions about how bears have defined themselves, as individuals and a community, via media consumption.

BEAR magazine began publishing out of San Francisco in 1987 under the editorial direction of Bart Thomas for the first two issues, then Richard Bulger for issues three to seven. The magazine was started in response to a growing feeling among gay men who did not fit the twink stereotype prevalent in club culture of the time that they were not represented in gay media. According to sociologist and historian Martin Levine, the twink comes from a distinction within gay clone social life in the 1980's. When clone cliques took on the significance of family for the men involved in them, older men, called "big brothers," would take a younger man under his wing; the "little brother". In alternate terminology, the big brothers were labeled "gay mothers," and the little brothers "twinkies." Though twinks do have these roots in clone culture, modern twinks tend to be less focused on butch masculinities, as their roots in clone culture would suggest. Twinks now are smooth, often-blond, gay men who take on affectations of youth, vapidness, and consumerism similar to metrosexuality. Stereotypically, they also tend not to cultivate the facial hair that was part of clone identity, and have a more varied, less rigid, dress code. In my personal experience, and based on my research for this project, this is the definition of twink that most bears seem to contrast themselves against.⁵ According to Les Wright, editor of *The Bear Book* and *The Bear Book II*, the two most comprehensive collections of essays about bear history and cultures, "many bears have created their image as a polarization from 'twinks' - the gay mainstream image of the young, blond, smooth-skinned, gym-buffed, presumably

⁵ Martin P. Levine, *Gay Macho: The Life and Death of the Homosexual Clone* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 46-7.

shallow and air-headed Southern California ‘surfer’ or *GQ* model type.”⁶ The image of the twink not only had certain physical characteristics, but also spoke to stereotypes of personality: a value on physical fitness, a lack of attention to intellect and inter-personal relations embodied by his shallow and air-headed nature, and most importantly, a valuation of bois like himself, replicating some of the attitudes of clones, if not their exact look. For both Levine and Thomas and the *BEAR* team, the image of the twink represented an effeminization of gay men that they did not identify with, and they set out to create a magazine for masculine gay men who could be hairy, older, larger, and were not interested in twinks as sexual objects. Thus, *BEAR* was born. *BEAR* actively attempted to present media which intervened in gay male sexual iconography by allowing “real men” to be sexualized, and valorized as legitimate objects of desire, rather than emphasizing the “Pretty boy Twinkies-soft, tan, and creamy, with an indeterminate shelf-life” that had dominated gay erotica up until that time.⁷ *BEAR* presented a history of gay porn that had become increasingly demasculinized (regardless of the place of the clone, apparently) which was begging for the intervention of this magazine.

According to Luke Mauerman, a former editorial staff member of *BEAR* and an inside witness to the early formation and growth of the magazine, the first seven issues of the magazine were “black-and-white, and featured bearded, hairy, masculine men. Real men. But the magazine was sleazy. It had a real open, trashy, in-your-face sexuality”.⁸ The opening statement on the first page of Issue 1 states: “We hope to present an alternative to today’s gay erotic entertainment. Young, clean shaven [sic] body builders with precision trimmed pubic hair and Naired buttoles

⁶ Les K. Wright, “Introduction: Theoretical Bears,” in *The Bear Book: Readings in the History and Evolution of a Gay Male Subculture*, ed. Les K. Wright (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1997), 1-17.

⁷Mauerman, 207.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 208.

don't do it for a lot of guys. BEAR will give you hairy faces and furry bodies, slender cowboys and pot-bellied laborers, sensual imagery and down-and-out dirt...So kick back, drop your drawers, pull on your meat and...enjoy!"⁹ The magazine established itself from its inception as being different from the majority of gay porn at the time, as a niche magazine for bear(ish) men, and a publication which was designed to give its readers what they wanted. It should be noted, though, that the magazine largely constructed the need it sought to fill, assuming a reader like the editors, in a move similar to how Thornton described the club cultures she studied constructing their identities and codifying their traits through an early pushback to a "mainstream" of some kind. *BEAR* had some relation to other forms of gay masculinity including leathermen and the clone, but the magazine and its staff clearly set themselves as delivering something new and different to a wanting audience that they both constructed or theorized were there, and which have been historically proven to have existed.

⁹ Richard H. Bulger, ed., *BEAR* no. 1, n.p.



Figure 6: *BEAR* 1

The cover of the first issues, pictured in Figure 6, shows both the low-budget, Xerox machine printing and anti-twink image of the early magazine. The man on the front and back covers, identified only as Best Bear and photographed by David Grant Smith, has a full beard, hairy chest and pubis, and stands with his arms crossed, emphasizing his musculature, staring straight at the camera. He is in your face and masculine, standing in direct opposition to the effeminate, skinny and smooth twink so prevalent at the time, and in his direct gaze at the reader, he is also defiant of these stereotypes.¹⁰ From the very first cover of the very first issue, *BEAR*

¹⁰ Ibid.

sought to tell its perceived reader that it was there for him as a dirty mag that would pay attention to his needs despite the twink-focused vagaries of the larger gay porn industry.

After the first two issues were produced and circulated, and the popularity of *BEAR* began to quickly increase, Richard Bulger took over as managing editor and began the process of branding the magazine more firmly and refining its vision. According to Mauerman, Bulger “understood what had always been missing from gay publications. He put into *BEAR* all the natural masculinity and kink he knew men weren’t getting, and added free personal ads so they could find each other. It was a concept so simple and necessary - but no one had ever done it quite that way before”.¹¹ With the initial interest in the magazine, Bulger’s focus sharpened on taking viewer feedback and refining *BEAR*’s vision and content to best suit those needs, as well as expanding the personals section of the magazine to provide its readers with a forum to connect to one another, hook up, flirt, date and make any other form of contact that they wanted to put in an ad. According to Mauerman, “Early *BEAR* grew from a biker, scooter-trash, ZZ-Top culture...Obviously the word ‘bear’ conjures up a certain images of weight, dense hair, a man affable (until provoked), curious, and sexual. So things started to swirl together. Word got out; an identification began, and the tone of *BEAR* started to swing to a little more logger, trucker, leather-daddy-without-leather tone.”¹² I will further discuss the shift in the magazine towards working-class imagery later in this chapter, but I wish to emphasize here the importance that was placed in the magazine’s formative issues on reader feedback and providing a bearish audience with sexual images that they identified with and a chance to connect with one another in a concrete fashion. Bulger (taking over from Thomas) envisioned a lifestyle magazine that

¹¹ Mauerman 211.

¹² *Ibid.*, 212.

articulated a contra-twink masculinity and sexuality that would be clear to the imagined blue-collar men it was aimed at.¹³ The first seven issues of *BEAR* served to both establish this audience and begin catering to it.

To be able to offer some concrete analyses of the magazine and its importance to the bear cultural fraction, I turn to gay historian Martin Meeker's work on the importance of communication networks in forming gay cultures as a theoretical framework for this paper. In the book *Contacts Desired*, Meeker explores the importance of establishing communications between people to form a sense of shared identity and community. He explores how the creation of gay and lesbian media acted as catalysts for community formation, cultural production, and most importantly, connecting people to others with whom they felt a queer (sexual) affinity. Meeker writes that "Before an individual might 'come out' into the gay world or 'come out' to the larger public as a homosexual, in most instances he or she would first become 'connected to' the knowledge that same-sex attraction meant something, that it had social ramifications, and that it had a name".¹⁴ The purpose of Meeker's study is to examine how gays and lesbians in the 40's-70's were able to gain the knowledge that they needed to join growing lesbian and gay (sub)cultures, namely regarding how to interpret, understand and interact with feelings of same-sex attraction and desire.¹⁵ Increasingly, this information began to come from media sources rather than face-to-face interactions or meetings. Eventually "...increasing numbers of

¹³ Wright, "Concise History," 31.

¹⁴ Martin Meeker, *Contacts Desired: Gay and Lesbian Communications and Communities, 1940's-1970's* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 2.

¹⁵ Much like Thornton, Meeker is another scholar who uses the term "subculture" exclusively, which I am leaving behind in my own theoretical framework, and explains why the term appears in direct quotations from his book. Also like my engagement with Thornton's work, the difference in terminology between Meeker's work and this project is a difference of discipline, methodology, and the goals of his project, an historical one, and mine, a more theoretical one. I am not interested in engaging whether bears count as a subculture (or not), and so define them in this chapter as a cultural fraction or just a culture, for shorthand. As a further note of clarification, another valence of my use of "bear culture," beyond as shorthand for "bear cultural fraction," in this chapter in the sense of cultural output, production, produsage, and commodities.

individuals in ever more far-flung and formerly isolated places read those [gay and lesbian] stories, heard those words, saw those images, and concluded that they too were homosexual, thus providing the context for a multitude of individuals to begin imagining themselves as being homosexual and as identifying with that subculture in many cases before the physical experience of visiting a gay bar or having a homosexual encounter.”¹⁶ The increasing ability of people in remote areas and of differing socio-economic positions to gain access to lesbian and gay media (especially print media) caused a shift in how queer people came into consciousness of non-mainstream identities, communities, and worldviews that they could identify with.

This chapter, however, will also borrow from select theories of communication and value-making taken from digital media studies, both to account for the digital nature of the BML and to continue this dissertation’s interdisciplinary aims: in this chapter, the insistence that methods and lessons from both queer and media historiography can and should inform one another in scholarly work on queer communities in a moment in history more driven by mediation, taste making, and identity formation than any before. Thus, though this chapter grounds its theoretical work in extensive historical and archival research, it remains united with my overall project of proposing new ways to explore how media consumption is used by queer and trans people to make concrete changes in their lives and world.

I thus borrow the key term *produser*, and to a lesser extent, its predecessor *prosumer*, from digital media theory to explore how media consumption can tell alternative histories, especially for queer people. S. Elizabeth Bird explores *produsage* in relation to digital fandoms in “Are We All Producers Now?” At first blush, “*prosumer*,” the combination of “*producer*” and “*consumer*,” seems to be the most apt term to use to describe the interaction early bears had with

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

their smut and other bears on the Internet. Prosumer, a term Bird borrows from Toeffler, is used to “describe his projected shift from a passive consumer society to one in which many more people will prefer to provide home-grown services to themselves and others, selectively producing and consuming depending on their interests and expertise.”¹⁷ As (internet) media became more prevalent and interacted with fan (and porn) cultures, passive consumers started to produce things related to and/or inspired by their media consumption for themselves or others. These productions would not generally include other, new media products. In the case of bears, I would suggest that much of their early prosumage of *BEAR* took the form of cum and sweat; not specifically mediated, and entirely ephemeral, and yet also a material production in the most embodied sense. They also produced personal ads for BEAR that other bears might choose to consume, and some produced photos that were featured in future magazines or personals sections, also for the consumption of other *BEAR* prosumers. In contemporary bear cultures, prosuming bears might be inspired to create home-video porno to upload onto xtube or redtube for other bear prosumers like them.

One could argue that the term produser, the combination of “producer” and “user,” can’t be applied to bear porn, unless, perhaps, it is online, even if someone uses porn for sexual pleasure, since the moment of use is not materially interactive between the user, the media being used, or between multiple users. Bird constructs a history of the shift from being prosumers to produsers, a term borrowed from Axel Bruns (and for Bird, via Henry Jenkins) to describe the ways that online fans move from internet user to the producers of new media about things they love.¹⁸ The prosumer to produser historical narrative maps onto the (utopic) historical narratives

¹⁷ S. Elizabeth Bird, “Are We All Producers Now?” *Cultural Studies* 25, nos. 4-5 (2011): 506.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 502.

of the internet and social media's increased emphasis on creating, reusing, and remixing content for others to see whether you know them or not, especially when thinking about fan activity in the era of Web 2.0.¹⁹ Bird critiques Jenkins' limiting of the term because many fans don't produce anything after consuming media. Furthermore, much of what they do produce isn't online content, it is "trivial" or "inconsequential" banter, crafts, non-uploaded video, or other things Jenkins' definition of the produsage occludes. Thus Bird destabilizes the term, including these "unimportant" (or, perhaps, "useless") examples of produsage and suggests that they have other equally important uses for the producers themselves.²⁰

Bird's tracing of the term producer through Jenkins addresses concerns in media studies with a focus on content creation from the same standpoint, or in conjunction with, media industries, but the term was originally used by media theorist Axel Bruns in *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and Beyond: From Production to Produsage*.²¹ For Bruns, at its core, produsage expands traditional content production through collaborative, ongoing building, rebuilding, and extensions of existing content, with the overall goal of further improvement, specifically within networked media environments and facilitated by the affordance of digital communication. Produsage has four key components: open participation and communal evaluation; a fluid heterarchy or ad hoc meritocracy; a continuing process changing (always) unfinished artefacts; and common property being produced by the community, which provides individual rewards to contributors in the form of receiving credit for their contributions.²² These conditions all apply to

¹⁹ Ibid., 503.

²⁰ Ibid., 505.

²¹ Axel Bruns, *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and Beyond: From Production to Produsage* (New York: Peter Lang, Inc., 2008).

²² Ibid.

the BML. It was an open listserv that anyone could join and remain part of as long as they followed the community guidelines (open participation) and members of the list regularly commented on the ir/relevance of content (communal evaluation). In having volunteer moderators who exercised their power sparsely, and who were selected based on a formal application system by outgoing moderators, the list kept itself organized (ad hoc meritocracy) but only so far as was useful to the group and approved by it (fluid heterarchy). As a listserv, artefacts were never complete: conversations continued for days, weeks, or months, and even when the moderators ended a thread, its topic could always be opened up later when new, interesting insights were provided, new BML members brought it up, or community members felt it was worth revisiting. Finally, the BML was a public listserv that did not have an owner (common property), but users could accrue social capital in the group as a regular poster, with other members mentioning other users they liked to respond to or read, and often with long-time members being those most encouraged to become moderators when a spot opened up (individual rewards).

Produser becomes a much more helpful term for studying early bear media as my exploration of the BML demonstrates both that many BML users were regular and long-term *BEAR* readers, but also that this online community had a general knowledge of *BEAR*, debates about bear identity and community that I trace in my visual analysis of *BEAR*, and even a general knowledge of early bear media personalities, whether self-identified or named as a bear by BML members, queer or not. For example, in March of 2000, a fairly long string of posts happened in the BML across many days arguing whether bear journalist and author Ron Suresha's request to find a published interview with Jack Radcliffe (a photographer and bear porn model featured heavily in early *BEAR* and in histories and narratives of bear media and cultural formation) was

something worth posting to the list in the first place. Many posters held Radcliffe up as an icon and hero of the bear community, while others argued that his iconic status in the community is perhaps unfairly ascribed to him because of being a porn actor. This is one of many direct connections between BML and bear porn cultures, and one of several I found to (early) *BEAR* even in a cross-section of the list 12 years after the magazine was first published.

Considering the productive definitional instability Bird is contributing to discussion of new media and produsage, I argue that bears have been producing in response to bear media from the very beginning of this gay culture's formation. As with most attempts to draw out parallels between "old" and "new" media forms, this mapping isn't perfect: the fourth condition of Bruns' produsage in particular cannot apply to a magazine owned by an individual company making profits off it. The second condition, fluid heterarchy, is also difficult to fit completely into a more traditional publishing entity, but early *BEAR* sought out the community it wished to serve, and saw itself, philosophically, as serving that community. Decision making authority for the publication was central, but my archive research showed that this magazine did more to let its readership define it, at least in its first few years, than most others, and in a way that stretched beyond traditional gay porn publishing hierarchies and frameworks. My argument, then, is more that, through the queer and community-based impulse of the early magazine's principles and production practices, bears were laying the foundation for produsage by turning a magazine into an analog communication network which would directly precede and inform the growing digital communication network of the BML and other Internet media forums and bear spaces to come. Thomas and Bulger encouraged as much open participation and communal evaluation as they could through soliciting personals ads, profiling bear clubs and events across the US, welcoming readers to visit the office and pose nude, and publishing letters to the editors which contributed

to conversations about what being a bear meant (which serves the function of communal evaluation). They also filmed a real bear sex party for *BEAR Fuck Party* and cast magazine readers and models in the solo jerkoff scenes of *Live Bears from COA*. Finally, the continuing process of working on unfinished artefacts applies surprisingly well to thinking through the publication's work defining bear-ness and bear community: it treated the identity of this community, its values, and its expression as an ongoing conversation with its readers, whether through soliciting self-identifying bear models or the ongoing personals section, with repeat and new messages every issue. Though produsage in its purest form requires networked (digital) communication, looking at the ways in which queer media consumption fed into production, both of more media (old and new) as well as queer community and identity demonstrates the ways that minoritized subjects have always used media consumption to create new cultural affordances, and cultural capital, for themselves. While the term produsage linguistically foregrounds production rather than consumption, the two are inseparable. From the perspective of my re-theorizations of Marx and Bourdieu, the inclusion of the term "user" in this portmanteau actually captures how produsage, whether jerking off, posting a personals ad in a magazine, or contributing to debates and discussion in a listserv, actually helps to create a term which captures the dialectic of media production and consumption, especially when that media is so blatantly involved in operations of community formation and identity definition. Bear porn and cultural input/output suggest a different form of usage and interactivity in both analog and digital communication networks that elucidate an alternative history of queer community and media produsage. In tracing the history of a bear cultural fraction, from its "old" media progenitors to the vibrant life of the BML, this chapter will both expand produsage to be a useful term for thinking through how media shape identities and are shaped by identity-based

communities in turn and recognize the queer impulses of pro-usage-based theories and histories rooted in creating identity, community, and representation for oneself and one's own pleasure out of mainstream culture.

From this point I will move forward to examine how *BEAR* magazine became a publication that carried out a similar role for the development of bear identity and community within larger queer communities and cultural fractions. It provided representations that ran against the norms of other gay erotic media and an avenue for identifying and making contact with other men who shared similar tastes, preferences and identities. Most importantly, I will situate *BEAR* as being part of a communication *network*. For Meeker, “the concept of communication networks contains within it not only the physical machinations of people but also their drives, ideas, passions, ambitions, and mistakes; the sexual communication network has agency only because it is made up of the people who participate in it.”²³ Key to a communication network is that it takes into account how it participates in the community formation that occurs through media consumption. In the case of *BEAR*, its readers contributed to the magazine's content through writing in, visiting, and making suggestions which the editors then acted on, taking part in discourses which served to help define bears as an identity and community of masculine gay men with a new and unique definition of their sense of gay masculinity, and by using the personals section of the magazine as a platform for meeting one another and initiating real face-to-face contact with bears they may not have met otherwise. Through analyzing *BEAR* and the BML as communication networks, I will demonstrate how these venues for bear-centred and -driven taste making played a significant role in defining a gay cultural fraction that is still active today.

²³ Meeker, 15.

Contestations Of Bear Identity

One of the most important impacts that the formative issues of *BEAR* had was to be a venue for early contestations of what constituted bear identity. As Meeker asserts, “The contexts in which individuals identify as homosexual change according to the transformation of networks carrying information about that identity.”²⁴ I contend that since *BEAR* is generally recognized as being the first venue where the definition of bear that would be the basis of a community forming was discussed and decided, it represents one of the most important contexts of how individuals who would come to identify as bears first encountered the term, and future bear communication networks would take many cues on group identity from this publication, a claim supported by my work with BML at the turn of the 21st century. *BEAR*, even in its contemporary print form (with a more pronounced online presence supplementing it), is still one of the most important mass-market, wide-spread carriers of information about beariness, meaning that just as “changes in [sexual] communication networks influence the very processes by which individuals encounter ideas about identity and then articulate their own,”²⁵ so *BEAR*, and the bear-themed media (published and online) that it influenced, has and continues to greatly influence the processes by which gay men encounter ideas about bearhood, and provide a framework for whether they will identify themselves as a bear or not. As such my first goal in this section will be to examine what conflicts about the definition of bear identity and community were espoused in the first seven issues of *BEAR* and how they have carried on in the BML. My second aim in this section is to also examine what was not included, or only marginally included, in the

²⁴ Ibid., 10.

²⁵ Ibid., 11.

definition of bearhood that came out of the formative years of *BEAR*, and how those occlusions largely continued in bear media, suggesting their sedimentation in bear culture generally. In particular, I will draw another parallel to Meeker's work on early gay communication networks, where "the ground upon which homosexual communication networks was built already had an established history of patterns of racism, sexism, and economic inequality that would, in turn, play a role in structuring new networks."²⁶ What has been excluded or discriminated against in gay communication networks also carries forward into bear communication networks, dovetailing with this dissertation's previously laid out multi-dimensional map of power flows, since they grew out of and in reaction to already established gay communication networks.

The bear cultural fraction has important roots in leather and gay clone culture of the 1960s to 1980s that are important to discuss briefly to contextualize the contestations over bear identity that are represented in *BEAR*, while also demonstrating the ways in which consuming other cultures, their iconographies, symbols, and beliefs is an important part of creating new identities and cultures: in many ways, queer media history is a long string of examples of produsage writ large, not just of specific media artefacts, but of ideas, beliefs, aesthetics, politics, and conceptions of the self as valuable, useful, and valorized in a world that makes queers feel useless or devalued on a regular basis, and often violently so.

Leather culture, much older than the clone, began to coalesce in the 1940s. According to anthropologist Gayle Rubin in her essay "The Miracle Mile: South of Market and Gay Male Leather 1962-1997," "If gay male leather can be said to have a core meaning, it would have to be gay masculinity. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, homosexuals were presumed to be effeminate - fairies, pansies and queens. Gay men who were masculine in their personal style, and especially

²⁶ Ibid.

those who wanted other masculine men as partners, began to carve out alternative gay social spaces.²⁷ Much of this gay masculinity was based, early on, in motorcycle culture. This biker aesthetic and set of behaviours is still a subset of leather culture, however the wider culture also includes valuations of leather related to kinky sex and sado/masochistic practices that are divergent from the biker masculinity.²⁸ The first seven issues of *BEAR* have elements of both parts of these subsets of leather culture in different photo sets, including the cover of issue 3 including a man in kinky leather wear.

In these early motorcycle cultures, “leather acquired many meanings. Leather came to mean more than gay masculinity. It also connoted brotherhood and group solidarity, on the one hand, and a kind of rebellious individualism on the other.”²⁹ This is a key legacy that carries forward into bear culture: a prevalent rejection of effeminacy often included the recycling of accusing effeminate gay men as having an obsession with narcissistic self-indulgence and a self-centered attitude. Bears developed a strong sense of solidarity and community based out of feeling ostracized by other aspects of gay male community, and the formulation of gay masculinity in leather and biker communities. According to Thornton, this is not uncommon when studying what she calls subcultures, and I am expanding to call cultural fractions: just as commodities and their values or meaning change over time and as culture(s) change, grow, form, and dissolve, so too did bears begin coalescing their cultural fraction around both what they weren’t and (perhaps less consciously or on the surface) what commodities, symbols, styles, and

²⁷ Gayle Rubin, “The Miracle Mile: South of Market and Gay Male Leather 1962-1997,” in *Reclaiming San Francisco: History, Politics, Culture: A City Lights Anthology*, eds. James Brook, Chris Carlsson, and Nancy J. Peters (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1998), 254.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 254-5.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 254.

traits could carry forward from preceding or adjacent cultural fractions into their own. This was, in fact, one of the key reasons that *BEAR* was started: to connect bears with one another as well as provide more solitary jack-off material. *BEAR* evinced some of the rebellious nature of leather culture, in that the magazine's creative team saw themselves as providing a new take on gay masculinity and desire that rejected what they constructed as being the mainstream homogenizing of gay cultures.

These larger themes of bears rejecting mass gay culture carry on loud and clear in the BML twelve years later, and very often framing questions of bear identity in very similar ways as *BEAR*. Even within the 11-month span I study in-depth in this chapter, BML regularly had posters ask questions akin to "but what IS a bear?" or bringing up something they heard was a bear trait, and asking the list to weigh in on whether it should count or not. Some of these traits brought up seem to come out of left field to a queer historian, but were clearly part of some bears' experience of the identity. One South African bear posted that, based largely on experiencing bear identity via the BML, he was surprised that going on roller coasters seemed to be central to gay identity. Upon further reading, I believe that this question may have come from how often one active and frequent poster to the BML at this time advertised events visiting Six Flags parks as bear groups, but the responses to this poster took his question seriously. Some responders asserted that this particular bear trait might not be a universal one, while others weighed in about how bears like to have fun together as part of community building, regardless of the specific activity.

Following the rebellious nature of leather cultures, many, *many* posts on the BML that could fall under a category debating what it means to be a bear embraced various rebellious impetuses behind bear identity. Refusing to buy into the beauty standards of mainstream, twink,

and/or club-focused gay culture was a very common theme, often coalescing around beards, body hair, leather, and, bear communities accepting and sexually valuing men of all shapes, sizes, and ages, just to name a few common themes. (There were also several discussions of how important motorcycles and motorcycle culture was to a not insignificant subset of posters, though the connections between bear cultural fractions and biker fractions seems to be getting looser over time in a way that connections to leather and clones aren't.) Interestingly, in the vein of rebellious acceptance being central to bear identity, a trait shared with leather culture especially, given its insistence on questioning (sexual) taboos to take away their power, BML contained significant discussions about how the bear community had changed since it started in the late 80s, with flashpoints including the predominance of bear pageants (another legacy of leather culture), the increasing predominance of muscle bears in porn and as winners of contests large and small in bear spaces, and the so-called coagulation of a nebulous group of bears known as "A-List Bears." The "a-listers" were not a group one self-identified with, more than seemingly had read onto you. Like many cultural constructs, there doesn't seem to be one definition of what an A-list bear is or is not, but they definitely skew younger, more muscly, and more narcissistic than many of the older bears on the list thought they should as public representatives of bear identity and community. Beyond these phenotypical concerns, most of the arguments made against there being an a-list within bear community was how it goes against the accepting ethos that bear community was based on in the minds of many of the BML posters: how could bears, who formed as a group to escape being seen as b-list gays in a world dominated by twinks, turn around and begin to label some bears as less-than? This process is, of course, one that is not uncommon, as Thornton, Clarke, and even Tinkcom (obliquely) point out. As cultural fractions move through time under capitalism, they can't not change, grow, and redefine their values, just

as the club cultures Thornton studies didn't last forever, how rebellious lesbian symbols lost their radical heft as they were incorporated into mainstream fashion, or how the directors Tinkcom profiles participated in the mainstreaming of queer cultural codes as part of growing their careers.³⁰ Here we see an interestingly layered example of produsage: bears fighting to use their digital produsage to help keep their community true to what they saw as its core ideals, while also (perhaps even unknowingly) continuing to remix and reuse traits from other, related gay male communities as part of the process of growth that a cultural fraction inevitably must go through, as relevance, power, and use/lessness are always being renegotiated and reframed under contemporary cultural capitalism.

Another predecessor of bear culture evident in the content and images in *BEAR* is the gay clone of the 1970s and 1980s. According to Levine, "it was through gender - the specific conformity to specific normative codes about the enactment of masculinity - that some gay men in the major urban environments sought to resolve the crisis of identity brought about by both their similarities to heterosexuals and the stigma attached to their sexual orientation."³¹ Levine positions gay clones as being caught between attachments to normative masculinities that gay men are raised with (like other boys), and the stigma associated with homosexuality both before and after the Stonewall riots. As being gay became more acceptable through the efforts and publicity of the gay liberation movement, clones sought to take on a new form of gay masculinity that could be exercised fairly openly in public while not relying on stereotypes of effeminate gay men. Levine argues that clones believed that effeminate gay men had internalized a self-hatred born out of homosexual stigma, and this led to an enactment of aspects of

³⁰ Thornton; Clarke; Tinkcom.

³¹ Levine, 6.

stereotypical femininity. Clones, on the other hand, believed that “Gay men were simply men who loved men. They were not deviant, were not failed men. They were real men - and in their presentational styles they set about demonstrating their newfound and hard-fought conformity to traditional norms of masculinity.”³² The increased momentum of gay liberation and the homophile movement’s emphasis on gay masculinity as a tool for appearing “normal,” combined with the watershed moment of the Stonewall riots, provided these men with the belief that they could express a gay masculinity which would become one of the predominate presentations of gay culture for the next two decades.

With regards to visual presentation and appearance, “The clone was a product of the confluence of several forces at once: the postwar ‘baby boom’...and its attendant social movements, from Civil Rights and antiwar movements, to feminism and gay liberation. He was most often white...he was a child of relative suburban affluence. But he was also a product of discrimination, both systemic and interpersonal.”³³ This focus on manhood centered among more affluent, primarily white, men who sought to reject stigmas associated with being gay and the effeminate stereotypes that came with that is one of the major legacies that clone culture contributes to bears. In particular, the celebratory nature of bear community that contributed greatly to the start of *BEAR* magazine seems to flow directly out of belief that effeminacy is often a product of self-hatred, and that gay men should redefine themselves as masculine to escape this.

Another important aspect of clone culture was how its definition of gay masculinity drew from the twin rhetorics of butch and hot. According to Levine these were “two rhetorics of

³² Ibid., 57.

³³ Ibid., 10-11.

exaggerated manliness: (1) ‘butch’ rhetoric, which fostered a masculine look through the verbal and visual symbols of macho manhood; and, (2) ‘hot’ rhetoric, which projected manly sexuality through the verbal and visual signs of macho eroticism.”³⁴ Butch was the clone’s aesthetics, his “look.” Accordingly, “Clones used such stereotypically macho sign-vehicles as musculature, facial hair, short haircuts, and rugged, functional clothing to express butchness. Clones developed ‘gym bodies,’ which denoted the physique associated with weightlifters. A gym body included tight buttocks, washboard stomachs, and ‘pumped-up’ biceps and pectorals. Clones favoured this physique because they felt it was the most macho male build.”³⁵ In many ways, the rejection of an effeminate gay aesthetic led clones to shape their bodies to the extreme opposite, with large muscles and overtly masculine beards, haircuts and clothes. Connected to this macho body, “the clone found his masculine identity in the working class. Like most middle-class men before him, the gay male middle class found the upper class feminized and effeminate; if he was going to prove his masculinity, he needed to embrace the rougher, coarser masculinity of the common laborer.”³⁶ Like much of the bear cultural fraction as it developed, the rejection of effeminate gay culture was mixed up in class politics and stereotyping, where the upper classes were seen as being more swish and less manly, whereas the men who laboured with their hands espoused a rough masculinity that could be desired and emulated by other gay men.

This is a trend in the formation of bear masculinity as well: the rough manhood of the working class would quickly become associated with the rough masculinity of the bear who rejected the bar-hopping twink. For muscle bears, this was also combined with a toned, muscle-focused physique similar to clone body types as well, though this legacy was contested by the

³⁴ Ibid., 58.

³⁵ Ibid., 59-60.

³⁶ Ibid., 60.

girth-n-mirth bear, who saw being larger as natural and beautiful. This division is hardly absolute within bear communities, just as cultural fractions, as a loose and porous social entanglement, inevitably include people who don't agree on everything they see as essential to occupying that fraction, but it does demonstrate how the adoption of parts of clone culture into the growing bear culture of the late 1980's was contingent at best. *BEAR* and its attendant VHS porn releases waded directly into this issue of masculinity and class: in *Live Bears*, many of the men featured in the jackoff scenes either wear the garb of various skilled trades, or present in otherwise rustic and manly ways. In *Bear Fuck Party* the viewer is treated to handheld camera footage of a bear sex party featuring men of all sizes, shapes, ages, and hairiness engaging in all manner of sex with one another freely, and with no visual representation of femininity or sexual restriction. This VHS also demonstrates, however, that while bears embraced the clone's desire for empowerment through sexuality and unashamed gay masculinities, it also shows how the clone's focus on a very particular muscular body, landscaped beyond the beard, was rejected by many early bears as the only definition of attractiveness, but would remain a sticking point for bear media, representation, and identification.

Thus, I argue, the formation of bear visual culture, and the broader identities and communities of bears, grows out of a process of produsage, specifically creative consumption leading to new, different, unexpected productions of the self, following Bird, and a continued desire to work on the objects under produsage, following Bruns. More importantly for this dissertation, is the context of this produsage of identity happening during the height of the AIDS crisis, when gay sex, in general, was a scary subject, and managing one's gay sexuality became, in many ways, an exercise in affective labour to counter the horrors and traumas heaped on queer people in a seemingly unending deluge during the 1980s. The AIDS crisis, itself exacerbated by

the horrors of capitalism: one need look no further than the government's unwillingness to move on AIDS, or the exorbitant prices required to get early, often experimental, and not always effective, drugs to treat the disease. This was a moment when large gay men found themselves not only living through this widespread epidemic, but also continued to feel rejected by what was perceived as "mass gay culture," represented in bear media (be it published media or bears' postings to the BML) as dominated by twinks, club kids, effeminacy that rejects more conventional forms of masculinity, a hatred of large and/or furry bodies, and a deeply negative attitude "conventional" gays took towards sex with others, represented especially as a broad criticality of others rather than a celebration of many different forms of sexuality and bodily comportment. Bears self-consciously drew from histories of gay culture which appealed to them in the admittedly utopic project of creating a sex-positive, body-positive, and generally more upbeat and supportive cultural fraction, recreating, reshaping, remaking, and even rejecting that which had been provided to them by both mass culture and "gay" culture. Though this dissertation may not be primarily rooted in digital media studies, it is a field of thought that, primarily through more contemporary scholarship studying digital media, theories of how consumption happens in diffuse, deeply personal ways yet is also able to contribute materially and significantly to social, communal, and ideological shifts in cultures both mass and niche.

Like any cultural fraction that has members spread out over large geographical areas and age, class, and racial backgrounds, it is not possible to pin down an exact definition of what a bear is or is not (even, I would add, in digital spaces that cross geographical boundaries, such as the BML). Even in the tendency to define bear heavily as what it is not, the term remains a contingent one. It is further contested within the conflict over whether an aesthetic, an attitude, or a mixing of both are the most important factor in defining what bear means. For the purposes of

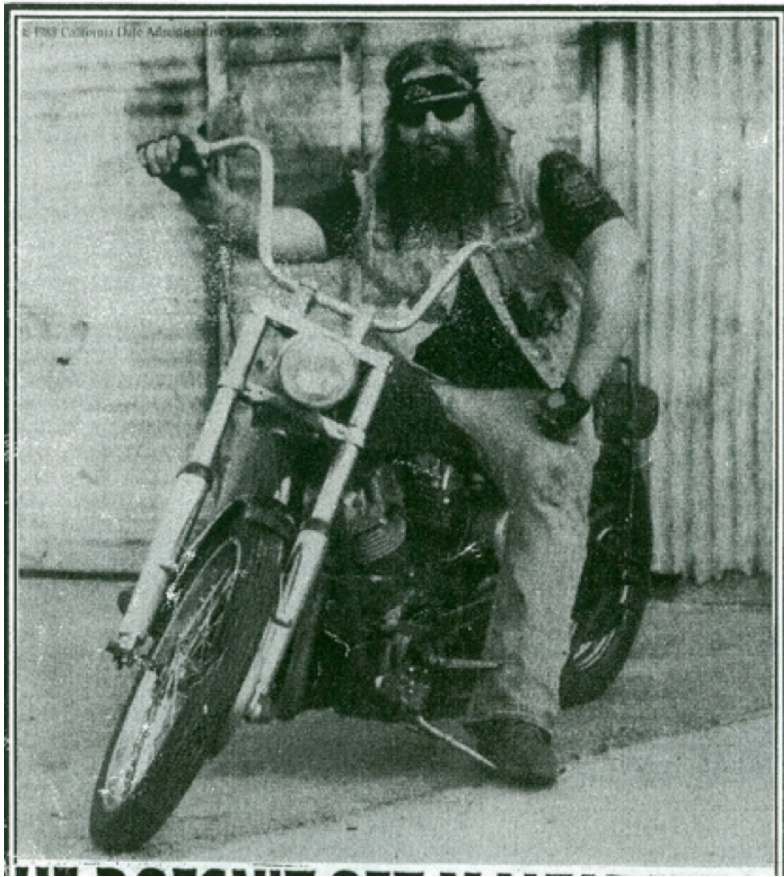


Figure 7: Biker Bear

this section I will be focusing primarily on the visual contestations of bear identity in *BEAR* magazine and its VHS porn releases, though aspects of different attitudes can also be read into the images in the magazine, and excavated from the personal ads that were submitted to the magazine. Though the magazine did not generally engage directly in these debates in any textual way, the first seven issues of *BEAR* still show a slow solidification of a bear image and aesthetic that held true in the later issues that I examined while researching for this paper, including in the 10 year anniversary edition of *BEAR*.

Figure 7 shows a picture of a man in issue 7 of bear with a full beard, sunglasses, a bandana and motorcycle leathers on a Harley Davidson motorcycle, who represents some of the legacy of leather motorcycle culture in early bear identity formation. This image reflects the rejection of the skinny-boy/twink image through an embrace of more traditional masculinities

including larger bodies and easily read macho symbols like the motorcycle. Motorcycles hardly leave bear communities either, even as “biker” is a less common gay/sexual identity than it used to be, both in bear and leather circles. On the BML there was a long, and otherwise largely unremarkable, thread of conversation by and about bears on bikes which was primarily about what brands and kinds of bikes bears loved and why, what they did to maintain their rides, and other related concerns. In Figure 8, from issue 6, a spread of photos of model Christopher presents a larger, hairy body, as well as close ups of Christopher’s penis and anus, one of *many* demonstration’s of the magazine’s political and intentionally in-your-face sexuality which was not just about sexual desire or functions, but also asserting bear identity proudly, no longer hiding the bodies bears felt had been ostracized. Added to these displays of ursine sexuality are two inset photos that include Christopher’s face. In the first he has a defiant stare, while in the second he smiles affably in an open plaid flannel shirt and open jeans revealing generic white briefs (a visual association with working class masculinity and aesthetic codes). Christopher shows the reader both the rebellious sexuality of the clone, as well as a hint of the affable nature of bear community that is in many ways a rejection of the clone. Though the magazine will end up moving to a visual definition of bears that is more muscled than this man as it became more mass market, glossy, and successful, following the muscle/glamour bear aesthetic, early *BEAR* still represents the contestations over bear identity and image that were prominent in the late 1980’s. In this way *BEAR* demonstrates Meeker’s theory that communication networks portray identity construction narratives visually for still-forming cultural fractions, including images, aesthetics and ideals that might be foreclosed later, but were an important part of the fraction forming. This demonstrates another key reason to move beyond the term sub/culture in my theoretical framework: fractions are more porous than cultures, allowing for them to contain

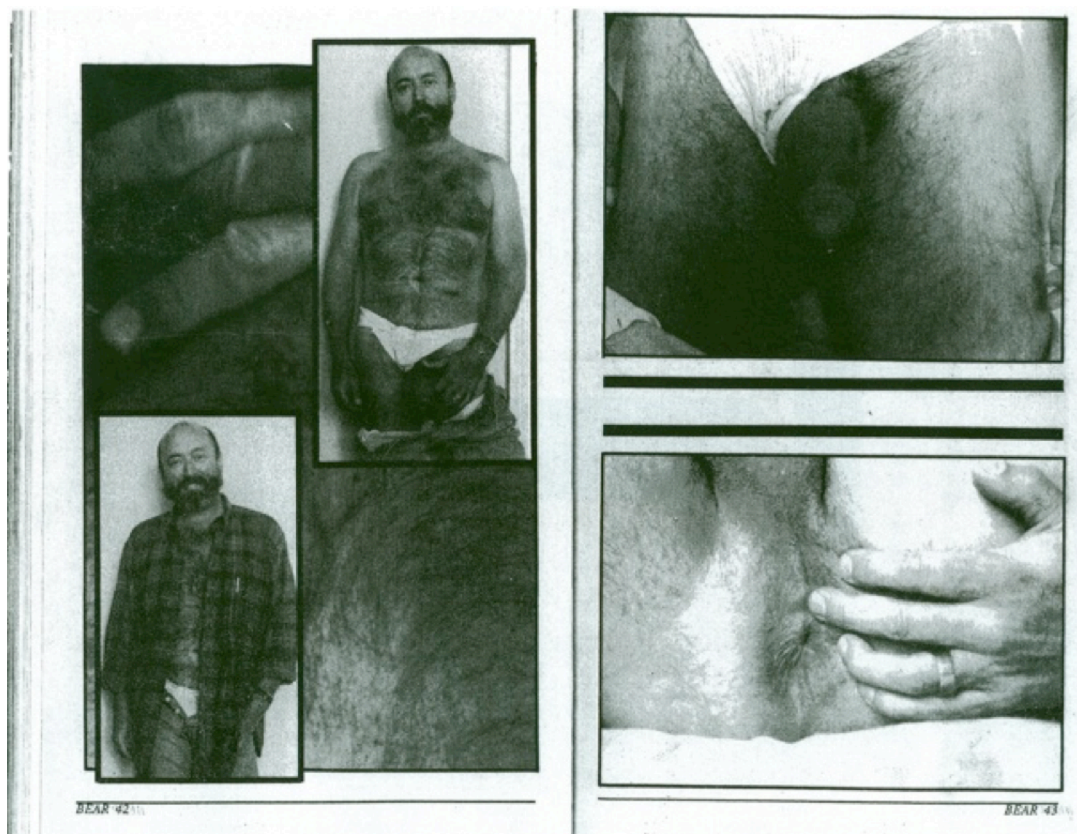


Figure 8: Christopher

shifting and changing referents over time while remaining apprehensible. These pictures could then become ideals that members of a burgeoning cultural fraction could identify with and use as a gateway into feeling a sense of belonging to a desired community. The BML proves Meeker's assertion as well: though various creators and avenues of bear porn were mentioned in the cross-section of the BML I explore in this chapter (including *BEAR*, other magazines that followed it like *American Bear*, and internet porn, both homemade and professional, among others), *many* users identified seeing images of bears in sexualized situations as being central to their own coming-to-terms with being a bear and/or feeling welcomed in the bear community in ways they did not find in other gay and queer communities and discourses.

This key identification, of claiming beariness with sexualized media representations, even then led to further produsage, pornographic and not, on the BML as part of the ongoing, even

recursive, process of debating what a bear *is* on the list. For example, some men shared pornographic stories on the list, or told stories about encounters with hot bears “in the wild” (i.e. in the real world), while others engaged enthusiastically in discussions of what sexual practices are essential to their own sexuality, as gay, bear, or both. (One particularly enduring and endearing thread involved men talking about how bears love and promote kissing and other forms of sexual and sensual intimacy that “mainstream” gay porn and culture deemphasize.) Yet others branched out from talking about pornography to bear representation in the media, with a generally positive tone struck surrounding seeing more and more bearish men in mass media, and even claiming straight stars as bear icons. (My personal favourite in this last vein being a multi-post thread lauding the sexual attractiveness of the original OxiClean man, Billy Mays, who showed off his sexy beard and furry arms on infomercials all over North America. One poster even directed fellow readers to a gif of an extreme close-up of Mays’ hand and naked arm as he wiped down a counter using OxiClean as a web link to follow for some woofy titillation.) Other prominent examples of gay bears becoming famous included original *Survivor* winner Richard Hatch, a hairy and somewhat larger out gay man making headlines during the then-new show’s initial run, and fat gay comedian Bruce Vilanch “coming out” as a bear on the *Roseanne* show in 2000, then addressing his realization that he is seen as a bear in the gay world in various interviews for entertainment publications that posters cited. Through the produsage of the BML, we see the lasting nature of several key aspects of bears’ historical development and how issues of definition brought to bear during the bear fraction’s nascent years remain central to bear media. The identity category of bear itself is demonstrated here not just to be an object of produsage in both analog and digital media communication networks, but also, that same object was able to remain the center of media produsage efforts across media platforms and genres: the

queering of what we now name prodisage in digital media studies began before prodisage was fully possible, and continued into bear-run spaces even as the magazine veered away from its user-focused ethos as it became a full-size, glossy magazine more focused on money making (and thus, muscle bears, who appeal to a larger audience outside of strictly bear-themed porn).

Another aspect of the early formation of bear culture reflected in *BEAR*, which is a parallel to other gay and lesbian communication networks, is the invocation of a coming out narrative. I contend, however, that this is likely a less stressful coming out than coming out as gay or lesbian, which makes it a less prominent part of *BEAR* than some of the networks that Meeker examines, and is why I only found reference to it in the personals sections of the magazine. Since most bears had already come out as gay before entering the bear cultural fraction via a personals ad in *BEAR*, at least during this early definitional phase of the bear cultural fraction, the comings-out espoused in the first seven issues of the magazine function more as a secondary coming-out that is cumulative with the first, primary one. Since a coming out narrative relies on an assumption of assuming a more “authentic” identity, it is logical that one coming out could follow another, as a person discovers more about himself and who he is, allowing for the bear coming out to follow the gay coming out.³⁷ I would also advance the potentiality that a secondary coming out narrative appended to joining a queer or trans cultural fraction makes sense, as the path to self-identification is often begun from learning about, and potentially coming out into (even if only to oneself, privately) the largest and most general

³⁷ It is, of course, possible that some men reading *BEAR* experienced coming out as gay and bear simultaneously or in reverse order, however one of the contingencies of a model of communication networks is that we can only examine what is portrayed as identity in the media being examined. Since *BEAR* magazine’s images and stories are prefaced on already being part of a larger gay identity, these media examples follow this more teleological narrative when analyzed. It is also important to point out that as bear communities and identities solidified, it is possible that the assumption of a gay coming out preceding a bear coming out would become more difficult to substantiate, since men could come to their sexuality through discovering this more established community before other forms of gay culture and/or use bear community as a safer first place in which to come out before coming out in other, more public areas of their lives.

connective thread holding queer and/or trans cultural fractions together: acknowledging that one is queer or trans. From there, it becomes easier and more likely to join increasingly community focused fractions (paralleling the scope of my chapter order moving from deeply individual consumption outward towards community-focused circuits of queer value), but that each of these larger fractions and/or communication networks are premised around an increasingly narrow conception of an identity, group, community, or culture.

Accordingly, for Wright, “The Ur-bear-coming-out narrative would follow a rocky path, overcoming numerous obstacles: societal rejection for being gay and coming to some terms of self-acceptance, coming out into the gay community and being rejected for not fitting the gay-dominant image (too heavy, too hairy, too old, too odd), coming out into the AIDS epidemic where everyone is afraid of sex and withdrawn in a state of fear or paranoia.”³⁸ As such, coming out as bear was not an easy process at the time of *BEAR*’s first publishing and early media commodity creation. Wright locates it within other coming out narratives, including coming out as gay, and coming out as a sexual being who values sexual prowess and capability (one of the legacies of clone culture) in the sex-negative atmosphere of the AIDS crisis, all increasingly specific comings out even as people discovered increasingly smaller communities and cultural fractions to identify with, aspire to join, or enjoy being part of. Following Meeker’s thinking, *BEAR* thus provides a venue to start making coming out as bear possible, even if only in the privacy on one’s own home or psyche, while also offering at least the possibility of meeting other like-minded bears through the potential of posting and receiving a response to a personals ad. Though there is no guarantee of contact being made through or because of a communication network such as *BEAR*, even the potential of making contact demonstrates that a community is

³⁸ Wright, “Introduction,” 15.

there waiting to come out into, which Meeker suggests is an important way of providing something to identify with for members of a cultural fraction.

One example of a coming out narrative in *BEAR* comes from the personals section of issue three. It reads:

Grizzly in training. Seeks non-smoking, intelligent, warm, caring bear into classics, music, theatre, cuddling, reading and all sorts of safe kink. 27. 5'10". 210, blue eyes, brown hair, beard, hairy body, pierced tits.³⁹

Though brief in length and written in the shorthand that developed in the personals sections of the magazine (and many other publications, gay and otherwise, designed to let people meet one another) which describes interests, height, weight, and activities of choice, even posting a personals ad in *BEAR* resides within a coming out narrative. The act of choosing to mail in an ad and pay for its printing demonstrates a willingness on the part of the sender identify himself with the growing bear cultural fraction, and seek out others who are like him. The heading of “Grizzly in training” is of particular interest in this example as it demonstrates that *BEAR* could be a venue for people who still feel relatively new to this identity and fraction to meet others who could help them learn, and be a companion along the road to self-identification and self-discovery. I also locate an act of produsage in this ad: through naming himself as a trainee, but having learned enough of the “code” of the bear community to write an ad using the proper shorthand, we see evidence of this user creating content which seeks out further produsage (hooking up, meeting a partner, sex, etc.) but still acknowledging their status and identity in the community as malleable, learning, open to being shaped. As Wright contends, “The rise of self-identifying bears as a social phenomenon has followed striking parallels with the gay liberation movement...[drawing upon] the gay liberationist tactic of ‘coming out’ as a bear. This would

³⁹ Richard H. Bulger, ed., *BEAR* 3, 28.

require an internal self-identification, most likely followed by public expression of that identity, and possibly voluntary association with a group of like-minded individuals.”⁴⁰ This novice bear felt comfortable enough within the *BEAR* communication network to at least seek out the possibility of bear-to-bear contact, which provides an example of how *BEAR* could be a place to seek out sex, companionship, or just cuddling up with a classic, which places it at least partially outside of being a strictly sex-based cultural text, and even more firmly within the realm of an identity-forming communication network. Wright’s placement of *BEAR* magazine and bear culture generally within queer history further positions bear identity (both in scholarship and my primary source research) as an object of produsage itself: something to create, try on, and continue modifying as needed to create individual gains out of communal work. Possible goals, gains, or alternative cultural capital created from entering the bear class fraction could include a renewed and/or positive sense of self, a feeling of belonging, love, sex, or whatever other boons users gained through consuming, and produsing, with *BEAR*, its products, and the community it was simultaneously representing and constructing.

Coming out as bear was, in fact, one of the most mundane functions of postings on the BML. By 1999 it had become entrenched in the BML’s culture that when a new member joined the list, they would send a public post to the administrators saying hello, introducing themselves, describing what they look like, and most often including some information about how and why the poster considered themselves a bear and found their way onto the BML. For all queer theorists are fond of critiquing coming out narratives, usually with very good cause, I must say the sheer banality of these posts, still met more often than not with many affirmations and greetings from long-time posters, offered a warmer take on coming out. In this online space, like

⁴⁰ Wright, “Concise History,” 22.

in *BEAR*'s personals sections, posters clearly considered themselves to be in a safe place where they could be generally comfortable with themselves as they are, and even expect validation for traits that they loved about themselves, but have faced criticism or ostracization for in the past. Coming out, here, becomes an affirmation.

Though the first seven issues of *BEAR* are already very firmly entrenched in the bear vs. twink binary, they visually demonstrate that what bears were coming out into had not yet been fully defined. When examining the bear vs. twink divide, Wright states "There are homosexualities in between and outside of such linear pairings. The bear phenomenon manifests both tendencies, arising originally out of an impulse to create 'safe spaces' for a wide range of homosocial identifications, and currently coagulating into a new polarity of 'bears' and 'twinks.'"⁴¹ As the magazine took part in wider debates about what a bear *was* (as opposed to the twink that he wasn't), it was incumbent upon *BEAR* to explore who could be included in the safe spaces that were suggested by this communication network. Who would be able to identify with these images and feel like a member of this growing community? Who would be represented in these early days of the magazine, thus drawing them into the network and the coalescing bear cultural fraction?

Though I have outlined some of the ways in which the first issues of *BEAR* were a space of possibility based in the legacies of leather, clone, and anti-twink ideals, this queer cultural fraction also carried into it many of the problems regarding portrayals and erasures of race and class that its parent movements had. As such I will now examine how these first 7 issues of *BEAR* generally erased bears of colour from its pages and engaged in a fetishization of a (quasi-fantastical) working class aesthetic and body image.

⁴¹ Wright, "Introduction," 3-4.

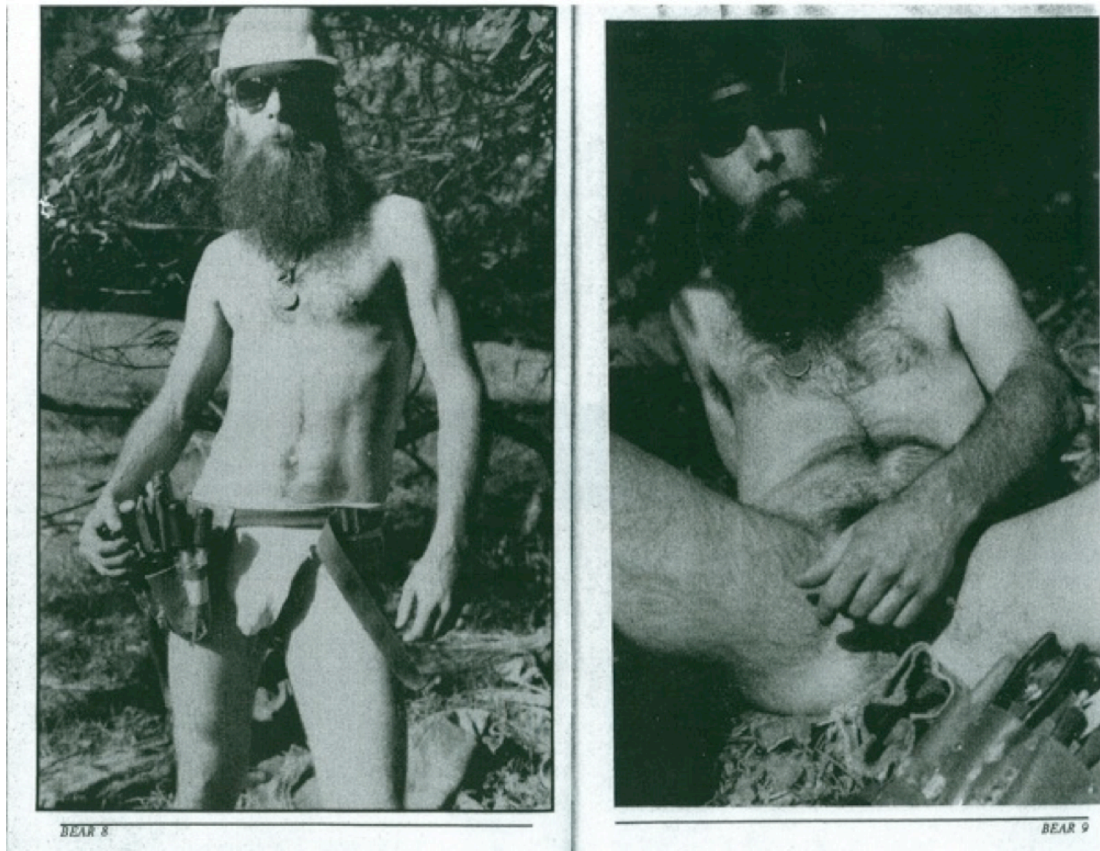


Figure 9: Woofer

Class and Commercialization in *BEAR*

The representation of class and the increased commercialization of *BEAR* are heavily entangled in the pages of the original issues of *BEAR*. One of the legacies of clone culture in bear community was the association of effeminate gays with the middle to upper classes, and butch, hot, gay masculinity with the working class, or, more accurately, with specifically aestheticized fantasies of working class masculinities. According to Wright, “Some self-identifying bears are actively engaged in shaping this change in notions of a hegemonic, quintessentially middle-class

gay masculinity.”⁴² The early magazine even contains some of these implied critiques of the middle-class mentality perceived as being an integral part of the gay culture that bears were rebelling against. The images of many of these men, some of the personals ads, and even the “models can come in off the street and shoot for us” mentality of early *BEAR* offers greater flexibility in middle-class regimes of acceptability, standards of dress and demeanour, and a more flexible aesthetic. Even the relatively cheap cost of the early magazine, only five dollars per issue, and its low-cost, hand printed and photocopied nature suggests that this porno rag would be available to purchase to a wider, and working class, audience than the other more expensive and well-produced porno rags available at the time (though this financial accessibility would begin to change, and eventually disappear, beginning with issue 8, when *BEAR* switched to a more conventional glossy, large-format printing design). Woofer, showing in Figure 9 from *BEAR* 6, is pictured in the woods wearing high-cut briefs and a fully equipped tool belt in the photo to the left of this spread, while in the right he lies in a bed of leaves and other detritus, covering his cock, but with the tool belt and its implements in the bottom right of the frame, positioned close to his (covered) cock and ass. This figure demonstrates some of the ways that blue-collar aesthetics were represented as desirable in early bear culture, drawing on clone culture, and a rejection of the assumed middle-class, urban position of both effeminate gay men and twinks.

According to Wright, “Gay social discourses are fundamentally middle class, and include the middle class’s pressures, in this case to conform to traditional gay ‘nonconformity.’”⁴³ It is in this site of tension between critiquing middle-class associations from a place that is still

⁴² Ibid., 5.

⁴³ Ibid., 11.

fundamentally lodged in gay-liberation focus on “nonconformity” that is also tied to a middle class ideal, that a paradox unfolds in the way that *BEAR* acts as a communication network. We see the contestations over identity in communication networks that Meeker discusses in the ways that the valorization of the working class in a framework of nonconformity and resistance to norms that is housed in a middle-class ideal turns into a fetishization of the stereotypes of working class, blue collar labourers that also begins to happen in *BEAR*. If, as Wright contends, bear masculinity registers in the “key of blue collar”, then “In that sense, the bears’ appeal to working-class value and dress may be a romanticizing longing for a mythical past.”⁴⁴ Parallel to how clones (over)valued and romanticized macho, muscled bodies, this romanticization of images of the working class including factory workers, construction workers, lumberjacks, etc, leads to just as much an overplaying and stereotyping of this image as the clone muscle-bodies espoused.

The first seven issues of *BEAR* are rife with examples of men espousing these overdetermined archetypes of working class bodies. Interestingly, explicit conversations of class status came up quite rarely in my cross-section of the BML, but in descriptions of porno contributors enjoyed and erotic fantasies posted, these same images of a fetishized working class appear again and again.⁴⁵ Figure 10 comes from *BEAR* 5. Gordon is a huskier bear in a hardhat, jeans, and a denim jacket in the first photo, as he reaches into his jeans to fondle himself while staring stoically at the camera. In the next photo his coat is off, his cock is out, and we see

⁴⁴ Ibid., 12.

⁴⁵ Though outside the scope of this section of this media-focused chapter, there were places where spectres of class background and monetary wealth did surface in the list, if obliquely. The most common were posts in which bears discussed how expensive major bear events, usually called bear runs, had become, including bears posting to the listserv to find roommates to share accommodations costs or find other ways to make visits to runs affordable. The listserv also featured many posts of people looking for work or seeking employees at their companies, knowing they were gay friendly, one 19-year old boy talking about barriers to accessing bear community due to the preponderance of local bear events happening in bars, and bears discussing the gentrification (and thus rising prices) of various “gay ghettos” across North America.

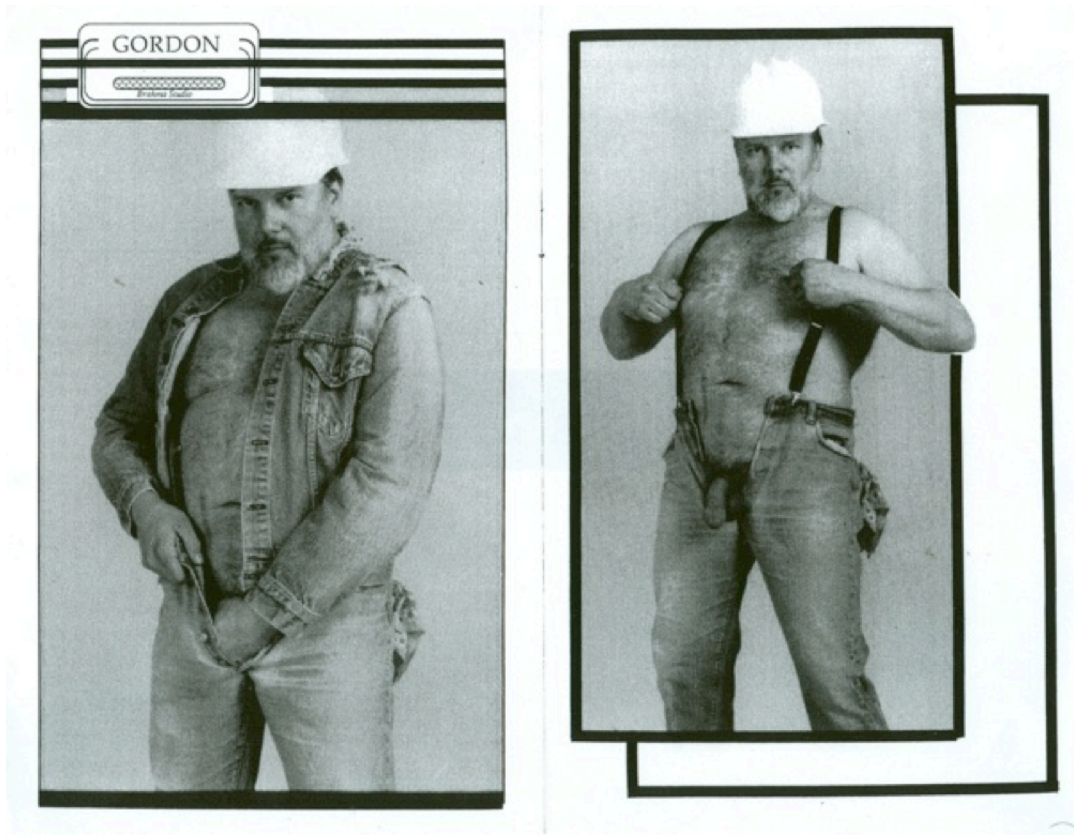


Figure 10: Gordon

Gordon tweak his nipples next to the thick suspenders that are holding up his jeans. This photo is also complete with the hardhat, signalling that Gordon's demeanour and attire come from some form of labour-based employment, combining a politicized statement about class and its desirability with standard pornographic tropes. These examples demonstrate the attention to stereotypes of working class bodies that quickly became eroticized in bear culture, and throughout the magazine's tenure slipped into a fetishization.

Another example of the oversexualization of working class archetypes comes from the *BEAR* produced, low budget, porn video *Live Bears*, which was advertised extensively in, and sold alongside, *BEAR*. This video consists entirely of solo jerk-off scenes, many of which include models working within a working-class aesthetic paradigm. One that stood out in particular had the model, a thinner bear, though still very hairy, jacking off in a tool belt, hardhat,

and wool socks. As the scene continues, he takes his hammer out of his belt, and proceeds to fuck himself in the ass with the handle. This part of the scene is given a great deal of attention, including multiple extreme close-ups on the hammer-fucking action. This is a blatant, but telling, example of the extreme, overt, and complete sexualization of skilled labour and working class bodies that was espoused by *BEAR* from its inception, especially as it was combined with the magazine's (and impending cultural fraction's) overtly political erotics of fat, hairy and unconventional bodies, and reified as it moved into a more heavily commercialized larger, glossy format.

Though I don't doubt that many men reading *BEAR* are working class themselves, and very likely could take part in the fetishization of working-class archetypes the magazine promoted, it is interesting to note the tension between the fetishization of a quasi-mythical working class and the many working class bears who don't have jobs that fit this ideal. This is especially true given that "An increasing number of bears are comfortable being themselves as middle-class professionals, who proudly work out, engage in conspicuous consumption, and may even shun their social inferiors in bear circles."⁴⁶ It is this link between the valorization of a gay working class masculinity as sexual object and ideal and the number of readers who likely did not fit these stereotypes that I turn to the increasingly important role of commercialization based in middle-class consumption in *BEAR*'s development.

Even in the first seven issues of *BEAR*, consumption begins to take up more visual and discursive space in the magazine in the form of more and more advertisements. Initially there were very few ads in the *BEAR*, and the most prominent were for the magazine itself, or related ventures like the *Live Bears* video. The increase in outside advertising suggests, first and

⁴⁶ Wright, "Introduction," 13-4.

foremost, the capitalist underpinnings of the porno magazine in general: to make money selling specialized sexual images to a wanting audience. It is this that distinguishes early *BEAR* most clearly from other publications printed in similar manners like zines or other alternative print media. I also read the increase in advertisements as a subtle change in the magazine to focus less on the working class audience suggested by the low price and DIY printing feel of the first few issues and more on middle-class clientele who can afford the wares being hawked in the magazine's margins. Even though the magazine continued to be inexpensive throughout these seven issues, the promotion of consumption outside of *BEAR* magazine's holdings suggests that the magazine was starting to view wealthier readers as its main target audience.

This move can be seen as lining up with a shift in bear culture towards being inducted into more mainstream gay cultural patterns of consumption. Wright explores this shift in gay and bear consumerism:

The disjunctive ideals of bears as working-class masculinity and bears as an increasingly distinct subculture within mainstream gay culture bring into sharp relief the larger issues of gay community. If bears began in a spirit of inclusiveness and egalitarian-mindedness, sex positive and relatively 'anti-looks-ist,' then what is to be made of the increasingly conformist, consumerist, competitiveness that has taken over? As the idea of bears has spread, the opportunities to travel far and wide, to purchase ever more costly bearphernalia, to update and expand one's computer resources are generating another, unanticipated dividing line between bear haves and bear have-nots.⁴⁷

The increasing trend towards selling bears not just their erotics but also accouterments that go with them begin to show how even in the urtexts of *BEAR*, there was always already a move towards being brought into the gay mainstream, even as the bear culture began partially out of a rejection of what was perceived as undesirable middle-class sensibilities and aesthetics. Even before *BEAR* switched over to a more expensive and mainstream-porno format, the first seven

⁴⁷ Wright, "Concise History," 34.

issues demonstrated that this tension was always present in bear identity formation exercises. Unlike many of the contestations over bear looks that are present throughout all 7 issues, the trend towards consumption and the bifurcation of bear culture into haves and have-nots along class lines represents a tension that appears to be heading towards resolving in favour of the more affluent, middle-class readership even before the change in format. This suggests that Meeker's assertion that communication networks, even as spaces of potential and hope, still carry with them issues of class from preceding communities and cultures, holds especially true for class and operations of consumption in the bear cultural fraction. As a result, it can be inferred that one aspect of *BEAR* that might foreclose identification from readers inside this communication network faster than other aspects of bear identity is the way in which the fetishized working-class ideal transforms into a body of desire catered towards a middle-class audience.

Race in Bear Media

For this section of my project I found disturbingly little material to build an argument on, which suggests right away that much of how race is (not) dealt with in *BEAR* and the BML involves erasure rather than visibility.⁴⁸ This is a black and white magazine that is almost entirely full of white-appearing bodies. Even with the potential that some seemingly white models might be men of colour due to the production quality (or lack thereof), the fact that so many of them show as white in the grainy images demonstrates a potential lack of sensitivity towards visually

⁴⁸ One important methodological note regarding this section of my analysis is that the material conditions of the magazine and its production in the first seven issues also present problems for analyzing race in *BEAR*. The magazine itself was made of black and white photocopies of the original print run, which means that the copies I have access to are photocopies of photocopies, significantly lowering the quality of the images that anyone viewing these early issues of *BEAR* can access. As a result it can be difficult to distinguish physical markers of race, especially skin tone. I include this note not as an excuse, but to point out that from the beginning this magazine and its format would have made it hard for readers to distinguish the racial background of many of the models, and this becomes a problem in analysis after the fact as well.

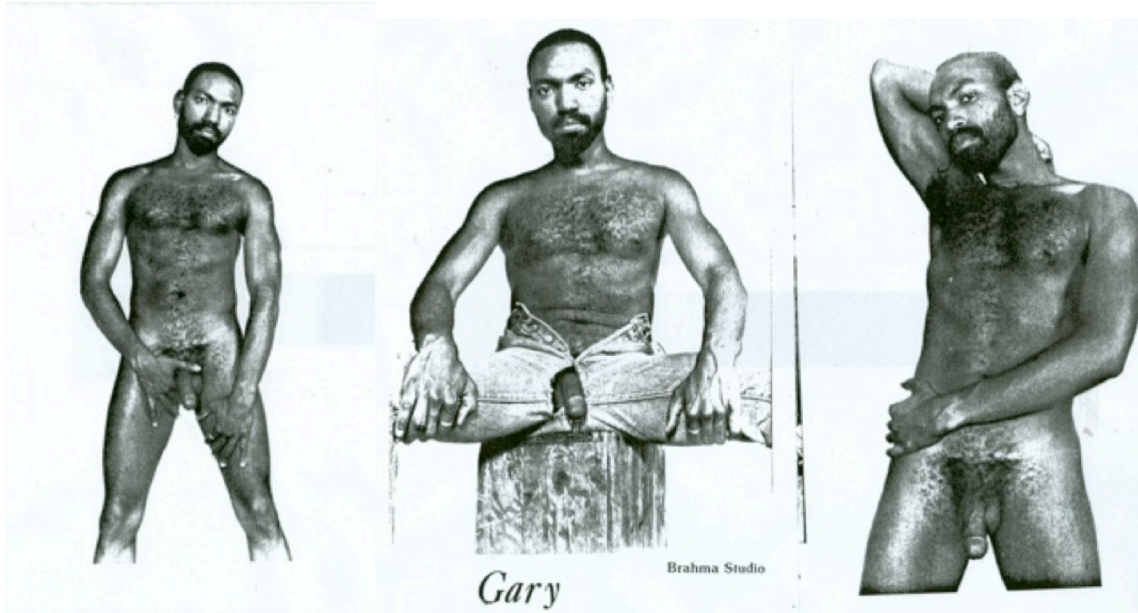


Figure 11: Gary

representing men of colour in bear media. This fact is extremely important given Meeker's discussion of how communication networks form along parallel lines to the larger culture and media that they emerge from, in this case mainstream gay media, culture, and discourses. Just as there were many elisions of race in the Mattachine Society and the published materials that composed its communication network, so the elisions of race in gay liberation, clone, and leatherman media also carry forward into *BEAR* magazine and its representations of a forming bear identity and cultural fraction.

In the first seven issues of *BEAR*, I was only able to find only three examples of featured models who appear clearly represented as men of colour. The first, Gary in Figure 11, is an African-American model in *BEAR* 2. Gary is presented relatively simply, with a beard and moustache, hairy chest, naked in two out of three photos of him, and wearing only a pair of jeans with a hole in the crotch that leaves his penis exposed in the third. Gary has a stoic expression in all three photos, and does not seem to give much indication of what, if any, bear archetype he fits



Figure 12: Raven

into, beyond being furry (which, to be clear, is absolutely be enough to self-identify as a bear and take part in bear communication networks, as my study of the BML demonstrates). Interestingly, his cock is never shown as fully erect, which runs contrary to most of the other models' photograph series. In *BEAR 5*, there is a five-photo spread of a model named Raven, two of which are included in this paper as Figure 12. Raven is presented similarly to Gary, with no clothing at all, a trimmed beard, and hair on his chest, stomach and pubis. His cock is shown erect in the photo series, and is the visual focus of the two photos in Figure 12. The lack of biography makes it difficult to ascertain Raven's racial background, however the slightly darker shade of his skin, and the proclivity of porn names to reflect attributes of the model, and are regularly racially coded, as a raven is black, suggests that Raven is certainly available to be read as black in this publication. Finally, in *BEAR 6* there are two photos of the model Jorge, who is shown in Figure 13. Jorge's name and somewhat darker skin tone, especially in the photo on the

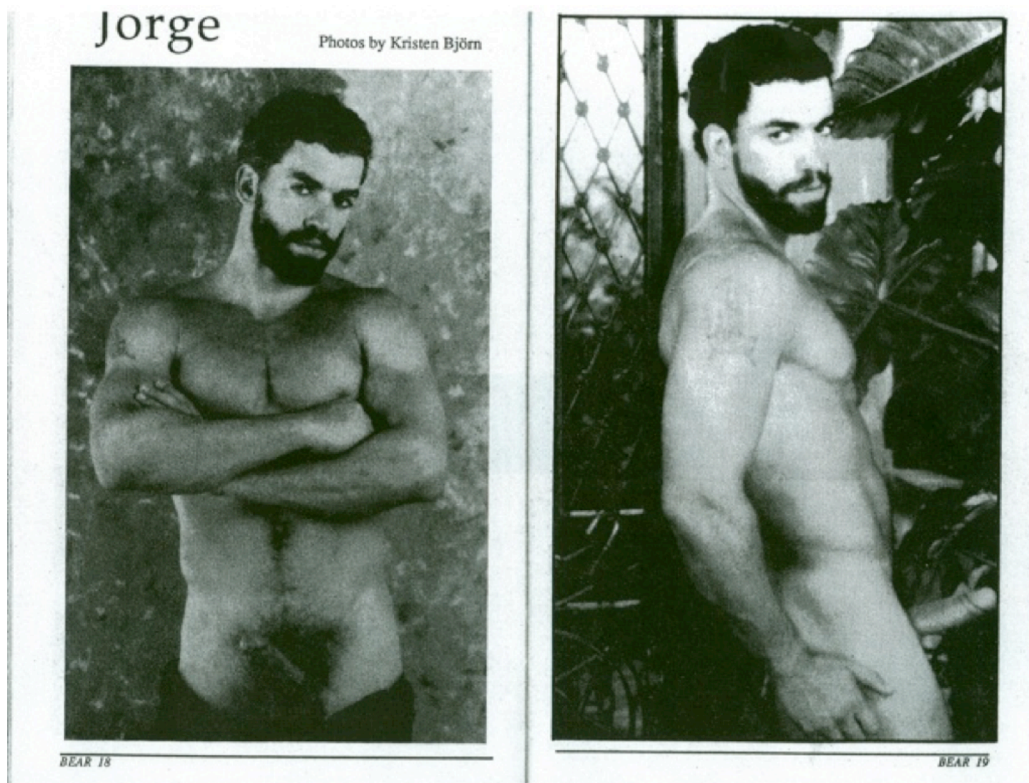


Figure 13: Jorge

left, suggest that he is likely Latino. Jorge, interestingly, has a full beard and moustache, but very little body hair outside of his pubic region, demonstrating that the debates about whether a beard or body hair made the bear could also be racially coded. (This issue actually comes up explicitly in a few BML posts by men who self-identify as black or Asian in the list: are they discounted from bear community because of genetic trends towards having little body hair or even hairlessness? Thankfully, these posts were largely answered with people saying that because beariness is not *just* about body hair, but also attitude, rejection of hurtful gay norms, and desire *for* other bears, among others, then these men should consider themselves bears, though obviously this does little to mitigate the discrimination and phenotype-based racism they've faced in their lives which led to these postings.) Jorge is also extremely muscular and, combined with the aggressive positioning of his erection in the photographs suggests that he fits into the archetype of the muscle bear that came to bears from clone culture, though this is also an inexact

adoption as clone culture, and especially visual representations of it, also generally exclude men of colour. It is interesting that the one Latino model in these seven issues is this kind of bear, as it could also reflect a display, and potential fetishization, of presumptions and stereotypes of Latino machismo. I recognize that in these three examples I have engaged in a fair amount of conjecture that could easily prove false, but the set up of the magazine both demands it, while also highlighting the fact that race was *clearly* not a primary concern of *BEAR*'s creative team, which only highlights the implicit whiteness of the forming bear community, or at least its early representations of itself. Outside of these three models the only other representation of non-white bodies comes in the form of advertisements in *BEAR* 5, 6, and 7 for the Latino focused porn company Hombres' movies and magazines. Though the Latino bodies pictured in these ads are not identified as bears, the fact that Hombres decided to advertise in *BEAR* for three consecutive issues does suggest that both Hombres and *BEAR* felt that there could be a convergence of the audience of *BEAR* and gay men who enjoy viewing or even fetishize Latino men (a group that would very likely include both Latino and non-Latino gay/queer men, possibly with *very* different motivations behind seeking out Latino-specific pornographic representations). In all of these instances race becomes primarily subsumed in *BEAR* under issues of class and commercialization. Though there are most definitely bears of colour, it would appear that *BEAR*, in its role as a communication network that had influence on early conceptions of bear identity, did not consider the visibility of these bears a priority in its presentation of this growing cultural fraction.

One very notable instance of race becoming a flashpoint for bears and bear community from the BML is worth bringing up to demonstrate the contested nature of racial identity in bear identity-based produsage. One very regular poster, who seemed already very well established on

the BML long before the summer of 1999, began a thread on 10 July 2000 about so-called sexual “preferences” that gay men tend to list in personals ads, both in print, and increasingly online as internet dating became more common. This thread lasted over a week, an abnormally long time on the BML, especially for a thread that became as contentious and divisive as this one did (the administrators usually tried to curtail fights or negative-seeming discourse on the list; I take this, perhaps optimistically, as implicit support on the part of the moderators to maintain the porous nature of the bear cultural fraction, allowing it to remain open for contestation and improvement, especially on the very important topic of race within gay and queer cultural fractions). The original poster begins by describing how much fat shaming he received posting sexual photos of himself on a different listserv, one nominally for all gay men where they could share sexual photos of themselves that they considered empowering. This poster received lots of private messages from others on the list, which he would later call “dominated by twinks,” telling him he was ugly, too fat, and that “no one” wanted to see his body, in a sexual light or not. The poster used this story to pivot to how frustrated he has become with dating profiles including phrases such as, and he directly quotes, “no fats,” “no fems,” “no nigs,” and “no spicks” (demonstrating how more contemporary discourses about how racist and body shaming the current use of “no fats, no femmes, no Asians” have an unfortunately deep and enduring history in gay digital culture). Many of the responses to this post were positive, in the sense that they talked about how there are key differences between a sexual preference, which most posters would prefer to see expressed in the affirmative (“I prefer slighter men”, for example, rather than “no fats”), as the tip over into negative phrasing and framing is where users tip into racism, sexism, femmephobia, and fatphobia. Discourses and debates in this thread included key terms like dehumanization, manners, preferences vs. discrimination or bigotry, and continued connections back to bear

culture's rejection of self-absorbed and hateful twink and/or problematic mainstream gay beliefs and ideals.

Unfortunately, other than in a few of the initial responses to this post sent out with the 11 July BML digest, race almost immediately falls out of this conversation on the BML. Most posters focus on “no fats,” and a few on “no fems,” as being indicative of problems in the gay community, while the silence around race began to ring louder and louder as I turned the pages of the BML printout in Cornell's archive. This thread even branched out into an in-depth discussion of how and why (or not) the short hand “straight-acting” should be considered equally as discriminatory in gay dating parlance. One otherwise amazing response even delved into the importance of connotation vs. literal meaning, suggesting that whereas a phrase like “no fats” with negative connotations causes harm to others reading it, a literal statement of preference avoids this trap. One of the only posts in this thread which did actively foreground race involved a largely off-topic rant about how gay people/bears need to be less “sensitive” because the more “offensive” terms get used, the less power they have, and people should get over them. The poster's primary evidence? That Quentin Tarantino defended the (over)use of the n-word in *Pulp Fiction* (1994) by claiming that, by using it so much, it becomes powerless to offend black people. (This poster also explicitly threw away Spike Lee's criticism of Tarantino on this affair, negating the only explicitly black voice brought up in this thread.) Not one other user that I could find called this poster out for his racist commentary, though in fairness, that post seemed to be one of the reasons the admins quickly declared this thread done and over with, potentially foreclosing anti-racist responses. Still, the BML demonstrated that bear cultures' race problems have persisted, regardless of new terms for bears of colour entering bear parlance and culture throughout the years, including black bears (black men, especially African-American bears),

brown bears (sometimes used to refer to Latino, middle-eastern, and/or central Asian bears), panda bears (Asian bears), and sun bears (not as set as a term, but I've seen it used to refer to Asian or Indigenous bears). These terms, which are frequently adopted by people of colour as a positive and inclusive label that marks them as part of the bear cultural fraction, are also seen by some as problematic for engaging in phenotype-based labelling practices not dissimilar to the ones I pointed out above about Raven's picture in the magazine.

According to Wright, "Print media has gone a long way in generating a prototypical bear icon - full-bearded, fairly to very hairy, beefy to chunky [gay white male] baby-boomer, probably of Irish, Jewish, Italian, Scandinavian, or Armenian heritage. In reality, the question of race, presence or absence of body hair, body build, social class, or outlook on life is anything but so neatly compartmentalized."⁴⁹ This quotation neatly summarizes the three aspects of identity formation that I read *BEAR* was engaged in during its early publishing run and its role as a communication network: aesthetics and body images, class, and the elision of race. As a communication network, *BEAR* acted as a site of discursive contestation in a proto-fraction that was fairly united in resisting the image of the twink while (contingently) drawing upon elements of gay male clone and leather cultures to build its aesthetic and early identities. This network, however, was involved in making choices by, for and even with its readership about which narratives from its past it would reify and repeat, such as a silent but very present whiteness which the BML demonstrates continues to be prominent in bear culture and discourse. These choices of narratives began the process of foreclosing some of the safe spaces of identity and identification that the magazine was trying to create (quite earnestly and honestly I believe).

⁴⁹ Wright, "Concise History," 36.

Including these critiques revolving around class, fetishized identities, race, and whiteness is also important in the context of my work extending produsage as a term of queer (and) media analysis. I try to focus on the positive ways in which media can be harnessed for queer and trans world building across this dissertation, and produsage has many positive, even utopic, potentialities and affordances. This is especially true because produsage is an open-ended, continuous process, in which definitions, communities, media, and selves can always change, grow, be edited, or be left behind. This same openness, however, means that any produsage-based community, publication, or media will always be vulnerable to recreating, reifying, or intensifying discriminatory attitudes, social norms, and cultural practices. Just as queer theory, politics, and activism change and grow over time, with new norms of acceptance, openness, and other communal priorities moving in and out of prominence in all these spheres over time, largely responding to mass culture, world events, and politics, so spaces of media produsage must contend with redefining their norms as time goes on, communities change and grow, and cultural attitudes shift. Just as Foucault conceives of power as a shifting topology where resistance is always already present as power is exercised, so produsage-based communities are always already spaces of contestation, negotiation, and the potential for growth and change, often unexpected or unforeseen. In the final analysis, however, produsage remains an extremely useful theory and analytic, exactly because of its flexibility, and the potential durability of produsage based communities. I turn now, then, to a discussion of how bear media have facilitated bears making contact with one another and building bonds which helps make bear culture a resilient and vibrant space of alternative value creation and identity valorization, even if it isn't perfect.

Making Contact

Having explored some of the stakes of identity formation that *BEAR* was involved in, I turn my attention to the second element of a communication network, the potential for a network to facilitate human contact after identification has occurred. *BEAR* gave its readers the potential to initiate this kind of contact, even if it was a contingent or tentative potential since many of *BEAR*'s readers were (and are) spread out geographically, and bears using digital media to communicate are even farther flung. This magazine, especially in its personals section, was an important venue for people who have started to identify as bears to begin talking to one another, and have their personal identification with this cultural fraction grow into identification with a group of like-minded men. To examine this aspect of *BEAR*'s early years, I will continue to explore Meeker's theories of communication networks, as well as Samuel Delany's thinking regarding the meaning of contact (whether sexual or not, though his focus is primarily on sexual contact) in *Times Square Red*, *Times Square Blue*. Delany's theorization of contact, which is heavily based in an analysis of class relationships, adds an element of highly sexual motivations in seeking contact to Meeker's more vanilla analysis.

According to Meeker, "being connected...often meant learning simultaneously that one was not alone *and* that one was alone. In other words, one might learn that he or she is part of a larger group but only gain that knowledge while isolated from that larger group. Thus, ironically, with the gaining of a sense of group identity oftentimes came the feeling of isolation from that group."⁵⁰ This is an apt framework through which to explore *BEAR* and the BML alike, as this tension between group identity and isolation from the growing bear cultural fraction is a key element of media-facilitated communications. On the one hand this can be a disappointment due feeling far away from the community that one has just come out into. The distance that a

⁵⁰ Meeker, 2.

communication network puts between the people in it can also be a benefit for people who are looking for a community to identify with, but may not be ready to go as far as meeting other people. It provides a space to come out into a community at one's own pace, and for comings-out to include just to oneself while reading the magazine all the way to posting a sexually explicit personals ad. Reading *BEAR* or the BML as communication networks thus allows for readers to be afforded a variation of agency and involvement in the cultural fraction it is a part of, materializing and embodying the porous nature of a cultural fraction at the level of the individual and quotidian.

Alongside the personals section of *BEAR*, several of the first issues also include a small, normally one-to-two page article called Sightings. This section of the magazine described where bear friendly bars, clubs and hangouts could be found in the city being featured that week. Like the personals section, it offers the possibility of the readers being able to take their experience as a reader and turn it into meeting other bears face-to-face. Both the personals and Sightings offer the potential of meeting like-minded people for many purposes that are not limited to sex (though these certainly make up the majority of the personals ads), such as friendship, discussion, and some more unexpected scenarios that I will discuss shortly.

The Sightings page in *BEAR 2* discusses bear friendly bars and hangouts in San Francisco. Most of the descriptions of bars include where an adventuring bear could find other bearded and hairy men, and even includes some interesting references to anti-twink culture including the New World Saloon South of Market, where “bearded men usually out-number circumcised faces two-to-one.”⁵¹ (Note the reframing of clean-shaven as circumcised: an early example of how discourses based in stereotypes of masculinity/femininity, castration, etc. pop up

⁵¹ Richard H. Bulger, ed., *BEAR* no. 2, n.p.

even in this early, casual way.) It is implied here that non-bears are castrated, which suggests a connection to the stereotype of the effeminate twink that *BEAR* espouses as a key aspect of bear identity. In *BEAR* 4, Boston is profiled. By this point sightings has grown to be two pages long, and interestingly this particular set of bars was submitted by a reader named Ron, who lives in Boston. The sightings section opens with a personal note from Ron about the various gay firsts he had in Boston, and includes bars that cater to bears, mixed crowds, the Paradise on MIT's campus with students and professors frequenting, and even the Boston Eagle, which sometimes caters to leather bears. Though Sightings may only be directly useful for bears living in or visiting the particular cities being profiled, it still suggests that through being a *BEAR* reader, there is the option for self-identified bears to meet others like them, and engage in larger communities of bears face to face. The fact that readers penned some Sightings, like Boston, further shows how *BEAR* had the potential to create a community by and for bears, where men shared information and connections through one another. These connections may never form for many of the readers of *BEAR*, but Sightings still provides a sense that there is a community that a bear could access if he wanted to when he was ready.

In a similar vein, the personals section of *BEAR* also provided a venue for bears to make gestures towards making direct contact with other bears, for sex or other purposes. One interesting personals ad by Gary in *BEAR* 3 reads: “[San Francisco] Bay fur trapper, 40, 6’2”, 165, brown/green, trim beard, moderately hairy seeks...fur bearing critters for safe, heavy petting. Write, exchange photos. Making bear rug--hair donations welcome.”⁵² Though Gary is seeking some sexual contact, he has also come to the *BEAR* communication network looking to complete his bear fur rug (though his posting does not make it clear whether this is a rug made of

⁵² Ibid.

human-bear fur, or ursine-bear fur, or if this is a sexual euphemism that I have not been able to find a definition of). In *BEAR* 5, Greg, a 27-year-old white gay male from Orlando, is “husky, bearded, shy and inexperienced but very eager to learn. Looking for older, husky bearded man for friendship and sex, someone willing to show me the ropes.”⁵³ Gary is also taking part in the bear coming out narrative, and seeking a friend (with benefits) who can help him learn the ins and outs of bear identity. Though sex is involved in this ad, Gary is seeking more than a casual hookup, and does not indicate a desire for a romantic relationship, which shows the non/sexual community potential that *BEAR*’s readers saw in its personals as a place of potential to explore forming or joining a bear community around themselves.

Even the relatively small section of the BML I studied included *many* examples of contact being desired, sought, and even made, both in person and through digital communication, and this contact took many forms, both sexual and non-sexual, romantic and pragmatic. For example, I mentioned above that the BML regularly included posts about contributors seeking work or seeking employees (interestingly, usually in tech-related fields), and one poster actually fired back at another contributor who suggested these posts didn’t belong on the BML by saying he had, in fact, helped to facilitate several bears being hired into the company he worked for after advertising positions on the BML. There was also, of course, many posters seeking relationships or sexual encounters, both where they lived, or (much more often) when they were travelling, whether for work or for bear and/or gay specific events. These posts also very regularly included seeking friends and/or playmates or dates in these areas not just to hang out with, but to show them around town, do tourist things, or otherwise spend quality time together, both in and out of bed. Seeking contact also took the form, in a few cases, of posting obituaries for bears who were

⁵³ Richard H. Bulger, ed., *BEAR* no. 5, n.p.

current or former members of BML, making suggestions for donations after death, or soliciting people sharing other memories of the deceased, demonstrating that for some, the BML was a space where they felt it appropriate to mourn and be emotionally vulnerable. Yet another debate I followed included many bears living in rural areas promising other bears that, despite what gay culture would have you think, urban areas were, in fact, *not* the only places where a bear could make friends, find lovers, and make a life for themselves, actively framing rural spaces as spaces ripe for the various kinds of contact bears on the BML regularly sought. Sometimes posters reached out for contact with others through humour, especially when creating a new, joke-based thread was explicitly framed as a way to defuse tensions brimming in other threads. One example of this included a bear starting a surprisingly long-running thread exhorting fellow contributors to write bear-themed haikus, largely for laughs. Another of my favourites involved one poster writing an hilarious and very polished comic dialogue about what happens when bears who were dating got married, via an extended metaphor of upgrading software: the post was framed as a bear experiencing “technical issues” upgrading from the “boyfriend 5.0” operating system, a tried and true OS, to “husbear 1.0” after marrying following a five-year courtship. Many of the more mundane posts desiring a form of contact I wouldn’t call earthshaking, but which was comfortingly common, were just bears reaching out to the list saying they liked something, and seeing who else had a common interest, from canning peaches to whether or not bears do and/or should like musical theatre. (That particular thread ended up with a surprisingly long discourse about the merits, or lack thereof, of Andrew Lloyd Weber’s musicals, with a large number of bears coming out of the woodwork to defend *Evita*, both the stage show and the Madonna-led movie. I suppose it just goes to show that even when a musical like *Phantom of the Opera* might seem like a candidate for bear fandom with its pained, unconventionally masculine anti-hero and

his foppish, feminine, even twink-ish foil winning the girl, gay diva worship can and often will still win out, demonstrating one small way in which a cultural fraction's stated beliefs or positions don't always hold true at a granular, individual level. The bears of the BML at this time also seemed to collectively hate *Riverdance* for unknown reasons and despite its overt butch, yet artistic, masculinity.)

It is important to remember, however, that the potential of making contact or community is not always distributed evenly between *BEAR*'s readers or BML's contributors, and may be more accessible and/or available to some. As Meeker states regarding communication networks, "The ability of an individual to move from identification to association is contingent upon the place of that individual in communication networks, with 'place' meaning either proximity to information or situatedness within a social identity such as one's race, class or gender."⁵⁴ The ability for a *BEAR* or BML producer to identify with other bears and feel like contact is possible in this communication network could be greatly effected by the contestations over bear identity that I explored in first half of this chapter. Having the right look, feel, or bearishness, especially as the prevalence of the muscle bear aesthetics grew, being of the consumerist middle-class audience who is able to regularly purchase personals space, having the proper body to be fetishized through the tropes of the labouring working class, or being a bear with a sorely underrepresented and erased non-white body are all factors that could influence a bear not to seek out contact through bear media even as he continues to read it and identify with certain aspects of beariness. Like any print media source, especially a pornographic one, or a largely unregulated and contingent digital network, the pressure to conform to the bodies pictured in the magazine and valorized most vociferously in one's individual experience of bear culture and

⁵⁴ Meeker, 11.

media can become an force of exclusion for bears seeking identity and community, which demonstrates the always tense and contingent ways that a communication network functions.

When discussing the potential contact evinced by the *BEAR* communication network, the role of sexuality and sexual contact cannot be discounted. Fucking and hooking up has a long history in gay cultural fractions, and gay culture generally, of being part of building community through sexual contact that ranges from friendly to rough, anonymous to extremely intimate and romantic, to polyamory. Meeker's project does not deal with this aspect of contact, so I will turn briefly to Samuel R. Delany's thinking regarding sexual contact in the porno/cruising/sex theaters of 1980s Times Square, New York, in *Times Square Red*, *Times Square Blue*.

For Delany, contact is more than having an interaction with someone: it is a chance, and often non-repeated, experience that allows for a brief moment of connection between two or more people that leaves an impression on one or both parties. Contact can be helpful, friendly, random, disturbing, sexual, or espouse any other range of emotions.⁵⁵ Delany's focus is on contact that involves public sex, and the first half of this book details many of the instances of sex-based contact with people who would often never re-enter his life that he experienced in the porno theaters he frequented before the gentrification of Times Square. What is particularly interesting in Delany's argument is the way in which contact is mediated by urban spaces where interclass interaction is more likely to occur. It is worth noting that one very important difference between Delany's formulation of sexual contact and my own, shaped primarily through our different venues (physical theatres and cityscapes vs. digital spaces and cultural fractions) is that Delany is very focused on entirely random contacts with strangers of any number of identities, physical traits, sexualities, class backgrounds, etc.. Though the BML and *BEAR* share a focus on

⁵⁵ Samuel R. Delany, *Times Square Red*, *Times Square Blue* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 123-6.

meeting people who are, at first, strangers, joining a prodisusage-based communication network does involve a higher level of intentionality and an at least vague pre-formed idea of who (and perhaps what) one is looking for when seeking contact. This difference separates our work, however, the importance of queer contact being framed through openness, acceptance, and perhaps even curiosity and empathy (in a broad sense) is an important node of similarity between our thinking. Public spaces and the willingness to engage with people from outside of one's socioeconomic class, often mediated through public sex, creates a situation where meaningful contacts can happen across class boundaries, and where these contacts can be self-affirming, positive experiences that a person did not see coming. According to Delany, if every sexual encounter involves bringing someone back to your house, the general sexual activity in a city becomes anxiety-filled, class-bound, and choosy. This tendency is even further exacerbated by the constantly increasing prevalence of digital spaces as primary sites of dating, procuring sex, and social interactions, as demonstrated by the aforementioned discussion of how impersonal and offensive dating profiles can be on the BML (and, frankly, demonstrating a trend in bear culture also prominent in other gay and queer communities as mobile dating and hookup apps become the main game in town when it comes to making contact, sexual or romantic). This is precisely *why* public rest rooms, peep shows, sex movies, bars with grope rooms, and parks with enough greenery are necessary for a relaxed and friendly sexual atmosphere in a democratic metropolis.”⁵⁶ For Delany, and I contend for *BEAR* and BML, sex is intimately tied into the contestations and internalizations of class and commercialization that I discussed earlier in this chapter. When so much of bear identity and self-definition in *BEAR* is tied up in catering to an increasingly middle-class target audience while also offering fetishized images of working class

⁵⁶ Ibid., 127.

men that could still serve as an identificatory figure for real working class men, the contact promoted by Sightings and the personals becomes heavily mediated by both sex(uality) and class. Making contact, especially fleeting, sex-based contact may or may not have a significant impact on one's life, such as confirming or denying one's membership in a growing cultural fraction. When this contact is facilitated by a communication network like *BEAR*, making contact becomes even further mediated by the images and contestations of identity that are happening visually and textually in the magazine.

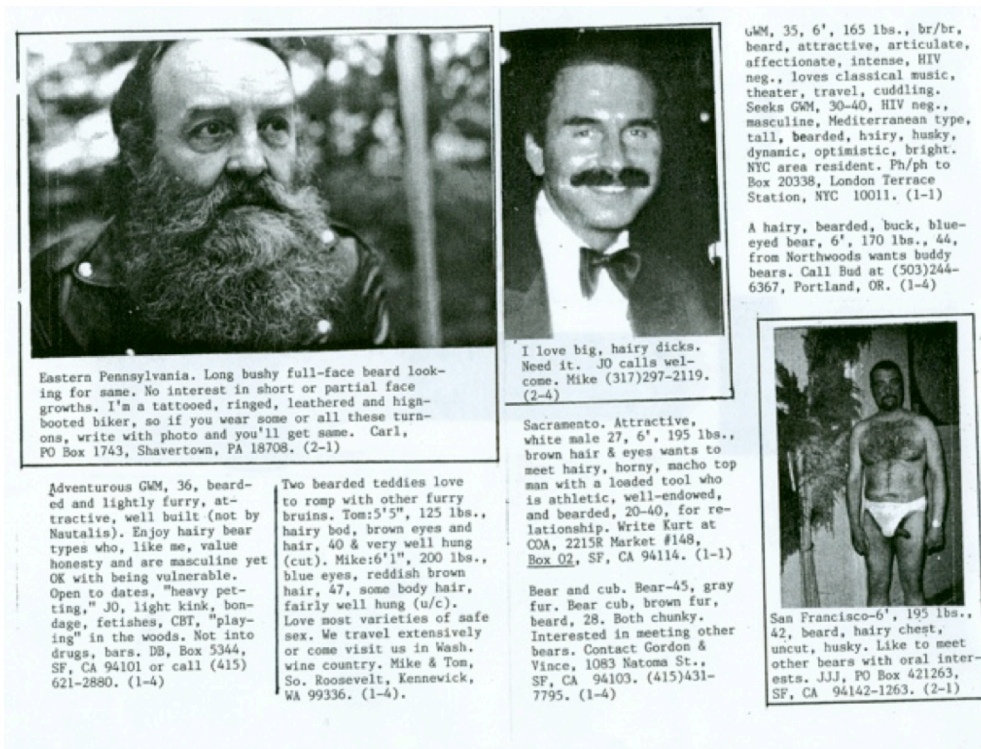


Figure 14: Getting Personal

Figure 14 shows two pages from the personals section of *BEAR 2* that is quite typical of the personals sections in the early issues of *BEAR*. On this page we find ads as simple as Mike's, in the top left corner of the second page, where under his photo of him wearing a tuxedo, it

simply states: “I love big, hairy dicks. Need it. JO [jack off] calls welcome.”⁵⁷ This personals spread also includes an ad looking for a third party to join Bear and cub Gordon and Vince, JJJ’s picture advert looking for other bears with “oral interests” and NYC area resident’s search for a bear who loves classical music and theatre as much as he does (the theme of artsy bears continues in BML, delightfully).⁵⁸ These men are seeking out contact through the mediation of various types of relationships and sex, and many ads in *BEAR* do not seek relationships, or suggest that though one could happen, it’s certainly not required for the poster to value what might come from his ad. These personals ads function within Meeker’s framework of a communication network by offering up the possibility of contact after identifying with the cultural fraction the magazine is part of, representing, and producing, and many of these contacts are mediated through a Delany-esque sexuality defined by cross-class desire for (often casual and/or anonymous) sex.

For Delany, “Contact regularly crosses class lines in those public spaces in which interclass encounters are at their most frequent.”⁵⁹ *BEAR* is a complicated and contingent site for the promotion of interclass, and I would add inter-fraction, contact through a public media communication networks in the personals and Sightings sections. The BML is even more complex as a space of contact, as throughout the 1990s, access to the internet and internet-capable computers became increasingly easy and affordable in both North America and around the globe, leading to an inevitable diversification of the users of the BML across not just class lines, but racial and ethnic identities, cultural values or norms, and geographic localities. The public-ness of sex in *BEAR* is more complicated than in Delany’s work based on the ways in

⁵⁷ Bulger, *BEAR* no. 2, n.p.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Delany, 129.

which reading a magazine that is for public sale in private blurs this line, but it is still heavily wrapped up in interclass contact in a way that resonates with Delany's work. Some contingency is added into this inter-fraction contact, however, because of the ways that working class bodies are often fetishized and presented as part of a heavily sexualized and quasi-mythical labour aesthetic. Though there is definitely the potential of positive, identity-affirming interclass and inter-fraction contact in a communication networks framed by these discourses, it could also serve to promote contact where the preconceived notion of this unrealistic ideal as being the object of desire serves to disenfranchise bears who cannot live up to it. In particular, this pressure to conform to the visual tropes of *BEAR* also carries the distinct possibility of reproducing the overarching valuation of whiteness espoused in the magazine and proto-bear culture. The contingencies of race and class in *BEAR* demonstrate how contact can never be guaranteed within the nebulous space of a communication network, even though there is simultaneously always the potential for it to occur.

By analyzing the first seven issues of *BEAR* using Meeker's model of the communication network that I have supplemented with Delany's inclusion of the role of sex in making contact, I have attempted to hold *BEAR* in its contemporaneous moment as a space of possibility for proto-bear cultures and communities. It offers an early space where contact could be encouraged and had the potential to be made, even if not all of *BEAR*'s readers necessarily made use of that potential. In this moment of possibility some contacts were likely made, and the possibility of contact served to help many bears feel connected to a new identity that they could come out into, even if that coming out was into a commercially mediated community that may not be what they originally saw it as before coming out. Though *BEAR* has changed significantly since its inaugural issue in 1987, my hope is that this analysis has provided a useful way of thinking about

the potential that *BEAR* represented in its early days, and how that contributed to how individual people became motivated to begin searching out other men like them in a process that helped to form the bear cultural fraction.

In general, from looking at a sampling of later issues of *BEAR* from its first ten years, examples across the BML's history, and from secondary source research on the growth of bear culture, I feel confident in my claims that bear media is and has been pivotal for many in helping them to identify with bear culture. They have had many important impacts on this gay cultural fraction, but over time for-profit bear media especially has shifted to emphasize muscle and glamour bears, the heavy commercialization of this gay identity and community, and the promotion of a much more specific and coded bear aesthetic that does not include many of the models and bears featured in the first seven issues.⁶⁰

As Wright states, “whatever ‘inclusionary’ desires of bears [were] present a decade ago have been largely displaced by gay-mainstream values - a tendency to elaborate a hierarchy of ‘bearishness,’ to organize in private membership clubs, rallying around images and icons of sexually desirable bears, and the creation of bears as a niche market in the domestic consumer economy.”⁶¹ Many of the original safe spaces gestured to in the first seven issues of *BEAR* would seem to have been closed down in how the magazine has more recently come to reflect the move towards hierarchization, commercialism, and iconicizing very particular aesthetic features of bears. This view is confirmed by Mauerman, who concludes his reflections on working at *BEAR*

⁶⁰ Though outside the scope of this chapter, it's worth pointing out that bear community and identity has, like so many other queer cultures, seen increasing representation in the mainstream and its concomitant appropriation for monetary gain. This is visible in a spate of bear-specific media released in the 2000s, from the *Bear City* (dir. Doug Langway, 2010) film franchise to the multi-season web show *Where the Bears Are* (creators Rick Copp and Ben Zook, 2012-8). Dating apps have also expanded into explicitly bear markets, with Scruff and Growlr popping up as popular alternatives to Grindr for men (largely in urban centres – a particular issue with mobile apps) who are larger, furrer, and/or are not interested in the still-dominant vision of the twink (and his new hipster variants) as the dominant norm in gay cultures.

⁶¹ Wright, “Concise History,” 23.

on a bittersweet note: “what started out as an escape from roles and labels, has become just another form of gay drag...*BEAR* was originally about being your own man...But the original *BEAR* magazine, such as it was, began to die a long time ago. It’s an age-old dilemma: you can’t mass-market individuality.”⁶² His reflections call to attention the ways in which gay communication networks cannot always escape the histories of commercialization, racism and whiteness that Meeker calls attention to in his work.

My hope, however, is that by using the analytical framework of the communication network to explore how spaces of hope were created, even contingently, in the beginning days of *BEAR*, and how many of these positive impulses have continued in bear media cultures, as evidenced by the many, many positive, hopeful, helpful, and supportive posts shared between members of the BML. These spaces may have been later foreclosed, but they still were, in their historical moment, potentially able to help many bears adopt a new form of self-identity. Though many of these men might not end up lining up behind what *BEAR* would become, this magazine contributed to the formation of a queer cultural fraction that now has many different veins and sub-fractions housed within it, even if the magazine no longer reflects them all as it did in its early days. My analysis provides a way to look at this magazine for what it was in its moment and not slam the door on its potential and the important role it played in the construction of contemporary bear identity.

Conclusion: Intersections of Use(lessness) and Media History

Paralleling Bird’s re-definition of produsage, I argue that it is valuable to name early *BEAR* readers and contributors to the BML alike as producers, and name their negotiations of

⁶² Mauerma, 216.

identity, self, and community facilitated by this grainy porno rag and internet listserv as a form of “trivial” yet significant prodisage. Is the ephemeral production of self a worthy production, even, or especially, when it is also accompanied by the production of cum and sweat and desire and lust? Is prodisage “inconsequential” if it flows out into a communication network which helps bear users feel connected to an ephemeral community full of others like them, sitting using their media for similar smutty or entertainment (or even banal and mundane) purposes, and sending that connection back to them like so many pings to/from a website? Since the so-called “direct” communication of social media doesn’t materially connect person to person, it would seem that an alternative history of BEAR and the BML suggests they perform a similar function through the affective, collective, and sticky linkages they create between users.

“Use” is a term I see as being applicable to the intersections of a commodity’s use value and the emotional, affective, or identity-based uses that object has for the person using it. In the relationship between queer identity and media consumption there are different forms of use that fracture away from Jenkins’ version of the term for minoritized users, who learn to recognize and sustain different kinds of production. Bear prodisage fits within Bird’s more democratized version of the term and its insistence on exploring the mundane and/or non-mediated prodisages media users create, though as with any negotiation between people and media forms, this relationship is not one without conflict and struggles. The magazine would end up encouraging a version of bear community which values muscle bears over the girth’n’irth crowd and make porn resembling mainstream gay porn in aesthetics and pricing as its profile grew (no pun intended), yet it still remains in contemporary and historical bear consciousness as a groundbreaking site of identity formation for those who are represented in it and those now largely excluded from its pages, both web and paper.

Bird closes her argument in “Are We All Producers Now?” with some tentative discussion of the influence, both direct and indirect, that media can have on its audience. For Bird, media influence “is not a simple cause-and-effect relationship, but a much more subtle issue. Media producers have the power to inscribe privileged representations of the world that place constraints on actual audience practices, and may actually shape those practices.”⁶³ This ability to limit choices through privileging certain representations without indicating that others have been taken out of play leaves media producers with scripted choices and feelings that feel like unique decisions and affective ties to their media. For Bird, these unique-feeling scripts serve as the ultimate critique of Jenkins’ appropriation of produsage models, sounding as a cautionary note regarding the utopic dimension of assuming that everyone gets to produce equally, and that somehow because “we” are making new things, they are automatically free of ideology or oppression. Bird’s is a useful critique of produsage, as it brings to engage with the interactions of minoritized subjects and their media by asking who has more ideological power and access to the means of media production. Adding queer considerations to these discourses, however, muddies Bird’s critique. Much like my own experiences watching the chiselled sexy bodies on *Queer as Folk* as a child, queer media identifications tend to come with simultaneous pleasures of inclusion and the pain of stinging exclusions (one could also tie this critique to the predominance of disidentifications in queer [media] theory). Bears in the 80s and 90s wanted to identify with what was shown in early *BEAR*, but would also write into the magazine to describe its pleasures while arguing vociferously about how and why something that wasn’t represented is a bear and why another representation is not, while many others took these concerns, both specifically related to *BEAR* and in more general terms, into other bear-centric communication

⁶³ Bird, 508.

networks like the BML. Queers often have to make do with depictions of something that feels like it is yours even as it also insists that you be different than what you are. Partial representation is still an amazing, beautiful, and unique-feeling experience even as it also tells you all the “good” things you aren’t.

And, thus, I conclude here by tying bear media, and its many forms of prodisage, back to my larger aim of tackling how queer media consumption becomes a space for the creation of alternative, and decidedly queer, cultural capital. I find it impossible to think thoroughly about queer media consumption without making a connection between prodisage, especially prodisage initiated by invested media consumers that is not aimed at providing capital to mass media producers, as an exercise in taste making. From personals ads to BML postings about everything from peaches to racism to *Evita* and rollercoasters, the history I’ve detailed through my close readings of archive materials, is a history of working to redefine media, especially pornography, that materialist thinkers like Marx and Bourdieu don’t even have on their radars, as both a taste of the necessary and a taste of freedom. Bears’ definitional work regarding sexual, communal, and attitudinal tastes is necessary as queer and trans media is so often felt to be truly necessary for subjects to create meaningful self-identifications and build or find community, digital or physical, which valorizes them as viable subjects, both sexual and not. Even the Canadian Supreme Court, in its various decisions in favour of Vancouver’s (now tragically defunct) queer book store Little Sisters as having the right to purvey queer (and) s/m porn because of its centrality to queer communities and identities, making it a form of speech protected by the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.⁶⁴ Whether in the iconographic representations of *BEAR* and its porn tapes or the much more banal work bears on the BML did to find out if

⁶⁴ Janine Fuller and Stuart Blackley. *Restricted Entry: Censorship on Trial* (Vancouver: Press Gang Publishers, 1995).

other bears shared similar interests, be they sexual or not, bear media consumption has, from its start, been a space of redefining tastes. This affective labour is carried out first to argue that these tastes are necessary, and thus useful, to their user, and through that argument and the ongoing bear produsage, turning these very necessary media tastes into tastes of freedom. From the very beginning, *BEAR*'s mission was not just to say bears existed, but also to valorize and validate them as desirable subjects and full humans. This may be a utopic goal, but it is certainly one invested in contributing to feelings of acceptance, and even freedom, within its community through fighting specifically against what the magazine's creators, and many BML users, saw as hegemonic and harmful tastes espoused by straight and gay culture alike.

This chapter's archive-based historiography also serves to make concretely clear the essential nature of affective and emotional labour to queer identity and community formation, especially via print and digital media consumption, in a way that my other, more theoretically focused chapters, cannot. Taking part in the analog communication networks of *BEAR* or the digital ones of the BML takes work, and in the case of the BML, often continued work, even if that's the regular (or irregular) reading of people on the list who rarely or never post (often called lurkers, both by other posters and by lurkers themselves on the rare occasion they would post, usually opening the post by saying they were "de-lurking"). These communication networks, more dynamic and recursive than film and television tend to be, demonstrate how media consumption, as a tool of taste making, identity formation, and community building, is a process, and often a labourious one. On the BML, even when users disagreed with one another, or got into full-blown arguments, the majority of posts (even those made by people most invested in arguments) included reaffirmations of how even when bears fight, they are committed to creating whatever they think an inclusive, affirming community is, and it is one that is nearly always

postured as being simultaneously inclusive of differences and those who have been derided for their difference *and* conceived of as occupying a space outside of dominant cultures and their tastes, gay or straight.

Thus, at the end of the day, I wholeheartedly hold up this case study as an example of queers' efforts to create, define, and recreate alternative forms of cultural capital designed to valorize the tastes, beliefs, and identities of those who take part in this community. This examples demonstrates how queer people, "useless" to both the gay and straight mainstreams, used the debased medium of pornography and new media like listservs (which had yet to be fully accepted as "useful" socially or commercially when bear community started to coalesce) to form new circuits of cultural capital and queer use value defined and enforced by and for themselves. Bears obviously cannot escape from the dominant cultures they must occupy in their lives, be those cultures gay or straight, corporate or cultural, but in their produsages of bear media, we find so many examples of bears working to support other bears and give them cultural capital, status, as valid, taste-making bears within their own community through supporting them, talking to them, debating with them, and sharing of themselves for no purpose other than to feel included in something special, built and framed as outside the dominant norm. What's even more amazing about this research, especially into the BML, is how often I came across users posting in the hopes of mobilizing the bear community to make positive changes in the world, giving back to the larger gay and queer communities they don't appeal to for cultural capital or validation, but still seeking to use their produsages to make yet more produsage in the hopes of positive change. Examples of this range from: bears discussing AIDS activism and history, while offering other bears suggestions about sexual health and disease prevention; organizing a letter campaign to support Proctor & Gamble in pulling its advertising from Dr. Laura Schlessinger's various radio

shows over her homophobic views, when it became clear that the Christian right were already mobilizing to boycott the company; encouraging bears to get involved in politics in and around their non-bear communities; and many more. Bear media produsage simultaneously worked to valorize and validate bears outside of mass cultures and for their own sake, rather than moving up in the world the way Bourdieu might conceive of demonstrations of cultural capital, while also at least trying to work at helping other queer people, but without an agenda based in getting other queer people to validate or valorize bear cultural tastes and capital. Thus I see, in bear media consumption and produsage, an example of how queer communities can create sites of alternative cultural capital, even contingent ones, which frustrate not only hegemonic injunctions against difference, but also Bourdieu's insistence that cultural capital must be practiced only to advance oneself or a cultural fraction to leadership or status within another fraction perceived to be of greater social value. This chapter stands as an example of mediated tutor texts for creating, sustaining, and defending alternative cultural capital and the media that facilitate it, creating value out of "uselessness." It is to producing models for defending queer and trans art, aesthetics, emotional labour, and uselessness that I turn in my next chapter, exploring camp and its relationships to expressing and dealing with the "useless" and "bad" feelings espoused and created by the traumas of capital.

Having explored an historical case study and example of how queer cultural consumption can both discursively and materially form connections, via communication networks, that undergird a queer and/or trans cultural fraction, I will take yet another step outward in scope in my final case study. Through exploring a new, contemporary, trauma- and healing-focused form of trans-specific camp, I will explore when consumption meets back up with production via a film that queerly consumes its "useless" or otherwise debased filmic inspirations, specifically

exploitation cinema genres and tropes, to produce (or produce) a tutor text for strengthening the bonds between members of a queer and/or trans class fraction and encouraging a particular form of social-justice oriented solidarity and healing. Chapter 4, and the camp it studies, are most engaged in critiquing and seeking to change structural issues and power imbalances, and thus becomes this dissertation's final stop as it zooms out from the act of consumption to thinking how consumption can be queerly useful.

Chapter 4

Cutting Camp with Killing: “Bad” Feelings, Homeopathy, and Consumptive Camp

Camp-recognition doesn't ask, "What kind of debased creature could possibly be the right audience for this spectacle?" Instead, it says what if: What if the right audience for this were exactly me?

-Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Some Binarisms (II)" from *Epistemology of the Closet*

There are no guilty pleasures, just pleasures. Hence, "it's so bad it's good" is just good.

-Yuki Nakayama

This chapter examines how *Ticked-Off Trannies with Knives* uses consumptive homeopathic camp to rework and reexamine the brutal everyday traumas that trans and queer folk face and fear.¹ *Ticked-Off Trannies with Knives* critiques its exploitation cinema roots while remaking select elements of exploitation aesthetics, repurposing them to homeopathically introject queer traumas and the “bad” feelings they espouse, especially the desire for revenge, into individual and communal bodies. These campy introjections allow *TOTWK* to explicate new modes of working through trauma that do not conform to individualistic social norms or to LGBT respectability politics. This camp is one that, like much camp performance, is rooted in the particularities of the people who the camp serves: camp is often located in specific times, places, spaces, social or political issues, identities, and/or communities. To that end, though this

¹ For the purposes of this chapter, I use the term trans to describe people who identify with any kind of trans identity and queer as an umbrella term covering fluid definitions of gender and sexuality. I have made these choices to reflect the intentional, and I believe productive, ambiguity about these axes of identification in *TOTWK* so that I can converse with the film using similar terminology, taking it as a model for troubling the rigid definitional politics often forced onto trans subjectivities in mass media. I have also chosen to use “trans” rather than “trans*”, a version of the term deploying the Boolean search operator “*” to signal the open-ended nature of trans identity, following recent trends in trans studies which resists the asterisks’ insistence that there must be *more* than trans to constitute an complete and legitimate identity.

chapter will offer some tentative potentialities for other kinds of camp, my focus will be on the camp of this film, based firmly in the experiences of trans women in contemporary American culture, and the shifts this film makes towards camp which promotes healing and communal solidarity in contrast to the exploitation narratives of the lone survivor and the singling out of trans and queer peoples killed and hurt by mass media, politicians, and LG(BT) activists alike.

Ticked-Off Trannies with Knives follows the story of five trans/queer heroines through a graphic tale of rape and murder followed by campy, bloody, and eminently satisfying revenge. After Bubbles Cliquot (Krystal Summers) is raped (off screen, before the film's narrative begins) by her boyfriend Boner (Tom Zembrod) upon his discovery of a "surprise" in her skirt, our heroines are lured into an empty warehouse where Boner and his henchmen, Nacho and Chuey (Kenny Ochoa and Gerardo Davila), attack them with murderous intent.² Boner et al succeed in murdering Tipper Sommore (Jenna Skyy) and Emma Grashun (Erica Andrews), but Bubbles, Rachel Slurr (Willam Belli), and Pinky La'Trimm (Kelexis Davenport) escape. After Bubbles comes out of the coma induced by being hit in the head with a baseball bat, the three survivors plan and execute their bloody revenge. After a crash course in martial arts training from Fergus (Richard D. Curtain), the manager of the bar where they perform, the heroines let Boner and his henchmen "trap" Bubbles. The heroines turn the tables on Boner and crew when Pinky and Rachel arrive and, after a drawn out series of fights and deliciously sassy humour, all three men are murdered in a gleeful and glamorous orgy of vengeance.

² In the film, as in this sentence, it is easy to assume what this "surprise" is, but it is never specified in the film. This "surprise" does not suggest that Bubbles is a drag queen or a trans woman: drag and trans encompass a wide variety of bodies and are categories that regularly blur together and overlap. Given what a caricature of straight masculinity Boner is, this line establishes Boner as a stand-in for undereducated straight culture and its regular assumption that the only determining factor of someone being trans is their genitalia. One need only watch a mainstream interview with trans people, and especially trans women, to observe this obsession with genitalia that is both inappropriate and reductive of trans experiences and bodily diversity.

What's Camp Got To Do With It?

In this chapter, “healing” is not used to define a bounded, finite moment or act, after which one is fixed and a trauma is resolved. Healing is a process, and from an aesthetic and symbolic perspective, a way to find acceptance of a trauma, and an acknowledgement of its material life effects as part of learning to live with it, overcome it, or even transform it into something positive, empowering, or, at least, livable. This is a narrative that, when applied to queer and trans politics, media, representations, and lives is advanced by LGBT groups with homonormative agendas rooted in respectability politics: they seek to have trans and queer communities “move beyond” the politically “bad,” “useless,” or “unproductive” feelings of hate, fear, violence, pain, and suffering that traumas evoke in the name of fitting in to mainstream society. These narratives also support a popular conception of trans lives in which transition occurs on a linear time scale marked by particular gender affirming surgeries, and this chapter explores how that narrative is troubled by trans camp productions, as they also question respectability politics’ impetus to suppress or release “bad” feelings like anger and the desire for revenge that are central to the lived experiences of many trans (and queer) people. By sidestepping the often-oppressive, or at least problematic, medicalization of trans subjectivity through exploring consumptive camp and homeopathically inflected healing practices, I demonstrate how camp labour has the possibility to frustrate linear, goal-based narratives and political imperatives in queerly productive ways. I argue that the new kind of camp *TOTWK* produces facilitates a coming to terms with trauma, hurt, and fear. Camp labours operate as if in relationship to long-term health, not triage or acute issues. Camp aids in the acknowledgement and naming of difficult situations and problems, but does not foreclose them or assume they’re healed once named or can be treated quickly or with simple solutions. Much as transition and the



Figure 15: “This is the F*cking Sh*t!” Promotional Material for *Ticked-Off Trannies with Knives*.

formation of trans identities are continuous projects, so consumptive camp aids in managing trauma over time.

Camp, as an aesthetic and performative style, is labour. There are many theories of what camp is or isn't, but the most compelling and enduring of them, and those which continue to apply to contemporary media created by queers, trans people, and people of colour, are those

based in performative acts which are meant to make change in the world, whether at a micro level in a dingy bar, or through mass media outlets aimed at affecting large populations. Camping requires the (re)performance of social norms, symbols, and politics, and thus these inherently performative acts are also inherently labourious ones.³ Camp is a process that people work at to model and encourage further labouring in the world through the consumption of camp: unlike many other aesthetic and performative categories, camp is one that is *used* for something, even as its frivolity, irony, or cutting nature often gets it marked as culturally useless.

One of the most common turns of phrase regarding camp is that camp is that which we do to laugh instead of cry about the traumas of queer and trans lives. Beyond this statement's positive sentiment, it alludes to the consumptive nature of camp labour: this kind of camp performance consumes something bad or traumatic, labouring upon it to create a performance of something better, perhaps more hopeful, or at least more aimed at the goal of living, even thriving, under systemic oppression. Given the historically marginalized positions of queer and trans peoples in North American society, it's no surprise that camp studies, as a field, has focused greatly on trauma and structural, cultural, and affective discrimination.

For example, in Esther Newton's landmark text *Mother Camp*, an anthropological study of drag queens and female impersonators in Chicago and Kansas City conducted in the 1960s, Newton's subjects explain their precarious social positions as gay men, queer performers, and the solidarity and competition between themselves that these harsh conditions incur. Newton is careful to demonstrate how much her subjects thought about the social and moral order of the US and the cities they lived in, their precarious place in those orders, and what they think needs to

³ For more on camp as labour, see: Matthew Tinkcom, *Working Like a Homosexual: Camp, Capital, Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

change. Though the text mostly focuses on the traumas and harms incurred for these queer subjects living under American (cultural) capitalism, it does make gestures towards the solidarities these conditions breed as well, both between performers (and their “collective consciousness”) and between queers and other marginalized groups, including especially African-Americans living under Jim Crow.⁴ Even when trauma or violence is not the central theme or topic of scholarship on camp, it’s hard not to see it lurking under the surface, whether through explaining the histories that lead to camp performances and styles, as Newton does, seeking out the problematic representations and issues that can arise from well-meaning camp politics (which I will explain in greater detail below, particularly through Caryl Flinn’s essay “Deaths of Camp”), or even exploring the many positive impacts camp communities and practices have for queer and trans people and communities.

More contemporary scholarship on camp, following trends in queer theory and history, have started to focus more on the positive impacts camp practices, spaces, and communities can have for queer and trans people, and this chapter aims to continue work in this direction. Healing camp offers representational models of non-normative, non-sanctioned ways of living as trans and queer subjects in the world, often in direct response to trauma, violence, or the difficulties of living a trans or queer life today. Aymar Jean Christian outlines a clear example of this kind of camp practice in their article “Camp 2.0.” Christian studies contemporary camp performers using YouTube as an avenue for trans and queer people of colour to express themselves and form their own identity categories through camp performance. The platform of YouTube allows for new possibilities for camp practitioners to reach out to their communities, imagined and material,

⁴ Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979).

providing positive, healing experiences for them and their viewers.⁵ This example is particularly pertinent to my own work as it is one of the only pieces published to date on how camp has migrated into digital media, providing new affordances for camp to reach more people in different, mediated ways, as well as providing spaces for new camp genres to emerge, like the vlogs that Christian foregrounds.

There is, of course, also significant overlap between camp studies, especially its relationships to trauma, and queer studies' exploration of the centrality of trauma, particularly stemming from the AIDS crisis, to queer identity and history. Though far too large a subfield of trans and queer studies to summarize fully, the legacy of AIDS is unavoidable when thinking through contemporary camp. Later in this chapter, for example, the centrality of AIDS as both an individual and communal and/or social trauma will arise in discussing the "irresponsible" (and often darkly campy) queer cinema of the 1990s. One important text to mention to demonstrate the overlaps I'm discussing is Deborah B. Gould's stunningly comprehensive and affecting book *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP's Fight Against AIDS*. In this rich history of ACT UP's organization, actions, activism, and existence in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Gould focuses on the feeling and affects that drove so much of what ACT UP did and stood for. From the rage, grief, and fear sparking protests and direct actions, to the mourning, sadness, and healing growing out of the communities and solidarity ACT UP built and maintained, Gould demonstrates the centrality of emotion, affect, trauma, and the need to cope with trauma (or heal from it, though given the context of this text, coping largely takes center stage in this instance).⁶ I bring this text up, despite it not directly engaging camp (though certainly some of the protests

⁵ Aymar Jean Christian, "Camp 2.0: A Queer Performance of the Personal", *Communication, Culture & Critique* 3 (2010).

⁶ Deborah B. Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP's Fight Against AIDS* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

and direct actions taken by ACT UP described in the text could be read as deadly serious political camp) because it is, I think, one of the best works of queer history and theory residing within both affect and trauma studies paradigms. Though the “gay shame” movement of the early 2000s did some important ground work for connecting affect and emotion to queer identities, it is with works of queer and trans affect theory, like Gould’s, that have laid the foundation for me to connect camp studies and theory into this growing nexus of queer and trans thought on affect, trauma, and healing with more explicitly reparative goals. (The Gay Shame conference at the University of Michigan in 2003 demonstrated that many of the scholars invested in this paradigm were only interested in cisgender white gay identities and shame, given the deeply problematic treatment of both people of colour and trans people at the conference, as well as the appropriation or disregard of their concerns and contributions to the sub-field, making it a poor predecessor to affect theory, which has, on the whole, been much more intersectional in its work.⁷) It is at the junctures of trauma, affect, healing, and camp where this chapter begins, then pulls these threads together by exploring camp as a labour, not just a style or performance or mentality, that can, and is, being taken up by more and more cultural fractions within queer and trans existence for more diverse goals, especially as media diversifies and spreads via the Internet. This movement is exciting and vibrant, and challenging the (historically inaccurate) conception of camp as the province of white gay male drag queens, just as more contemporary affect theory has challenged the centrality of white cisgender masculinities to studying “bad” feelings and their centrality to queer existence.

One thing camp regularly labours on, especially to change tears to laughter, are bad feelings: trans- and queerphobia, hatred, fear, and other emotions and affects that suffuse trans

⁷ For more on this conference and its deeply problematic erasures of trans subjects from queer theories of shame, see: Judith Halberstam, “Shame and White Gay Masculinity”, *Social Text* 23.3-4 (Fall-Winter 2005).

and queer existence. Camp's history of dealing with oppression lends itself to thinking about not just what is bad, but how trans and queer subjects actively labour on these bad objects as ways to reclaim, remake, and revalorize them as objects of value and potential for trans and queer communities, as well as for healing and/or working through the traumas of queer and trans life.⁸ Despite the scholarly work done on how camp deals with controversial or painful topics, its work as healing, consumptive *labour*, especially in the context of paradigms of LGBT respectability politics, has not been well theorized, and is one of the main places in which this dissertation intervenes in camp studies. The closest interlocutor to my work is José Esteban Muñoz's book *Disidentifications*. In particular, his chapter on the performances of Vaginal Crème Davis explores how Davis uses performance as a way to disidentify with cultural and media objects, discourses, and power structures to call attention to oppressive cultural formations.

Disidentificatory objects are ones which the performer, or a minoritized subject in general, relate to or feel they should relate to, but cannot entirely identify with due to their sense of alienation from mass cultures and structures of power that do not represent them fully.⁹ In the book's introduction, Muñoz provides the example of watching white gay men on TV as a child, their faces blacked out due to the controversy of their interviews at the time, and their fear of discovery. Muñoz felt a pull to them, recognizing in them a difference that he shared (being gay), but also the alienation of knowing, instinctively, that his brown skin distanced him from these men, creating a push-and-pull effect with his desired object.¹⁰ Disidentification, as a concept, is useful for thinking about camp as labour since it identifies the kinds of relationships that require

⁸ For an overview of camp's history, interventions, and important place in queer culture, see: *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader*, ed. Fabio Cleto (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999).

⁹ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

¹⁰ Ibid.

the working through and coming to terms with that are not valorized or acknowledged as culturally acceptable. It is also, once again, implicitly a concept about trauma, if not always healing: the very act of disidentifying seems, to me, to require the acknowledgement of not just the positive attachment, but also the recognition of something that hurts the consuming subject as well. Much as Berlant's concept of cruel optimism encompasses both hurt and optimistic desires simultaneously, so disidentification requires a fraught relationship between trauma and identification, which I see as central not just to camp in general, but to changes occurring in camp performances, genres, trends and practices contemporaneously, as camp both moves into new media distribution networks and continues to grapple with the changing conditions of (cultural) capitalism and its violences. As with much camp, seeing both the good and the bad, the hopeful and hurtful, in a situation of queer and/or trans life, sets the conditions for the irony, distance and/or troubled relationship to a social object, and political messaging of camp. Thus, relationships of disidentification can become the catalyst for performances seeking to create new forms of queer and/or trans culture and cultural capital.

Another contemporary example of the ways that camp labour and performance is used for healing ends comes from Marlon Bailey's *Butch Queens Up in Pumps*.¹¹ Though Bailey doesn't reference camp theory explicitly, his study of ballroom cultures, spaces, and performances in Detroit, Michigan, long staples of camp production and definition, show how performative camp labours are used not just for identity formation, but as spaces of activism and community healing in trans, queer, and POC communities. Many of the performers and houses he visited in the course of his research work together at balls to raise awareness about HIV/AIDS

¹¹ Marlon M. Bailey, *Butch Queens Up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014).

prevention and care in their communities, provide resources for participants and spectators living in financially precarious situations, and create safe, supportive spaces for the development of positive identities and affirmative communities.¹² Spaces of healing, caring, and solidarity in this text included communal living spaces that members of the same House occupied, community activism and organizing, especially around HIV/AIDS prevention, awareness, and treatment. Bailey also explored the affective healing and/or care that can come from implicitly campy relationships: whether young members of houses working together to accrue resources for balls and daily life alike or the deeply caring relationships between house mothers and children, Bailey's work shines light on how current camp spaces and practices are as invested as ever in projects of healing and care.

Building off of Newton, Gould, Muñoz, Bailey, and Christian's work, this chapter identifies not just the relationships to bad objects which spur camp performances, but sets the groundwork for a theory of trans and queer cultural capital and labour which creates its own networks of cultural value, consumption, and worth outside of dominant flows of power and cultural capital through healing, consumptive camp. In studying a "bad" cultural object, this derided or barely watched trans (and) queer B-grade exploitation flick, I examine how they serve as models for new practices of trans and queer cultural consumption operating outside of, and even actively fighting against, LGBT respectability politics. I aim to rethink how camp, specifically, works as an avenue for creating cultural worth, capital, and value outside the mainstream, especially (and increasingly visibly) for trans people and communities as they fight to survive and thrive in a hostile contemporary world.

¹² Ibid.

It is important to point out, however, that the volatile concept of camp is capable of generating problematic representations of and through trauma as well as resistant and liberatory ones. Camp, like any performative mode, cannot avoid excluding people from its messages and mechanics as it targets various cultural texts. Though this exclusion is not always intentional or malicious, it does mean that camp is an imperfect art form and works best when it limits its target to a particular issue or identity. I find this to be particularly true of the blunt workings of camp dealing with death, mayhem, and revenge. As Caryl Flinn points out in her essay “Deaths of Camp,” when camp engages in sending up and parodying a cultural phenomenon written on the bodies of particular subjects such as women or people of colour, it still often engages in an operation of othering.¹³ Viewed in this light, *TOTWK* contains some serious issues in its portrayal of race and class. As part of the cutting humour that the heroines espouse, Rachel Slurr and Emma Grashun regularly makes jokes based on stereotypes of race (such as Rachel saying Emma talking quickly with her accented voice makes it hard for them to communicate one-on-one, because “it’s like Charo spittin’ Fritos at me”) which, though enjoyed by the other characters in the film, certainly stereotypes people of color in the name of celebrating trans/drag/queer subjects. *TOTWK* creates trans-positive camp, to a large extent, at the expense of espousing a clearer anti-racist politics. The villains, presented as a group of trashy hicks, two of whom are Latinx men name Nacho and Chuey, also evoke class-based stereotypes. Furthermore, when Bubbles wakes from her coma, she gains a lisp that the other queens mock in an ableist way. *TOTWK* demonstrates how, at the same time that the film’s camp allows for disempowered trans people to take power from oppressive heteronormative structures, they can

¹³ Flinn “Deaths”.

also further disempower people of other identity categories, revealing a perennial tangle in the power dynamics of camp artistic activism.

The camp I'm exploring in this chapter is a labour and style of bad feelings. Camp is generally strong at critiquing the issue, idea, or situation it targets for consumption and (re)production, as *TOTWK* does for bashing and violence, but camp often makes this critique at the expense of other identities. Camp magnifies and expands upon ideas, like putting a magnifying glass over a small part of a picture: it brings one part into focus, but blurs the edges of what's visible through the lens. It's quite normal, and in my experience almost standard, that a camp performance or production about drag, trans, and queer subjects will often trade in problematic representations of race and class, as happens in *TOTWK*. This tendency doesn't make camp unimportant as a resistant strategy, but it is something that needs to be examined critically in camp's production and consumption.

TOTWK's camp is further complicated by the possible othering of the feminist messages of 1970's exploitation rape-revenge films being camped. Flinn writes that, "However adored, then, the camp icon can be ridiculed or put down for its presumed 'differences' from its spectator/critic/consumer."¹⁴ One of the very real problems in camp performance and theory is that it is often based in cisgender gay male culture, or in broader queer cultures, that, as Flinn points out, often uncritically rehearse misogyny, racism, and classism even as they strive for LGBT acceptance. For example, when California voted on Proposition 8, which banned gay marriage in the state after passing, many groups and people espousing LGBT acceptance and respectability politics largely, and uncritically, blamed the "black Christian community" for the bill passing. This assertion was blatantly racist, and largely inaccurate, but for a time was

¹⁴ Ibid., 444.

unquestionably considered to be true in American LGBT circles. In *TOTWK*, the icon being potentially ridiculed (even as its being re-read and brought back to life, after a fashion), 1970s feminist exploitation rape-revenge films, are having the straight woman being attacked evacuated from them by the gay man who wrote and directed this new camp production, meaning that this camping could be involved in a misogynistic silencing of the continued issue cisgender women who suffer sexual violence. On the other hand, by adding the concerns of trans women to discussions of sexual violence, *TOTWK* inclusively expands feminist politics and discussions of sexual violence that all too often exclude non-cisgender women, especially in an era when Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists (TERFS) are making a comeback culturally, though not without significant resistance in academic and activist circles. Furthermore, director Israel Luna takes trans women and drag queens as his camp subjects, and as the controversy over the film at the Tribeca film festival demonstrated, there was some public perception that he was degrading trans subjects by doing so.

All this said, the trans women, drag queens, and people of colour in this film chose to take part in it, and many expressed in the DVD's making-of featurette and in media surrounding the film that they believed in its message of this film and director, suggesting that they were comfortable with the way it was made, including these problematics. The fact that Luna cast three trans women to play trans/queer characters is also not insignificant; many mainstream films including *Boys Don't Cry* and *Transamerica* (dir. Duncan Tucker, 2005) cast cisgender women as trans men and women, where others such as *Dallas Buyer's Club* (dir. Jean-Marc Vallée, 2013) cast a cisgender straight man as a trans woman. Mainstream conversations about the importance of casting trans people in trans roles continue to grow, and *TOTWK* was largely ahead of the curve in this regard (though it has received no significant public credit for this fact).

I don't believe that *TOTWK* or the theories that I am applying to it resolve these ambiguities, but they are worth outlining to show some potential limitations of consumptive homeopathic camp.

TOTWK's humour, thrills, and chills, following from the film's homage to exploitation cinema of the 1970s, are based in the body: the camped body, the sexy body, the trans body, and the body in action. Rape-revenge is a sub-genre of exploitation cinema studied extensively by feminist horror scholars because of its complicated relationship to women's agency over their bodies and the lack of justice they regularly face. As with many of exploitation cinema's sub-genres, the rape-revenge narrative trope predates the heyday of exploitation cinema, with one of the most famous example being Ingmar Bergman's 1960 film *The Virgin Spring*, which would go on to become the (very loose) basis of Wes Craven's exploitation touchstone *The Last House on the Left* (1972). The trope has continued to circulate in Hollywood to this day, through films like Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill* films (2003, 2004).¹⁵ Given that exploitation rape-revenge films are premised on dealing with a crime that invades, penetrates, and violates bodies in a visceral way, the thrill of the revenge sequence comes not just from the cutting wit and crass-yet-sharp mockery of the villains at the hands of *TOTWK*'s heroines, but also at the visual pleasure of watching them fight and murder their attackers. Whether it is Rachel Slurr using two broken CDs to slice up Boner's henchmen or Bubbles cleaving Boner's skull apart with a comically large dagger, watching blood flow and insides come out as revenge for nonconsensual physical, emotional, and symbolic penetration is key to *TOTWK*'s mood, plot, and enjoyment. There is a

¹⁵ For more on rape and sexual violence in exploitation and horror cinema, as well as the history and issues surrounding the rape-revenge narrative generally, see: Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992). Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1993). Jacinda Read, *The New Avengers: Feminism, Femininity, and the Rape-Revenge Cycle* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2000).

distinguished lineage of camp performance and media which engage primarily in body camp, where the joke, wink, and nod are often physical in nature, and regularly involve bodily pleasures, over-emphasized body parts, modifications of bodily presence, scatological humour, or other entertainments involving bodily fluids and functions.¹⁶ Some famous examples of body camp include the hypersexual and ironic performance style of Mae West, the gross out humour of Divine, and the hyperphysical antics of Pee-wee Herman. *TOTWK* evokes body camp through the delight the film takes in our heroine's sultry, athletic forms and the fluids that flow throughout the film, in a funny rewriting of exploitation cinema's more serious (in intent at least) engagement with bodies. *TOTWK* reclaims 'body camp' by revelling in the gorgeous bodies of trans women and drag queens as they murder their attackers. In doing so, the film's camp aesthetic embraces the 'bad' feelings of anger, rage, and desiring revenge are an important embodied part of the lived experiences of trans subjects. Homeopathic camp allows *TOTWK* to explicate new modes of working through trauma that do not conform to individualistic LGBT respectability politics.

¹⁶ In her essay "Deaths of Camp," Caryl Flinn deftly explores body camp and its shortfalls. In particular, female, old, disabled, and fat bodies, as well as bodies of colour, are disproportionately the butt of the joke in body camp. *TOTWK* has some serious shortcomings in its deployment of body camp, which I will address later in this chapter, and though its revenge sequence is a take on body camp that delights in the athleticism and sexual attractiveness of the trans and queer bodies of the film's heroines, it does use some stereotypical and problematic physical markers to construct the caricatures of working class and Latino masculinity that Boner, Nacho, and Cheuy espouse.



Figure 16: Bubbles Survives. Screenshot featuring Krystal Summers as Bubbles Cliquot in *Ticked-Off Trannies with Knives*.

This film's focus on trans and queer bodies committing violence is an important inversion of the grim reality of the first half of the film (and real life trans and queer bashings and murders): violence based on body type and society's transphobic obsession with enforcing "proper" bodily configurations is a part of trans experience, especially for trans women, and particularly trans women of colour, who are also disproportionately impoverished, have unstable or no housing, or live in economic precarity. Discursive violence about the "realness" of Bubbles' body and womanhood turns into physical violence against her and her community. This acknowledgement of the real threat of bodily violence that trans subjects face is then subdued by the campy, humorous violence of the revenge sequence, taking the exploitation rape-revenge formula and campily politicizing it through the reversal of attacker and attacked that the film carries out. *TOTWK* further politicizes the exploitation rape-revenge convention by bucking the trend of isolating the rape victim from their community. Exploitation rape-revenge films typically have one victim, who either avenges herself on her attackers without help, or is

avenged by her family without outside help or support.¹⁷ In these films, violence is committed when someone is most isolated, and vengeance is a personal matter, epitomized especially in *I Spit On Your Grave*, where the protagonist is travelling alone, is gang raped in a rural area, then recovers and exacts revenge with no outside help. Hollywood dramatizations of true stories of queer and trans bashings have a reason to maintain this depiction of the lonely victim, such as in *Boys Don't Cry* (dir. Kimberly Peirce, 1999) and *The Laramie Project* (dir. Moisés Kaufman, 2002), as they are based on true stories. Other fictional films like *The Crying Game* (dir. Neil Jordan, 1992) and the Oscar winning *Brokeback Mountain* (dir. Ang Lee, 2005), however, maintain the trope of the lonely, sad victim of violence without considering how deeply problematic this trope can be when a film's stated goals include promoting queer and trans acceptance. By using body camp and exploitation rape-revenge conventions, *TOTWK*'s diverse trans and queer cast move beyond this trend by not showing viewers Bubbles' rape, denying the consumer any transphobic leering pleasure or the perpetuation of trans genitalia obsessions. Finally, *TOTWK* depicts the heroine's community facing their bashing together, defending one another when Bubbles calls for help, and taking revenge as a group: one for all and all for one (and always in fabulous heels).

Luna and the cast of *TOTWK* describe the film as being made for people who are tired of bashing victims and trans and queer communities "sucking it up" when violence occurs. They would rather see people fight back against their oppression. Many in LGBT political circles and trans communities did not embrace this message, embroiling *TOTWK* in controversy when it was screened at the 2011 Tribeca Film Festival. The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation

¹⁷ Overall the family revenge trope is far less common, but was famously used in *The Last House on the Left*, which is loosely based on Ingmar Bergman's film *The Virgin Spring*, and thus it still merits mention in any discussion of exploitation rape-revenge films.
Read.

(GLAAD) condemned the film on the eve of the festival, citing several reasons why it failed in its stated mission of empowerment.¹⁸ The first iteration of *TOTWK*'s trailer included references to Angie Zapata, a victim of anti-transgender violence in Colorado in 2008, and Jorge Mercado, a gay teen killed in Puerto Rico in 2009. GLAAD asked that the trailer for the film be changed to only use footage from the film. Luna asserted that he has referenced these previous crimes to showcase how the film is about fighting back against real, material transphobic violence, but acquiesced and removed all outside footage.¹⁹ When the film was released, GLAAD and the Media Advocates Giving National Equality to Trans People (MAGNET) protested the film at Tribeca, claiming that Luna's "revenge fantasy" glorified transphobic violence and did not take seriously the plight of transpeople who have suffered or live in constant fear of being bashed. Some critics even suggested that the film would promote violence against transpeople, based in the over-simplified logic that if it's shown on screen, more people will want to commit similar crimes (a position which shares more in common with "decency" crusaders like Tipper Gore than any nuanced, activist position).²⁰ This, despite the fact that there were many transpeople involved in the film's production who publicly spoke out against this claim, yet were apparently ignored by protesters. According to Krystal Summers,

I am a transgender woman and one of the lead actors in "Ticked-Off Trannies with Knives" [sic]. Our film does not promote hate or violence against transgender women. It is not a documentary, but a work of fiction and a revenge fantasy. I would never partake in a project that made light of the appalling acts of hate that we, as transgender women, encounter nearly every

¹⁸ For Krystal Summer's support of Luna's objectives, see Itzkoff "'Ticked-Off Trannies' Actor Responds to Controversy". For Willam Belli's response to the film's detractors, especially those who didn't like its use of the contentious term "tranny", see Belli "Ticked-Off Actor." For more on GLAAD's protest of the film see Musto "'Ticked-Off Trannies' Should Get a GLAAD Award!". The making of featurette on the *Ticked-Off Trannies With Knives* DVD, along with the cast and crew commentary on the film, also include multiple references to the protests, the film's stated mission/intentions, and the cast's support for the film.

¹⁹ Itzkoff "Trailer", Bolcer "Alter".

²⁰ Bolcer "Tribeca Protested"

day... The transgender community is always asking that people not judge us by our exterior and take the time to look deeper - I hope that you will do the same with our film.²¹

The assertion that the film would promote transphobic violence rested on the premise of LGBT respectability politics. Ascribed to by organizations like GLAAD and MAGNET, respectability politics encourages LGBT people to embrace “good” social comportment and act like “good” citizens to gain legally recognized civil rights such as the ability to marry, serve in the military, and gain equal access to workplace benefits.²² Though there is nothing wrong with these goals, organizations such as GLAAD often use the plea for the representation of “respectable” LGBT subjects in the media to censor “inappropriate” or “problematic” language and “disrespectful” representations of queer and trans subjects. One need only look as far as the recent controversy over the use of the terms “tranny” and “she-mail,” a pun combining the derogatory term she-male with e-mail, on the popular reality TV show *RuPaul’s Drag Race* to see the kinds of language regulation that GLAAD promotes in the name of respectability politics. One can also see how divisive these politics are within queer communities, regardless of one’s position in an argument: the *Drag Race* controversy and LogoTV’s decision to pull episodes and segments with content deemed offensive by GLAAD has led to a very large and vocal schism among former cast members of *Drag Race* and major drag and trans media figures. (Though, in this instance, I agree with the decisions made to remedy these specific issues, due to *Drag Race*’s increasingly vast audience and marketing towards mainstream and straight audiences.

Furthermore, at no point did the show or RuPaul claim that these uses were for political or activist aims, campy or otherwise, implicitly framing them as just “funny” or “meaningless

²¹ Itzkoff, “Actor Responds.”

²² For more, see: Vincent Doyle, *Making Out in the Mainstream: GLAAD and the Politics of Respectability* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2016).

jokes.” Bluntly, RuPaul’s general relationship with, and response to, trans communities is similar to a politician who “apologizes” for doing something bad, but frames it as a generational issue, and/or “the youth” or “activists” or another “divisive,” vaguely defined group of people taking things “too seriously,” showing yet another way that homonormativity breeds strange parallels between gays and lesbians and the political tactics of the right, the same political and discursive trap many of the protests of *TOTWK* fell into.)

Trans activist, theorist, and artist Kate Bornstein wrote a review of *TOTWK* called “When Bad Movies Happen to Good People” in which she panned the film *and* GLAAD. Referring to the organization as “GL(noT)AAD,” Bornstein questioned their commitment to trans experience and understanding of the complexities of trans subjects’ relationships to violence in media. She writes, “I’ve read the protest blogs and the press releases denouncing the film. For the most part, they’re well-reasoned and justifiably passionate. And still, the bulk of activist responses to this unworthy film have been myopic in [their] concern for the ‘respectability’ of trans people. Look, not all trans people want to be considered respectable citizens of a culture that would rather see us as dead as the trannies in Luna’s film.”²³ Though I disagree with her opinions of the film, Bornstein astutely identifies the problems with rights-based organizations telling trans people how to react to the media they consume, especially when the goal of respectability seems, to many, to be about propagating a social system which often causes trans people harm. Accordingly, when GLAAD referred to the damage the film does to “actual transgender women,” Bornstein reminds us that “Transgender does not equal only trans men and trans women who make themselves and their lives as close as they can to you. Transgender is [an] experience shared by countless people with a limitless number of gender

²³ Bornstein.

expressions. Drag queens and drag kings are transgender people, family, tribe. It's a tactic of power politics to divide and conquer."²⁴ By proscribing what transgender can mean in the very name of defending it, GLAAD and respectability politics stand to cause harm through exclusion rather than engaging with the complicated experiences of trans people and communities.

These discourses also seek to proscribe what counts as appropriate affect, emotion, or action for media and queer or trans aesthetics and art. At every level *TOTWK* was deemed inappropriate from the point of view of respectability politics: it was branded too violent, too insensitive, too politically incorrect, not sympathetic enough, not made by trans people (despite casting more of them than the Oscar movies organizations including GLAAD and the HRC pronounce to be progressive), and made by a cisgender gay man (who is a person of colour and part of the community in which this film was produced and is loosely based on). What counts as appropriate is a function of what is culturally valourized: those with the most cultural and social capital are those with appropriate politics, affects, and expressions of dissent, though I doubt Bourdieu ever envisioned this point being made to differentiate levels of privilege within queer and trans politics or identity. They become the tastemakers and determiners of what elements of social and cultural capital will pay off, and for whom. Inappropriate affects, politics, or representations are those which do not seek to climb the social ladder out of "queer" or "radical" spaces and into mainstream (read: privileged) cultural fractions, but to valourize the work and values of lower fractions, changing the system of value and questioning the hierarchy of worth that upwardly mobile LGBT organizations cling to. Therefore, "in/appropriate" is a moving and relative target, but one that can be defined through cultural context and an examination of the political climate that cultural expressions operate in. By saying that *TOTWK* doesn't live up to

²⁴ Ibid.

appropriate ways of representing trans people, or even how best to “be” trans, organizations like GLAAD missed exactly the point that camp makes about bad affects, feelings, emotions, and politics. Life is not appropriate, and the desire to conform to standards of appropriateness lines up neatly with Bourdieu’s conception of how cultural capital and social structures operate: in constantly trying to be like the fraction above, oppressed people will always stay oppressed, and do so willingly, if unconsciously, even if some of them advance up the social ladder through systems like homonormativity. In critiquing and silencing this film, which happened in no small part because seemingly no LG(BT) organizations recognized that *TOTWK* is deeply politically campy (a commitment the film doesn’t even attempt to hide, and even celebrates), organizations including GLAAD once again show their lack of commitment to real change and revolutionary politics for *all* the groups they purport to represent.

This conflict represents the two major positions espoused by queer and trans reviewers, bloggers, and internet commentators on the film: that *TOTWK* is a campy and empowering symbolic bashing back against trans- and queerphobia, or that it symbolically commits transphobic violence and revictimizes trans and queer folk who have been harmed. It is the film’s polarizing nature that makes it important to discuss as a camp and queer cultural icon. Despite the film’s problematics and limitations, however, it presents a new kind of camp which, rather than seeking to be incorporated into mainstream media and a politics of respectability, recognizes the necessity of working through and embracing the “bad” feelings that grow out of the individual and community traumas that trans and queer people experience regularly.

What’s Good About Bad Pleasures: Consumptive Camp as Homeopathic

“Ooooh gurl, he’s bleeding on your couch. I’ll kill him for you.”
- Rachel Slurr

A “good” spectator is expected to be embarrassed about loving exploitation cinema, alongside horror films, gory films, sappy melodramas, pornography, and all the other “debased” forms of art. These films, often made “badly” or cheaply, engage in “bad” pleasures that run contrary to our norms of institutional justice, and they provide “bad” pleasures that are decried by religious establishments, societal institutions, and assimilationist LGBT activist groups alike. In the case of exploitation rape-revenge films specifically, their graphic violence and depiction of trauma are derided as being amoral or promoting future sexual violence through their “glorification” of rape, and they are not something to be enjoyed or engaged with as serious cultural artistic expression with personal or community use value. These were all complaints lobbed at *TOTWK* in its reviews and in the protests against it.²⁵ If you love these genres, it is completely common to express your love as being based in the old adage “it’s so bad, it’s *good*,” one that I have used repeatedly myself, particularly in reference to *TOTWK*, as a way to justify something implicitly understood to be inappropriate to like in polite company or taste cultures. Given the overwhelming historical and contemporary popularity of the films and genres that trade in “bad” pleasures, particularly those that depict personal and community trauma and violence, *TOTWK* is an ideal sites from which to examine and question the relationship that trans and queer subjects have to traumas on screen, and how camping trauma can help to negotiate the fear of impending trauma. I am interested in the “bad” desires that drive camp production and consumption, and how these films works to validate “bad” desires that arise from the experience of watching trauma on film. Their camp demonstrates that the “bad” feelings of exploitation

²⁵ Some internet and mass media reviews that expressed some or all of these concerns include Natasia Rose’s for [lezgetreal.com](#), Genzlinger “Seeking Vengeance in High Heels” for *The New York Times*, Gary Goldstein’s review for the *Los Angeles Times*, and Advocate.com’s opinion piece “A Gay Man’s Fantasy?”.

films can be a vehicle for confronting fear and improper emotions at both a personal and communal level.

As a consumption style, camp takes in pop culture, historical references, current events, and other cultural references, consumes them, and in doing so, transforms them. Sometimes the process of camping produces social critique, or art, or even nonsense, as a way to perform the laughing-over-crying function mentioned in this chapter's introduction. In the case of *TOTWK*, the intersection of camp and exploitation rape-revenge conventions mark it as a film that is doubly condemnable for its "bad" pleasures and potential for causing more harm than good, as GLAAD assured us the film would promote violence against trans folk and the trans community.²⁶ The potential for camp and horror to be sites of moral turpitude is not a new one: Jack Babuscio explains: "The horror genre, in particular, is susceptible to a camp interpretation. Not all horror films are camp, of course; only those which make the most of stylish conventions for expressing instant feeling, thrills, sharply define personality, [and] outrageous and 'unacceptable' sentiments."²⁷ Though exploitation rape-revenge films have a contentious relationship within the larger genre of horror, these descriptors are certainly applicable to *TOTWK*. Bubbles' sexy female body makes her both attractive and monstrous to Boner, the heroines' humour and revenge plot are outrageous (and barely narratively coherent), and the film's fight scenes are both thrilling and ridiculous in their unbelievability. *TOTWK* uses the stylish performativeness of the heroines' bodies, beauty, and wit to engage in evoking the thrills and chills of rape-revenge films and the socially "unacceptable" act of taking revenge into one's own vigilante hands. Given that Susan Sontag, in her formative essay "Notes on 'Camp,'"

²⁶ Villarreal.

²⁷ Jack Babuscio, "The Cinema of Camp (AKA Camp and the Gay Sensibility)," in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader*, eds. Fabio Cleto et al (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 121.

believes that “Camp is art that proposes itself seriously, but cannot be taken altogether seriously because it is ‘too much’”²⁸ and that “Camp is a solvent of morality,”²⁹ the ability of camp and exploitation films to work hand in hand seems even stronger given that exploitation cinema is loved as a cult object *because* of its cultural debasement for having just “too much” gore, violence, and bad (or un[re]productive) pleasure.

Perhaps it is unsurprising, then, that the protests against *TOTWK* also completely ignore the aesthetic and generic codes of the film in their rush to condemn it. *TOTWK* draws connections not only to exploitation cinema, but also to the ground-breaking impropriety of the New Queer Cinema of the 1990s. For example, it isn’t hard to see *TOTWK* as continuing the work of “irresponsible cinema,” a term coined by director Gregg Araki to describe his 1992 film *The Living End*. Originally titled *Fuck the World*,³⁰ *The Living End* follows two HIV positive men, Luke and Jon, as they flee across America after believing they’ve killed a cop in a queer riff on the road movie. The film features graphic scenes of bareback anal sex, erotic asphyxiation, and rape, which are used to flip AIDS-era stereotypes of gay promiscuity, showing HIV positive characters continuing to be sexual creatures rather than sickly husks, and engaging in “irresponsible” sex acts and leading “irresponsible” lives. More importantly, the film presents the men cherishing revenge fantasies: Luke suggests that they drive all the way to the White House and inject President Bush with a syringe of their seropositive blood as a way to force the government to act to help people suffering from HIV/AIDS. For Grundmann, “The film’s outlaw

²⁸ Susan Sontag, “Notes on Camp,” in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader*, eds. Fabio Cleto et al (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 59.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 64.

³⁰ Kylo-Patrick R. Hart, “Boldly Representing AIDS Rage, Realities, and Risks: Gay Male Characters and the Boundary-Pushing Films of Gregg Araki,” in *Proceedings of the 18th Annual American Men’s Studies Association Conference*, 96.

component is fairly straightforward even as it receives a queer activist spin-the couple want to destroy what destroys them, namely the Establishment.”³¹ New Queer Cinema offers an exploitation-tinged queer form of political critique, and *TOTWK* uses the further camping of both exploitation and irresponsible cinema, framed through its resistance to respectability politics, to turn irresponsibility into a homeopathic, specifically trans politics. By saying that *TOTWK* doesn’t live up to “appropriate” ways of representing trans people, or even how best to “be” trans, organizations like GLAAD miss exactly the point that camp makes about bad affects, feelings, emotions, and politics: *trans and/or queer life is not appropriate and never has been.*

³¹ Roy Grundmann, “The Fantasies We Live By: Bad Boys in *Swoon* & *The Living End*,” *Cinéaste* 19 no. 4 (1993).

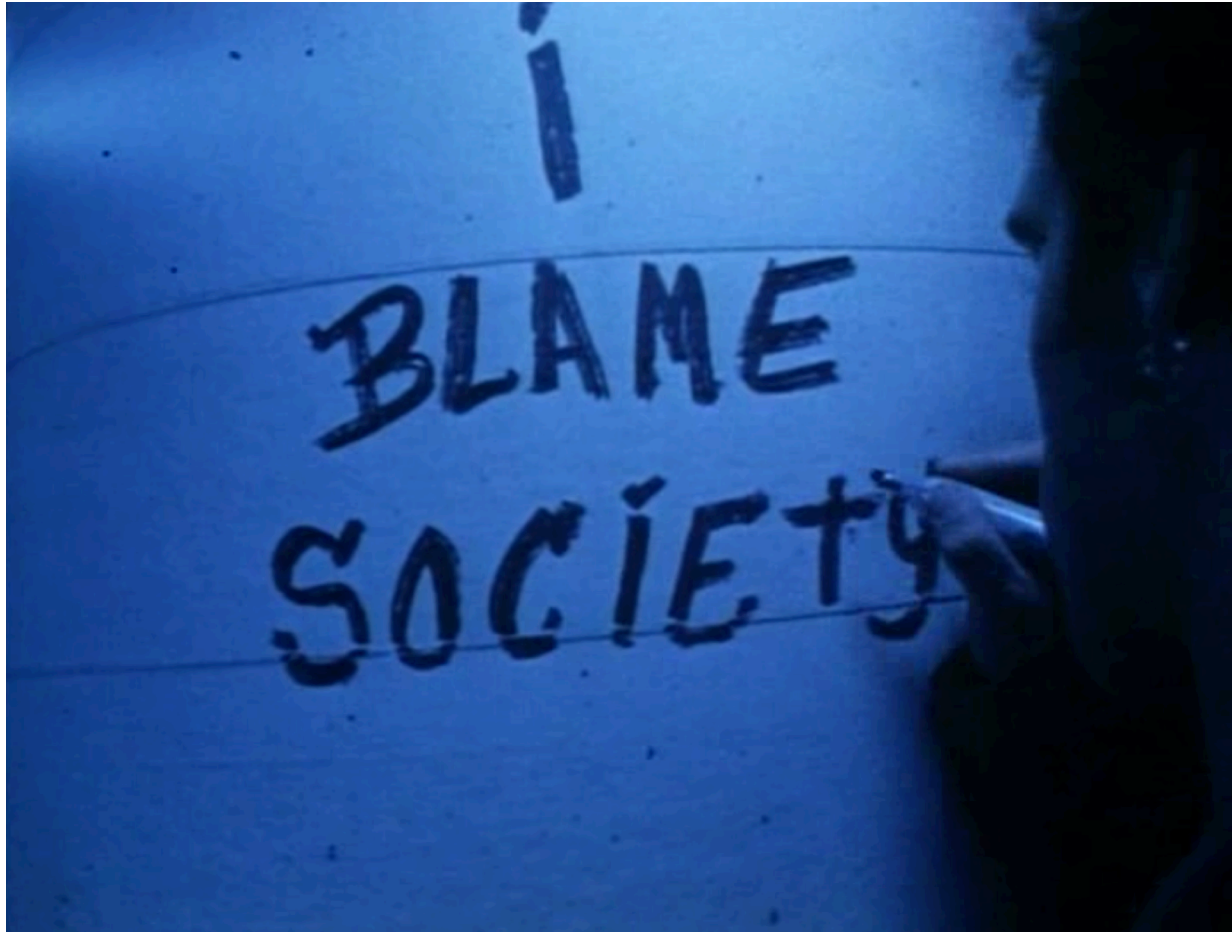


Figure 17: “I Blame Society.” Screenshot from *The Living End*.

In his “‘Trashing’ the Academy: Taste, Excess, and an Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style,” Jeffrey Sconce draws a connection between camp and paracinema, a class of films including exploitation movies which is loved for being excessive, cheap, and panned by the (Hollywood) establishment. He considers both “highly ironic:” paracinema “is an aesthetic of vocal confrontation” that attacks the established canon of “quality” cinema.³² Unfortunately, Sconce ignores that camp, though sometimes a gay-centric, Hollywood-focused aesthetic strategy, has a proud history of vocal confrontation, from ball cultures to drag queen José

³² Jeffrey Sconce, “‘Trashing’ the Academy: Taste, Excess, and an Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style,” *Screen* 36 no. 4 (1995), 374.

Sarria's 1961 run for the San Francisco Board of Supervisors. Camp and exploitation cinema are both political and confrontational, and their similarities are made clear in *TOTWK*.

Exploitation cinema's deeply problematic nature lies in exploiting the bodies of women, people of colour, and trans and queer subjects for aesthetic pleasure and profit. Yet, as a genre, it engages with social issues affecting minoritized populations in raw, sometimes confused, and yet often prescient ways. For example, iconic trash-film director Ed Wood's 1953 film *Glen or Glenda* capitalized on the media sensation surrounding the Christine Jorgenson's public transition by purporting to be an exposé and examination of sex change operations and trans lives. The film's fans have received it, however, as "an odd plea for public tolerance of transvestitism," drawing on Wood's own experiences as a transvestite.³³ The film's presentation of trans identity may confuse related trans desires, yet it still publicized, even humanized, trans issues to paracinematic Wood fans who might not have been aware of Jorgenson or the possibility of being a transsexual or transvestite. For Sconce, the love of paracinema includes the excess of knowing how to read outside of the text itself, connecting it to the lives of the people in the film,³⁴ be that Wood's own experiences, or sympathy for public figures like Jorgenson. A similar connection is legible in *TOTWK* (though perhaps with a more coherent political aim) by evoking the real dangers that trans people face under contemporary capitalist power structures, inviting the viewer to consider the broader social context that the film engages.

TOTWK draws attention to the very real contemporary politics of trans bashings, and in this vein, the brutal revenge carried out by Bubbles, Pinky, and Rachel against their attackers and rapists is one which presents them as taking power for themselves in a moral order that would

³³ Ibid., 388.

³⁴ Ibid., 388-9.

deny them justice, agency, and healing. This moral order, embodied by Boner, takes the form of a card game, in which he offers Bubbles the “choice” to pick how she dies by selecting a random card that represents a different gruesome death. Upon being rescued (and following a costume change into a very 70s black latex catsuit), Bubbles flips the script on Boner, offering him the same “choice” about how to die. This is a guilty pleasure for the audience and the heroines, as they have taken the tools of torture of their attackers, clearly framed as awful transphobes by the film, and turned them back on the villains. This pleasure is transmuted into a new kind of “bad,” but not guilty, pleasure through the campy comedy routine of Bubbles, Pinky, and Rachel eventually forgetting which card means what, capped by Rachel Slurr’s punch line “This is too complicated! You shouldn’t need flashcards for murder!” Doing away with Boner’s convoluted game, the heroines engage in an orgy of recuperative violence to reclaim their lives from the fear and terror wrought upon them, leading to an extended exploitation fight sequence full of cheesy choreography and slow-motion overlap cuts of high kicks (complete with exaggerated synthesized, cartoon-esque fight sound effects), which lingers on the deaths of the villains by knife, broken CD, larger knife, and a (comically tiny) gun (Boner’s, naturally, providing a final punchline to a name already rooted in reversing problematic obsessions with genitalia).

Furthermore, given the ways that feminist theorists have celebrated rape-revenge films like *I Spit*, they certainly have the potential to unglue the mores that govern heteronormative society, and *TOTWK* has been painted as being counter to the moral tales told by LGBT respectability politics.³⁵ Additionally, “while camp advocates the dissolution of hard and

³⁵ Interestingly, the only constituency of reviewers that I found who widely lauded the film, or gave it poor reviews based on its plot and aesthetics rather than political or identity-based content, came from the (largely straight) horror community. In many reviews, this seemed to come from the film’s homage to cult favourites from the seventies that it carries out in its faux scratched film finish, bad music, and intentionally awkward pacing.

inflexible moral rules, it pleads, too, for a morality of sympathy”³⁶ based in the fact that “to be camp is to present oneself as being committed to the marginal with a commitment greater than the marginal merits.”³⁷ These two quotations point to the generative side of camp that always sits counter to its destructive or mocking side: with every attack on the moral fibre of society is a commitment to those marginalized subjects being attacked by morality, one which evokes a sympathetic rewriting of that community’s position and subjectivity. Subjects, identities, and aesthetics deemed “useless” from a mainstream perspective are valued and valourized above and beyond what they “deserve” artistically, exactly because of their excessive “uselessness.” Even the brutal revenge carried out by Bubbles, Pinky, and Rachel is one which presents them as taking power for themselves in a moral order that would deny them justice, agency, and healing after they were attacked. Camp and exploitation rape-revenge films are a bad match made in immoral heaven, and it is this match that has such generative potential for trans people who want to kill in a world where mainstream LGBT politics has largely given up on radical politics.

³⁶ Babuscio 120.

³⁷ Booth quoted in Andrew Ross, “Uses of Camp,” in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader*, eds. Fabio Cleto et al (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 317.



Figure 18: “You Shouldn’t Need Flashcards for Murder.” Screenshot featuring Krystal Summers as Bubbles Cliquot in *Ticked-Off Trannies with Knives*.

TOTWK engages the cinematic bodies of both the film’s participants and viewers in an invitation to see camp as a means for engaging in ongoing healing practices. According to Eric Santner, who developed a theory of homeopathy which engages its core concepts (rather than actual medical practices) in analyzing cultural artefacts,

In a homeopathic procedure the controlled introduction of a negative element - a symbolic or, in medical contexts, real poison - helps to heal a system infected by a similar poisonous substance. The poison becomes a cure by empowering the individual to master the potentially traumatic effects of large doses of the morphologically related poison.³⁸

³⁸ Eric L. Santner, *Stranded Objects: Mourning, Memory, and Film in Postwar Germany* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 21.

Trans theorist Eliza Steinbock refers to this phenomenon as the “law of similars” which “trigger[s] the body’s system of healing through administering a dose of what ails,”³⁹ or letting “like be cured by like,” a central tenet of homeopathic practice as a response to the violence of early medical intensive treatments like bloodletting.⁴⁰ Santner elaborates on how homeopathy works psychically: when a trauma has been suffered, one can relive it in small doses in a controlled and supportive environment to come to terms with it and complete the work of mourning a loss, building resilience to future traumas.⁴¹ Aesthetic homeopathy, then, is useful for thinking through how people come to terms with an overwhelming pain, fear, or hurt through the reliving of that trauma in small doses.

Philosophies of homeopathy present an alternative to conventional medicine in much the same way trans studies questions the philosophies of medicalized definitions of trans-ness as pathological alongside activism regarding diagnostic practices and medical policies trans people regularly navigate. Calling into question the “victim-perpetrator model for dualistic relations of violence-agency,” Steinbock argues that trans aesthetics navigate the tensions between curative violence wrought through transition-related surgical cuts and how the “resemblance of embodiment” that they entail can allow trans people to gain agency through them.⁴² Much as Steinbock demonstrates how famous Danish trans woman and writer Lili Elbe’s public embrace of sex-change technologies in the early 20th century not as for healing a disease, but for working through one’s own desires and identity, demonstrates the broader “adaption of sex-change”

³⁹ Eliza Steinbock, “The Violence of the Cut: Transsexual Homeopathy and Cinematic Aesthetics,” in *Violence and Agency: Queer and Feminist Perspectives*, eds. Gender Initiativkolleg Wein (Frankfurt and New York: Campus Publications), 162.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 163.

⁴¹ Santner 20-5.

⁴² Steinbock 155.

technologies for many trans people,⁴³ so *TOTWK*, its production team, and its stars campily adapt exploitation cinema technics of minoritized reclamation and empowerment. Building out of Steinbock's work, *TOTWK* exemplifies how cuts, whether filmic or surgical, or symbolic, as I suggest, can in fact open up new forms of agency for viewers, characters, and communities, as cuts revitalize and engender a renewed aesthetic experience through the mediation of violence and technologies.⁴⁴ Thus, representations of agential trans violence can act as a homeopathic, cinematic, consumptive and campy strategy of trans healing.

Importantly, homeopathy is primarily used for dealing with long-term health concerns, rather than “healing” something immediately, the focus of big-pharma-fueled medical industries and the narratives of surgery and drugs as the entirety of transition that they propose for trans people. Scholar Eric Cazdyn discusses the ways that dealing with chronic illness has become a new, and megalithic, part of contemporary pharmacological and medical discourses, as big pharma companies look for ways to make acute diseases chronic ones through drugs, which then require continued medicating. Homeopathy is also different than this trend, both in its less diagnostic impetus, and because it is not looking for management via drugs which stabilize the human and make a disease somehow more “bearable” or “less noticeable.”⁴⁵ In other words, the homeopathic framework helps to refute the myth of a one-stop transition for trans people, by refocusing on the long arc of medical and non-medical practices, techne, and (self-)care strategies. Rather than trying to keep something negative at bay, homeopathy seeks to incorporate it into the body; similarly the consumptive trans camp of *TOTWK* demonstrates that

⁴³ Ibid., 161.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 162.

⁴⁵ Eric Cazdyn, *The Already Dead: The New Time of Politics, Culture, and Illness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

the “bad” feelings of exploitation films can be a mode of homeopathic introjection into bodies beyond the physical and individual, thus expanding the scope of trans homeopathy. It works at a communal level to begin the process of reintroducing the ‘toxins’ of trauma and phobic violence in small, controlled doses with the goal of engaging in the process of coming to terms with it in a healthy way in bodies larger and more diffuse than the material, individual body: it works at the level of the symbolic body, the communal body, the imagined body, and the cinematic body.

In Caryl Flinn’s exploration of Germany’s attempts to come to terms with the atrocities committed by the Nazi regime, she shows how kitsch referencing Nazi symbols and aesthetics can provide a specifically filmic homeopathic experience. She writes that “homeopathic introjection” works by “enmeshing the worst of the past with the present without guilt or nostalgia.”⁴⁶ The introjected object is one of memory: Flinn examines how Werner Schroeter’s films begin the process of allowing Germany to acknowledge and move beyond the trauma of being complicit with the Nazi regime’s crimes by introjecting small pieces of it into the national identity rather than continuing to deny it, specifically through kitsch, a debased (and I would say “useless”) genre.⁴⁷ As such, Schroeter’s kitsch accepts the abject of Germany’s past, and “takes in’ controlled doses of unwanted aesthetic, political ideology, desire, and history” to depict “things that audiences are not supposed to talk about, desire, or lament. It helps us engage off-limit memories and desires, even though they seem to be at considerable remove from our current positions.”⁴⁸ Importantly, the films Flinn discusses are not Nazi propaganda, just as *TOTWK* doesn’t promote transphobic violence and *The Living End* wasn’t advocating for the

⁴⁶ Caryl Flinn, “Introjecting Kitsch: Werner Schroeter, Music, and Alterity,” in *The New German Cinema: Music, History, and the Matter of Style* (Los Angeles: University of California Press), 233.

⁴⁷ Ibid. 255-62.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 256.

president to be intentionally infected with HIV. The kitsch of the films appropriate Nazi symbols, the “poison” being introjected, which allow viewers come to terms with the actual toxicity of the Nazi regime and the memories of its crimes in small doses couched in humour, musical numbers, and kitsch aesthetics. In debasing “true” culture, the kitsch of Schroeter’s films creates a similar-but-different toxin that becomes a homeopathic tool of healing for a culture. Whereas Flinn’s primary focus in this chapter is on the importance of memories being introjected into the German national identity by Schroeter’s films, I am more interested in the question of the *desires* which drive consumption via camp, and how *TOTWK* works to introject “bad” desires that arise from the experience of watching trauma on film (back) into the trans/queer viewer’s experience, whether specific traumas done to a person that the film evokes or the everyday trauma and fear of attack that being trans/queer entails.

TOTWK uses its campy humour to make the shock of watching trans people committing murder most satisfying, reducing the shock of these images, and allowing for them to be ingested more easily. They are introjected through the humour and camp’s irony, which allows for processing these feelings from a safe distance, rather than be overwhelmed by them in an unmodified, more concentrated, and perhaps more “serious” form. For *TOTWK*, camp becomes (to misquote Julie Andrews) the sugar that helps the (natural) medicine go down so that minoritized communities can embrace the full range of feelings that living in an oppressive society espouses. Homeopathic communal camp aims to slowly reintroduce and consume vengeance, hate, trauma, violence, and other “nasty” desires into individual and communal bodies in a way that lets consumers come to terms with it, harness it, and control it to change the world. These “bad” feelings are important, and *TOTWK* reminds us that bad feelings don’t

always lead to bad outcomes: they can be the catalysts that free people from the hurt and pain of trauma that they no longer have the tools to process fully.

Homeopathic consumptive camp isn't about closing off wounds and doing away with traumas once they're sufficiently worked through, or staying with them forever or remaining mired in pain as a form of politics. Camp is a practice of owning bad feelings and laying claim to the right to have and express them, but also dealing with them slowly, in small doses, valuing them as part of our experiences, but not needing to consistently see them as strictly positive or negative. This sets it apart from politics and theories of queer shame, which usually take the position of something being valued as bad, and through the embracing of the shame that brings, evoking a radical queer negativity. Camp seeks to be a bridge between happiness and sadness, closure and shame, through being a response to material conditions in the world, and address them openly through representation, allowing the consumer space to negotiate their own relationship with communal traumas and find their own place in communal bodies. Camp is an active labour and process of negotiating positions as opposed to taking and holding one. It is an act of translation between the material world where bad things happen and the representation of "bad" valuations, moving them into a different register of queer and trans expression and cultural capital so that they can be encountered in small doses, and valued for themselves.

It is in this space where I find significant, and under-theorized, overlaps between camp studies, homeopathic philosophy, and trans theory. All three are disavowed in some way by mainstream politics, media, and institutions: dark, violent camp is disavowed by LGBT politics and respectable media, trans studies has had a long fight for legitimacy separate from (and sometimes counter to) both feminist and queer studies, and homeopathy is largely considered to be bunk science to medical practitioners. Just as trans studies and theory have long questioned

the assumptions of mainstream society about gender, and camp has long questioned hurtful norms from inside and outside queer communities, so homeopathy looks for more humane ways for people to be healthy in their daily lives and life practices.

Many key texts of trans studies, both “classic” and contemporary, actively resist linear narratives of medicalized transition, seeking instead to view trans experiences and subjectivities as temporally continuous processes of translation, change, and growth. This line of thought can be traced back to pieces as early as Sandy Stone’s “‘Empire’ Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto,” Kate Bornstein’s *Gender Outlaw*, and many others. These authors recognize that though having transition defined medically as a largely surgical process which takes place after psychiatric evaluation and, usually, hormone therapies, is beneficial to trans people who can learn to play the system and tell it what it wants to get the care and services they need and deserve, these narratives also largely ignore the lived experiences of constant transition, healing, and acceptance of, or coming to terms with, the trans self. Transition and trans experience happen over time, gradually, and may never stop happening or changing in meaning and material reality. This is much the same as coming out of the closet is a constant occurrence for queer people: despite its social construction as a bounded event as one leaves a bounded space, we carry our closets with us, and come out of it constantly, throughout our lives.

Though bodies and selves are rigidly categorized at birth, and transition usually begins from these cultural, gendered locations, trans bodies are always bodies in transition, often inhabiting ways of being not entirely coherent to social categories of sex and gender. *TOTWK* espouse trans subjectivity in a way that is, inherently, always occupying a space, time, and place of transiting. Trans theories of subjectivity, medicalization, and healing acknowledge this: in Stone’s work we see practices of trans embodiment and living that go well beyond the

medicalized narrative of the transsexual that Stone recognizes as institutionally important (until such a time that trans people don't have to "play the system" to get the services that they are entitled to).⁴⁹

It is telling that cutting up bodies is central to *TOTWK*, given the centrality of the cut to both film as a medium, the history of slashing bodies apart in exploitation cinema, and the centrality of making cuts in trans bodies as part of surgical transition operations in trans literature and cinema. In "The Violence of the Cut: Transsexual Homeopathy and Cinematic Aesthetics," Eliza Steinbock argues that the centrality of cutting celluloid to make filmic meaning can act as a salve for the traumas of modern capitalist life through awakening senses dulled by a constant stream of media attractions.⁵⁰ Steinbock uses this premise to undo the false dichotomy often constructed between agency and violence for trans people, positing that through the selective violence of surgical cuttings that trans people can claim agency over their body through the application of technologies that remake their embodied selves. Therefore, the implicit violence of representing trans subjects in cinema through the filmic cut can become a site of trans agency, which allows for a refusal of both technophobia and transphobia, and the creation of a specifically trans aesthetic practice.⁵¹ In its cinematic bodies, both on screen and the body of the film itself, *TOTWK* transforms Steinbock's literal and metaphorical scalpel into the cutting and puncturing tools of knives, guns, CDs, and other sharp and penetrative objects put to use on the bodies of transphobes. Through cutting up and remaking exploitation cinema into a campy trans-positive vision of gleeful revenge, *TOTWK* puts a new spin on Steinbock's cutting trans

⁴⁹ Sandy Stone, "The *Empire* Strikes Back: a Posttranssexual Manifesto," in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, eds. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006).

⁵⁰ Steinbock.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

aesthetic. Here trans and queer subjects seize the means of the cut's literal and symbolic power, both diagetically in the form of claiming the power to wield violence, and extradiagetically through the representation of powerful, gorgeous trans women and drag queens claiming agency for themselves.

TOTWK's focus on trans women committing violence is an important inversion of the grim reality advanced in the first third of the film: the prevalence of violence based on assumed morphology and transphobic obsessions with enforcing 'proper' bodily configurations. Discursive violence seeking to define the "realness" of Bubbles' body turns into physical violence against her and her friends as Boner specifically cites his motivations for raping and trying to kill Bubbles as finding a "surprise" under her skirt, which the film (importantly) does not name or define. Similar to "trans panic" defences used in court to "justify" real life trans bashings and murders, Boner clearly believes that he is not responsible for his violent actions because he was "tricked" by Bubbles: he reads her body and womanhood as fake, and enacts violence as a result. This acknowledgement of the real threat of bodily violence that trans women face is then reworked by the campy violence of the revenge sequence, employing the feminist exploitation rape-revenge formula of reversing the roles of attacker and attacked. *TOTWK* further radicalizes and updates exploitation rape-revenge conventions by bucking the trend of isolating the rape victim from their community. Exploitation rape-revenge films typically have one victim, who either avenges herself on her attackers, or is avenged by her family: violence is committed when someone is most isolated, and vengeance is a personal matter. Using body camp to upend exploitation rape-revenge conventions, *TOTWK* doesn't show viewers Bubbles' rape, denying any possible transphobic leering pleasure or perpetuation of trans genitalia obsessions, and

depicts the heroine's community facing their bashing together, defending one another, and taking communal revenge.

In "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage," Susan Stryker examines rage and monstrosity as part of trans embodiment and experience, and as contributing to transitional natures. For Stryker, being trans is to be outside of the mainstream world looking in on it, as the monster looks over the town, as well as to live in a transitory body, made of different parts and pieces in different states of liveness, deadness, and age.⁵² The heroines of *TOTWK* perform for crowds in a bar but have their own community with its own norms and affections that make them a target for people afraid of difference. Boner and his henchmen see the heroines as monstrous because their bodies are not entirely legible to their ideas of normalcy (nor to the viewer: the film purposely withholds information about the heroines' identity and bodily comportment). Bubbles feels this monstrosity in her unfulfilled desire to have a heterosexual relationship with a cisgender man (one named Boner, no less), yet she is unable to fulfill this desire through no fault of her own, much as Frankenstein's monster, as evoked by Stryker, is unable to fit into the society he runs through despite his willingness to live a peaceful life.

TOTWK uses its campy humour to introject controlled doses of transphobic trauma and the feelings they espouse, including (and perhaps especially) trans rage, through humour, allowing the spectator to process trauma from a safe distance, rather than be overwhelmed by it in an unmodified, more concentrated form. In *TOTWK*, homeopathic communal camp slowly reintroduces and consumes vengeance, hate, and other 'bad' desires into individual and communal bodies in a way that lets them come to terms with them, harness them, and control

⁵² Susan Stryker, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1, no. 3 (1994).

them to change the world. These ‘bad’ feelings are ever-present, and *TOTWK* insists that bad feelings don’t always lead to bad outcomes: they can be catalysts that free people from the hurt and pain of trauma. *TOTWK* allows for the experience of coming to terms with trauma, demonstrating how the film’s dark, violent camp is actually one of communal homeopathic healing. As such, *TOTWK* operates as a *translation* between the material world where bad things happen and the representation of “bad” valuations, moving them into a different register of trans expression so that they can be encountered in small doses and even become positively pleasurable.

For example, in *TOTWK*, during the hyper-camp comedy of the extended revenge sequence, as the heroines take turns facing off with Boner, Nacho, and Chuey one by one, they lose track of Boner while Rachel and Pinky kill the other two men. There is a tonal shift at this moment out of the campy into the very real fear of trauma returning, in the form of Boner, after seemingly having been dealt with, as he returns to the frame with a gun. Bubbles disarms him, turning the gun on Boner, who proceeds to tell Bubbles all the reasons why she shouldn’t kill him. His reasons deploy typical gaslighting techniques, telling Bubbles that she’s the kind of woman who wants a scumbag like Boner in her life because she doesn’t deserve better; it follows that she must want to be abused, and has even been asking for it: all responsibility lies with her, even for her own rape and bashing. Bubbles, buoyed by the camaraderie of her friends, and in keeping with the cinematic tropes of triumphant exploitation cinema, practically spits “Boner, you don’t know shit!” Having learned to acknowledge, appreciate, and use her newly incorporated desire for violence based in justifiable trans rage, Bubbles proceeds to shoot Boner in an extended slow-motion, low angle medium shot of his torso and chest, (obvious) blood packets exploding as he falls to his knees. Returning to the campy tone, Bubbles laboriously



Figure 19: Boner's End. Screenshot featuring Tom Zebrod as Boner in *Ticked-Off Trannies with Knives*.

pulls an oversized curved knife out of one of the henchmen's chest, using her boot for leverage to dislodge it from his rib cage, before swinging into Boner's skull, killing him for good. The film uses judicious cuts to lose Boner from the frame by focusing on the other villains' deaths, only to have him return to be contained once more. This cutting of the cinematic body of the film enacts the process of trans homeopathy, for the trans characters of the diegesis by literalizing the return of trauma that one thought has been resolved, and for the communal trans body being evoked through the campy reworkings of exploitation cinema in response to real dangers to trans existence and safety. The 'bad' pleasure of watching revenge becomes explicitly a positive, healing pleasure of not just taking revenge, but witnessing someone finding the strength to survive trauma.

Homeopathic consumptive camp presents trans identities as processes coming to terms with oneself, and healing as an ongoing practice, rather than the normalized progress narratives found in traditional medicalization and respectability politics. Trans homeopathy, loosely

following Steinbock, is a process of cuts and becoming in, of, and through oneself, a process now projected onto a screen, and onto a communal body, through replacing the trope of the lonely rape victim with a group of women acting in solidarity. Through introjection, trans homeopathy works as an ongoing, cumulative process of coming to terms with stigma and trauma through the slow build-up of a defence against the negative effects of hegemonic power structures. The internalizing, consuming, and embracing of these desires allows Bubbles to come to terms with the abuse Boner has heaped on her. Only after learning to fight back and take joy in campy, community-building violence that incorporates a process of healing into her embodiment of her identity does Bubbles reject Boner's hold on her, shooting him and rejecting his attempt to re-enter her life as a recurring trauma. Thus, I see *TOTWK* acknowledging the systemic cultures of violence and phobia that surrounds its characters through the death of two of the original group of five friends, but the survivors have all come to a better place to fight again in the future. Bubbles, Rachel, and Pinky stride towards the camera in the last, low angle medium-long shot of *TOTWK*, glammed to the nines, defiant and sexy. They dominate the tight frame, and the shot ends in Pinky's cleavage in a campy wink and nod to the beauty of trans bodies, the resilience of trans communities, and the jubilant, empowering over-sexualization of exploitation cinema.

Santner insists that homeopathic treatment is only effective if it is conducted in an environment where the social formation around the subject are empathetic enough to avoid the introjected toxin turning into a larger problem; support is necessary.⁵³ *TOTWK* provides a funny, campy, and safe atmosphere around the very serious issue of transphobic and queerphobic violence. For example, at the beginning of the second act of the film, the 'recovery and training for revenge' part of the rape-revenge three act formula, though Bubbles must begin to come to

⁵³ Santner 24.

terms with her attack after she wakes up from a coma induced by Boner hitting her in the head with a baseball bat, she is able to do this with Pinky and Rachel always nearby to help her through. They come to the hospital to see her regularly, and are present when she awakens. Even as she is told the sad news of Emma and Tipper's deaths, Rachel and Pinky are present to hold her hand, tell jokes, and celebrate the fact that all three of them survived. The film itself aids in this process by moving into the aforementioned extended "porno nurse" sequence which does very little to advance the plot of the film, beyond explaining that Bubbles voice, symbolically taken by the attack and coma, should return once she recovers from her emotional and physical traumas. Its affective purpose, however, is to further lighten the mood for the characters and the viewer, offering a space of supportive, loving emotion in the viewing experience through yet another loving throwback to exploitation cinema tropes.



Figure 20: Triumphant (Campy) Ending. Screenshots from *Ticked-Off Trannies with Knives*.

Camp seeks to do the same: when used for healing, it isn't about fixing social problems right now, or finding an immediate solution, but laughing when you could be crying at the traumatic nature of the world. Consumptive, healing camp takes that which is bad, and re-presents it in small doses as something that can be dealt with so that the communal bodies being

introjected can become stronger through the consumption of “bad” objects and feelings. Through the introjection of toxic feelings and substances, the heroines of both films embrace trans and queer community and love. They don’t solve all their problems, as both films acknowledge the systemic cultures of violence and phobia that surround their characters, but they have all come to a better place to fight again in the future, and have gained a new measure of happiness and acceptance along the way.

TOTWK uses homeopathic consumptive camp to show how the consumption of “bad” feelings, “bad” desires, and pieces of that which oppress trans and queer people create opportunities for coming to terms with oneself (communally and individually) in a controlled and safe way for positive ends. Rather than be consumed by discourses of normativity and respectability, this camp consumes oppressive culture to produce new and different forms of cultural capital through the valourization of the very same camp labours. In medicalized discourses of transition trauma is something to be healed and dealt with, whereas homeopathic consumptive camp turns trauma into something healing, placing it in conversation with other queer theories about the importance of trauma, but adding an ironic, positive twist to the process of becoming and transition: by taking away the end goal of trans and queer narratives and identities, camp promotes an acceptance of the process of identity and cultural labour.

The desires to kill and bash back, to avenge oneself on heterocentric culture in an embodiment of righteous trans rage, are strong ones that *TOTWK* recognizes and validates for individuals and any queer community, real or imagined, that wants to explore them. This film recognizes that natural “bad” feelings are suppressed and shamed in a time when groups like GLAAD and sanitized gay media pumped out into queer and straight communities by networks like Bravo and LogoTV dominate progressive politics and encourage only “respectable”

behaviour and goals. But with the “bad” feelings evoked by camp consumption come potential for healing, activism, politics, and community formation. *TOTWK* validates that literal and figural deaths of queer subjects should make the death of heterocentric societal norms and institutions a goal rather than assimilating to them, and in doing so, turns the deaths in the film, and perhaps some of the deaths of camp, back on majoritarian society through the depiction of its avatars, caricatured past the point of being serious, through resistant homeopathic consumptive act.

The final element of *TOTWK*'s homeopathic camp is that it attempts to make its camping one which is available to communities of queers, rather than individuals, as I foreground in my explanation of how the film critiques feminist psychoanalytic analyses of female violence. It is in the film's engagement with violence as part of the everyday experience of queer trauma that I see these connections form. In her landmark exploration of lesbian public cultures of trauma and healing, Ann Cvetkovich argues that “an exploration of cultural texts as repositories of feelings and emotions, which are encoded not only in the content of the texts themselves but in the practices that surround their production and reception” and that her “focus on trauma serves as a point of entry into a vast archive of feelings, the many forms of love, rage, intimacy, grief, shame, and more that are part of the vibrancy of queer cultures.”⁵⁴ The homeopathic camp practices and performances of *TOTWK* with regard to the specific traumas of sexual violence that many trans women face are also an entry point into exploring the importance of other feelings to queer cultures and communities, including the “bad” feelings espoused by exploitation rape-revenge such as rage and the desire for vengeance. Trauma is a fruitful site of

⁵⁴ Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 7.

queer recuperative community building because “as a name for experiences of socially situated political violence, trauma forges overt connections between politics and emotion.”⁵⁵ It is this connective force that allows trauma to be a site for the decentering of individualizing discourses such as various forms of psychology and psychiatry that are so heavily imbricated in transphobic and queerphobic cultural attitudes. Cvetkovich is committed to looking at trauma as “a window onto the study of how historical experience is embedded in sensational experience and how affective experience can form the basis for culture.”⁵⁶ Similarly, *TOTWK* moves its engagement with trauma away from an individual’s psychic life to camped bodies for all to enjoy and to homeopathic, recuperative consumption as a community response to violence.

In using homeopathic camp, *TOTWK* asks us to reframe artistic homeopathy as a community experience that negotiates and injects the “bad” feelings of victims of hate into trans and queer experience. Santner insists that homeopathic treatment is only effective if it is conducted in an environment where the social formation around the subject are empathetic enough to avoid the introjected toxin not to turn into a larger problem; support is necessary.⁵⁷ Most importantly, “Homeopathy without appropriate affect becomes a purely mechanical procedure that can never lead to empowerment.”⁵⁸ The inclusion of *appropriate affect* is the most radical use of homeopathy in cultural and aesthetic studies. *TOTWK* provides a funny, campy, and safe affect around the very serious issue of transphobic and queerphobic violence. It takes violence and “bad” desires for vengeance and turns them into a related introjection of violence in small doses without ever promoting actual trans- or queerbashings or the literal

⁵⁵ Ibid., 3.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 285.

⁵⁷ Santner, 24.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 25.

taking revenge upon attackers. Instead it creates an affect that delivers the homeopathic consumption of “bad” feelings and politics. Camp is not just part of the treatment: it is the needle that delivers the morphologically similar toxin while reminding the queer/trans viewer that there is a community of support available to them. The film and its camp offer up trauma as a political and affective tool for all to identify with, even if they haven't themselves suffered phobic violence, turning media consumption into an active force of cultural healing. *TOTWK* both legitimates rage and the desire for vengeance *and* offers its campy representation up as a tool of communal healing and change.

TOTWK carries out its homeopathic communal camp in the ways that it repeats the past of exploitation rape-revenge with a difference, casting gender fluid queer and trans heroines, and it invites its camp consumers to face the trans-generational traumas of everyday life as a queer/trans person head on, yet safely. In doing so, it acknowledges that our desire for revenge, to kill that which attacks us, is a communal feeling, rather than a “bad,” pathologized individual one, and a desire that we can celebrate and incorporate into our ways of being resistantly queer in the world. Even the film's material body does this in its scratchy frame and lost reel homages to exploitation and exploitation cinema. *TOTWK* gives us a sense of how its past material and generic being, 1970s exploitation cinema, may have decayed over time, subject to losses which hurt it, but is now brought back before our eyes, available for renewed consumption through camp, reminding us of the traumas that we still face and that we are not alone in facing them. Most importantly, we are reminded that those bodies are right to desire revenge that circumvent the abstracted, psychic, and legal-political forms of thinking and justice which have never represented them fully and no longer allow us to feel the rage and desires necessary to heal as a community. *TOTWK*'s plot, characters, and materiality legitimize our feelings, and beg us to

think about new ways to incorporate our communally felt traumas into our bodies and our practices through media consumption in ways that don't automatically rehearse the violence of heteronormativity or LGBT respectability politics. This is why it is so pivotal in *TOTWK* that a community of heroines was attacked, a community survived, and it was a community of attackers that had revenge carried out against them, refusing the standard final girl trope of horror films and the solitary victim-heroine in rape-revenge films.

Our heroines' community actions are facilitated and represented by a camp which rewrites history with homeopathic aims, and is thus, importantly, a community camp that urges us to consider different and radical forms of political resistance that sidestep the copycat strategies of respectability politics. Camp as an artistic mode and political method asks us to acknowledge the important lessons of the past while also reframing them, perhaps even unfaithfully or occasionally uncritically, into our present moment. Just as violent films can be an expression of, an outlet for, and a site of critical investigation of our own violent desires without directly causing or promoting actual violent acts, so homeopathic camp does not espouse taking actions that directly repeat the past and recreate institutions that have harmed us. It asks us to inject into our individual and communal bodies desires and traumas that we have been told to repress for respectability's sake, and to face these desires and traumas as a way to strive for new and different politics, expressions, feelings, and futures than those that have been given to us by people outside and inside our communities. Camp shines a light on problems past and present with the generative hope that this light will reveal different ways to move forward than the paths taken between the past it poaches from to the present it laments as incomplete.

Conclusion: Camp's Not Dead Yet

I think that this movie is a movie about triumph. I think this movie is for anyone who has ever felt that they were the underdog and they had had enough, this is them winning the war...Anybody who has ever, ever had enough will enjoy it.

-Kalexis Davenport on *Ticked-Off Trannies with Knives*

In this chapter, I have attempted to outline one particular example of how camp, as a performance, style, aesthetic, and politic is being reshaped to address and work through the particular traumas faced by trans and queer communities. I've referred to this new form of camp as consumptive homeopathic camp to describe its functions and operations, but it is important to point out how central trans women, and trans subjectivities, politics, and communities broadly, are to the broad growth in camp that I am seeing in texts including not just *TOTWK* but also older niche film's like Alexi Arquette's b-grade star vehicle *Killer Drag Queens on Dope* or Sean Baker's amazing 2015 film *Tangerine*, which follows two trans women of colour, one of whom is a sex worker, through LA, documenting the kinds of issues, joys, loves, and passions these women face. All of this is also happening during a cultural moment when trans issues are more visible than ever before in American culture, both in the stream of news of trans women killed or hurt, but also positive movements like Laverne Cox's rising star and the important political work being done by Chelsea Manning or the 2018 midterm elections including trans politician Christine Hallquist running for governor of Vermont on the Democratic ticket. Trans cultural and political production, consumption, and presence are all on the rise, and it is in this fertile, but still difficult, soil that this new form of trans-focused camp is arising. I am hesitant to put a label such as "trans camp" onto this movement, both because it is still growing, but also because I don't think it's necessary to pin radical camp, and especially healing camp, to one specific identity, especially given camp's past being frequently narrated to erase the trans people who have been driving and influencing camp from its start. Still, in trans- and trauma-focused camp I see new opportunities for future art, aesthetics, scholarship, pedagogy, and queer world-

building being led, defined, and shaped by trans people, and especially trans women and trans people of colour that I am excited to continue exploring in future work, and see other people explore as well.

Camp rethinks past events and queer/trans traumas not just for humour, irony, or apolitical artistic creation, but to unearth traumas that span generations of trans experience and communities and, by presenting them as cultural objects for consumption, encourage their homeopathic introjection into individual and communal queer bodies. This introjection promotes the exploration of different political objectives, goals, and ways of being based on accepting and learning from our “bad” desires for vengeance and revenge against those who commit those very same everyday and exceptional traumas against us. As an active and transformative mode of media consumption, homeopathic camp encourages the formation of new form of queer cultural capital which resist the insistence of LGBT respectability politics and heteronormative culture alike that the only valuable queer representations are sanitized ones based in culturally allowed “good” feelings. *TOTWK*, its camping of 1970’s exploitation rape-revenge films, and its implied critique of the spate of remakes of these films in the present day, explores what camp offers to expand upon previous scholarship on exploitation rape-revenge films and critique the suppression of the “bad” feelings given to us as part of the political agenda of both majoritarian society and assimilationist LGBT activists.

Camp consumption is a labour of learning from history by consuming “useless” aesthetic and artistic representations to critique the present, both for what it lacks and what it has yet to explore, with the hope of providing new ways of thinking about futures outside of contemporary political and theoretical paradigms. In its use of homeopathic consumption, the camp of *TOTWK* embodies a generative element that looks ahead to something better. We need

to ask not just “might this camp text be exactly for me?”, but also “how does this camp offer us a picture of a better world through our cultural labour and consumption?” And, even more importantly, “how might camp valorize the work that trans people do to not just survive, but thrive, in an actively hostile world?” I do not endorse actual bloody rampages, nor throwing out the pain and trauma of past experiences frivolously. I do, however, believe in learning from and confronting the “bad” feelings and suppressed desires that the past and present reveal, to show how introjecting them into our communal bodies through camp consumption can do justice to past hurts and strive for something better to come from facing them head on. Consumptive camp labour is not just about surviving, but thriving queerly. It asks us to revalue art, culture, and cultural capital in terms set by and for marginalized people, reclaiming (sometimes violently) the right to define what affects, aesthetics, and politics are useful for trans subjects, and insisting that they are their own tastemakers. Through consumptive homeopathic camp, a manifesto in favour of making surviving shitty circumstances its own taste of freedom.

By Way of a Conclusion

Annie's Eyes: Walking on the Broken Glass of Contemporary Capitalism

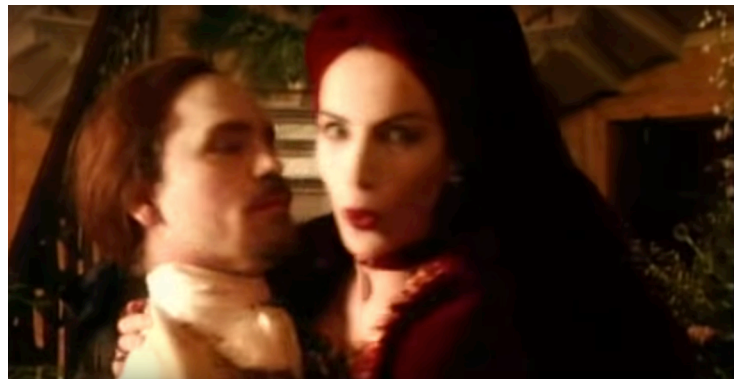


Figure 21: Annie's Eyes. Stills from Annie Lennox's music video "Walking on Broken Glass", starring Annie Lennox, John Malkovich, and Hugh Laurie (not pictured). Annie Lennox, "Walking on Broken Glass," directed by Sophie Muller, written and performed by Annie Lennox (BMG, Arista: 1992), music

My very first clear visual memory is Annie Lennox's eyes. They bored into me from my parents' old dial change TV as she belted out "Walking on Broken Glass" on the CHUM FM Top 20 music video countdown, airing on CityTV in 1992. I was five. The video is based in heavy references to the sumptuous film *Dangerous Liaisons* (dir. Stephen Frears, 1988), in which John Malkovich starred in as the Vicomte de Valmont, a playboy and libertine engaged in a complicated game of politics, alliances, and personal vendettas opposite the Marquise de Merteuil, played by the indomitable Glenn Close. Malkovich doesn't exactly reprise the role in "Walking on Broken Glass," as he's clearly about to be married, or perhaps just was, which doesn't occur in *Liaisons* (though given his fiancée/wife's appearance and youth, she could perhaps be a stand-in for Valmont's love interest, Madame de Tourvel, played by Michelle Pfeiffer). His appearance, however, and the 18th century French noble period costumes and setting of the video make the video's referent clear. Lennox, resplendent in a scarlet velvet gown and matching headdress in a room full of white and beige clothing and ornate white period wigs, plays a woman who has been having a secret affair with Malkovich's character, behind the backs of both his partner and Lennox's character's presumed husband, played by Hugh Laurie. Laurie, in costume and mannerisms, seems to be referencing his own role as Prince George, the Prince Regent, in the British comedy *Blackadder* (BBC1, 1983-9). Lennox's character tries to have a private conversation with Malkovich's, which seems to end poorly, with him leaving her on a darkened balcony beating her fists against her thighs. Lennox responds by having a few fortifying drinks, then confronting Malkovich's character, even as other women seek to pull her away from him as she grasps desperately at his arms. She ends up crawling across the floor, belting the last verse of the song, continuing as she stands up brushes herself off, holds up her head defiantly and walks out of the party: "Now every one of us was made to suffer/Every one of

us was made to weep/We've been hurting one another/Now the pain has cut too deep/So take me from the wreckage/Save me from the blast/Lift me up and take me back/Don't let me keep on walking/I can't keep on walking, keep on walking on broken glass.”¹ She runs down the ornate main staircase of this soirée's venue, with rapid cutting between shots of her ornate shoes pounding down the steps while peeking out from under her scarlet gown and its gold embellishments, and her face, determined and almost huffing, as she leaves the site of her trauma and dashed hopes. As the lyrics continue to repeat “Walking on, walking on broken glass”² until the song's fadeout and the video's fade to black, Malkovich's character appears at the bottom of the stairs, sweeping her into his arms and twirling her around, filmed with a series of stutter cuts so we are constantly treated to parts of the spins where Annie's face comes into view, and she can stare out at us from the camera again and again.

At a narrative level, neither this song nor video are queer or feminist anthems: in the video, Lennox continues to have an affair with a married man behind her husband's back (though the time period certainly allows some leeway here, as it's entirely possible these marriages were arranged and/or political unions), and in the song, she continues to reach out to the person who hurt her in the first place, imploring him to stop hurting her and undo the damage he's done to her life, her soul, and her heart. On the surface, both song and video present compelling examples of Berlantian cruelly optimistic attachments. Pop music, however, shares a commonality in purpose with kitsch as I've defined it in this dissertation, in that its focus on surfaces leaves tonnes of room to fill it with personal meanings through creative consumption.

¹ Annie Lennox, “Walking on Broken Glass,” released April 1992, track 2 on *Diva*, RCA/Arista, compact disc.

² Ibid.

And I believe it is Annie's eyes that invite this creation of meaning and identification, especially for people feeling beaten down, trodden upon, or just exhausted.

In this way, pop music is ripe to be considered a form of potato media. As Ries explains in "Potato Ontology", potato doesn't solve life's problems or hardships, and it can't do the work of lifting people out of poverty or other difficult conditions on its own. And yet, it is a nexus for creating positive affects and feelings, valuing what one has and what one hopes they can do as they keep living through its consumption.³ Potato is the solid, reliable promise the life will keep going when it's hard, as long as one keeps putting in the work, and builds supportive networks through which to have their labouring supported, encouraged, and nurtured. In Annie's eyes I have always seen an embodiment of potato media and its potentials, especially for a confused, yet fabulous, queer pop princess growing up in small town Ontario.

Queer affect theorist Ann Cvetkovich argues that Marx himself frequently traded in a rhetoric of the sensational to make his point in *Capital* as a strategy for creating material change from his very visual writing, paralleling other literary genres of his era, particularly the Victorian sensation novel. All of *Capital* does not, of course, read like a novel or melodrama: the parts of the text focusing on strict economic analysis is fairly dry. The key portions of his text meant to convince people of his message though, often through descriptions of suffering, trauma, or other crimes of capitalism, are extremely evocative and, in my opinion, the most important parts of the text today, as they are not tied to the specific economic conditions, technologies, or power flows of a particular moment in history. Through the graphic, almost Gothic, writing of the degradation of the worker's body, *Capital* trades largely in representations of violence serving strategies of revolution. Accordingly, "The collapsing of seeing and reading is a reminder that what is at

³ Ries.

stake [in *Capital*] are *representations* of reality, rather than reality itself. However, representations can offer *reality effects*, often by effacing the signs of their production and appearing to be mimetically real or to possess immediate and transparent meanings.”⁴ In *Capital*, Marx sought to make visible for the reader, through evocative, visual language, the invisible destruction of the people who make it possible, a process that requires obscuring the seemingly all-present commodity to see the social relations of power necessary to produce it.⁵ By showing the invisible relations of the social conditions of capitalism, Marx aimed to denaturalize them, countering the symbolic violence of capital, implanting the seed of revolution in the worker drawn in by the sensationalist narrative written with popular genres in mind. *Capital* engages in a project of creating revolutionary cultural capital for the worker, giving her the tools with which to struggle against her oppression. Thus, “Marx considers his project to consist not of presenting the reality *behind* the image, but of presenting the image right side up.”⁶

Pushing Cvetkovich’s point even further, I would argue that Marx’s sensationalist project, and the gravitational well of Annie’s eyes, are queer ones, seeking to embody concerns of power and envision different ways of seeing the future through alternative forms of capital. In this light, *Capital* is an affective manifesto, doing work similar to Muñoz in *Cruising Utopia* in its focus on evoking the promise of something more and better beyond the horizon of our oppressive present. Though I am not seeking to find an absolute truth in any of my case studies as Marx sought to behind the images he evokes, I do believe there are realities of alternative aesthetic and artistic labours behind media commodities and their consumption that, through

⁴ Ann Cvetkovich, “Marx’s *Capital* and the Mystery of the Commodity,” in *Mixed Feelings: Feminism, Mass Culture, and Victorian Sensationalism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press), 167.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 179.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 167.

their representations of queerness, transness, eroticism, camp, and kitsch, create reality effects which are not “useful” under dominant cultural capital. It is these labours that create a taste of hope and freedom out of the tastes of the necessary handed down to cultural fractions from above. Each of my case studies carries on in the spirit of Marx’s affective project, seeking out points of resistance, survival, and alternative valuation through intersectional queer cultural labour hiding in the melodramatic, the intense, the queer, the silly, and (above all) the “useless.”

This dissertation, slingshotting out of my own memories, histories, and Annie’s eyes, thinks media and its intersections with queer and trans identity and community as potato theory. Potato promises use value, and the ability to keep going for another day, just as queer and trans media consumption, and its creation of alternative cultural capital, help keep trans and queer subjects going in difficult conditions, or encouraging them to strive for even more when things are going right. Therefore, as potato promises the ability to keep going, keep walking on broken glass, so it becomes queerly promising of excess, ascendance, beyond-ness, just as Massumi and Muñoz insist are central to rethinkings of capitalism and the value of both media and queer and trans people. In Annie’s eyes, I see queer potato shining bright, promising that labour is worth it, and can find new venues for one’s own, uniquely queer cultural capital to be valued and valorized.

Cvetkovich’s work is also important for reminding us the audiences Marx perhaps hoped to reach with his work, riling them into a revolutionary fervour (or at least getting them to rethink their positions): not just fellow economists and academics, nor just politicians or policymakers (perhaps the likely audiences for the drier, more analytic parts of Marx’s work), but the people he saw as oppressed. Just as Annie told me early that life is often pain, but it’s worth continuing to walk towards what you want, so Marx asks us to keep walking, Ries asks us

to keep growing (in ourselves and in the world), kitsch tells us to keep loving, communication networks to keep reaching out, and camp to keep fighting. No matter the desired or projected destination of a project of creative consumption, be it Marx's revolution or the desire to make it through another day with just a hint of a taste of freedom, it is the *process*, the *labour* of getting there, that matters, especially in how Marx, Cvetkovich, Massumi, Muñoz, Annie, and I all account for the emotional and affective labour that journeying through a capitalist mediascape and society require.

So, just as Cvetkovich offers *Capital* as a mediation of a bad, even violent situation as also being a text using the drama of that affect to promote change, growth, and new forms and conceptions of what life under capitalism looks like, so I offer "Walking on Broken Glass" as a more contemporary and quotidian example of the excess-ness necessary to walk away from trauma, even if the path one takes doesn't always get you where you need to end up right away. When theorizing the very high stakes of queer and trans cultural creation, value, and capital, the tastes of freedom aren't generated from the tastes of the necessary immediately or completely, just as Muñoz's utopia and Massumi's postcapitalist society can only ever arrive in fits and starts, ever on the horizon, but still worth striving for. Queer and trans tastes of freedom come out of difficult, awful, and even violent places, and trying to find ways out of them, even if one isn't travelling in a "straight" line or along a perfectly "progressive" path, is a difficult, contingent, and often barely successful project. Yet it's still one worth investigating and encouraging, as I hope my work in this dissertation has done.

Annie croons: "The sun's still shining in the big blue sky/but it don't mean nothing to me/Oh, let the rain come down/Let the wind blow through me/I'm living in an empty room/With all the windows smashed/And I've got so little left to lose/That it feels just like I'm walking on

broken glass.”⁷ Since I was too young to understand its message, this verse, and this song and music video, and above all Annie’s eyes, tell the affective story of this song and video. They’ve always been the touchstone to which I return when I need to marshal the strength to keep going in a world that seeks to grind me down, whether in my small home town or today on the academic job market. As kitsch like the Spice Girls can. As finding representations of your desires and like minded people can. As knowing your “bad” feelings are not just understandable, but central to healing can. As potato can. Just as in the video’s inconclusive, affectively messy ending, Annie reminds me that progress and success don’t come without facing the pains of capitalist queer living, and that they come in stutter steps and stutter cuts, one piece at a time. Uselessness is a beginning, not an ending, and an invitation to create out of consumption and outside of the norm, as I hope this dissertation has shown. But as long as one keeps going, walking, stretching, consuming, building, then you stay alive for another day, another moment. And, above all, I’ve always taken the incandescence in Annie’s eyes, framed by her excessive clothing and mise-en-scene, as an exhortation to keep creating meaning, love, and value for myself and those I love, no matter how outside the norm those relationships are.

⁷ Lennox.

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