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A Qualitative Study of Queer Student Desire

Desire refers to the sexual and/or romantic longing that one feels—the aspiration for human connection that one presumes may give gratification or, at a minimum, satisfaction, to themselves and/or to others. In the case of queer desire, these internalized desires serve as what Foucault may have called a "reverse discourse" (Callis, 2009)—desires that are counter to (and are thus labelled as deviant) heteronormative society. While the recognition of these desires is fundamental to queer identity development, they have been effectively taken for granted within the higher education literature, with the academic focus instead pointed towards *identities* and not towards *sex* and *romance* as queer phenomena in and of themselves that are worthy of academic inquiry (Lange et al., 2019).

While it is tempting to believe that a "reverse discourse" of desire, by its very nature, subverts a heteronormative discourse, the reality is that the hegemony of heteronormativity has the potential to perpetually shape even queer subjectivities. In other words, even the desires of queer people can be heteronormative. Not only can these desires be heteronormative, but they, too, can be shaped by other interlocking systems of domination—including white supremacy, misogyny, and ableism, to name a few. While the phenomena of racism and misogyny in the queer community are not new, they are underexplored in the college student development literature, and even less understood in the context of desire. This being the case, I began this study with the following research questions:

(1) For queer, masculine-identified college students, how is desire shaped by race and gender?
(2) What is the role of desire in shaping queer, masculine-identified college students' sense of identity?

Before discussing the mechanics of the present study, it is necessary that I position myself within the research. I come to this study as a queer/gay, Mixed-Race, Asian-American doctoral student. My experiences as both an undergraduate and graduate student near the research site deeply resonated with those of the participants, and undoubtedly my interest in this research was shaped by my own experiences with racism, heteronormativity, and patriarchy within queer dating and sex. This is a reality I was cognizant of throughout the research process, and which I systematically reflected on through field notes and analytical memos.

In this paper, I first discuss the relevant theoretical perspectives and empirical literature that guided this study. I then present the major findings, before making recommendations for higher education research and practice.

Theoretical Frameworks

Queer theory. Queer theory is a social theory that draws its intellectual roots from poststructuralism, theories of discourse, and feminist thought (Watson, 2005). Rather than viewing identity (particularly, gender and sexuality) as stagnant, pre-determined, or inherent, queer theorists seek to "ask how we produce such identities" (Turner, 2000, p. 5). Central to queer theory is the notion of *performance*. Judith Butler (1990) most famously articulated the notion of performance and identity as they relate to gender, arguing that, rather than being given a gender, one must continually perform that gender—a role that is dictated by social context (as cited in Callis, 2009). Gender is thus performance in that "the essence of identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means" (Butler, 1990, p. 185). Butler argues that gender is neither fixed nor stagnant but is instead constantly reified through socialized performance. Queer theory thus provides an appropriate framework to analyze the discourse that arose throughout the course of this study, as queer students' desires are understood to be reflected in performance that subverts (and can reinforce) heteronormativity.

Intersectionality. While the concept of *intersectionality* had been theorized throughout the twentieth century, Kimberlé Crenshaw first coined the term in 1989 (Crenshaw, 1989; as cited in Crenshaw, 1991). Crenshaw describes intersectionality utilizing an analogy of a literal intersection, wherein Black identity and femininity meet – the experience of being a Black woman greater than the sum of its parts. Crenshaw's work has been instrumental for Critical Race Theorists, and this work provides an appropriate framework to understand the simultaneously racialized and gendered sexual and romantic experiences of queer, masculine college students. Intersectionality is suitable in providing a lens for this work as I view this research as part of a larger anti-oppression social project that is meant to interrogate the same systems of domination that Crenshaw critiques— those of racism/anti-Blackness, patriarchy, (cis)sexism, and, in particular, the relationships amongst these systems.

Literature Review

While a significant portion of student development research has been devoted to sexuality/sexual orientation as an *identity*, little college student development research has examined queer sex as a phenomenon in and of itself. I begin by discussing the present direction of research concerning queer students in higher education, highlighting the absence of desire within the existing

scholarship. I then discuss the notion of queer desire and its interconnectedness with racism, heteronormativity, and patriarchy.

The present state of queer scholarship in higher education research. A significant amount of literature in higher education has attempted to understand queer identities in social context, including research postulating developmental models (e.g., D'Augelli, 1994), research examining LGBTQ student perceptions of campus climate (e.g., Garvey, Sanders, & Flint, 2017), and research examining LGBTQ student activism and campus involvement (e.g., Renn, 2007). Indeed, as Renn (2010) describes, these topics—visibility, campus climate, and identity development—form the bulk of contemporary literature examining LGBTQ students in higher education. More recently, however, scholars have begun to engage in more critical research that has utilized newer and more diverse theories that center the experiences of queer students who possess multiple marginalized identities (such as queer Students of Color). This includes higher education research that utilizes theoretical frameworks such as queer of color critique (Brockenbrough, 2015), intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991), and quare theory (Johnson, 2001). As Duran (2019) notes, this movement in higher education research is rooted in Black feminist thought and is a reaction to long-standing trends in LGBTQ research that center white, able-bodied experiences as the norm. Research along these lines has elucidated the unique ways that queer Students of Color must navigate the racism of LGBTQ spaces, and conversely, the homophobia in Communities of Color (e.g., Goode-Cross & good, 2008, 2009; Harris, 2003, as cited in Duran, 2019). Similarly, such scholarship has also investigated how queer Students of Color navigate the meaning(s) of religion/spirituality (e.g., Means & Jaeger, 2015, as cited in Duran, 2019), as well as highlighted the lack of resources and representation that queer Students of Color are able to find on campus (e.g., Strayhorn, 2013, as cited in Duran, 2019).

Queer desire, sex, and interlocking systems of domination. Despite the wide array of scholarship elucidating the experiences of queer students, no readily available scholarship has examined the *desires* of queer college students as they relate to sex and romantic attraction. In other words, the literature described in the previous section has viewed queerness as a social identity in context, with little regard to the individual sexual and romantic wants and practices of queer students. Lange et al. (2019) directly spoke to this gap in the literature, arguing that the absence of such work in the college student development literature necessarily pathologizes queer sex amongst collegians and obscures a holistic perspective. Furthermore, queer sex and desire are important phenomena in sexual identity development. From the perspective of queer theory, *desire* is integral to

one's *becoming*—that is, the recognition of our wants is the antecedent to actualizing our identities (Morton, 1996). Thus, attempts to understand queer identity development are/have been incomplete without an examination of the desires that potentially drive this development. Moreover, a critical examination of desire has the potential to elucidate how queer phenomena intersect with interlocking systems of domination. Though these themes have been largely unexamined within the higher education literature, scholars in fields such as gender studies and Critical Race Theory have noted the ways that queer sex and desire can be shaped by interlocking systems of oppression. For example, Raj (2011) discusses how online technologies (such as "grindr") have become forums that shape and regulate queer subjectivities, upholding normative values of race and capital. Other scholars have noted the ways that racism (Giwa & Greensmith, 2012; Ibañez et al., 2012) and misogyny (Hale & Ojeda, 2018; Taywaditep, 2002) manifests in queer communities. Thus, while documented in other fields, the reality of multiple marginalities is an unexplored phenomenon in the realm of queer students' sexual and romantic desires.

Methods

Sampling and data. Data for this study was collected at Pacific Western University (PWU, pseudonym). PWU is a selective, large, public research university that is historically white. Eligible participants for this study had to be queer, masculine students who were current undergraduate students at PWU. In this context, both "queer" and "masculine" were self-identifications so as not to unnecessarily restrict the various manifestations of, and identities within, these categories. Participants were recruited utilizing purposive sampling (Ravitch & Carl, 2016), and were identified via a flyer that was distributed through the campus's LGBT Resource Center. The final sample for this study consisted of three participants, whose pseudonyms and demographic information are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Queer Masculinities Study: Participant Summary

Name	Age	Major	Class Standing	Race/Ethnicity	Gender	Sexuality
Jacob	18	Neuroscience	First Year	Ethnically Mixed; Culturally Russian	Cisgendered. Male	Homosexual, Biromantic
Carl	20	Statistics Economics	Second Year	Mixed White, Japanese; "White Passing"	Man of Transgender Experience	Gay
Kurtis	20	Psychology	Second-Year Transfer; Graduating Senior	Taiwanese American; Mixed Race	Transmasculine; Nonbinary; FtM	Pansexual

Data collection. Data was primarily collected through two, sixty-minute, semi-structured, in-depth interviews per participant, utilizing an adaptation of Seidman's (2019) three-interview series. The first interview consisted of a focused life history—asking participants to describe their upbringing as it related to sexuality, sex, gender, and race. This first interview also concerned their lived experiences as queer, masculine college students (what Seidman [2019] calls "details of experience")—including details regarding their sexual practices, how they meet sexual and/or romantic partners, and their experiences with race, gender, and sexuality. The second interview encouraged participants to reflect on the prior interview, and to form a deeper understanding of the context they previously described. During data collection, I maintained field notes to highlight salient points during the interviews. After each interview, I transcribed audio recordings into a Word document, omitting the names of the participants by utilizing pseudonyms in an effort to maintain confidentiality. These field notes during the interview, as well as the after-contact notes, were included as a form of data.

Data analysis. Analysis of the data was an ongoing process that began with the notes I took during the interviews, as well as the notes I wrote in my research journal after the interviews. Once the data was collected and all interviews transcribed, I first read through the entirety of the data sets and my notes. I then began first-cycle/open coding of the data sets (Saldaña, 2016) utilizing the qualitative analysis software Dedoose. This cycle utilized a mixture of *a priori*/concept coding (rooted in queer theory and intersectionality), process coding, and values coding (Saldaña, 2016). I elected to treat each individual as their own "case study," creating a new codebook for each participant (Bazeley, 2013). Additionally, while coding the data during the first cycle, I wrote dozens of analytical memos.

After I completed first-cycle coding of all transcripts, I merged the three individual codebooks into one document, maintaining separate columns for each participant. I then arranged the codes by general topic area (such as gender, race, etc.) as a form of intermediary coding before engaging in second cycle/axial coding (Saldaña, 2016). I then began second cycle coding, which consisted of arranging each participant's codes within a matrix, with each participant constituting their own respective columns, and the rows consisting of the intersections of various identities with sexuality (e.g., race and sexuality, gender and sexuality, etc.). Finally, each participant was compared to one another in order to identify convergence and divergence of experiences and opinions. These comparisons resulted in the primary assertions/generative themes detailed in the findings section.

Validity/Trustworthiness. Participants were given the entirety of the first interview transcript and were given the opportunity to correct and/or redact information that they thought was either inaccurate or which they did not feel comfortable sharing. While redactions were honored, I maintained a critical eye towards first impressions that participants shared. For example, multiple participants shared that they believed they had racial biases within their romantic lives, but then clarified/amended these statements in their second interviews, claiming that they do not believe this to be true; however, I believe that these initial impressions may be reflective of the individual subconscious. Within the findings of this paper, I have focused upon when participants elected to change their position, as contrasted with my own reading into why these shifts may have occurred.

Limitations. The greatest limitation of this research is the unintentional sampling of solely Mixed Race students. As a result, these findings may not reflect the perspectives of Black, Indigenous, or Latinx students. Another limitation concerns constraints that prohibited additional member checking, namely, the COVID-19 public health pandemic. While this study was meant to include a third interview (where participants would review their second interview transcripts and where I would receive feedback on preliminary findings) the constraints of social distancing made this effectively impossible.

Findings

Gender and sexuality. An overriding theme in the case studies was the profound influence of hetero/homonormativity as a structuring[1] discourse in the lives of queer, masculine college students. Whereas heteronormativity constitutes how existing structures and society are centered on heterosexual and cisgender discourses, *homonormativity* concerns the (re)production of heteronormative discourses (such as the nuclear family, the institution of marriage, etc.) by queer people (Duggan, 2002). Throughout this study, all participants discussed the ways that femininity is systematically devalued in the queer community and how "traditional" feminine and masculine gender roles are simultaneously de/re-constructed.

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[1] Here, I use the word *structuring,* in line with Owen (2007) who refers to whiteness as a "structuring property." Owen asserts that as a structuring property, "whiteness affects every aspect . . . it shapes the consciousness of individuals . . . the pattern of social practices" (p. 208). Throughout this paper, I extend the notion of whiteness as structuring property to discourses broadly, and to describe how ideologies frame/structure discourses and social practices. As an ideology structures discourse it then intersects with other interlocking systems of domination.

A corollary of this then is that queer, masculine individuals (re)produce misogyny through sex and dating. All three individuals within this study discussed how elements of their perceived femininity (either in actions or appearance) were devalued and admonished. Jakob, a first-year neuroscience student who identifies as cisgender and homosexual/biromantic, illustrates this by discussing an experience he had when first exploring web-based dating applications when starting college:

> . . . when I first started dating, like I think two people told me that they didn't want to date me at first because they were like, you seemed feminine . . . . And I was like what? And then that definitely shocked me because then I sort of start associating femininity with like, unattraction. I remember looking at this one Instagram post that I made, and just being like, this, this is like the reason…And then I did delete that post, which I now regret because, why should I care? It's just I think it's hard when…the majority of people don't agree with you and so have that prejudice and internalized discrimination.

Jakob's experience illustrates how femininity is frequently seen as undesirable amongst queer men. Through Jakob's social media and dating profiles, Jakob's potential partners deduced that he was a more effeminate man and was thus unwanted. The association of femininity with undesirability is a translation of misogyny, in this case, directed towards male bodies.

Similarly, in discussing sex, Kurtis, a graduating psychology major who identifies as pansexual and transmasculine, shared how before dating their current partner, they had never experienced an orgasm, as "tops" (those who penetrate during vaginal or anal sex) do not value the sexual gratification of "bottoms" (those who are penetrated during sex):

> My sex with [my partner] is like the best sex I've ever had. And I really needed that [chuckling] cause I just didn't have good sex before, so I didn't know like you could have good sex . . . [Interviewer: What makes it good?] Um, I orgasm, and like, I guess like it's not all about him, cause I'm a bottom and I feel like tops really like to just like make it all about themselves and then like once they come [OC: orgasm] then it's done. So I feel like [my partner] actually cares about me and wants me to have a good time, too.

Kurtis' experience mirrors those of straight women, whose sexual gratification is frequently dismissed as unnecessary or implausible. "Tops" then, by assuming that bottoms are unworthy or incapable of pleasure, necessarily reproduce misogyny by transposing heteronormative discourses upon queer bodies. Penetration thus assumes a masculine connotation, with those who penetrate

presuming that individuals in a "feminine" role (i.e., receiving penetration) are undeserving of pleasure.

Finally, throughout the study it became clear that queer, masculine desires are frequently structured by transphobia. Both of the trans individuals within this study expressed how their bodies—in having anatomy that is perceived as feminine—were frequently seen as undesirable to gay men. While Carl passes (and desires to pass) as a cisgender, heterosexual man, he has had encounters where he was seen as sexually desirable up until the point where the individual found out that he was trans:

> But um, yeah, I mean, just like people saying that they're just like, not attracted to vagina or whatever. I'm like, well, I mean, okay, like, I can respect that. Like, it's a personal preference, I guess. But also like, you were telling me how hot you think like the rest of me is like 15 minutes ago. And it's just like it's kind of an L [OC: "loss"] that it's like, well, because [I] don't have a dick [you] no longer want to have sex with [me].

For Carl, presenting and performing heteromasculinity is insufficient for some queer men who view his body as feminine. Contrary to Carl's point that it is a "personal preference," I assert that this personal preference is one rooted in transphobia and that is reflective of devaluing "feminine" bodies and body parts. As Carl suggests at the end of the quotation, experiences such as these can be invalidating and dehumanizing.

Race and sexuality. In addition to sexuality's intersections with gender, *race* proved to be a salient factor in how participants conceived of their sexuality, with whiteness and white people being recurrent themes. White supremacy thus proved to be a structuring discourse in queer, masculine students' desire**s.** Across all participants, individuals discussed both experiencing and perpetuating white supremacy through fetishization and "racial preference."

All participants in this study identified as racially mixed, and, similarly, all participants discussed being fetishized for their racial backgrounds whilst dating other queer people. For Kurtis (whose father is a white American and his mother Taiwanese American), being read as Asian has attracted individuals who seem to only be interested in them because of their racial heritage. Namely, Kurtis cited that they have spoken to many "weeaboos" (people of non-Japanese descent who are obsessed with Japanese culture) who seem attracted to them because of their Asian heritage: "I looked at his Facebook…and his like Facebook account, like it was an anime character, and he liked all these anime things and I was really like, I don't know I'm disappointed in myself for going through with that." When asked

why "weeaboos" may be interested in them (despite them not being of Japanese heritage), Kurtis reflected: "like they're into what I represent…which is, I guess, the entire Asian population, to them." As a result, Kurtis has felt objectified as an Asian American – being sometimes seen as only desirable because of their racial heritage. As Kurtis described, many of these weeaboos are white. Their interest in Kurtis is emblematic of a long history of fetishizing Asians as "exotic" and "other". This racialization as the perpetual foreigner is rooted in orientalism, and, through this, upholds white supremacy (Ng et al., 2007).

Similarly, just as all participants discussed experiencing various forms of racial fetishization, all participants discussed how whiteness is valorized within the queer community, with some participants (sub)consciously valorizing whiteness themselves. When asked if he thought his race was desirable in the queer dating scene, Carl reflected:

> I mean, I think the like, knee jerk response is yes. Like I've definitely, at least like for me being white passing and like looking white, it's definitely like – when you see an attractive gay man portrayed in like media, stuff like that. It's usually a white man. So I, so I think the knee jerk response is "yes."

Carl's assertion is that, as a result of media discourses centering whiteness in queer communities, whiteness is than valorized within queer communities themselves. Kurtis seemed to identify a similar theme; when asked about their own racial preferences, Kurtis remarked:

> I feel like when I think about like who I am attracted to though, I feel like there probably is a preference for lighter skin people, but also I'm not sure if that's like who I'm actually attracted to or just like the media I'm exposed to. 'Cause I'm thinking about like the people I thirst follow on Instagram…'cause like all of my recommendations are like white men, like that's all I see, and it's, I don't know if that's really like, I have a preference, or that's just like what, like, I'm getting.

Regardless of why Kurtis may be exposed to more light skinned individuals through social media, the consequence is that they feel they may have a subconscious preference for light skinned people. This process – of individuals both shaping, and being shaped by, social media—works to uphold anti-Blackness and white supremacy.

Conversely, though Kurtis was unable to concretely identify their own racial preferences, they very quickly noted the racialized sexual desires of the queer community in general, noting: "Mmm yeah, they prefer white people." When discussing their own lack of racial preferences, though, Kurtis made a curious statement:

> And my boyfriend now is Black, so—no, no, that's not. I'm not being like, oh like my boyfriend's Black so I'm not racist. But like, it, I feel like for me like I don't really look for like a race, or like, I don't really look at it as like a criteria or anything.

In this statement, Kurtis attempts to substantiate their claim that they do not use race as a criterion in selecting partners by citing that their current partner is Black. While they ultimately back track on this statement (perhaps realizing that it may sounds objectifying of Black people and counter-productive to their argument) the fact that they chose to highlight their Black partner in the context of racism and racial preference is important. The implication of such a statement is that Black people are so undesirable that by dating a Black person one demonstrates they would date any race. This "Freudian slip" is revealing of Kurtis' subconscious devaluation of Black bodies, and how anti-Blackness and white supremacy can be structuring discourses in the lives of all queer people—including the racially conscious individuals who have, in Kurtis' words, "put in the work" to address issues of racism and social justice.

Discussion and Implications for Research and Practice

As has been documented throughout this study, queer, masculine college students are both subjected to, and (re)produce, racialized, sexual, and gendered systems of oppression in their sexual and romantic desires. Their subjectivities are not in and of themselves reflective of a "reverse discourse," but instead are products of the discourses that are representative of the interlocking systems of domination that manifest in their everyday experience as mediated through social media, dating applications, and interpersonal interactions. In other words, queer, masculine students *uphold* oppressive discourses through modes of communication, and simultaneously are *shaped by* oppressive discourses in these interactions. Moreover, their desires are complex, nuanced, and inextricably linked to their development of a queer identity. Furthermore, it should be noted that the objective of this study was not to reduce queer students to merely sex and desire, but instead to highlight the importance that sex and desire can have in the development of a queer identity. As this study has demonstrated, desire and pleasure can be integral parts of queer student experiences, and by intentionally overlooking these realities scholars have inevitably pathologized queer students.

Thus, for higher education and student development scholars, this research highlights the need to account for desire and the phenomenon of sex itself when seeking to understand *sexuality* development. Fruitful areas for future research may include centering the experiences of other marginalized groups of students

(such as feminine identifying students, students with disabilities, etc.) as they relate to sex, desire, and sexuality. In doing this work, scholars may wish to (de)construct how they go about recruiting for such studies. For example, by defining "masculinity" loosely in the recruitment for this study, a greater diversity of gendered experiences was able to be catalogued, including trans and non-binary experiences. Scholars may thus wish to interrogate how they define gender (and other social identities) in their recruitment efforts. In doing so, we may begin to dismantle binary logic even while engaging in seemingly binary research topics (e.g., masculinity vs. femininity, white vs. Person of Color, etc.)

For higher education practitioners, this study demonstrates that educators must be willing to engage in potentially difficult discussions about sex, pleasure, and desire in order to promote holistic development of a sexual identity. Programming and counseling of students around issues related to LGBTQ identities are at best incomplete, and, at worst, oppressive, if they do not simultaneously consider the racialized, sexualized, and gendered experiences of queer people. More broadly, conversations about topics such as "healthy relationships" and "safer sex" are incomplete if they do not account for desire, queer perspectives, and the interlocking systems of domination that shape these phenomena. To avoid such conversation perpetuates a damaging "identity-neutral" discourse that inevitably centers whiteness, heteronormativity, and transphobia. Furthermore, as this study demonstrates, we are not always cognizant of the ways that oppressive discourses shape our subjectivities. Oppression is *structural* and not merely interpersonal, and we must be constantly vigilant of this fact regardless of our self-perceived notions of social consciousness. Thus, racism, transphobia, and misogyny must be interrogated within every space from the walls of the campus LGBT center, to the classrooms where instruction transpires, and certainly in the minds of academics producing knowledge.

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