6 "Do you want to form an alliance with me?"

Glimpses of Utopia in the Works of Queer Women and Non-Binary Creators on TikTok

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"Do you want to form an alliance with me?" asks the voice of Dwight Schrute of TV's *The Office*. Posing the question via lip-synch is TikTok creator Alayna Joy as part of a humorous imagining of how queer community is created.[1] The invitation for solidarity that this audio depicts can be considered representative of a particular type of dynamic that exists on Queer TikTok. "Do you want to form an alliance with me?" is the question that queer TikTok users and creators are extending to one another through their innovations and interactions on the app, inviting each other into their journey of identity performance, self-exploration, and sexual education. In so doing, they are building space for community and connection, a process that has been of particular importance during the COVID-19 pandemic due to confinement in homes that may not be supportive of their identities and isolation from queer support groups.[2]

In order to analyze the nature and impact of these moves toward community, this chapter utilizes the lens of José Esteban Muñoz's concept of "queer utopia." More specifically, this chapter focuses on the queer utopia that is being pursued on TikTok by queer women and non-binary people whose sexualities do not center men. My intent in focusing on this demographic is to contribute to the effort to fill in the gap in queer studies that has resulted from scholarly attention being skewed toward gay men.[3] In so doing, I wish to bring to the fore the culture and community of those whose experience and desire lies outside of the heteropatriarchal idealized gender. I look at two case studies—one being the trend of queer women and non-binary people utilizing TikTok to discuss or theatrically recreate their turning away from heteronormativity during the pandemic; and the second being a creator-specific case study that looks at the work and experiences of Archie Bongiovanni.

Queer Space and Utopia

The opportunity to create, configure, repurpose, and reclaim space for queer livelihoods has been a salve and refuge for LGBTQ+ peoples. The dance floor, the bathroom stall, the college campus safe space, a Pride festival parade route, or an affordable housing apartment—these spaces have been and are essential for survival and flourishing. However, these spaces have also long been fraught with violence. Police raids on gay and lesbian bars were frequent from the mid to late twentieth century, along with harassment and attacks from homophobic locals.[4] Despite what the image of rainbow-painted police cars may suggest, state violence against queer communities has not abated in the present day, as demonstrated by incidents such as the 2020 NYPD police assault on Pride month protestors.[5]

Owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, an already compromised relationship with space has been made more difficult for queer people and their communities, particularly for working-class queer communities and queer communities of color who are pushed out of potential spaces of belonging due to a system of white supremacist capitalism. The conditions of the pandemic necessitate transfigurations of the existing, predominantly in-person, practices involved in creating and sustaining community, and the performance of identity. Without such in-person spaces, social media apps, which have previously mostly functioned as complementary albeit increasingly prominent sites for queer sociality, have become the necessary alternative. One such social media app is TikTok. TikTok has seen a marked increase in users since social distancing began in March 2020, with lockdown being a major factor behind the exponential rise in TikTok's use and visibility.[6]

With TikTok users can edit videos within the app, utilizing a number of image filters, visual effects, and sound clips. Once a video is published, these visual and auditory effects are noted onscreen as a hyperlink that if selected by a viewer will offer them the opportunity to make their own video with that effect, enabling them to create their own riff on the narrative structure created by those effects. Their video will then be automatically entered into a catalog of videos that all use that particular effect. This reproducible but adaptable structure operates as a sort of palimpsest that allows for the development of community culture.

Diana Zulli and David James Zulli (2020) conclude that TikTok's infrastructure positions mimesis as the basis of sociality on the site, encouraging a novel type of networked public.[7] What is unique about the publics formed via TikTok, Zulli and Zulli argue, is that TikTok

publics are not based on experiences that are interpersonal, discursive, or affective, but that they are largely processual.[8] Nonetheless, research demonstrates that impactful communities are possible on the app, with İrem İnceoglu and Yiğit Bahadır Kaya finding that LGBTI+ youth are able to construct "discrete bubbles" on TikTok that foster the expression of queer identity.[9] Additionally, Ellen Simpson and Bryan Semaan's 2020 study of LGBTQ+ users of TikTok finds that their respondents have discovered "a sense of community with other LGBTQ+ people they encountered on the app as manifest through their individual creativity and expression."[10] Their respondents attested to the community they encountered being a network they could "turn to for identity support and validation."[11]

Simpson and Semaan's interviews with TikTok users concluded in April 2020 at the beginning of the global COVID-19 pandemic. They infer that LGBTQ+ peoples' experiences on the app did not change following physical distancing orders. However, I would argue that the significance of the app to LGBTQ+ users during the pandemic would have increased. For queer people, the loss of physical spaces in which they can be in community with others is immense as these are the spaces in which queer people can shelter from and refuse heteronormative society's practices. For queer people holed up in their homes, with some potentially self-censoring because they now have to share space with parents or roommates they're not out to, TikTok becomes a portal to experience part of what they could be doing if they were free to be out in the world, in both senses of the term.[12]

This is not to say that TikTok is in itself a queer space. As George Chauncy has stated, "there is no queer space. There are only spaces put to queer uses."[13] On apps such as TikTok, this is possible through the "affordances" of social media, which refers to the possibilities for action when social media users interact with the mechanisms of platform design. Hanckel et al. (2019) have found that LGBTQ+ young people are using the functions of social media apps strategically so as to participate in queer-world-building.[14] Adding to their findings is Andre Cavalcante, who argues that the social media site Tumblr serves as Muñoz's "queer utopia" for LGBTQ+ youth.[15] I would argue that on Queer TikTok we can also see evidence of LGBTQ+ social media users generating "the specter of a 'queer utopia.'"

Queerness, as envisioned by Muñoz, is not yet here. "Queerness is an ideality," Muñoz argues, and while we may never touch queerness, "we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality."[16] In creating a queer utopia, one does not believe naively in perfection but rejects the here and now and insists on and strives for

the potentiality of another world.[17] Potentiality, Muñoz explains, is different from possibility as the possible is linked to current material conditions; potentiality, on the other hand, does not exist in present things but in the horizon.[18] Queer utopia is perpetually immanent. It can never be arrived at; it only exists in our continual striving for a queer world that provides for one another.

The potentiality of a queer utopia can be found in everyday, quotidian acts, according to Muñoz. Acts of play, of performance, of connection with others—these are the moments in which we model glimpses for ways of being in the future. Central to Muñoz's concept of "queer utopia" is the transformative act of refusal, as per the Hegelian dialectic that he takes his cue from. More specifically, the refusal that Muñoz speaks of is the refusal of assimilationist moves toward incorporation into white, heteropatriarchal, imperial, capitalist society. Enacting this refusal is a performance that maps for audiences our repression, fragmentation, and alienation.[19] With this map, we can begin to chart pathways forward, not to a prescribed endpoint, but to a perpetual becoming in which we grow with and for one another.

I contend that queer TikTokers are participating in a long lineage of people who are working toward queer utopia, collectively forming the constellation that we can call Queer TikTok. With the work of queer creators on TikTok, there is a discernable desire or effort on their part to contribute to and strengthen the landscape of queer cultural texts, and to pass on advice for navigating queer identity, relationships, and community. As a loose collectivity, they are making breaks in heteronormative and homonormative thinking, and thereby providing glimpses into alternative queer modalities.

The Pandemic Made Me Gay(er)

A genre of Queer TikTok that is particularly notable for its illumination of a path toward a queer future are those TikToks that discuss or depict the loosening grip of heteronormativity in theirs and others lives as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.[20] In fact, a number of people specifically identify their being on TikTok as a contributing factor to their queer revelations during the pandemic.[21] This genre is predominantly populated with queer women and non-binary people noting or imaginatively depicting that they or others have discovered during the pandemic that they are not attracted to men or less attracted than previously thought. These creators are utilizing the space of TikTok as a place in which they can announce, discuss, and revel

in their explorations of gender and sexuality, hailing others from different publics with whom they can be in conversation and build community with.

TikTok creator @special_feel, for instance, says the following:

> I think it is so sad that we had to go through a global pandemic and mandatory quarantine wherein girls didn't have to perform their gender for anyone else and because of that, they realized that they were lesbians! (laughs).[22]

The creator theorizes that the observed trend of women and non-binary people realizing that they are not attracted to or interested in men is due to the necessity to pursue school or work from home during the pandemic. This shift meant that people were instead conducting their daily lives from the far more private sphere of their own home, reducing the number of public and bodily interactions with men or under the gaze of men for many women and non-binary people.

@grahsar agrees, identifying the hegemonic ideology that orders these public interactions as "compulsory heterosexuality," a concept introduced by essayist Adrienne Rich in 1980.[23] @kardashionion adds scholarly theory for this discussion, likely because, as noted in their caption, they have produced this video as a submission for a college course assignment.[24] They reference Judith Butler's "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution" (1988) in order to argue that the pandemic has "stagnated" the repeated performance of gender that is mandated by larger society.

Whilst their conclusion that people now only have to perform for themselves is questionable, considering the pervasive nature of gender and sexuality norms, their argument that this stagnation could prompt internal questioning of the kind of performances they are engaging in is merited. Potentially, people's isolation from the public outside their home could lead them to pursue other forms of gender performance that they have developed an interest in, with TikTok offering a fertile space to practice that performance and find others who model such gender and sexuality play. In offering this potential explanation for people's relatively sudden evolution of their gender and/or sexual identity, TikToks such as these chart out the map that Muñoz prescribes, in which our repression, fragmentation, and alienation are located. These TikToks are a form of consciousness-raising, naming for viewers the specificities of the similar experiences they have gone through and, for some, forecasting potential trajectories out of compulsory heterosexuality.

Complementing these discursive TikToks are those TikToks that are more theatrical, constructing representations of their own journey of queer evolution. These TikToks utilize remixed popular songs to construct a familiar narrative structure whilst their superimposed text and bodily movements personalize the narrative to convey their own story of discovering their gender and sexuality. Simpson and Semaan credit the use of specific audio clips for content creation as contributing to the supportive and welcoming nature of the LGBTQ+ TikTok community.[25] This is likely because creating content around a specific audio lends to others being able to recognize and replicate the identity performance they have observed, thereby affirming their place in a community of practice.

Creator Tanya Compas has overlaid their video with a remix of the song "Levitating" by Dua Lipa.[26] This song was very popular on TikTok in early 2021, with creators employing the call and response of the lyrics "you want me/I want you baby" to express desire toward something or someone.[27] A riff on this TikTok meme then developed wherein the response of "I want you baby" was edited out. By simply editing out the response of "I want you baby," the participant in this trend could instead use it to indicate refusal or a lack of desire for the object depicted, just as Compas does.

Compas sets the scene as "before the pandemic," with her past self-identifying as bisexual. She switches her clothing and the camera orientation to then pose as the undesirable entity of her video—cisgender men—and then lip-synchs to the lyrics "You want me" and uses the silence of what should be the response to indicate her lack of attraction to the original subject. This humorous diss is used by Compas to indicate that prior to the pandemic she had thought she was bisexual, but that she has since realized she "will never date a CIS man again."

Creator Joan has used a remixed version of the 2012 song "Gangnam Style" by PSY to convey the transformative process they have gone through during the pandemic.[28] The TikTok begins with audio of a person saying, "Oh my god he's dead? No!" signaling the death of the person that is described in the superimposed text—"a cis bi girl." While the text remains onscreen, Joan thrashes around their bedroom, their movements erratic and extremely fast as a result of video editing. The sound clip switches to the opening rhythm of the song "Gangnam Style" with the pulsing rhythm of the song leaving the audience in anticipation of the very familiar lyrics "oppa gangnam style."

This instrumental arc frames the narrative of the TikTok in a similar manner—just as we expect to hear the familiar, titular lyrics of

"Gangnam Style," we also expect the emergence of a new narrative subject to replace the cis bi girl who has metaphorically died. Sure enough, just as the anticipated lyrics play, Joan stops thrashing around and looks at the camera as new text that reads "non-binary lesbian" is superimposed on the frame. Thus, using the theatrics of a TikTok trend, the creator has been able to express the transformative experience that was discovering during the pandemic they were not a bisexual woman but a non-binary lesbian.

Both of these TikToks offer a performance of refusal and discovery that echoes Muñoz's description of queer utopia, in which the here and now is rejected in favor of the innovation of new queer futures. The very act of desiring involves a discontent with the organization of a current reality. To choose alterity is to reject one's present. And this rejection has enabled the two TikTok creators discussed here to come into their own, finding confidence and peace through the process, as depicted by their narrative arcs. In rejecting the heteronormative expectation that they, in being assigned female at birth, should be attracted to or desiring of men, the two TikTok creators reveal that they have been able to come into a better and more liberating understanding of who they are. These TikToks demonstrate for viewers the freedom that can come from listening to feelings of discontent with the way of things, inviting them to instead choose the future they desire.

In between the Trends: Archie Bongiovanni's Queer Utopia

From looking at popular trends on Queer TikTok, we can learn a lot about the queer potentialities in how TikTok is being used, but it is also important to zoom in on specific creators. In looking at the posts and experiences of individual creators, we can see between and beyond the trends and can thereby discover not only how the resulting discourse is extended out into differently impactful conversations, but also how the algorithm can debilitate the conversation. One queer TikTok creator whose work illuminates the potentialities of a queer utopia is Archie Bongiovanni. Archie is a 35-year-old genderqueer cartoonist, illustrator, and zine-maker in Minneapolis who uses TikTok to continue their pre-pandemic work of recommending sex toys. For those who may gain a greater understanding of their gender and sexuality through the pandemic or via TikTok, TikToks like Archie's may be the site of a more material investment in their queer future.

An example of Archie's work is a TikTok in which they respond to a commenter who asks whether there are strap-on sex toys that are

pleasurable for the wearer without having to be inserted in the wearer's body.[29] Archie responds with a video of themself that is shot handheld from their mobile phone as they stroll and slightly dance down a tree-lined street walking their dog to a song by K-Pop band BTS. Archie has also superimposed text on this video that reads, "Yes! It sounds like ur looking for something that stays outside of the bod, here are my ideas! Lmk urs in the comments" and then proceeds to provide recommendations for this kind of sex toy in text that is superimposed on the subsequent frames of their video.

This video is a gleeful offering from a queer creator to assist their digital neighbors. In their video, Archie uses casual language and a public setting, demonstrating that their account is a place to discuss the topic of queer sex and pleasure openly and without any shame. Their performance in this video is a refusal of the dictates of comport-ment in public space, reclaiming public space to be the site where queer celebration and discussion can take place. Additionally, in choosing to shoot their video as they go about their day, Archie has created a point of connection to their viewer, who can feel as though they are receiving advice from a trusted friend. It feels especially important to see such a performance during COVID times, with queer spaces at risk due to business closures and physical distancing requirements.

In creating this space of interpersonal intimacy, Archie is better able to provide information that can aid their viewers in their queer sex goals. The information that they provide is detailed and consid-ers various goals or concerns that the commenter might have, such as comfort and maximizing pleasure. In providing such a service, Archie demonstrates a commitment to realizing the vision of queer futurity that Muñoz describes—one that is "all about desire."[30] Archie has taken the opportunity to configure a space that was not made specif-ically with queer people in mind in order to create new openings to a queer potentiality. Additionally, Archie destabilizes the homonorma-tive primacy of the cisgender, able-bodied gay man by producing and sharing resources that specifically attend to the experiences of peo-ple in LGBTQ+ communities who are non-binary and/or disabled, to name just a couple of the experiences and identities that are spoken to on their page.

This is likely to be the reason that Archie faces considerable censor-ship on the app.[31] Archie has had many of their TikToks taken down, and in May 2021, their account was deleted, cutting them off from a huge audience they had built for interaction and to sustain their small business. After two days of raising awareness of their situation and drumming up some support, the account was returned to Archie but

the incident is illustrative of the vulnerable position that queer and other marginalized creators are in on social media platforms like Tik-Tok. Simpson and Semaan document that many of their research participants have experienced or observed situations similar to that of Archie's.[32]

Black TikTok creators in particular have been working hard to expose TikTok's discriminatory algorithm.[33] Non-binary creator Ryan Ken has spoken out on Twitter about the removal of one of their videos satirizing cis straight male comedy for what TikTok deemed hate speech violations. Ken calls TikTok a "wild case study of how we build bias into our technologies" and warns that "if enough people choose to say 'Can I speak to a manager?' to an algorithm, someone's entire livelihood can be cut off."[34] Here, Ken is referring to the practice in which TikTok users will report content as violating TikTok's community guidelines in order to get it removed, an issue that Simpson and Semaan noted as prevalent for queer TikTok creators.[35]

In Archie's case, along with other queer content creators on TikTok, TikTok's community guideline against the posting of "sexually explicit content" is usually cited as the reason for their content removal. Much like the Tumblr ban on sexually explicit content in 2017, this community guideline can be and is wielded to suppress LGBTQ+ content.[36] This policy disappointed queer Tumblr users and drove many people away from the app.[37] In fact, Simpson and Semaan's study of LGBTQ+ TikTok users found that some of their participants had moved away from Tumblr and toward other social media spaces like TikTok for exactly this reason.[38] It remains to be seen how TikTok's implementation of a similar policy, as well as its anti-Black policies, will impact the pursuit of queer utopia on the app.

Conclusion

Queer utopia, as described by Muñoz, is an evolving innovation in which the future is designed and redesigned based off of the cues of our past and the rejection of the constraints of our present. It is a creative force that strides ahead of the inertia imposed by a pragmatic homonormative politics. During the pandemic, queer people have utilized the space of TikTok for a generative play through refusal and creation, seizing the opportunity for public yet intimate performance in order to come into themselves and build community.

For queer women and non-binary people, this journey has been one of great transformation, breaking down the hold of heteronormativity and cisnormativity on their lives. Queer women and non-binary

TikTok creators are developing their own theories of how exactly this transformation has come about and what role both TikTok and the pandemic has played in the process. Further research on these experiences and theories is required so as to better understand queer women and non-binary people's use of social media technology, as well as what this usage reveals about the functioning of the cis heteropatriarchal system.

The continued viability of TikTok for efforts toward queer utopia is yet to be determined, with TikTok's interpretation and implementation of conduct violation policy continually falling on the side of the white supremacist heteropatriarchy. Nevertheless, the methods developed by creators on the app to create cultural texts and build community are powerful and also show signs of being translated into in-person strategies. As of this writing, I am aware of three pop-ups or meet-ups organized by queer/lesbian creators on TikTok that have occurred in 2021 in cities such as Los Angeles, Austin, and Denver.[39] To better understand our directions toward queer utopia, future scholarship will need to bear witness to community-building methods on the app and as they make their way out into additional spaces.

Notes

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