

Why Have There Been No Great Women Eroticists?

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Abstract

This thesis project seeks to explore the erotic image-making of (queer) women and femmes as a means of challenging current established understandings of sexual desire and cisheteropatriarchal sexual scripting. Drawing on bell hooks' concept of the oppositional gaze and Audre Lorde's theory on the erotic as power, I suggest ways of seeing these works as proclamations of power and potential roadmaps towards queer eutopic futures. Also, in order to create these worlds which are wholly divested from institutions which champion power imbalances, I probe further and suggest a framework for liberating desire from these institutions.

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Introduction

First, a provocation: how would the world have responded if, instead, Hugh Hefner had been a woman marketing male bunnies and centerfolds to an audience of women buyers? Drawing on bell hooks' concept of the oppositional gaze and Audre Lorde's theory on the erotic as power, I consider this question (and the various hypotheticals and complications that arise from it) as a means to critique cisheteropatriarchal sexuality, challenge the white colonial male gaze, and present possible eutopic queer futures.

This thesis is in conversation with Linda Nochlin's 1971 essay, *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?* in which she discusses the systems and institutions that have stifled women's art making. I daresay that the essay's conclusion had been conceived from the first page but of course because the burden of proof always lies on those with marginalized identities, an explanation is always necessary.

My guiding questions are:

- Why have there been no great women eroticists (especially those who use the male body as a muse, medium, and message)?
- Should we draw a distinction between erotic and pornographic imagery? *Can* we make that distinction? What will drawing this distinction do to help assess and process the sexually explicit material(SEM) that is created going forward?
- How can we use the heterotopias embodied by erotic imagery made by women and femmes to move towards queer eutopic futures?

Inspired by Anna Anthropy's *Rise of the Video Game Zinesters: How Freaks, Normals, Amateurs, Artists, Dreamers, Drop-outs, Queers, Housewives, and People Like You Are Taking Back an Art Form*, I opted to contextualize and exhibit my thesis as a zine because it allowed me

the creative freedom to abandon the restrictions that are associated with academia as an institution. Zines are staples within counterculture and this thesis has some heavy lifting to do, it doesn't have the time or the luxury to remain as some esoteric elevated concept.

In bell hooks' *Feminism Is For Everybody: Passionate Politics*, she makes an astute point that I colloquialize thus: feminism retreated into academia to die. Feminism (and any liberatory practice) is not just theoretical practice, it is to inform ways of living and thinking with aspirations towards equitable futures and pluralities of existence, unfortunately a lot of these theories and concepts are made inaccessible because they are hidden in the pages of texts so dense you can't see through them. How is this helpful? If the theories and concepts I am inventing, investigating, and invoking cannot survive to inform popular culture (where reality and representation are heavily contested) then who am I serving? With that being said, I want to stress that the most complete way to absorb the message and essence of this thesis is by reading the zine. If you are doing that then 🍷. If you desire a copy or need help locating one, please reach out to me at eroticists@proton.me.

Finally, this work is a work of autotheory. It could not have existed in any other way.

Definitions & Trials

In doing this work, it has been important for me to emphasize how language is a tool and all tools can be used, misused, and designed to fail. Some notes that I would like to highlight for the reader as they partake of this journey with me:

1. Gender

An ongoing challenge that I encounter while discussing these topics is the issue of gender and language. When I speak about women, I am including transgender and cisgender women, agender people, intersex folks, and to some **very marginal degree** transgender men (marginal because I want to recognize transgender men's and masc experiences with misogyny but I do not want this recognition to come at the expense of invalidating their individual connections with manhood and masculinity). To solve this, I thought to use the term women and femmes but that also comes with its own baggage because there are agender and intersex people who may be uncomfortable with being ascribed the feminine.

I am seeking a word that would be used to denote anyone who is non-cismale without it being explicitly the word "non-cismale" as that would serve to solely define cisgender women, transgender women, agender people, intersex folks, and transgender men through the lens of cisgender masculinity as the norm. In the zine component of this thesis, I community-build by posing the question to the reader to email me with their suggestions for language that would do the work that is necessary.

2. Heterotopia

Heterotopias are worlds within worlds that mirror and unsettle the world outside of them. Consider heterotopia alongside liminal space, that sense of being in transit, the messiness of

movement and creation. Queer Pride festivals are heterotopias (excluding the carnivorous claw of capitalism that has sunk itself into the flesh of its belly).

There was a nude man at Pride with a Prince Albert piercing and a backpack. I noticed him standing by the barricades separating the festival from the rest of the world. My friends and I were stopped close to the barricade, trying to decide where to get something to eat. The man gingerly goes into his backpack. A few moments later, we are walking down the street and a man walks past me, the same man but clothed. That transformation was unsettling in a way that made me think.

I consider the worlds created by the women and femme erotic artists, I see them as heterotopias – these works enable readers to see what is missing in the current world, maybe to wonder about why these things are still missing. Part of this work is pondering how to maneuver that liminality, the heterotopia on our quest towards eutopia.

3. Eutopia VS Utopia

In Ivana Milojevic and Sohail Inayatullah's essay, *Futures Dreaming: Challenges From Outside and on the Margins of the Western World*, they briefly bring up the concept of eutopia and describe it as the "good, not perfect." I see this as the attainable. I consider this: what if we strive for eutopia as opposed to utopia? The good but imperfect. I want to stress, however, that systematic racism, misogyny, queerphobia, colonialism and its many offshoots do not count as imperfections, they are blights that have no place or space within even eutopia.

"a safe space isn't a conflict free space. in fact a conflict free space is an unsafe space" — @june_lastname on Twitter

Not All Bodies

At an outdoor art fair, I find a (white) woman with the most amazing paintings. I am taken by one particular piece — in it, she has depicted a man with eyes so brown and deep.

“Beautiful isn’t he?”

“Yes, amazing.”

“He’s my muse. I love him so much. He’s such an amazing performer and delight to be around.”

“What’s his name?”

She stutters. She gives me a social media handle that leads to nowhere. I am only able to find his name by scrolling all the way down through her social media feed until I find the post in which she had initially shared this painting’s completion and had tagged him in it. I find him by my own diligence. I find him because I know the importance of being fully remembered as a Black person.

The guiding question, as mentioned earlier, ponders how the world would have responded to a woman Hugh Hefner marketing and selling male bunnies to women buyers. This is spurred on by wondering how and why this cishetmale gaze has dominated our public discourse and visual language for so long. I wanted to see “how do women look at men and how does that undo the thread of cisheteropatriarchy.” The question is simple and succinct. Now I must complicate it.

What if this woman Hugh Hefner happens to be a white woman and the male bunnies happen to be solely Black men and the women buyers happen to be majority white women? Does that destabilized cisheteropatriarchy in any way? Well, all I see happening in this case is a continuation of white people’s ability to use the bodies of people of color as fodder for their own

sexual “awakenings.” Consider the complicated history of white women turning on their Black men lovers in order to maintain their own social standing when miscegenation laws were in place. Consider this alongside the white women who engage in sex tourism in countries with populations of color, for example the Caribbean. Whole empires and nations have been built from the violent and forced trade of Black and brown skin, you think you’re being a radical feminist because you go to Jamaica every summer to rent a Rasta? This exercise is a reminder of the fact that there can be no sexual revolution without first the liberation of people of color.

I considered this deeply while creating the art within the zine component of my thesis. The bodies of Black men are objectified in ways that can only be understood when thoroughly considering the cross-section between race, sex, and gender. People of color are sexed by our race and (e)raced by our sex.

I make my art using nude male bodies as a point. It is an act of rebellion, forcing the bodies of those who have long assessed my worth on my appearance into my viewfinder. But then I remember the ways that the Black male body is also a spectacle under the white gaze. How then do I make art featuring Black men nude without drawing that white gaze to the work? That is a gaze that doesn’t look with the discerning eye to see through to the message I am trying to convey, it instead salivates at a fetish served for it to feast on. The thing that then becomes even more concerning for me is pondering how this white gaze shapes how I see the bodies of Black men? Then I consider: how does the white gaze influence the way that I look at myself, the way that I look at other Black women, and the way that other Black people look at me? How do I fully divest from this gaze and way of gazing? How do we collectively fully divest from this gaze and way of gazing? How will we know when we have fully divested from this gaze and way of gazing?

I consider Maggie Nelson's quote from her book *The Argonauts*:

"You're the only one who knows when you're using things to protect yourself and keep your ego together and when you're opening and letting things fall apart, letting the world come as it is—working with it rather than struggling against it. You're the only one who knows. And the thing is, even you don't always know."

Stop Calling Men Thick

“By courageously looking, we defiantly declared: “Not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality.”

bell hooks, The Oppositional Gaze

Free! should have just been another sports anime. It had all the signifiers: a simple title with too many exclamation points and a cast of enthusiastic team members excited to advance in their sport of choice.

But for some reason, the backlash on social media was impossible to ignore. Below is a transcription of a post from an anime forum showing the sentiment that was being directed towards the show and its fans:

“The increase in literally gay anime is increasing lately. So many this season just to please the gays. I counted 9 airing that include outright gays, extremely gay looking, cross dressing. The gay activist are making their way to change fanservice as we know it. Pretty soon, half the anime airing charts will be for gays.

Here comes the “oh what about females liking..” NO. Cut the crap gay boy.”

Sometimes, this backlash masked the absolute queer and femme joy that radiated from the online spaces dedicated to the anime and I find myself asking the question again: what was so different about *Free!* that made the dudebros set their sights on it and lose their shit?

Anime as a contemporary medium looks nothing like it did during its inception. Unfortunately, the over-relevance of certain tropes and design principles has caused anime to become more akin to a genre than a medium. Fan service (which I colloquially dub cishetman service) involving gratuitous amounts of female nudity or just putting its female characters in some uncomfortable positions e.g. the infamous panty shot scenes or the scenes in which the male main character falls head first into the female character’s cleavage has become a mainstay.

(I remember my unfortunate experience of stumbling upon *Seven Deadly Sins*, a show listed as one of the top 10 anime, unfortunately its ranking had no bearing on whether or not the male main character of the show made me uncomfortable because of his propensity towards sexual harassment). Popular anime became shorthand for ‘there will be some amount of female nudity’ and questioning it is futile because all of this is at home within the ecosystem of this world. And then came *Free!*

Set in the fictional seaport town of Iwatobi, *Free!* follows a swim team of high school boys as they aspire for gold and mend friendships along the way. The directors and writers made the clever decision of interplaying the visual language of shoujo and josei (anime that is aimed at young girls and women respectively) with the very shounen (anime that is aimed at boys) theme of the main characters training for a competition. There are scenes where the boys engage in moments of the heart and pour out their love and admiration for their fellow swimmers all while being lit by the sun strewn through cherry blossom trees while the wind rustles their hair. And then we have scenes where the camera lingers on their bodies as they stretch. The directors wanted us to fall in love with these characters and fall in love we did. And this must have been what perplexed these men so much: how dare someone look at a male body. I am man, I am not to be looked at, I do the looking.

However, despite all these complaints of “reverse objectification,” it’s shocking just how devoid of overt sexuality (and possibly sexuality as a whole) the entirety of the show was — the male characters do not pursue any love interests; despite being shirtless for most of an episode’s runtime, none of the characters are depicted with nipples; and, most importantly, they all suffer from a serious case of Ken Doll Syndrome which makes their anatomy seem even more uncanny. But this was what we got. And this is what they were aggressively protesting against in their

forums and social media posts. So extensive was their displeasure that a whole Tumblr blog was created to document all the insane shit that cishetmen (and those who had aligned themselves with cishetmanhood) were saying about the show titled, Mad About Free!

Related to that, the title for this essay comes from a very funny instance on ~~Twitter~~ in which a man posted a very angry tweet ordering people to stop calling men thick. According to Dictionary.com, the meaning of thicc or thick is ““not skinny, with meat on your bones” and alludes to a fuller body type the term’s users value as beautiful. Thickness, a term and concept, is particularly used and celebrated in hip-hop culture.”Thick has been relegated to women’s and femme’s bodies however, now, cishetmen are discovering that their own assets are up for regard and not taking it too well. So this man makes this post on ~~Twitter~~ and immediately, everyone starts clowning him for his ridiculousness. His responses to this then reveal that his initial words had indeed (obviously) been backed by misogyny and queerphobia. Are you worried that your booty draws the attention of another man? Are you worried about your attraction to another man’s booty? Are you disturbed that your woman partner may begin to assess you the same way that you do her? Are you worried that women are looking at each other’s booties? Are you worried about potentially finding a trans or agender booty attractive? Are you worried about that attraction being mutual?

I wonder if this has anything to do with cishetmen understanding the inherently destructive nature of how cisheteronormative patriarchy dictates that sexuality be expressed on bodies. The explicit ways in which there is to be a winner and a loser. The male gaze is an assertion of power that demands that the subject does not look back, does not reciprocate with the same intensity, it is an enforcer that serves to overwhelm and dominate, it wants to see and not be seen, existing as a perpetual voyeur.

Sex is political. Desire is political. The language of sex is political. The language of desire is political. In the preface of her book, *The Right to Sex: Feminism in the Twenty-First Century*, Amia Srinivasan states:

“A famous philosopher once said to me that he objected to feminist critiques of sex because it was only during sex that he felt truly outside politics, that he felt truly free. I asked him what his wife would say to that. (I couldn’t ask her myself; she hadn’t been invited to the dinner.) This is not to say that sex cannot be free. Feminists have long dreamed of sexual freedom. What they refuse to accept is its simulacrum: sex that is said to be free, not because it is equal, but because it is ubiquitous. In this world, sexual freedom is not a given but something to be achieved, and it is always incomplete.”

I consider these words in tandem with the through line argument in Literal Shipley’s essay *Erika Moen, cuckolding, and the casualties of “Oh Joy Sex Toy.”* *Oh Joy Sex Toy* is an ongoing webcomic by Erika Moen and her husband Matthew Nolan that started its life reviewing sex toys before expanding into exploring various aspects of sex and trying to provide a more comprehensive sex education for its adult audience. There has always been an air of whimsy associated with this comic and I remember how much it filled me with delight. Literal Shipley’s essay, however, discusses some things that I had subconsciously recognized even while I enjoyed this once beloved webcomic: the authors had completely flubbed their discussion of cuckolding by glossing over the racism imbued within the kink. Shipley describes how in this world that Moen paints, sex is not messy, it’s just fun all the time with minimal consequence. There is no discussion of the histories that have shaped the ways that sex and sexuality play out on different bodies today, it is all just spectacle. Sure, cuckolding may have its foundation in the whitemale obsession with dominating the bodies of blackmen and whitewomen (something that is still pervasive and the default for the porn genre right now) but you can have it anyway you

like it, you can forget all that! In this world, the ultimate sin isn't racism, misogynoir, or misogyny, the ultimate sin is kink-shaming.

In this, the white and male gaze, that oppressive gaze remains unchallenged. Our power imbalances remain as they are because “👉that's hot👈.” That is why the Order must be maintained — men look, women are looked at, and since the ethnostate will only ever open the gates to those who will align with its hegemony, then same-gender relationships must align with these markers as well (“so, who's the girl in your relationship?”). A fellow sapphic friend shared with me that it had taken her a long time to believe that she was actually sapphic because she couldn't look at women through that male gaze but felt that if she didn't look at women with that gaze then it meant she wasn't experiencing desire, just friendship. I felt something similar, especially after having a run in with a short-form vertical video in which a butch lesbian told off femmes for touching her butt because “how would you like it if you saw your mama scoop up your daddy's butt cheek?” This video made me wonder – are you sapphic because you are genuinely attracted to women or because you want to finally have someone who society sees as permissible to dominate? Misogyny is a universal language regardless of where your heart lies on the alphabet.

My respite came when I watched *Portrait of a Lady On Fire* (I think about this film a lot). In the film, I meet Marianne, an artist tasked with painting a portrait of Héloïse. That portrait will be the nail in the coffin that is to be Héloïse's marriage to a man she doesn't want thus she wants no part in this endeavor, forcing Marianne to employ some serious duplicity in order to get her subject to comply with the sitting. When the film starts, we can establish who is the painter and who is the painted subject. Marianne watches Héloïse, trying to capture the details. But then, we find scenes of Héloïse engrossed in Marianne's presence, taking her in. In a

pivotal scene, Marianne states that she would hate to be in Héloïse's place as a model because of the visceral nakedness it imposes on her but Héloïse remarks that they are both in the same place: "When you look at me, who do I look at?" Marianne becomes flustered at the weight of being seen.

The film subverts our perceptions of the roles of painter and subject to present an axis of mutual vulnerability. As you look at me, so shall I look at you, imbued within one another. This intimacy is the praxis towards the beginnings of a much needed sexual eutopia. This is the intimacy that Audre Lorde speaks of in *Uses of the Erotic* - something mutual, something that rejects the farce and abuse of feeling of the pornographic. Something that evokes the intimacies and intricacies of seeing, being seen, being seen being seen, and being seen seeing.

Talking About Pornography

“You don’t have to save the things that kill you”

Christina Sharpe, Note 106, Ordinary Notes

“What does it mean to say that we want to transform the political world – but that we ourselves will remain unchanged?”

Amia Srinivasan, The Right to Sex: Feminism in the Twenty-First Century

On the *Notes to America* podcast, Tracie Hunte and Tressie McMillan Cottom reflect on the question of who gets to be beautiful in America. Cottom speaks from a place of knowing that as a Black woman in the USA, she is not capital B beautiful, she doesn’t confer status and she is candid about not being swept up in the whole “we’re all beautiful” belief because that doesn’t serve anyone especially when our beauty sick culture dictates otherwise. When Hunte asks about reclaiming beauty, Cottom responds, “Reclaiming is not the same thing as reimagining, if I take the word back from you, I’m still accepting the word, I’m still accepting the history of the term.” What do we give up when we opt for the project of merely reclaiming something?

In *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, Andrea Dworkin explains:

“The porne was the cheapest in the literal sense least regarded least protected of all women including slaves. She was, simply and clearly and absolutely, a sexual slave. Graphos means writing, a chain, or drawing.

The word pornography does not mean “writing about sex” or “depictions of the erotic” or “depictions of sexual acts” or “depictions of nude bodies” or “sexual representations” or any other such euphemism. It means the graphic depiction of women as vile whores. In ancient Greece, not all prostitutes were considered vile: only the porneia.... The word has not changed its meaning and the genre is not misnamed.”

I mention Dworkin with the utmost caution. In this landscape, a person is either for porn or against it and I can understand the anxiety that people have about any discussion or critiques of porn – sex workers bear the brunt of every societies own shame of its desires and whenever there are bans or legislations on porn those tools are immediately used as weapons to oppress queer people, and that doesn't even get into how Big Porn (think the Hubs, the Videos, and the Tubes) bully smaller niche creators. And this endeavor becomes even more daunting when I realize that there are so many bad faith actors poisoning porn-critical scholarship, I have had several instances where I am reading a text that (on the surface) seems to have a sophisticated view but then I have to give it the side eye wondering “Is this a TERFy SWERFy religious bigot?” and then proceed to put on a hazmat suit as I decide what to do with the material.

In *Refusing Compulsory Sexuality: A Black Asexual Lens on Our Sex-Obsessed Culture*, (a book I recommend **everyone** read) Sherronda J. Brown describes how, with its preoccupations with power, domination, and violence, white supremacy is a sexual fantasy within the pornographic imagination. I consider the ways in which the vilest forms of bigotry become permissible and taken at face value as soon as they are sanctified by the pornographic – during the 2020 protests for Black lives, the pornographic life of racism showed itself in the police brutality that had led to the protests **and** in some of the protest imagery from “allies” (a white woman walking with sign saying “I only suck black dick” or the joke post that someone made about a particular porn site standing in solidarity with the protests by only featuring “ebony” performers on their front page, a post that I was surprised to find people rallying behind). *Whole empires and nations built on Black skin, how does this make its people see that skin as flesh for the carving, can protest porn exist on that sort of foundation, can it really?* I consider the ways that living within societies that impose purity all while being obsessed with sex but not providing

comprehensive sex education fuel the ways that pornography (which is often made with and for the eyes of cishetwhite men) influence how sexuality is mediated as a whole. A desperate need for transgression yet somehow these transgressions arc towards replication of the normative. To go back to that Playboy allegory, Hugh Hefner really thought he was liberating people with his magazine, a liberation predicated on the ownership of (white) women. This is why I have a lot of problems when people claim that he shepherded some sort of sexual revolution – is the bar so far down in hell that a water droplet is an oasis? Now within this sexual revolution I have nothing more to my personhood than the words “ebony.”

Porn has a very distinct image. What comes to mind is a white woman in full view sucking on a disembodied penis with jizz on her tits. With this in mind then, is feminist porn really just an oxymoron? Searching it as a keyword on porn sites yields videos titled “(white) feminist gets destroyed by BBC” or “(white) lesbian tries dick” or “(white) feminist gets fucked” or suggested related tags of “misogyny” and “anti-feminist.” I see a male gaze masquerading as female and consider how American cheese (those Kraft singles) can’t legally be called cheese so the product packaging actually says cheese food product in small letters but the huge standout letters scream that it is “cheese” or how Hawaiian Punch is “juice” but in the fine print says its a “juice drink beverage.” It’s all marketing corporate-speak, deceit hidden in plain sight.

And then I consider the words of our (Audre) Lorde, in her essay, *Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic As Power*:

“Pornography emphasizes sensation without feeling. The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves. It is never easy to demand the most from ourselves, from our lives, from our work. To encourage

excellence is to go beyond the encouraged mediocrity of our society is to encourage excellence.”

Mediating on this, shall we not come up with a new language, a new word, a new umbrella to under which to house the things that bring us sexual visual pleasure?

some fandom discourse

Everyone's new favorite vampire is Astarion Ancunin, an origin character from *Baldur's Gate 3*. Never had a thing for vampires, sorry, didn't care for Edward, definitely didn't care for Spike or Lestat. I told myself I wasn't interested in this game but now here I am simping for this stupid sexy high-elf. Another character I love very dearly from this game is Karlach, an unbearably hot tiefling whose heart has been replaced with an infernal engine which causes her to overheat when excited, she burns so hot that she cannot be touched (sigh, unfortunate). The fun thing about loving a piece of media is getting the chance to participate in the community that is fandom, however, something to note when participating in any fandom: you may think you've seen it all but trust me when I tell you that you haven't.

The hot thing right now is to claim that Astarion and Karlach are actually not pansexual/bisexual/omnisexual because:

- Astarion talks with his hands too much, there's no way that a cisman who's so flamboyant could ever be anything other than gay! And the fact that he likes it when you call him beautiful and misses being able to look at his reflection in the mirror so that he can preen? He has to be gay! Just flaming gay! And in that scene that we see some of the people he had seduced in the past, sure there is a woman there but that woman looked like a man anyway so there's no way that he can be anything other than gay (BTW the woman that someone claimed looked like a man anyway was a dark-skinned woman, in a note in *Ordinary Notes*, Christina Sharpe discusses Toni Morrison's writing craft decisions in *Beloved*: "Morrison knows fully the imbrication of racesexgender and so she writes whitemen and blackmen, just two examples, as nouns, there is no space between

the noun (men) and the racial modifier.” We are (e)raced by our sex, we are sexed by our race.)

- Karlach has to be a lesbian, she’s even got the side-shave to prove it! She’s so buff with sculpted shoulders. She’s so unfeminine and dorky, look at what she does in her idle animations. Look how aggressive she is in combat and she is even taller than all the male origin characters in the main cast. If you ship her with anything other than women then you are being lesbophobic.

I scroll through all these texts that try to prove that an undying elven vampire and a tiefling who is perpetually on fire must live in forced boxes. Where do we spend our imagination? Is it an imagination unto fascist nationalism? Imaginationalism?

Alien Attacks on Uranus: Exploring the Male Body as Object Through *Pain Killer*

Pain Killer cuts like a dagger through a heart. Authored and illustrated by HamletMachine, the comic follows Juan, a soldier in an army tasked with eliminating the hordes of monsters that prowl the world's surface but he quickly learns that evil sleeps among his people just as easily as it roams the outside world. Within this space, *Pain Killer* summons the power of its predecessors in the science fiction genre and blends these tones seamlessly with elements from many major Japanese role-playing and hack 'n' slash video games.^{[1][2]} Taken at face value, upon reading the PG-13 description of this comic-artbook hybrid, one could easily dismiss it as child's play, another run-of-the-mill copycat, but all this dissipates once you see the cover: Juan sits on the floor, his legs spread with his BFS planted right between his legs, donning his soldier uniform which immediately looks... off – consisting of a leotard sporting large metal shoulderpads, some elbow-length gloves, and a pair of thigh high stockings adorned with gun metal gray kneepad; his outfit resembles something out of a latex or leather fetishist magazine.^[3] Undeniably, there is something inherently erotic about the naked flesh of Juan's thighs, his non-confrontational gaze; he doesn't look like most male sci-fi comic book heroes. Juan's character costume serves as an exact replica of the bikini battle armor trope – female characters in science fiction and fantasy often venture into the fray wearing clothing that one would expect from a Victoria's Secret catalog with their vitals exposed and their makeup and hair immaculate e.g. Princess Leia's slave costume in *Star Wars*.

Upon first unexamined glance, Juan looks, oddly enough, like any other male character from a AAA hack 'n' slash video game – with his spiky hair and ginormous sword, he could

¹ A type of gameplay that emphasizes combat with melee-based weapons (such as swords or blades).

² A game in which players assume the roles of different characters within a fantasy setting.

³ A common trope to both video games and anime, a BFS is an unrealistically large sword most often owned by The Hero, The Chosen One, or whatever type the lead happens to be.

easily be mistaken for Cloud Strife from *Final Fantasy VIII*, Raiden from *Metal Gear Solid*, or Zagreus from *Hades*.^[4] Juan's categorization becomes a form of trickery for the unsuspecting reader, a sham, a surprise packaged within a surprise as *Pain Killer* challenges expectations and doesn't deliver on presumptions. Juan, despite the hefty sword and extensive training, falls in battle and is overcome by the monsters he fights. Through being overpowered, his battles with the hordes take on a whole new meaning of 'physical.' Through this, *Pain Killer*'s main objective reveals itself – arousing the reader.

Juan's exploits in this wasteland present a subgenre of erotica referred to as teratophilia (the sexual attraction to monsters). This sexual attraction comes either by way of creating a repulsion by making these monsters detestable and hideous i.e. the monsters present as more monster than human, or by framing the monster as a "gentle giant," a human surrogate in a body that one could look past to see the kindness within. The monsters in *Pain Killer* are the former, they subject Juan to a range of assaults; there is no consent, there is only grotesque violation of bodily autonomy. Although troubling, this element in the story and imagery exposes issues that have been canonized within science fiction and fantasy storytelling – the aspects of the female character as damsel in distress and the female character as visual pleasure for a presumed male spectator (remember the aforementioned Princess Leia). Considering how science fiction and fantasy are inextricably linked and wholly powered by the fandoms that are created surrounding them, the fan labor and fanon that arises to advance the original canon of a work is invaluable for any would be writer, game maker, or artist.^{[5][6]} Often, these female characters become fodder for

⁴ An informal classification used to categorize games produced and distributed by a mid-sized or major publisher, which typically have higher development and marketing budgets than other tiers of games.

⁵ Fan labor refers to the practices and creative activities of fans, which may take the form of fanworks (e.g., fanfiction, fanart, fanvids, and so on), but also encompasses the labor of organizing conventions, fan translation, beta reading, providing feedback, editing fan wikis, and more.

⁶ Fanon is any element that is widely accepted among fans, but has little or no basis in canon. Sometimes it's a small event in canon that gets exaggerated; sometimes it's something in a fanfic story that gets picked up on and repeated

fan-made pornographic content in machinima and comics disseminated through online spaces which raises the question of what role the female body serves within these spaces.^[7] The most well-known populator of these images, _____ relies on the shock and repulsion factor – monsters, demons, and... Black men sexually assault and debase (white) female characters from well-known video games with remorseless reckless abandon. One can illustrate the sheer infernal rot of _____'s filmography by stating **one** fact – they are permanently banned from Patreon (one of the few crowdsourcing sites with a marginally high tolerance for NSFW content).^[8]

As well as being subjected to the threat of monsters outside the safe haven of his bunker, Juan must contend with corrupt superiors who also wish to subordinate him and often succeed at doing so. Juan is, in every sense of the word, utterly powerless. While these games and comics within this genre often grant readers/players the fantasy of omnipotence, fragmented demigodhood afforded by proximities to maleness, within the realms of *Pain Killer*'s pages, the male body experiences treatment often reserved for its female counterparts. Even its title, *Pain Killer*, stands as an antithesis to its subject matter – what could possibly be relieving about a hero whose victimization forms the beating core of the story? Maybe more is revealed when one considers its creator and when the work was made. HamletMachine has masculinity collide with itself in an unending spar which always ends with the male flesh being torn asunder, an eroticized spectacle of the male body as sacrifice, queer in its constructs and overwhelming in its rage. Compiled into a single volume and published in 2020 during the fever pitch of the COVID-

by other writers until it's so common that newbies might think it's a canonical fact. Not to be confused with the psychiatrist and political philosopher, Frantz Fanon. His work is pretty dope, I recommend reading it.

⁷ A method of making animated film using software similar to that designed for making video and computer games.

⁸ An internet slang that is often used to describe online posts that are mainly associated with heavy nudity, sexual, heavy profanity and other things that could often link with pornography.

19 lockdowns, protests for racial equity, and mass layoffs, where the frayings of society became common witness that could no longer be ignored by the greater mainstream; the artist has transferred that sense of powerlessness to a male surrogate to feel the agony of a capitalist colonialist patriarchy. No longer allowed, by way of his gendered representation, to be an orchestrator of conquest or the apocalypse, Juan's surrogacy makes his masculinity impotent against both the beasts and monsters in human skin that wish to dominate him, his exposed flesh renders him as land to be conquered. This raises important questions about which gendered embodiments allow for greatest access to power within the presets defined by patriarchy, e.g. how differently would the violence within the comic have felt if Juan was, instead, being sexually assaulted by being forced to penetrate as opposed to being forcefully penetrated?

Consider the tenuous state of abortion access from 2019 onwards as a result of Donald's presidency. Although at the time of writing this, *Roe v Wade* has been overturned in the United States, in 2020 this was still open for discussion. Considering the peculiar dichotomy that exists for bodies assigned female at birth – sex object and birth canal – Juan's state of surrogacy and his lack of bodily autonomy in this world creates a stark contrast for what happens within the cisheteropatriarchy of reality. *HamletMachine* has appropriated the image of this male hero power fantasy and erected a mausoleum with his still living body, the sound of his cries echoing through its walls; it's the closest equivalent would be parading a bloody severed head on a pole.

Ultimately, *Pain Killer* offers an exploration of control within a speculative space. In using Juan as a surrogate, *HamletMachine* seizes his male body and suspends it as a mode of catharsis for the audience's collective rapture. In doing so, the male body is presented for queer spectatorship, no longer allowed to hide behind the camera or play puppet master for othered bodies.

Huge note: I made the deliberate choice of blocking out some information in this essay while being aware of the Streisand Effect – attempts to conceal information just make people want to seek it out even more. I made this choice because I am intentional about who I choose to platform, hate-mentions are still mentions and information is very much political in how it is shared and wielded. Should you, the reader, so choose to seek out this information I want you to look inward and ask yourself:

- Why am I doing this?
- What are my reasons and to what end?
- What could I be doing instead of this fool's errand?

If you find that you are doing it to stoke the flames of your own outrage then I will encourage you to stop because this is what you look like every time you proactively seek out the things that provoke you: 🤪. Your morbid investment in being outraged and sharing that outrage does nothing but raise your own blood pressure and give you anxiety. If you want to actually *do* something useful, support the artists discussed in this thesis on whatever monetization platforms they are on (they are all linked here and on the are.na site) or share their work with folks who you think will be interested.

Sigh. Shame.

For some time in my life, I was well nestled within the loathsome grip of a very manipulative and dogmatic religious institution. During that time an artist I was collaborating with emailed me:

“I’m working on an erotic lesbian comic and need a writer. Would you like to work on it with me?”

Umm, hell fucking yes! Are you kidding me?!

It sounded like a very interesting prospect but now, here I was in this religious institution that had strict rules about expressions of sexuality and even stricter ones concerning anything perceived to be a deviation from the burdening legalism of their holy text. I remember that sharp breath that I forced out of me as I quickly responded that I wasn’t interested. But the shame of it lingered. The shame of wanting it.

Why are there no great women eroticists? Shame. Because of shame. Shame functions towards silence, towards dismissal.

I reached out to a few queer women and femme erotic artists and they all told me something about shame, either having to contend with it internally from lifetimes of conditioning or having it used as a weapon by their critics.

Kiss Kicker is an artist who decided, at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, to create a separate social media account for their “spicy” art because they were so fed up: “If Chris Sanders and Bruce Tim get to be considered professional artists despite having smut in their portfolios, why can’t I?”^[9] They shared some pointers with me on how to avoid the mobs that are so ready to swoop down on queer and femme erotic artists.

⁹ Chris Sanders is the creator of *Lilo and Stitch*. Bruce Tim is the guy who created the DC Comics character, Harley Quinn

During my conversation with Hamletmachine, she mentioned that she had created *Pain Killer*, a comic-artbook hybrid, as an outlet. The work draws on the visual language and thematic elements of monster hentai (Japanese pornographic comics and animation which places emphasis on the violent non-consensual subjugation of the female character either by human or non-human forces). In *Pain Killer*, it is the male main character, Juan, who is at the mercy of this subjugation and the work is a very interesting exploration in playing with and breaking visual and cultural signifiers. Hamletmachine is very open about her art and has come under fire for it: in 2023, detractors (who more than likely have anti-shippers in their ranks) mass reported her Patreon page and had it taken offline for several days thus threatening her income.^[10] Her page was restored but the message they were trying to send was clear. The funny thing though is that I can name several cishetmale creators whose work is more graphic but have not been dealt anywhere near the same amount of vitriol.

PassionPhantom is an illustrator and comic artist whose latest work, *Tears of Iscariot*, blends biblical language, imagery, and themes with heavy eroticism and a huge helping of dead doves.^[11] She shared with me how her experience being raised within the (Black) church had led her to purge her art archive because of this overwhelming sense that what she was making was inherently sinful and she would ultimately be punished for it. She is still burdened by these feelings as she does the work that brings her fulfillment, how unfortunate that she must now also worry about anti-shippers in her inbox and DMs (Direct Messages).^[12]

¹⁰Anti-shippers are people in fandom who are against ships that they consider morally offensive and equate a person's ship preferences to their moral character. Often, their campaigning against "bad ships" are done in bad faith and will mirror legalistic and dogmatic fanaticism. For more info, read Sam Aburime's articles on the matter (I have one cited in bibliography and there is another included in the dedicated are.na site - scan the QR Code on the last page of this zine to gain access.)

¹¹Dead Dove is used to denote works that contain content/themes that may be viewed as problematic or extreme. These tags are meant to serve as adequate warnings to prevent those who would find such themes upsetting. This to preserve order within the ecosystem of fandom and show respect to people with different tastes and interests.

¹² Direct Messages.

E.K. Weaver is a comic book artist, illustrator, and fan artist based in Austin, TX whose weekly comic *The Less Than Epic Adventures of TJ and Amal* had served as my entry point into their work. The sex scenes in their work capture something so organic, so beautifully mundane that it tastes wholesome; they represent the sexual in ways that are so hot yet still provide so much tender light and warmth. They mentioned that they have not specifically been harassed for making queer erotic art but instead have been targeted for objecting to the harassment and slander of other queer and adult artists. Being harassed for being anti-harassment. They noted that the reason they have been spared from being made into a target is because of their smaller, more modest following. They said, “You’re more likely to get targeted by bad-faith and pro-censorship types, and sadly, the call often comes from inside the house.”

HeartcoreDev is a small indie game developer headed by a suburban housewife graphic designer and a BL-savant enby, both of whom live on two separate parts of the globe.^[13] Together they brought us *The Symbiant*, a sexy queer alien romance game with all the fixings – a compelling story, amazing art, and superior voice acting. The game is banned in Russia because a queerphobic man couldn’t just stop at giving the game a 1-star review on Steam, they went as far as to invoke a censorship/obscenity bureau to make the game vanish all-together.

Shame and the effects of shaming take precedence, whether it be internally or externally motivated. It’s disappointing just how often I see cis(het)men claim they are being oppressed for their "transgressive" interests, meanwhile those interests align perfectly with current patriarchal norms yet they spearhead the conversations about "censorship" meanwhile queer folks bear the full brunt of these issues.

¹³ BL - Boys Love, "comics or novels about male homosexuality, targeted at young women" "Boys’ Love (hereafter BL) is one of the most popular terms used to describe male/male romantic fiction technically aimed for female readers. However, the actual audience includes various gender and sexual identities. The word BL was born in 1990s Japan and reached international fans in the 2000s..." – View more at fujoshi.info [Link here](#).

Although I have found reverie within the worlds created by the erotic artists that I cherish, I consider the glaring ways in which the race/sex/gender dynamic continues: dark skin as shorthand for masculine, aggressive, dominant; light skin as shorthand for feminine, passive. This is not to say that only white creators are guilty of relying on this type of visual language, I just wonder what more there is to offer if there were more voices available in the erotic landscape.

When I pondered on the near absence of people of color in the pool of queer erotic artists that had been most visible to me, that lack of visibility made me look inward, drawing on my own personal experiences to assess the reasons why these spaces may be less accessible to women and femmes of color. Well, first of all, my sexual self has always felt alien to me and I attribute this to how bodies that look like mine are so fetishized and exoticized out of their humanity. That and the plague of religious dogma that follows colonialism like a stench on shit.

Also, I consider shame as a product and tool of colonization. I worked on this zine while living on the traditional territories of Indigenous people of a land now so-called Canada. I am based in Tkaronto - the traditional territories of the Wendat, the Haudenosaunee, the Anishinaabe, and the Mississaugas of the Credit. I had mentioned earlier that there can be no sexual revolution without first the liberation of Black people, in that same vein, there can be no conversation about being free from shame to pursue pleasure without discussing how colonization has (ab)used sex as a weapon of control and destruction. Consider what is happening right now as you read this: “holy” soldiers claiming “holy” land while posing with the underwear of murdered and displaced women; children enslaved to mine minerals for technology that empower (empire) worlds so greedy and wasteful in their excesses; waters poisoned by oil

companies siphoning all they can and so much more; colonized lands, colonized bodies, odes to the brutal pornographic.

I often find myself wondering how my Kabo-Ijaw and Urhobo ancestors had loved and had sex prior to colonial invasion. What would the trajectory of my life have been like if we had stayed that course? In those moments, I imagine, I mourn, I tell myself:

Thou shalt not colonize this pussy.

Conclusion (?)

“Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality. We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be dis-tilled from the past and used to imagine a future. The future is queerness’s domain. Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present. The here and now is a prison house. We must strive, in the face of the here and now’s total-izing rendering of reality, to think and feel a then and there. Some will say that all we have are the pleasures of this moment, but we must never settle for that minimal transport; we must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds. Queerness is a longing that propels us onward, beyond romances of the negative and toiling in the present. Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing. Often we can glimpse the worlds proposed and promised by queerness in the realm of the aesthetic. The aesthetic, especially the queer aesthetic, frequently contains blueprints and sche-mata of a forward-dawning futurity. Both the ornamental and the quotidian can contain a map of the utopia that is queerness. Turning to the aesthetic in the case of queerness is nothing like an escape from the social realm, insofar as queer aesthetics map future social relations. Queerness is also a performative because it is not simply a being but a doing for and toward the future. Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insis-tence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world.”

José Esteban Muñoz, Cruising Utopia: the Then and There of Queer Futurity

I have struggled to write this conclusion. I wondered why I could not find that conclusion and I remembered the words that open Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia* – “Queerness is not yet here.”

Through this project I have worked through some old and newly discovered shame. There was a point where I felt so embarrassed about sharing the erotic images that have (a)roused me to undertake this project, the images that had spurred me to realize that there were other women, femmes, and queers who were putting in work to make this happen. I am embarrassed of anyone knowing the things that I find sexually exciting, that vulnerability is overwhelming.

I do believe that this erotic imagery could do more, challenge more, speak more, feel more and the same can be said for any other venture. When I finally shared some of the images,

a comment that I got was that I must be holding back, that there has to be more imagery that I have not shared. But now I realize that that **is** the point, we are not yet there, these erotic images could challenge more, speak more, feel more. I can't think of what more I am holding back unless I am being asked to become indulgent for the sake of rousing some morbid disgust in the viewer with no real end other than making them feel repulsed.

For example, an image that keeps returning to me is this photograph of a man's bare bottom and on that bottom the soft indents of where his underwear had laid on his flesh are clearly visible. And that's it. It's very simple in its presentation but I do not think I will ever be able to accurately describe how the pure sensuality of that image unlocks something deeply feral within me. And sometimes that's just **it**. Being able to find the sexual energy and beauty in things tame and mundane as well as those that are grandiose in display. Sexuality has so long been understood with androcentric modalities and language, what about the full spectrum of ways of being and expressing the sexual and the erotic? I compare it to when I made a post on a *Baldur's Gate 3* forum asking if there was any other sexy armor similar to the Wave Mother's Robe because I wanted my entire party to look hot, look fierce, serve cunt and slay while adventuring and a majority of the responses told me to just have the characters naked as if I didn't already know that, that was not an answer to the question I asked. There needs to be a spectrum but creating and navigating that spectrum has its challenges: how do I/we not defer to androcentric and patriarchal ways of expressing our sexualities as a way of legitimizing these expressions due to years of marginalized sexualities being infantilized, trivialized, and demonized? How do I/we then not deny expressions that may appear to align to these patriarchal ways of expressing even if that is not our intention because of either our or our viewers' limited language or current ways of knowing (epistemologies). Similar to the dilemma of trying to find a

word that describes folks who are not cis(het)men without viewing us solely through the lens of being not men, I find it here: how do we see ourselves and our actions separate from the oppressor class that has foisted identities on us? How do we create a new being and meaning separate from that identity? I make myself an active participant, I make intentional choices as I navigate my coming into being with the sexual eutopia I envision but sometimes it can be hard to distinguish what I am choosing from what has been chosen for me. My leading compass dictates that I will know if these choices align if they do not feel like a betrayal of my *self* as she is now and the *self* I see living within that eutopic future; a heavy but sturdy thought. No creature that has ever given birth will ever proclaim it to be easy. A new world is being born and it is in need of care and community and I orient myself towards Muñoz's proclamation as a means of grounding for this work.

Including Muñoz's introduction to *Cruising Utopia* has deeply personal decision as well – I read it very shortly after leaving that religious institution and because my thinking was still very addled by the programming of that institution, I had been in no place to receive the message that Muñoz was trying to share with me. Now how serendipitous it is that his words are where I choose to let my work have respite for the night before it continues its journey at dawn.

“Utopia is on the horizon. I move two steps closer; it moves two steps further away. I walk another ten steps and the horizon runs ten steps further away. As much as I may walk, I'll never reach it. So what's the point of utopia? The point is this: to keep walking.”

Eduardo Galeano

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Appendix

Appendix A: *Pain Killer* cover image



Pain Killer, HamletMachine, 2020

Appendix B: HamletMachine's Work



Bug Mob, HamletMachine, 2023

Appendix C: PassionPhantom's Work



The Taking of Darren Hallow, PassionPhantom, 2023

Appendix D: Kiss Kicker's Work



Naga, Kiss Kicker, 2022



Scene from *The Symbiant*, 2023

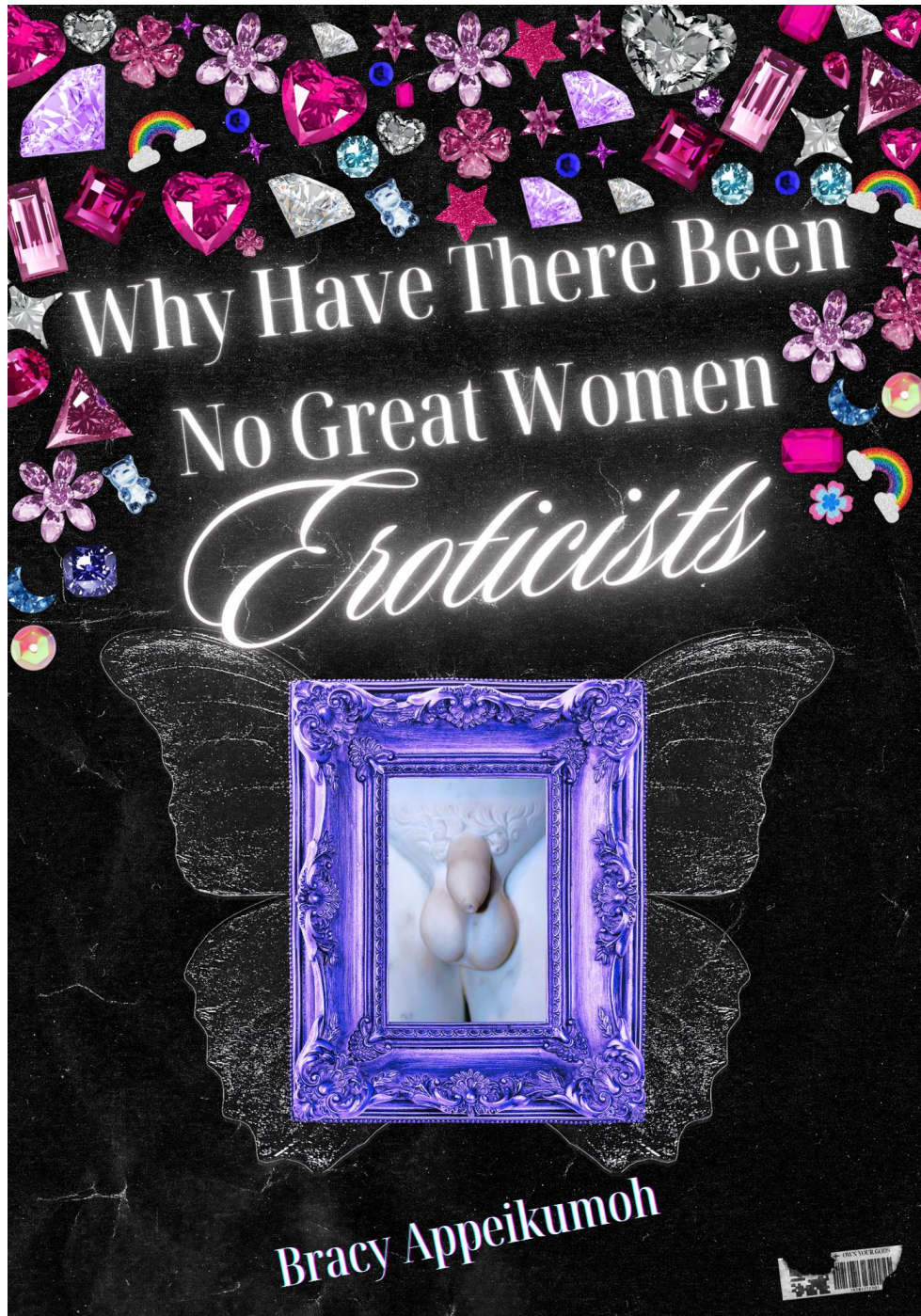
Illustration by 700hash

Appendix F: E.K. Weaver's Work



Page from *SWEET ABILENE*, 2024


Appendix G: *Why Have There Been No Great Women Eroticists?* Zine Cover





Appendix I: Forum comment about *Free!*

☒ **Comment by Anonymous**

08:58 16/07/2014 #!   Neutral (0)



The increase in literally gay anime is increasing lately. So many this season just to please the gays. I counted 9 airing that include outright gays, extremely gay looking, cross dressing. The gay activists are making their way to change fanservice as we know it. Pretty soon, half the anime airing charts will be for gays.

Here comes the "oh what about females liking.." NO. Cut the crap gay boy.

[Reply to Anonymous](#)