no more potlucks

CREDITS

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EDITORIAL

27: Crush

Welcome to #27: this is the **CRUSH** issue.

Crush as in:

- *to press, to squeeze, to damage, to grind*
- *a crowd of people pressed closely together in an enclosed space*
- *a burning desire for someone*
- *a painful obsession*
- *a superficial attraction based on imagining a person as better than they actually are*

In this issue:

Tracy Tidgwell interviews **Michèle Pearson Clarke** about her new photography project, *It's Good To Be Needed*, rendering queernesses visible through the sadness and loss of breakups. Her latest project presents images of queer women who are ex-partners – but no longer friends – holding hands. According to Tidgwell, *It's Good To Be Needed* serves as "an archive of experience that explores the powerful possibilities created through opening up to vulnerability and performing intimacy."

Referencing Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha's personal narrative "Gonna Get my Girl Body Back: This is a Work in Progress" (2002) and Keri Hulme's novel *The Bone People* (1984), **Ela Przybylo** and **Danielle Cooper** ask: What might make the asexual crush *queer*?

Alex McClelland interviews artist **Lex Vaughn** on what it means to be a butch lesbian during a cultural moment when – as the authors argue – that identity is dying out.

James P. Ascher presents a brief essay on the nature of creepiness arguing that a two-part conception is needed: desire and insistence. It discusses these through a lens of literature and experience in sex-positive discussion groups.

NMP Editor, **Mél Hogan,** interviews her close friend, and academic and creative collaborator, **Jacqueline Wallace**. This piece is a profile of Wallace as a feminist designer-thinker.

Our next theme is REVENGE, out July 1, 2013.

If you would like to pitch us an idea for a future submission, please consult our Guidelines and use the Submit form (or email us: info at nomorepotlucks dot org).

NMP comes out every 2 months online, and bit later in print-on-demand.

As always, huge thank-you to our copy editor, Tamara Shepherd, to all the NMP regulars, contributors past and future, and to readers and supporters of the project in so many ways.

Dear readers, we are still and always committed to bringing forward a crush-worthy and entangled journal bimonthly.

Mél Hogan & M-C MacPhee
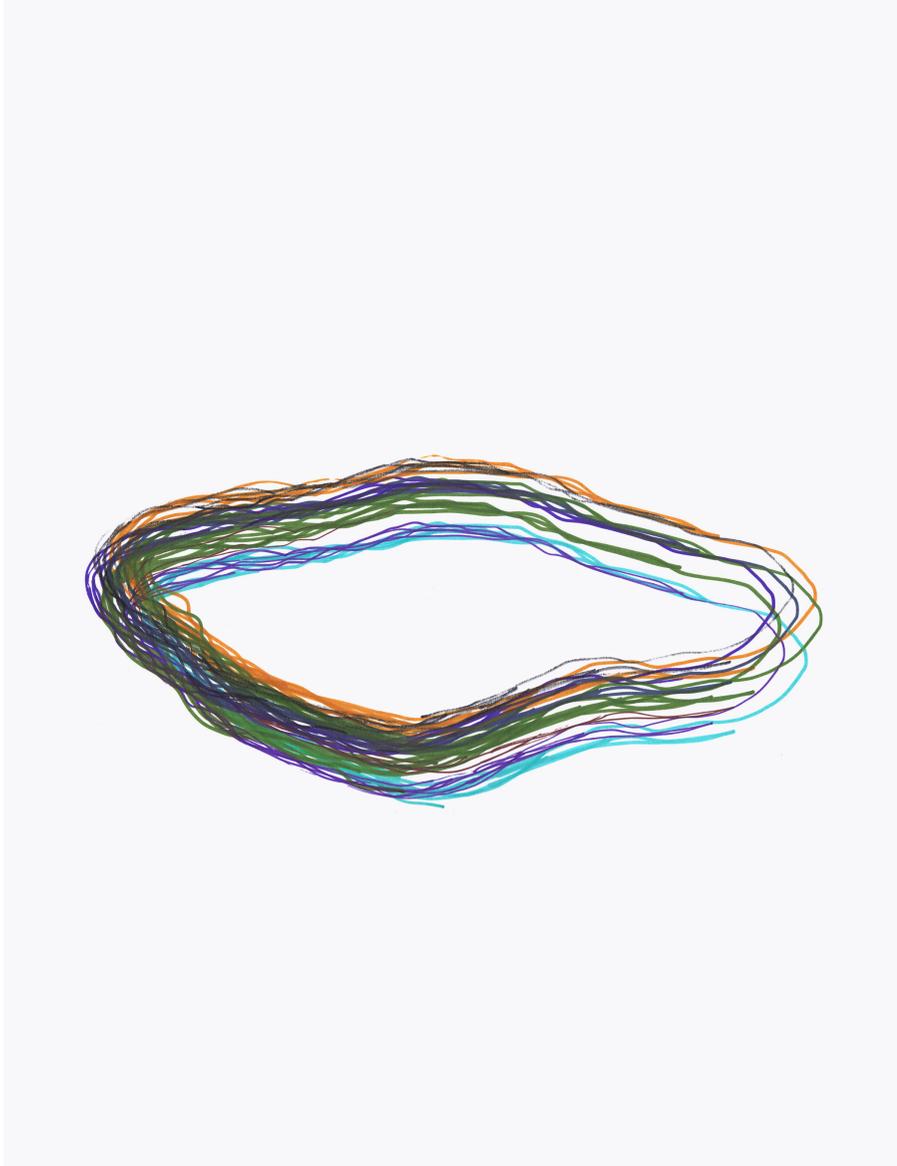
"Loop03" by Jeff Kulak

What Makes a Crush?

Ela Przybylo and Danielle Cooper
with "Loop03" by Jeff Kulak

What is a crush? What makes a crush *queer*? How is the moment of the crush marked by a different affective positioning than the moment before the crush? How do we know we are in a state of crushing? We are pulled psycho-affectively towards something or someone, we are oriented in a direction often unanticipated, sometimes undesirable. We are left to sit in these new feelings, we are carried by them. But truly, are crushes always entangled in sexual imaginings of others?

Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha's personal narrative "Gonna Get my Girl Body Back: This is a Work in Progress" (2002) and Keri Hulme's novel *The Bone People* (1984), while entirely different in scope, narrative, and format, both offer the possibility for exploring crushes as *queerly asexual*. Leah's text speaks to the possible proximities of trauma and asexuality and the blurriness of the sexual and asexual, while also providing an example of a romantically driven asexual crush. Hulme's novel, through the character of Kerewin, on the other hand, provides a distancing of asexuality from trauma and also an example of an aromantically experienced form of the crush.

For the burgeoning asexual community, the crush is a highly viable form of human kinship and relatability. For example, the *Asexuality Visibility and Education Network*(AVEN) – the largest vernacular archive of asexuality – has a thread on its forum devoted to crushes. Similarly, crushes are a popular topic on many other asexuality blogs. Asexual crushes tend to highlight romantic attractions as opposed to sexual attractions. Also, the asexual community has developed the concept of a "squish" to differentiate aromantic crushes from romantic crushes:

> There is a fine line between a crush and a squish. Both crushes and squishes could involve persistent thoughts about the person of interest, self-consciousness around that person, desires to be with him or her, fantasies about physical (not necessarily sexual) contact with him or her, or any combination of these. However, crushes typically entail jealousy [of the] partners of the person of interest, desires for romantic contact (such as kissing), a dating relationship, or marriage, while squishes do not. (AVENwiki)

When, then, is the crush asexual? When is the crush not asexual? What might make the asexual crush *queer*?

Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha's "Gonna Get My Girl Body Back: This is a Work in Progress" from the *Brazen Femme* anthology (2002) demonstrates how crushes weave into larger queer life narratives that include both asexual and sexual moments. While Leah characterizes her teenage self as a "nympho nerd" that put her sex radical theory to good practice (literally), she also felt ambivalence towards sex as a teenager due to her experiences as an incest survivor. As she described this period in her life: "'Sex is a prison, a kingdom of death,'[1] yeah, where that black red hole between my legs is. I slept with queer boys and trans kids cuz it was queer and easy, and I crushed on girls and didn't let myself do anything for reasons I couldn't let myself know" (35). Regarding the first girl she fell in love with, also during her teenage years, Leah notes: "she loved me too much to fuck me. I understood completely" (35).

In her adulthood, Leah explains how she still experienced asexual periods in the wake of leaving her abusive partner:

> For a long time I didn't understand why I had crushes and flirtations but not actually nudity, but then I started to. When it shocked the shit out of me as I watched my friends touch each other casually. When I stood on the sidelines on every coloredgirl dance floor trying to decode how you could pump ass into cunt like that and have it be okay. (39)

Leah's crush-experiences as a queer femme reflect how crushes exist beyond distinct sexual or asexual understandings. She does not self-identify as asexual, and some from the asexuality community might question her as an example of asexuality; she describes an inner longing to act on her desires for women, but an inability to do so due to her past traumas: "On the dance floor I lost my desire, but in the my dream life I was free […]. I figured out that only in a world where nobody would ever get raped could I open the doors and fly free, fuck in magic loft beds with jungle vines growing all around me" (40). While the asexual crush certainly need not be motivated by experiences of past sexual trauma, it is also important to allow for articulations of asexuality that register the possibility of trauma. At different points in her narrative, Leah's asexuality was a product of and a strategy for processing and dealing with traumatic life experiences. Leah's narrative also diverges from dominant models of queerness, which often celebrate sex due to the historic desexualization of queer people by mainstream culture. Reading narratives like Leah's within a queer asexual context, therefore, illustrates that where one finds queerness one also often finds asexuality and that the experience of crushing can blur distinctions between the sexual and asexual.

Another queerly asexual instantiation of the crush appears in Keri Hulme's *The Bone People* (1984)*,* a novel speaking to the intersectionality of Maori experience. In Hulme's novel, Kerewin Holmes, a reclusive Maori artist who lives in a spiral tower, is drawn through circumstance into the lives of young boy Simon and his adoptive (and abusive) father Joe. Notably, Kerewin expresses her disinterest in sexual and

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While the asexual crush certainly need not be motivated by experiences of past sexual trauma, it is also important to allow for articulations of asexuality that register the possibility of trauma.

physical intimacy in a dialogue with Joe, who is keen on "de-asexualizing" her, where he attempts to convince Kerewin to explore her sexual energy with him:

> Joe: "I thought maybe someone had been bad to you in the past, and that was why you don't like people touching or holding you."
> Kerewin: "Ah damn to hell," she bangs the lamp down on the desk and the flame jumps wildly. "I said no. I haven't been raped or jilted or abused in any fashion. There's nothing in my background to explain the way I am." She steadies her voice, taking the impatience out of it. "I'm the odd one out, the peculiarity in my family, because they're all normal and demonstrative physically. But ever since I can remember, I've disliked close contact, emotional contact, as well as any overtly sexual contact. I veer away from it, because it always feels like the other person is drawing something out of me. I know that's irrational, but that's the way I feel." [...] "I've never been attracted to men. Or women. Or anything else. [...] I don't have any sexual urge or appetite." (265-266)

Yet despite a self-understood lack of attraction to others – men, women, things – Kerewin experiences intense connections with both Simon and Joe (not to mention her objects and the places she inhabits), which, while radically asexual, are also trembling with the affective saturation characteristic of crushing. For Kerewin, "this *peculiar* sensation that tightens [her] chest and throat," includes pleasure in spending time together, in eating and drinking together, in sharing Maori myths together (127). A penchant for togetherness with Simon and Joe, despite her reclusiveness, characterizes Kerewin's moments of crushing. By being incorporated into the lives of Joe, suffering the death of his wife, and Simon, marred by mysterious past traumas and ongoing abuse from Joe, Kerewin slides into a state of crushing, longing for their company on asexual terms. Yet the crush is not unambivalent for Kerewin, but is haunted by the dark affects, by interpersonal loathing, for instance for Simon, whom she calls the "unintelligent little creep" (168).

Kerewin's asexuality, as articulated most strongly in the dialogue between her and Joe included above, fits in quite well with models of asexual identification in that

she voices her asexuality as unchanging and as based on a lack of sexual attraction to others. But Kerewin's model of asexuality, as well as her manner of crushing, is also queerly asexual because it is transformative in its reclusiveness. Through withdrawing from the world in her tower, Kerewin transforms herself into a site sensitive to all human interaction and relationality. Thus she feels the crush acutely on her skin and in her insides, she feels with all her body – asexually.

Also, unlike in Leah's personal narrative where trauma and asexuality hinge together, Kerewin disassociates her asexuality from trauma. Yet both Leah and Kerewin's crushes are marked not by sexual longing but rather by a subtle affective shift that alters their positioning to others and to themselves. While Kerewin's crushes open her up to building aromantic friendships with Joe and Simon, Leah's crushes embody restraint towards others. These two instances of queerly asexual crushing urge us towards dropping all efforts to map the crush, to indicate what it is and what it is not. The crush, instead, becomes a space, lodged within the body, for opening up emotion, imagination, and relationships to others and to the self.

Footnotes:
[1] Here Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha is quoting Chrystos, "Don't Try," *Dream On* (Vancouver: Press Gang, 1994).

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Ela Przybylo and Danielle Cooper are PhD students in the Feminist, Gender and Women's Studies Program at York University. Ela's research flirts with the intersections between asexuality and feminism, while Danielle researches LGBTQ grassroots information organizations and the queer activities found therein. Together they are working to expand the limits of the asexual archive, searching for asexual "resonances" in both familiar and discomforting historical locations. Their work on asexuality and the archive is forthcoming in GLQ. www.daniellecooper.ca

Jeff Kulak is a graphic designer, illustrator and visual artist based in Montreal. Underlying his practice is an exploration of drawing as the basis for visual communication. What is a drawing? Where is its place today? How can it exist in the world in new ways? He pursues responses to these questions through a process that incorporates chance, change, and a playful manipulation of everyday materials. *www.jeffkulak.com*

Design Crush:
Profiling Jacqueline Wallace

Mél Hogan

In this piece I wanted to highlight the work of my good friend and collaborator, Jacqueline Wallace. Some people are incredible – yet incredibly understated – and so this became an opportunity for me to profile Jacquie's work, which makes important connections between design, academia, and feminist politics. Together we tease out the intricacies of work, in and out of academia, from a start up called Veer to a dissertation about women's cultural production.

MH: Can you talk about your background in design?

JW: I've always had a strong aesthetic sensibility, but I came to really know design by working at <u>Veer</u>. I was part of the startup team that founded the company in 2002. We produced, curated and distributed images, type and motion footage for use by creatives working in advertising, design and publishing. Veer wasn't just a random start-up. Many of us had worked together at earlier companies in the visual media industry. When a number of us were spun out after an ownership change at the previous company, we felt there was still opportunity in the market, but we knew we needed to do things differently.

The other major players in our market space were big, faceless companies–the Walmarts of the industry. Veer, on the other hand, was steeped in design. Our goal was to inspire creativity at every touch point. In fact, the company was purposefully called 'Veer' to diverge from the norm and disrupt an established market by presenting our products (digital photography, illustration, typefaces and motion footage) with imagination and style. We looked to appeal to the design sensibilities and "inner circle" of peers in the graphic design community who would understand the cultural references and vocabulary of our brand and voice, lend it credibility and find affinity with it.
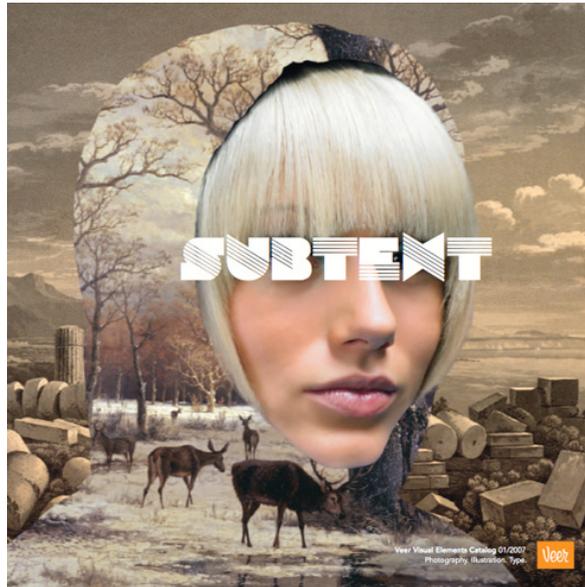
Image Credit: Veer

We followed a 'look what you can do' philosophy with our images and type and produced monthly print catalogs that showcased compelling designs and beautiful typography. We played up common misunderstandings of graphic designers' identities in our merchandise products with whimsical t-shirts that read 'I draw pictures all day' or our 'Kern' zip-up hoodie, an inside reference to typesetting. We

even produced a series of <u>Summer Activity</u> books just like the ones you had as a kid going on family vacation, but these ones were full of games, puzzles and quizzes created especially for designers. We were constantly interacting with the creative community through our print communications, web site and blog, at conferences and in co-productions, like our involvement in the documentary film _<u>Helvetica</u>_, directed by <u>Gary Hustwit</u>.

Image Credit: Veer

MH: Tell me more about Veer: what was your role there?

JW: My role evolved from the startup phase where I was primarily responsible for communications, media relations and cultivating partnerships with other creatives, photographers or complementary brands. In 2005, I took on the role of VP, International, leveraging my international communications background, French and German language skills and ecommerce competency. I was responsible for expanding the company outside of North America, establishing our European headquarters in Berlin and an international distribution channel.

I worked in partnership with my management team peers and with our creative director and brand communications director, a team I deeply respect and a constant source of mutual learning and collaboration. Being part of a successful start-up is a remarkable experience. One is completely immersed in a culture of production and we were fortunate to build a culture that valued creativity, collaboration and which saw making mistakes as part of the creative process.

Image Credit: Veer

MH: How did your experience in the creative industries lead you back to academia? And, what might you bring from academia back into the creative industries?

JW: I loved my work at Veer. It was deeply rewarding to build a brand, business and devoted following of the design community, and to lead our expansion into Europe. By far, it was the people I worked with that made the experience so enjoyable–smart, creative, and hard-working. Design and creative strategy were integral to my every day. I am a creative thinker, a strategist, and a believer in the power of good design–

not just aesthetically, but deep design, as vital to business and brand strategy and to successfully achieve the vision and mission of any organization. I drew inspiration from our many collaborators and influencers, including the work of <u>Marian Bantjes</u>, Paula Scher, <u>Bryony Gomez-Palacio and Armit Vit</u>, Erik Spiekermann, <u>Alejandro Paul</u>. By far, my design *crush* is <u>Debbie Millman</u>, whose circuitous career swirling around the place where design, business and education meet, resonates with my own path. I can only hope that I have a career as diverse and interesting as hers.

Yet, despite all our success, there is an underside–what I call the 'dark matter' of creative work, including the precarious realities and constraints of 'emotional labour'. This extends to the tensions around agency, negotiation, gender politics, and power relations relative to the intensity and demands of a startup culture. I struggled with what I would now identify as 'the covert nature of living my feminist values' inside the company, including the many standpoints and paradoxical experiences of being a woman, building a meaningful career while also navigating personal responsibilities and gendered hierarchies of the business and technology worlds. I was 26 when we started Veer. I look back now and I can see internal moments of so-called 'imposter syndrome', where I was unsure of what to do next. I could have used a mentor to guide me. But, I also recognize a strong instinctive and strategic ability and that fear can be an incredible motivator. I knew that I would figure it out and my peers trusted me to do so. The more successful the company became, the more entrenched my work was in its management, numbers and admin, and further away from the creative practices. We were a creative company, yet the economic imperative was always biting at our heels. This is the constant state of negotiation of being invested in the success of the company, while trying to find that elusive equilibrium between creativity and commerce, between the personal and the professional.

In 2007, Veer was acquired by <u>Corbis</u>, a privately held Bill Gates corporation. I took on a new position as VP, Global Brands and Web Platforms for the larger organization. In all ways, being part of Veer and Corbis was a tremendously rewarding experience, however, the questions and struggles I experienced are what led me to return to

I ♥
HAND
MADE

Image Credit: Veer

school to do a PhD… to shift to researching the questions around women's creative labour, design/making and start-up cultures. By 2009, after nearly a decade in the creative industries, I decided to apply to the Joint PhD Program in Communication at Concordia in Montreal. I wanted to be a part of this progressive program and to work with Dr. Matt Soar, whose work bridges design, media and cultural production. Combining my professional and academic interests, my own dissertation research examines the new indie crafts/design/maker movement as a *cultural economy*—of women's cultural production, informal networks and entrepreneurship—a highly contemporary cultural and economic phenomenon buoyed by the rise of the so-called creative class, a do-it-yourself ethic and a broader conception of craftwork as 'Handmade 2.0', reifying an intersection with digital media, new technologies and networked communications. I've been interviewing makers and doing significant fieldwork, including a digital ethnography of Etsy, the marketplace 'to buy and sell all things handmade'.

Returning to the academic world has been fascinating, challenging and intellectually fulfilling. There is an intensity, rigour and level of discourse that recognizes the complexity of cultural and creative research and doesn't take the easy road of reducing it. My work on design and cultural production has been published and well-received by the academic community. Yet, returning to school mid-career has also been destabilizing and has a vulnerability that I didn't expect. I thought that my startup and creative industries experience would be well understood and valued. There is a desire among grad school programs to bring in diverse students with professional experience, but once 'on the inside' I've experienced everything from respect and admiration (nice) to suspicion and a kind of infantalization and erasure of my professional acumen in the face of academic hierarchies and institutional funding models. There are built-in assumptions in the academic system, and among its culture, that perpetuates a sense that grad students are inexperienced and that mentorship only goes one way. There are, of course, wonderful exceptions–professors, collaborators and peers who champion good work, open doors, and are great inspirations. These tensions, contradictions and pressures are a common concern among my cohort and in broader circles of graduate students reflecting the

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academic job market and the changing educational system. It is a critical dialogue about the state the university, the decline in tenure-track jobs, and the pressures of the market. At the same time digital tools and technologies that are requiring a recalibration of how we educate and discussions of the purpose of doctoral education. In my case, my startup experience and capacity-building has led my undergraduate students to seek me out as a non-academic mentor.

Why not also at the graduate level? The combination of these conditions means we need to broaden the understanding of a doctoral education and its value outside the academy. Our governments speak of the knowledge economy, venture capital stake their claims on human capital, established firm and startups invest in 'talent' to fuel innovation. Addressing this problem is a design challenge, one that requires broadening the purpose for doctoral education and how the academy prepares and evaluates its students, and ensuring that companies, non-governmental organizations, and other employers, recruit from this pool of capable thinkers and producers.

MH: Last May you turned down the Managing Director job at Icograda. Can you talk about this decision? How important is it for you to finish the PhD and, going back to the prior question, how will your research feed into your next move – within or beyond academia?

JW: Icograda was a dream job. It still is, really. Icograda is the international umbrella organization for design associations around the world. It was an ideal match in many ways–my experience in the creative industries, start-up capacities and ability to lead an organization that was looking for change. I deeply admire the organization and the wealth of talent on its board. It would have been an exciting new challenge for me. Yet, I still had my dissertation to write and, although I know I would persist with working on it part-time, I came to the heart-wrenching decision that the timing wasn't right. In the past I had always pushed myself to the max, however I look back at this decision as a moment of deep introspection and determination to finish the PhD with my full attention. There are few times
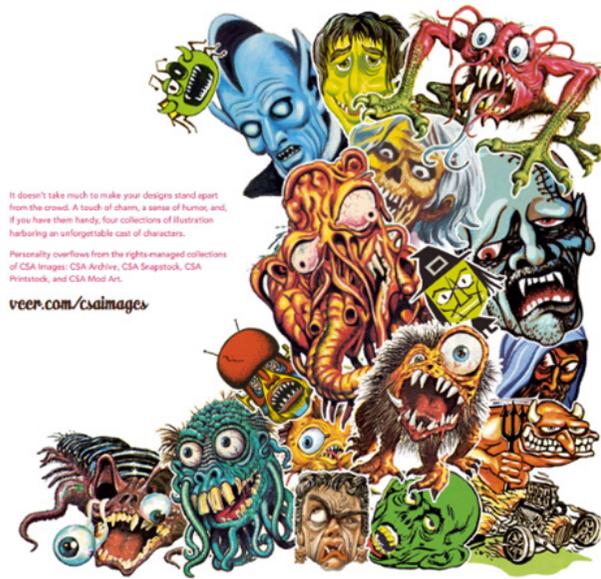
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in life when we are able to give ourselves the time to do something as personal fulfillment and I recognized that this was one of those precious opportunities. I also believe that it was an act of personal leadership; that finishing the PhD and fully investigating the intersections of maker culture, design and women's creative work is integral to the next phase of my career. It is also valuable research that is greatly lacking in Canada and internationally. Decisions like these are incredibly difficult. Yet, there is a freedom in choosing to believe deeply in yourself and value the present challenge, while also knowing that it is a rare occasion to come across a position that so ideally fits one's professional experience, values and creative convictions. This is the authenticity that I will continue to bring to my work and life.

MH: What is your ideal vision of a firm that bridges the training (critical thinking and production skills) of academia with the demands of the creative industries? Do they sometimes feel at odds, and if so, how?

JW: After a seemingly ever-present discussion among my graduate cohort, at conferences and by way of my involvement in the digital humanities collaboratory,HASTAC, and the Fembot collective, there an increasingly public questioning of what academia purports to lead up to–a tenure-track job. Grad students are more and more skilled in technical and production abilities, including design, programming, social media, and data visualization alongside strategy, partnership development and process capacities (just a cursory look at the HASTAC forums demonstrates this range). Combined with advanced research and critical thinking skills, these grad students are not just 'performing legitimacy', they are vastly skilled and capable.

Part of these discussions is the need for more PhDs "on the outside," especially when academic jobs are sparse and underpaid. Why are so many talented and capable researchers and critical thinkers not tackling the major problems that are facing our society? For some, there is a kind of stigma that by working outside the university, you've somehow failed. Yet, aren't these the innovators who can bridge the challenges not only facing the future of the university but also the economic

and social inequities that are very real. Educated, critical thinkers with cultural and social research skills are paramount to bridging the gaps between the private sector and policy makers. They are capacity builders who understand and can mobilize social, cultural and financial capital in highly productive ways. They can ask the right questions (access? media literacy? power relations?); go beyond 'big data' to use digital analytics and media archeologies to seek out cultural patterns and translate research for broader use and consumption. They are proven to be intrinsically-motivated (essential to finishing a PhD) and capable communicators and collaborators–vital to new modes of work in the digital economy.

This leads me to a vision for a firm that mobilizes the idea-generation, critical thinking and production skills gained in higher learning and unleashing them towards a capacity to innovate — the ability to solve problems creatively or bring new possibilities to life. Orienting these skills and interdisciplinarity to solve demands of the private, public and third sectors is vital to economic development and policy that takes sustainability, social innovation and cultural expression seriously. I'm inspired by firms like IDEO, the global design consultancy; frog design; and innovative program's like Stanford's d-school. I envision a creative collaboratory that provides strategy, product and service design, social innovation, research and education. It networks and brings together an interdisciplinary mix of scholars and professionals and uses a design-thinking model to tackle challenges from obesity to bullying to game design.

Jacqueline Wallace is a HASTAC Scholar and PhD candidate (ABD) in the Joint Doctoral Program in Communication at Concordia University, Montreal. She is a former co-founder and VP, International of Veer Inc. (veer.com), an award-winning visual media and design company. Wallace is currently working on her dissertation titled: Women's Creative Labor: DIY Networks and the Indie Crafts Movement. She is also an advisory board member of the Fembot Collective, a scholarly collaboration promoting research on gender, media, and technology. Web: http://jacquelinewallace.com Twitter: @aliceinwunder

How To Not be Creepy

James P. Ascher

First of all, congratulations! Merely glancing at this essay shows that you are not a pathological monster, incapable of empathy, who doesn't belong in civilized society. Even if someone else gave you the essay, it means that they think you have hope and could be potentially not-creepy. Of course, you may be utterly un-creepy already, in which case this essay may be only of clinical interest. Perhaps you have a friend who is creepy who needs your help and guidance to avoid horrifying her neighbors? Maybe you have a lover who is creepy and you'd like some practical advice? Or perhaps–like me–you hang out in sex positive communities and are baffled as to how people can be creepy in an open discussion group about fucking. If so, then this essay is for you too.

The first thing about creepiness is that it's really common and nothing to be ashamed of, much like bed wetting. World leaders, teachers, parents, postal carriers, movie stars, taxidermists, and morticians can all be deeply creepy and not bad people; they may simply need more empathy for the plight of other people or not realize that there are better ways for them to achieve the human contact they want. I'd venture to guess that we all start out as creepy infants, demanding things and giving nothing in return, as tyrants of the high-chair eyeing another cookie, plotting to throw a fit to get the larger humans to bring it to us, and it's only through growth that we can pass beyond this. But, considering the origin of creepiness is the topic for another essay. Let us talk about process of becoming creepy first, with its complexities.

Imagine a small house with a wooden floor, warm in the cold winter night. A group of eccentrically clothed people, wearing studded leather, bright feathers, jeans, or a tee-shirt celebrating the Goddess, have gathered to discuss polyamory, relationships, love, and sex. Half are already friends and the other half are timidly looking for a community of support and nervously eyeing the door. The process-oriented group begins by going around the circle for introductions; each person gives the name they want to be called, the gender pronoun they prefer, and–if they want–why the came to the discussion group tonight. The leader gives the ground rules: be respectful, don't touch people without permission, and try to make sure everyone's voice is heard. Everything goes well with a few light jokes until the circle comes to Bob–not his real name–who introduces himself while staring at the youngest woman in the group then announces that he has a really nice cabin in the mountains and is looking for someone to come "hang-out" with him; he also announces that he's going to the World-Polyamory conference next week for the first time and that this makes him a really big deal. He knows things. You should all think he is important. He finally glances around the room and smugly smiles at everyone else knowing he killed his introduction and soon all the slutty girls will be spending the weekend in his remote cabin.

This is phenomenally creepy.

But why? For a group that regularly discusses the intricacies of your girlfriend catching your boyfriend fisting your girlfriend's boyfriend's ex, spiraling into a tutorial on fisting, a discussion of what constitutes cheating, if cheating is a real thing, to STIs, and back to "well, it wasn't a big deal until my parents found out," it seems like nothing should be off-limits. Bob was fairly transparently saying he wanted to have consensual sex with an adult and even offering the attributes he brought to the table. What gives?

I argue that creepiness consists of two key elements: first, wanting something from someone else. In Bob's case, he wanted to screw, but this isn't creepy in itself since most people want to screw at some point. Creepiness consists of secondarily appearing not to understand the word "no." This later one is subtle. If Bob had said, "I love sex and would love to have sex with someone; I'm hoping this group can help me think about how to do that" it would have been charming and endearing. However, rather than saying what was patently obvious, he couched his desire in a euphemism and tried to demonstrate superior value. Perhaps to a child, these strategies would not be obvious, but to people with dating experience this behavior is tantamount to someone who feels entitled and ready to convince someone using whatever is on hand, someone who doesn't fully understand "no" waving candy out of an unmarked van.

It seems that the two-fold nature of creepiness is slightly unexpected. We're all used to the creepy stalker seeking something he can't have, but we welcome the advances of someone we like. Sexuality itself is not creepy. Creepiness requires both desire and drive. A truly creepy person won't take no for an answer.

This dual nature appears historically in 18th century England. William Hogarth engraved the Harlot's Progress in 1732 as a moral tale about the dangers of the city. In it, Moll goes into the city and becomes a prostitute, earning her living at first entertaining aristocrats, later robbers, and finally dying of quack cures for the syphilis she contracted in her work, unmourned even by her own bastard child. These engravings passed the censors, in part, because of their obvious moralizing. On the surface, they suggested that a life of dissolution lead to disaster, but they

were even more critical of the corrupting power of the city. One would think that Moll would be creepy, seeking death and sex, living as there is no tomorrow, but she actually comes off as a deeply sympathetic. She is a young woman, seduced by the glitter of the city, and thrown away by its corruption.

In the first plate, we have Moll, newly arrived in the city with her carriage, fresh faced and innocent. In the background, Francis Charteris appears to masturbate under his jacket, his glare creepily focused on Moll. Even though she will be shortly selling her body and he could have her in a fair transaction, or another woman, his behavior is creepy. He demonstrates that he wants something from her and his public masturbation shows a disturbing disregard for public mores. What sort of man begins masturbating in the street when he sees a pretty woman? Someone who gets told "no" a lot and has decided to take his jollies where he can, who rejects the answer of "no." In the masturbating rake we have the image of the city's indifference to Moll and her ultimate downfall. He's creepy because–like fictional London–he takes and won't take no for an answer. He sees her as an object in his own lascivious plans and not as another human being. Martin Buber pathologized this stance as I-It as opposed to I-Thou. I-It relationships see the self as the center of the universe with everything else merely sensation for the eminence of the individual. Our rake, Charteris, demonstrates this stance by ignoring the social rules that other people rely on to feel comfortable. He objectifies Moll, rejecting the I-Thou encounter, forcing a separation which allows him to abuse his power in society.

This is key to avoid being creepy, rather than avoiding appearing creepy. One can learn to avoid behaviors that demonstrate that you have lascivious intents towards someone, but often people can see through these efforts, which has the unfortunate side-effect of making you look like you preemptively reject their right to say no by avoiding asking the question. Lust is fine, common, and natural, but treating other people as objects–even as objects deserving respect–is creepy. This is how Charteris and earlier Bob managed to creep us out with their lust, even while being painfully obvious.

Creeps need not exclusively want something sexual. The 2007 film, Funny Games, epitomizes another kind of creepiness. The serial killers, Peter and Paul, hold special horror for the audience and the family they terrorize because of their inchoate desire. They first arrive asking to borrow eggs, but break them along the way, returning and breaking more eggs. Clearly, these men want something else, but appear to be civilized and understand rejection. However, the family becomes uneasy. When the paterfamilias, George, asks the men to leave they break his legs with a golf-club and refuse to leave out of politeness. What was originally mild potential creepiness becomes full-fledged creepiness when the villains demonstrate that they desperately want something horrible from the family and won't take no as an answer. Encouraged to just go ahead and rob the family, Peter and Paul show that they want something else entirely. The emotive power of many of their games can be seen in light of their refusal, accusing the family of impoliteness, to leave. We are not dealing with normal murders here (whatever that is), but people profoundly detached from society.

However, even after demonstrating their violent ways, George and his wife Ann still try to communicate and reason with them. Like most recipients of creepiness, they are profoundly disempowered and afraid, barely able to communicate their discomfort. When they finally strike back, shooting Peter with the shotgun, a tension is released. The response to the murderous boys is finally appropriate to their intentions and activities, already made clear by this point. However, Paul rewinds the film in a surreal moment, undoing his partner's death, snatching the weapon away, and ultimately killing both George and Ann. Paul and Peter refuse to hear the cues of their creepy behavior–bent on murder as they are–but for the reader of this essay who wishes to avoid creepiness, this gives another technique. Carefully listening to people as they react to you. If you're being creepy, people will tell you, but typically people who feel disempowered and afraid, so you have to listen for a quiet voice. It's very possible to be innocently unaware of creepiness, and certainly not damnable, but listening empathetically to those around you will often show the nature of creepiness.

We see in creepiness a sort of immune-system response from communities, who are composed of individuals who want safe people who do not rape, assault, molest, or harm them. A community, thus, rejects an individual who appears to wish to do these things and not recognize the social authority to forbid certain kinds of harm. When we perceive creepiness, we empathize with the recipient of the creepy, as part of their community and respond emotionally. In Funny Games, this becomes the emotive trajectory of the film, the feeling of oppressive weight of creepy rejection, released, and then reapplied. Hogarth uses our empathy with Moll, who must therefore be a sympathetic character, to demonstrate the corruption of the city. Its creepy individual citizens are a human metonym for the corruption throughout. Bob from the discussion group was rejected socially as a creep to train him the appropriate behaviors for the discussion group. If he persisted, the group's response would have escalated, but because he relented it was a mere small incident.

Though creepiness is a sort of response a community uses to police itself, it isn't always sufficient. In the 18th century French epistolary novel Les Liaisons Dangereuses, Pierre Choderlos de Laclos provocatively shows two protagonists who are far from creepy. The Marquise de Merteuil and the Vicomte de Valmont may behave in utterly disreputable ways, plotting seductions for revenge and fun, but they are both fully integrated into polite society. Even while she is rebuffing the advances of the Vicomte, Madame de Tourvel still does not think of him as a creep, just a threat to her constancy. Corruption is rampant and part of the horror is realize that the Vicomte and the Marquise want things from people: to seduce them, that is, to induce those people to want them, and neither will accept no as an answer. The Vicomte describes his persistence in seduction in letter 110:

> My only means of keeping myself informed, [regarding the situation with Madame de Tourvel, his target for seduction] as you will have gathered, is to intercept this clandestine exchange of letters. I've already given appropriate instructions to my valet and I'm expecting him to put them into effect any day now. Until then I can only operate at random; so for the last week I've been vainly going over every known way, in novels or in my secret memoirs,

without finding anything to fit either the circumstances of this adventure or the character of the heroine. It wouldn't be difficult to slip into her hous, at night indeed, nor even to drug her and turn her into another Clarissa; [who was drugged and raped by Lovelace in the eponymous novel] but imagine having to resort to methods so foreign to my nature after more than two months of laborious and meticulous effort! To gain a victory without glory by following slavishly in someone else's tracks!... No, she's not going to enjoy the pleasures of vice and the honours of virtue. Just possessing her isn't enough; I want her to surrender willingly. And to do that, it's not only necessary to get into her house but for her to let me in herself; to find her alone and ready to listen to me; above all to close her eyes to any danger, for if she sees it she'll be able to overcome it or die in the attempt. (Pierre Choderlos de Laclos Les Liaisons Dangereuses, trans Douglas Parmée (Oxford: O. U. Press, 1995): 245)

With some false nobility, he refuses to outright rape his target or to drug her but describes his toolkit of techniques for inducing Madame de Tourvel to desire him supposedly freely. Both the Vicomte and the Marquise plot and manipulate other people in I-It relationships, including each other, but until their correspondence is revealed they are–mostly–without creepiness. How can this be? We have two people who want things and won't take no, but theirs is a meta-game. They play to make other people desire the outcome they desire. Their unethical behavior lies in their intention, well hidden from others.

The intrigue of the story comes from the secretive nature of the letters. Admitted into confidence by having full access to their correspondence, we become entangled with the Vicomte's and the Marquise's plotting. We perceive that their behavior is creepy in its desire and undeniability, empathizing with their victims who should perceive them as creepy. However, at the same time we can see their individual behavior as creepy to each other, though neither seems to notice until the very end. Their hidden rejection of social mores makes them sympathetic to a queer reading and their victimization to each other gives us empathy for them, so by the end their downfall is both a success and horrifying. The story vindicates us from their creepy villainy, yet they too were victims of each other and of their

differing mores. Our horror is only magnified with the invisibility of the creepiness, or even non-presence.

Thus, avoiding creepiness is necessary for a certain kind of ethical behavior, but not sufficient. The very sort of anti-social behavior that creepiness emblematizes can be hidden under a veneer of sociability. Crucially, this gets back to avoiding being creepy, rather than merely not appearing to be creepy. The more innocent, perhaps, cannot manage to avoid appearing creepy when they are, but for experienced libertines like the Vicomte and the Marquise, avoiding appearances is possible for a while. Remember, no-one wants you or anyone else to be creepy, so while being straightforward and honest may be at first difficult, eventually a community will show where creepiness is. Creepiness is nothing to be ashamed of, but not learning to avoid it when you don't want to be creepy is just sad.

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Last Butch Standing:
Talking Fried Chicken, Analog to Digital, and The End of Butch with Lex Vaughn

Alex McClelland

I love lesbian butches. They have often been my friends and a strong part of my support network. As a young fag in the 1990s, my safety was often threatened because I was never masculine enough. In the lez-queer-gay world, we have a deeply complex relationship with gender roles, especially with masculinity and butchness – ways of being that are often demonized, fetishized and commodified more than they are understood or reconciled.

While I am no longer a scrawny effeminate teenager, I am often comforted in knowing that my lez-bro pals have got my back, and vice versa. Hanging out with my butch lez pals has allowed us to engage with masculinity in ways that aren't dangerous or sexual, but rather just part of a hybrid state of being.

Recently, I had a chat with my pal, artist Lex Vaughn about being a butch lesbian. Lex is the comedy mastermind behind AM Radio geriatric dandy Peanut Brittle, and the famed and frigid ventriloquist Diane and her alter ego puppet troublemaker Graham. Lex and I have an ongoing conversation about the lesbian butch in the current social and cultural context, where the identity for some is outdated and seems to have lost its utility and place. Here is part of this discussion.

Alex McClelland: Hi! How are you feeling today?

Lex Vaughn: It's a great day to be alive. But I am a bit hungover. There's chicken on the stove, which is always great, and… we got potatoes, and parsnips. I'm in love, the sun is shining!

AM: Amazing! So let's talk about butchness. I really love your butchness a lot. There is such a comfortableness and casualness to how you embody butch. We have been having some chats about this for a while now. Can you tell me your philosophy on being butch?

LV: Yes. Thank you. I think the natural transition from cooking chicken would be to talk about butchness.

AM: Haha!

LV: Well, my thoughts on butchness, umm… I just turned 40, and even though I'm not freaked out about it, I feel that it's inevitable that you're going to examine what that means about one's goals, life scopes, blah blah blah. I tried to circumvent all of that 40 anxiety by creating a birthday party that was part Croning, part Quinceañera, so that I could incorporate aging and youth and ritual and humour. I didn't want to be having dinner at Jack Astor's or something, you know? But anyways, I am at this place where I have experienced some sort of passage, and I am thinking a lot about my identity in the world, both socially and sexually.

AM: Well you look great. Your grey hairs are especially fancy today. But why are you not wearing any pants?

LV: Real butches don't wear pants, thank you. I love being a silver fox! I think that my white walls are a big part of my butch/creature identity. It makes me feel like I'm part of some secret society. Except the other day, I googled "silver haired butches," and all I found was "Silver Haired Bitches," which was this crazy hot and gross hetero porn from the 1980s.

AM: Haha [coughing] ha! Sorry. I have a touch of kennel cough. What do you mean by secret society of butches?

LV: Yes, well sometimes it seems that way. I feel like 'The Butch' is an endangered species, you know, a dying breed, and it has really gotten me all fired up lately.

AM: Fired up how? Like that you have to assert being a butch to keep the flame alive?

LV: Oh, for sure, and for a whole number of reasons. I mean, we are in the middle of an incredible era, where everything is accessible and mutable and beyond stasis, you know? We are so beyond analog, and digital has become this whole limitless beast, in both a good and bad way. And some days I feel like I've "fallen behind" and that I'm old fashioned by still identifying as butch. But that's a super fucked place to get my head into, because it's not about evolution, per se, it's more about pride.

AM: So along with moving towards the digital and this new multiplicity that is replacing the binary (whether that is evolution, or progress or not), do you feel like the past ways of existing or identifying are now being erased? Do you think that the word 'butch' itself is then now used pejoratively?

LV: Oh my god yes! Regardless of their sex or gender, even people who are tough acting or very masculine bristle easily at the term butch. I think that that's a throwback from butch/femme identity politics, or, the ongoing resistance to the binary. You know, some people just aren't that interested in having that label anymore.

AM: What was it like being a butch growing up?

LV: When I was first living in San Francisco in 1990 and I started dating more, within the uh, well, I had been dating girls for a long time, but I was dating like jocks and poets, and people who weren't necessarily in the S/M or identity politics world. Anyhow, I started dating this woman who identified as a high-femme top. That was

her deal, and I thought it was so funny, cause I grew up in Colorado where lesbians were lesbians and just played softball, drove trucks, and wore really crappy shoes. Even dyke was a derogatory term!

Anyway, I was like 19 and I dating this high-femme top, and I remember hanging out with her and a friend of hers, this butch, and I had a toothpick in my mouth and she's just like, "*Oh look at the little butch.*" And I was like, "*I'm not butch*", and she's like "*oh honey, you're butcher than you think you are*!" And then I was like, "*fuck you*"... in my mind.

But after that, I was like, oh okay, yeah, butch, that fits! It didn't take very long. I think I had resistance to having that identity placed on me because, a) it was someone trying to limit me and tell me who I was, and b) because I grew up with my mom, who was the least militant person ever. She's really put off by anything political and always says "*why does everyone have to have labels?*" So it just took me a while to kind of uh... absorb that, but not for very long 'cause it's just who I am.

AM: It is totally who you are. Did you have any butch role models back in the day? Or even today?

LV: Oh, for sure. My butch identity really became solidified at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, which–inherently fucked politics aside–was a mind-blowing experience for me.

I was 21 years old when I first went, and the idea of creating community through labour was totally my jam. Every single thing was being built by dykes. Everyone's out there with sledge hammers and building scaffolding, and giant stages and laying pipe and doing wiring and you know, chopping down trees and shit, just everything.

Then there's this whole community of workers of freaks and old school butches and grandmas and high-femmes and hippies and druggies and witches. But the butches and freaks, that's what got me. These creature weirdos who identified as nothing

and everything. Also, these 40-to-70-year-old butches who worked their asses off, and got the shit kicked out of them in the outside world to maintain this identity – that really marked me.

AM: They worked their asses off to keep it butch?

LV: Yes, in that way, and also in an industrious sense too. I am very dedicated to the butch body in the workplace.

AM: Hot.

LV: [laughs] So, J.D. Samson has been really integral about being an activist for that. Just as much as she was for rescuing the word 'lesbian' from its perceived grossness. Remember in the 1990s and early 2000s when 'lesbian' was offensive?

AM: Yeah, I do remember that. So how does being a butch body relate to your work as a comic, or in the service industry?

LV: I was at Second City for three years as an ensemble member, doing improv and sketch comedy with the Touring Company. In that company, as a cast, you do older sketch material from Toronto or Chicago, and nine out of..., no, *ALL* of the sketches had characters for women that were only either mothers, sisters or girlfriends, or doing really girly things, you know whatever, it's a heterosexual world.

In Toronto, Second City specifically is way more relationship-based comedy and situations, whereas Chicago works a little more with gender and are way more political. So there's specific types of comedy that each Second City emphasizes. I found that being active in the industry, you have to play the part. I had to wear make-up, grow my hair a bit, wear more feminine clothes. I tried to go as androgynous as a could, and a lot of the times we would be touring and people would be like "*oh my god it's K.D. Lang.*" I've been called K.D. Lang or Ellen so many times, like, there's worse things that could happen right?

"

Look at K.D. Lang, butch, well she doesn't *have* to wear make up, but she does sometimes, right?

AM: Yeah, I guess.

LV: But, I found it really insulting. I had to be all these women. Like, these kind of subservient or stereotypical women.

AM: Gross.

LV: Because of my personality and that I was good at what I was doing, I got more experience and got to play men in some sketches. Also, when I was doing improv, I could just be myself, and I brought in a lot more gay politics. By presenting the way I did, I was kind of able to bring that forward. But as I was more in the industry, I started learning like, oh, I just have to be in drag, like this is the game you play. That's how it works. And you look at Rachel Maddow, butch has to wear make up, look at Ellen, butch has to wear make up...

AM: Yeah true, true...

LV: Look at K.D. Lang, butch, well she doesn't *have* to wear make up, but she does sometimes, right? It's just what's expected and it's how you sell, and that's just what the market is. So I find that, you know, I sometimes just get frustrated with the industry that I have to be that way, and it's exhausting to be in drag, you know? But I know a lot of people that I trust who also work in the industry are the same way to me, they say "*if you had fucking blond hair you'd be famous.*" Do you know what I mean? If you were a girl, if you acted like a girl...

AM: If you only had long blond hair...

LV: Yeah, if I just did the part better, I would have a lot more luck in the 'industry.' But I'm not really willing to do that. It's a hard job and it's really difficult to resist. Like, I know that's what I'm good at, and I know that's what I want to do. But I just don't really feel like being a girl sometimes.

AM: What about your other jobs in the service industry? Or in your daily life? How does butch visibility fit in there?

LV: Thank you for getting me out of that k-hole of possible self-loathing.

AM: That's why we are friends.

LV: I love you. Let's see. Well, it's all about service, right? And that is just such a craggy nest of gender crapola, but it's something that I'm good at and feel strongly about as an important life tenet. It's work with the public, and so similar rules apply around people's perception of my face.

AM: "*Excuse me, sir.*"

LV: [Laughs] Yes! "*Excuse me uh, ma'am sir, sir ma'am, uhhh, ahhhhhhh!!*" My favourite is the back-track look on their faces. I can tell in a fraction of a second what someone's already putting on me. I combat it by being really charming or friendly and just doing my job, and most of the time the gender stare freakout just disappears. We both get back to a normal human exchange. I think that has been my greatest asset, is having a really strong and cordial personality. That has really saved me from a lot of grief, and a lot of blatant homophobia. I have been very lucky in that regard.

In my life outside my work, there are places like public bathrooms that are sometimes an issue. Well it's mostly an issue. But I find that I when go into bathrooms, when in whatever, like the Houston Airport, I'll go like "*la, la, la, la, la*", like I'll raise my voice, or I'll whistle, or I'll walk, or I'll flounce. It's like a protection of myself, or it's not even that, it's like protecting people from freaking the fuck out…

AM: So it's kind of acting like a queen to pre-empt people's reactions towards you as a butch?

LV: Yes, a pre-emptive strike!

AM: And overall, it sounds like asserting a confident butchness in your life is very important both in hetero and in gay and/or queer worlds.

For me, we are in a curious moment, where some queers are still so embroiled in these identity politics discussions, which for me are seemingly endless, and can be tiring, but are still very important for many people as they discover themselves. And instead of identity politics going away, with the multiplicity of identities today, these discussions can be more complicated and heated than ever. Which can turn into this 'snake-eating-its-own-tail' obsessive community narcissism. There can be this fear about exclusion, because queers have been so oppressed and still are. You know what I mean?

But at the same time, with new ways of identifying, our past can be steamrollered over. Not that it should be an either/or situation, a past/present issue, an analog/digital issue, or a gender binary/gender multiplicity issue. It is just interesting how ways of being can be so quickly erased from the community consciousness.

LV: For me it's visibility, which is activism. I prefer it to have a positive effect, and I think it's more important than ever to identify as a butch. Although it just seems ludicrous to so many people who see it as so outdated. You know, a lot of people get so bent out of shape about it. Also, people say to me, "It must be so easy for you to date; you are, like, one of the last butches standing." I've heard that so many times. I can think of like maybe five or six butches right off the top of my head that are in my age group.

AM: Last butch standing! [laughs]

LV: Yeah, Last Butch Standing, my new reality show! I don't know, it doesn't seem to be a thing anymore, being a butch lesbian. When I was still in my teens, there were so many butches in San Francisco, and lots of butch pride. At Michigan there's still the Butch Strut. They have a Femme Parade and the Butch Strut, and its really cute...

AM: That's amazing.

LV: ...yeah, like 200 butches from all over. It's like going to Mecca or something. Did you read the Malcolm X autobiography? In it he goes to Mecca, and it totally blew his mind open right? Cause he saw white guys with red hair, and all these diverse Muslim brothers from all over the world and he's just like "*oh,*" and I feel that same way at Michigan. It's like when I watch the Butch Strut. I'm like "*oh shit, you are the butchest thing in your town.*" They will be wearing a little frilly shirt or you know, just that they identify; it's so heart-warming. But they're still out there. It just makes me so happy. But maybe I'm just... maybe I'm old fashioned. Or maybe I just really need to eat that chicken and potatoes. You want some?

AM: Yes please.

LV: Get a plate, queen!

Alex McClelland is a writer, researcher and activist who is perusing a Ph.D. at Concordia University in Montreal. Alex is a member of AIDS ACTION NOW! and co-curates the Day With(out) Art postervirus project.

Lex Vaughn is a multi-disciplinary artist from the USA, now with a Canadian passport. She has been performing the character "Peanut Brittle," a geriatric dandy, since 2004, and makes people angry and aroused with her ventriloquism work of the duo "Graham and Diane." Lex's website is out of date because she often refuses to engage with the 21st century, much to her demise. http://lexvaughn.net/

It's Good To Be Needed:
A Conversation with
Michèle Pearson Clarke

Tracy Tidgwell

As Audre Lorde says, "that visibility which makes us most vulnerable is that which also is the source of our greatest strength."[i] Michèle Pearson Clarke's new photography project, *It's Good To Be Needed*, makes visible our queernesses as well as our shared experiences of sadness and loss, as it presents images of queer women who are ex-partners but no longer friends, holding hands. *It's Good To Be Needed* offers an archive of experience that explores the powerful possibilities created through opening up to vulnerability and performing intimacy.

Michèle and I got together for this reflective conversation on a cold April afternoon at the Feminist Art Gallery (FAG), in Toronto. She didn't hesitate to hold my hands when I reached out for hers in search of connection and warmth.

Tracy Tidgwell: Since we already covered the "how are you?" part, let's begin with how this project began for you.

Michèle Pearson Clarke: When I first started working on this project at the end of 2011, it was four months after my mother died. Losing her has dredged up a lot of old unresolved grief related to other previous losses in my life, including the end of

my marriage in 2009. I had also started a new relationship just before she died and my partner, Suzanne, and her ex-husband are very close and my ex-wife and I are not. There's this idea that dykes are usually friends with their exes and that people in straight relationships are not. The contrast around that in our own lives was interesting and got me thinking about creative ways to move through loss.

As I continued to search for ways to heal and to figure out how to move forward in my own life, I realized that many of us lack the capacity to resolve things that linger. And we don't necessarily have structures or rituals in place to address that. The idea of photographing ex-girlfriends who are not friends came to me as a way to revisit a site of grief in an attempt to explore whether a moment of emotional vulnerability and discomfort could offer a letting go.

When I began to develop the idea and talked to people about it, they would tense up and say, "Oh my god, well nobody's going to want to do it but I want to see it when they do." So immediately there was intrigue. I had questioned whether it would be a viable project to do but the response that it provoked made me think that I had something here. Even right up to launching the project I still wasn't sure whether it would be something that people would actually want to do.

TET: Have people wanted to do it?

MPC: I launched the project in December, we're now in April and there's still only one photo. In some ways I'm surprised. I didn't expect hoards of people to do it but I'm surprised that I've only had one set of participants so far. At the same time, I've had a tremendous amount of interest. People contact me and say that they love the project. It strikes a chord. I think what's interesting is that everybody seems to try to imagine whether or not they could do it. People seem to immediately think of a particular ex. And most people break out in a cold sweat. It resonates with people.

TET: People seem to be very stirred by your project.

MPC: Somebody came to me recently and told me that they had been at a dinner party with a bunch of dykes and they were discussing my project. They went around the table and each shared whether they could be part of the project or

not and why and with which ex. They had this group processing together. There is this way that people are participating without having their picture in the project. Ultimately the project is an attempt to shift things in a healing direction. And even simply having these conversations or imagining the process may be part of this shift.

TET: The participation process seems very involved but I wonder if it's missing something, like processing? Holding hands for a photo with an ex you likely have unresolved stuff with seems like it might revive some unresolved feelings. I'm curious to know if participating in your project will compel exes to do some more processing.

MPC: I can't speak for everybody but I think, for most queer women, an enormous amount of processing has already happened in order to decide to end a relationship. Most of us feel the pressure to be friends. It's a norm and expectation in the queer community. Most of us desire harmony in our lives in general so we've done a lot of processing around breaking up. If you aren't friends then that processing obviously didn't resolve how to be friends. The project is an experiment that asks, is performing intimacy a way to offer some of what processing was not able to provide? What if we bypass more processing and just perform intimacy? Is it possible that to agree to have this ritual, to meet each other in this place and time, to hold hands, and to let this moment allow for letting go – might that negate the need for more processing?

TET: In a blog post on your project, Charlotte Cooper extends the paradigm of partner-type breakups to community fractures among friends and groups. [ii] She suggests that queer communities haven't created spaces or structures for meaningful processes that might lead to healing. Do you see your project as a nuanced approach to making stronger relationships and communities?

MPC: I love what Charlotte wrote. Clearly we don't always resolve the pain from our breakups, in whichever relationships they may occur. These hurts continue to linger

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Sometimes not being friends with an ex is the best way to take care of yourself.

and they trickle out into other dynamics in the community. So yes, I would say that my project is an attempt to offer a structured process that might lead to healing.

One thing I'd like to make clear though is that this is not a project for everybody. There are many ex-couples who are not friends for very good, valid reasons. The project is in no way trying to suggest that everybody should be friends with their exes or that reconciliation with somebody who's hurt you is the ideal stage to get to, especially if someone has been abusive emotionally or physically or in any other way.

Sometimes not being friends with an ex is the best way to take care of yourself. I'm not saying that reconciliation and letting go is the ideal state to reach or that participating in the project is the first step in becoming friends with an ex. What I'm saying is that there are some of us who wish to shift the dynamics of what is unresolved and we don't have ways to do it. The project is trying to offer those people a way to explore risk, vulnerability and letting go.

I've thought a lot about the ethics of what I am asking people to do. I've thought a lot about how people could use this project in ways that may not be healthy and how responsible am I for people who may not have enough of a sense of self-awareness to do something that might be unhealthy for them. I had to work through many of these questions before I started to do the project.

TET: So it's a ritual between people who have shared a history of intimacy and there's something reparative going on in performing this intimacy.

MPC: Exactly. People who have expressed interest seem to have a shared desire to manifest something for themselves but I think people get that doing this is giving something to other people too. People keep saying, "I want to see more!" as though it's healing for people to see people trying to heal. I think the people who are interested in doing this get that there's something in it for them personally but also that sharing this experience publically offers something too.

TET: How is the photograph an important part of this process?

MPC: I see the photograph as the last step. I describe the project as part participatory performance. To do this project you have to go through a bunch of emotional and practical steps. In the end I'm documenting that final moment.

I think that the documenting is important as an output for this process because of other people's responses to it. There's a lot of power in understanding what's possible and with this project we can reflect on our own lives when we see what's possible for other people. We learn about each other and ourselves from that and maybe this can help us heal in other parts of our lives with exes, friends, or in any relationships really. We're human beings and we hurt each other. It's what we do, over and over and over again. And that pain and that shame aren't emotions that we learn how to deal with. We don't learn how to have those difficult moments and conversations and move through them and still be ok with each other.

TET: You're documenting traces of former intimacy, disconnection and, as you say, what's possible from this. Do you think the project and its images are signs of both something reparative and something irreconcilable?

MPC: This question makes me think about scattering my mom's ashes. This was not a reconcilable thing for me but scattering her ashes was still reparative. It was a ritual, a process, a step, a symbol, an act. Scattering her ashes was this thing that I did that allowed me to let go of something I needed to let go of even though that loss will never truly be repaired in my life. I see the project as an opportunity to attempt a similar thing. As I said, processing didn't work so more processing is not necessarily going to help months or years later. Maybe doing this different kind of thing, this kind of ritual, offers an alternative to processing and helps let go of something. Not with the intention of becoming friends, not to fix it all, but to let go of something or part of that thing that you're still carrying.

TET: *It's Good To Be Needed* is such a fitting project for NMP's Crush theme. Your images picture people who had once fallen for and been completely crushed out in love with each other and who had later been possibly crushed by the despair of breaking up.

MPC: What I like about Crush is its connection to relationships. Part of what the project recognizes is that when we break up we are consumed with negatives. But every relationship begins with a crush. You once shared a beautiful, magical connection. But when we break up we often don't have ways to continue to honour that. If you're exes that continue to be friends, you find ways to honour what you love about that person and what they bring into your life. In thinking about the theme of Crush in relation to the project there's this recall, maybe, to the first time you held that person's hand and how that was a beautiful moment of possibility. The project offers a different moment of possibility.

TET: I get a real sense of embodied experience from your project through ritual and performing intimacy through touch.

MPC: Touch is an important part of the project since the instant a breakup begins, touch becomes complicated. And being physically in touch with somebody that you used to be intimate with but are no longer friends with is now charged. I think touch helps make you present in your body and this helps honour the ways in which you were once connected. Care is embodied through touch and holding hands for this picture is a demonstration of our care for each other. Even saying yes to taking part in the project together is caring.

TET: Let's talk about the title, *It's Good to be Needed*.

MPC: From my perspective, everything that we carry with us and everything that we do serves a function, good or bad. We learn coping strategies – some healthy, some unhealthy – but for some reason, we need the things that haunt us. The title speaks to that. It's also about the fact that this was once a person that you needed in intimate ways, and through a breakup this need was shifted fundamentally. The

title is about this extreme contrast. The project title also speaks to an attempt to try to trouble and provoke the whole concept of lesbians being friends with their exes as somewhat of a cultural norm. I believe that it's a cultural norm because the community needs it. As queer community, wherever we're situated, we tend to be a minority community within the larger society so we're inclined to maintain community connections and harmony. I think there's a certain cultural pressure to be friends with our exes because it benefits everybody else. When you're not friends with your ex you can sometimes feel that you've failed your community somehow.

TET: Need and vulnerability seem to be intimately tied to each other and to your project. Can you say more about how you're inspired by vulnerability?

MPC: Vulnerability is such a thread for me. I'm very comfortable with it. I think unconditional love gave me that. In working through so much grief in the last year, I've come to realize what a privilege it is to have been unconditionally loved by my mother. It's a powerful privilege that has shaped my life in influential ways, similar to my class, my socio-economic position, my intellect and my education. Because until the death of my mother, I have not known fear the way I know it now. I have not known "you can't do that." All my cockiness and swagger comes from this unconditional love. There are so many things in my life that I've never questioned and now I'm experiencing doubt and fear because I've lost my anchor.

But I have experienced nothing but strength when I have allowed myself to embrace vulnerability. My project is an attempt to do that. It's not about asking people to go to a place of vulnerability to re-experience shame or pain; it's about risking vulnerability and hopefully coming out of it with strength.

Works Cited:
[i] Audre Lorde, "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: The Crossing Press, 1984), 42.

[ii] Charlotte Cooper, "Queer community is a place of wonder and delight and pain and sadness that can never be healed," Blog post at *Death to the Fascist Insect* (March 27, 2013): http://tmblr.co/Zzrh5thE_tOn.

Photographs from *It's Good to Be Needed* will be included in *That's So Gay 2013: Say It To My Face*, The Gladstone Hotel's annual gay pride art exhibition running from June 12 to July 28, 2013. http://www.gladstonehotel.com/event-pages/exhibitions/upcoming-exhibitions/thats-so-gay**.**

Visit the project website:
http://www.goodtobeneeded.com/

See Michèle's other work:
http://www.michelepearsonclarke.com/

Tracy Tidgwell is a queer lesbian-feminist cultural crafter who continues to explore life through the body, feelings, queerness, community and creativity. She's friends with only some of her exes but still holds love for them all.

Michèle Pearson Clarke is a Trinidad-born filmmaker and photographer who lives and works in Toronto, Canada. She is the director of Surrounded by Water (2003) and Black Men and Me (2006). NOW Magazine's Cameron Bailey named Michèle one of Toronto's 10 best Filmmakers of the Year in 2006, and the following year she won the Best Canadian Female Short Award at the Inside Out Toronto LGBT Film and Video Festival. Her most recent photography project, Diplomatic Communication, was presented at Axe Grinding Workshop, part of the Civil Partnerships? Queer and Feminist Curating conference at The Tate Modern in May 2012. Her current photography project, It's Good to Be Needed, will be included in the group exhibiton That's So Gay at The Gladstone Hotel in June 2013. Michèle has served on the board of directors for the Inside Out LGBT Film and Video Festival and Trinity Square Video and she was a jury member for the Ontario Association of Art Galleries annual awards in 2010. Currently she is on the board of the Feminist Art Gallery and Gallery 44. Michèle will be pursuing an MFA in Documentary Media Studies at Ryerson University beginning in September 2013.