

Intimate Spaces

A short series in six episodes

by

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Abstract

Drawing from Claire Mortimer's historical framing of the romantic comedy, I argue that Hollywood cinema since the 1930s has been developing a genre with plots limited to heteronormative conceptions of love, intimacy, success and sex. My research project *Intimate Spaces* is a limited series of six episodes with characters created to interrogate the stereotypical nature and predictable flow of intimacies depicted in the mainstream genre. My aim is to destabilize the dominant form by taking up what Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner theorize as 'normal intimacy'. The script of *Intimate Spaces* is a reflection on the idea that normative relationships require constant work, what Laura Kipnis notes as a capitalistic reality. Pulling from my personal archive of writing as a queer, BIPOC, first-generation Canadian woman, I alter the romantic comedy genre, making it a site for mutual interpersonal understanding. I present these stories episodically, as a way to center non-conjugal intimate relationships alongside romantic ones, focusing individually on diverse examples of intimate scenes – parent and child, grandparent and grandchild, friends and roommates. These imagined stories were developed and are set in the context of the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic in Toronto. They depict how being jolted into this time of isolation has altered ordinary life differently for each of us, placing new emphasis on our intimate experiences.

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Intimate Spaces is dedicated to my mother Donna Chin who has taught me that failure moves life forward.

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... we desperately need fiction, poetry and art, precisely because they are places where we can continue to imagine the pleasurable mis-alignment of social subjects and encounters in passing, as scenes of intimacy.
- Jean Paul Ricco

Chapter 1: An Introduction to Love

The primary goal of this research was to find ways to portray non-normative forms of intimacy through BIPOC and queer characters in the romantic comedy genre. In researching the history of romantic comedy, I discovered that outdated industry standards outlined in the Hays Code have resulted in the upholding of longstanding structures which continue to render queer and BIPOC existence invisible. I finally created narratives that are alternative roadmaps for intimate relationships, accepting that they are tied to the romantic comedy form because of their content and style.

In creating *Intimate Spaces* I considered other, non-romantic and non-sexual forms of intimacy, celebrating that they exist despite the prevalence of the dominant form. The intimate scenes produced in *Intimate Spaces* use aspects of the romantic comedy genre as inspiration instead of structure. This is an acknowledgement that they are iconic sites for building intimacy, while accepting that intimacy is a part of all close relationships. By working to understand my feelings of ambivalence regarding romantic comedies I have written alternative forms of intimacy into the genre, thereby altering the form of the genre itself for my own use. Each of the six (6) episodes of *Intimate Spaces* introduce and follow a different type of intimate relationship, undermining heteronormative tendencies in romcoms with satire while often getting trapped by the genre's predictable stipulations. By questioning the absolute power of heteronormativity in American cinematic media by re-presenting its constraints in episodic format and digital space, heteronormative-divergent ideologies are made accessible.

There's something about a happy ending that comes after an hour and a half of pure chaos that pulls at my heartstrings. No matter how challenging a relationship in a romcom seems to be, no matter how impossible the great misunderstanding, these characters put all of that aside to be together because *love conquers all*. Romantic comedy as a genre offers the opportunity to encounter at-will what feels so fleeting in relationships: intimacy. Let *intimacy* in the context of this thesis work represent moments of mutual identification in social or physical proximity that allow participants to feel deeply connected to each other. Repeatedly seeing formulaic intimate scenes steeped in heteronormativity in romcoms, I couldn't help but wonder: is this the only way?

This introduction serves to outline my positionality as a BIPOC and queer woman. As a media artist whose practice has been heavily rooted in the subjects of love, intimacy and reflexivity, I consider the particular challenges of writing queer intimacy in my short series: *Intimate Spaces*. As a first-generation Canadian raised in various suburbs of the Greater Toronto Area, there were growing pains associated with coming into both queerness and racialized identity, respectively.

I wonder now where my parents' hobby of consuming mainstream American cinema originated. Both of my parents grew up in Jamaica, both of them mixed race. While both of their families carry on Chinese traditions, no part of my family on either side are avid consumers of Jamaican-made content, and certainly not Chinese-made content as my ancestors have not lived in China since 1930. For my immigrant parents American film was a good way to assimilate into North American society. Our family trips to the movie theatre are some of my most treasured family memories. Every Saturday we would hop in the car en route to our local Cineplex Cinemas for a double-feature.

My mother and I were particularly fond of romantic comedies. Physical comedy has always made her laugh like nothing else, and romcoms have plenty of that. I enjoyed seeing her so immersed in a love story, lost in the romcom's fantasy of intimacy. Whether intentionally or not, she passed this same affinity down to me. I remember that the pair of us always opted to add the newest addition to the genre to our regularly scheduled programming whenever the opportunity presented itself, this to the faux-dismay of my father.

As I entered my teens, television shows became another primary source of my mediated content engagement. These episodic stories were faster-paced, promising a satisfying resolution every week.¹ Because this content was so quickly and easily digestible, I was consuming a lot of it and I continue to prefer comedic pieces of writing over dramatic writing for the dialogical banter that comedies accomplish in a shorter run time. It was around this time, that I became conscious of how my identity as both a queer and BIPOC woman had adverse effects on how I was being trained by these movies and shows to move through the world. I noticed in the romantic relationships in these movies and shows from the 2010s that there was a significant lack of non-stereotypical representations of both queer and BIPOC people in film and television forms.²

What was considered 'appropriate behaviour' for the white characters in these scenes, was not the same for me in real life and so I was left uncertain about how to express my queerness and racialized

¹ A reader born after 2000 might be wondering why I was not consuming my content on-demand. I was a teen as of 2010, before streaming access, when we were still bound to the weekly programming decisions of the networks. While mining the media referred to in this thesis, I was struck by how eventful going to the movie theatre once was and in remembering how brutal the hiatuses between seasons were on loyal TV-watchers.

² A couple of exceptions to this was *Saving Face* (2004), written and directed by Alice Wu whose work has inspired many other Asian-American media makers, myself included and *Maid in Manhattan* (2002) which features a working class female lead.

identity. I was desperate for ways to approach adult relationships as a queer woman of colour. In my over-consumption of romantic comedies narratives, I have had to suspend my disbelief because I don't align with heteronormative values heavily promoted in such shows and films. Nevertheless, the intimate scenes of these stories were what drew me in. These fictional depictions served as roadmaps to experiencing social relationships and exploring the space between us.

In my first intimate and romantic experiences I felt trapped by the *normal* ways to be in relationships like those exemplified in teen- and young adult-targeted content.³ Even when watching *The Mindy Project* (2012-2017) – a romcom network television show featuring a protagonist who is a woman of colour – there remained an undeniable disconnect between how I was experiencing intimacy in comparison to the characters on-screen. I found the depiction of relationships in these narratives entertaining, however very few diverted from heteronormative storylines even when depicting relationships between queer or queer-coded characters. These romcoms did not provide ways of being that accepted queer and nonheteronormative possibilities and the dominant messaging throughout was that the pursuit of a heteronormative life was the only choice for intimacy. Although distant from my lived reality, I nevertheless continued to be interested in stories about intimacy. I enjoyed seeing these relationships develop because I still saw them as valuable for coaching me into my platonic adult relationships. I found safety in their predictability.

³ Prominent examples of this include *The Vampire Diaries* (2009-2017) which portrayed strictly heterosexual relationships, even with its supernatural overtones. *Glee* (2009-2015), created by Ryan Murphy, a gay man, added queer characters to plot as an afterthought, frequently presenting queer trauma as necessary and only overcome through perseverance. Even films from my adulthood like *How to Be Single* (2016) seemingly prioritize 'feminist' approaches to love and coupledness, while continuing to fall victim to the female-subjugating tropes of romantic comedy.

By the time I was eighteen, I had made up my mind that not personally relating to the characters of these narratives was irrelevant. The white, heterosexual characters in these stories held different privileges than I and I subconsciously removed myself from these scenes of intimacy, accepting to an extent that this exclusion was the norm for marginalized people. The pervasiveness of straight white-washing in romcoms continued to create a wedge between me and the homophobic and racially tokenizing romantic comedies that continued to be released into my late adolescence.⁴ This tension gradually intensified with time and I began to have affirming queer experiences despite having little instruction from the genre.

Romantic comedy's fictional examples of intimacy continued to bring me a degree of comfort because of how they were depicting intimate healing as possible, even between people who seemed so different from each other. The scenes of intimacy in romcoms shaped a support system around the main character, telling stories that constantly validated them as worthy of love. These narratives of acceptance or success often feel inaccessible to queer people. This narrative exclusion keeps LGBTQIA2S+ issues and race issues as taboo something that is too alternative to be discussed in the public space of mainstream media. I wondered how romantic comedy narratives might exist for queer and BIPOC people someday.

Coming into my queer identity I found that films featuring queer characters were frequently written with trauma narratives.⁵ Characters in these dramas rarely had the chance to find successful resolutions, much less the *happy ending* that romantic comedies promise for their heroine and hero.

⁴ Including Kevin Hart's character in *The Wedding Ringer* (2015) and Anthony Mackie's in *Love the Coopers* (2015). Not to mention *Aloha*'s (2015) controversy over Emma Stone's casting as a Chinese-Hawaiian character.

⁵ *Boys Don't Cry* (2003), *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), *Moonlight* (2016), *Boy Erased* (2018).

Without representations of what successful queer relationships could look like in any genre of mainstream narrative content, I was left to my own devices to locate queer subcultures and spaces, namely in the theatre arts and online, where queer possibilities were being represented and were much more attainable. Suddenly heteronormative success was not the only right path towards happiness. I sought to create experiences for myself that felt like explorations that were label-less and infinite. In these subcultures, I found others who were exploring what intimacy could be aside from what romantic comedies demonstrated.

My love for broadcast media and film continued as a driving force in my life and led me to an undergraduate career in new media production where I co-created *Cavalier* (2019).⁶ This non-linear short film investigates romantic love in heterosexual intimate relationships from the perspective of BIPOC characters. My intent with creating this narrative was to show intimacy in a nonlinear timeline. I fictionalized temporary love and dysfunctional love as a useful way to explore the disconnection I felt for so long between enjoying romantic comedy narratives for their optimism about love while at the same time feeling disdain for their ignorance of BIPOC experiences.

⁶ Figure 1. *Cavalier* (2019).



Figure 1. Screenshot of *Cavalier* (2019)

After completing *Cavalier*, I thought more about how to resolve this tension, this time through queer characters and plots inspired by my own queer experiences. I built romantic scripts that critiqued heteronormative conventions. I began to use an autoethnographic lens to write reflexively about my queer identity and my intimate experiences. This quickly became central to my practice. As a maker and writer, I rely heavily on descriptive and metaphorical language to communicate sentimentality, familiarity, and potentiality, and focus on the subjects of memory, impression and intimacy.

Upon starting in the Interdisciplinary Art, Media and Design (IAMD) program to which this thesis work belongs, I was intent on continuing to write intimate relationships from my queer and BIPOC perspectives. Through my research I explored my connection to my own ethnic heritage and

made work featuring traditional Chinese aesthetics and cultural pieces; primarily in the mediums of sculpture and projection.⁷ Over the course of the subsequent summer semester, I read numerous theoretical texts about intimacy and completed the poetry book *Avant la lettre* (2020), an amalgamation of lessons learned in my intimate relationships. The production of this work took place during COVID-19 quarantine, the same circumstances that have informed the way that I have written the scope of relationships in *Intimate Spaces*.



Figure 2: Detail of *Suspended* (2019)

⁷ Figure 2. *Suspended* (2019) and Figure 3. *Drag Me Down* (2019).



Figure 3. Close-up of *Drag Me Down* (2019)

In *Intimate Spaces*, I am creating a space for queer people to enjoy content with romcom elements in a narrative written through a BIPOC lens. The work is meant to be an entry point for people with various understandings of what it means to be queer and racialized. This research is a reflexive consideration of my artistic practice and a further exploration of my intersectional identity. While writing *Intimate Spaces*, I carefully embedded fragments of my experiences and reality into each character, learning how to incorporate the more nuanced parts of my race, culture, sexuality and gender identities in order to produce characters with points of view true to my experiences.

Writer Wesley Morris states that the romcom genre's depictions of intimacies in narrative are valuable as cultural objects because they "take our primal hunger to connect to one another and give it

a story.”⁸ I am not interested in *fixing* romcoms, but rather, I propose that romantic comedy can meet audiences with nuanced representations of queer intimacies. This thesis with its 6 episodes intends to provide theoretical context by evaluating the romantic comedy genre’s plausibility as a platform for queer intimacies through a web series set during pandemic times.

After establishing what I found valuable about romcoms and knowing that I wanted to write from a place of self, I found that the biggest challenge was creating a romantic comedy narrative that works to be anti-heteronormative. I needed to break queer characters out of the tired roles historically present in romantic comedy narratives, namely the ‘gay best friend.’ Tropes of the genre are familiar, and comfortable – albeit ignorant – which makes it difficult to find ways to divert from normative scenarios. I had to continually ask myself how I could move away from the expected results of a romantic comedy. The solution seemed to be to write my characters as critics of the genre’s form. My research pivoted to focus on the potential challenges for writing queer intimacy in queer intimate space.

Chapter 2: Romantic Comedy as Genre & Theories of Alternative Intimacy will address the theoretical questions that arose during the research and production process of *Intimate Spaces*. It follows my analysis of the romantic comedy genre by Claire Mortimer in *Romantic Comedy*. This, along with, queer and feminist theories by theorists including Laura Kipnis, Lauren Berlant & Michael Warner, José Muñoz, Jack Halberstam, and Sara Ahmed, outline considerations for how the scenes of *Intimate Spaces* were written. Queer and feminist theory is useful here in identifying issues within

⁸ Wesley Morris, “Twilight of The Romcoms,” *The New York Times*.

romantic comedy that must be rectified for other forms of intimacy to be observed and validated, including but not limited to dynamics in parental, platonic, or ex-partner relationships.

The production of *Intimate Spaces* is explained in Chapter 3: Reimagining Romantic Comedy as Queer Space with Intimate Spaces. This final chapter articulates the rationale and methodological approaches for writing about queer intimacy and making *Intimate Spaces* the series. These decisions are based on my positionality as a maker, in my roles as writer and director, my findings from my theoretical research, the genre-based considerations of the script, and the making process itself.

Chapter 2: Romantic Comedy as Genre & Theories of Alternative Intimacy

The word *queer* is used to describe something out of the norm, and in this case I have *queer*-ed the dominant form of relationship depicted in romantic comedy. The term especially describes what does not correspond to established ideas of sexuality and gender, namely heterosexual norms.⁹ What I refer to in this text as *queer intimacy* – and on occasion – alternative intimacy makes space for intimate relations that exist outside of heterosexual norms of romantic relationships, and can include anything concerning the subjects of sex, commitment, and reproduction. Locations where these intimacies take place are referred to as *queer intimate space*. Episodes one (1) through six (6) of *Intimate Spaces* present a set of possibilities that are not the direct inverse nor are they the replication of heteronormativity. They are instead segments of a serialized story that features queer characters caught between the idealistic pull of heteronormativity and the queer fulfillment of their personal intimate experiences.

Romantic Comedy History

Claire Mortimer's writing informs the basis of my analysis of the romantic comedy genre. In her guidebook *Romantic Comedy* she unpacks the genre from its origins in the 1930s to today. The work serves up an overview of romcom tropes, plot devices and character archetypes typical of these films. She summarizes the genre as “a hybrid of the romance and comedy genres, featuring a narrative that centres on the progress of a relationship, and, being a comedy, resulting in a happy ending. The dynamic of the film rests on the central quest – the pursuit of love – and almost always leads to a successful resolution.”¹⁰ This definition of romantic comedy only indicates that its basic form relies on

⁹ *Oxford*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), s.v. “Queer.”

¹⁰ Claire Mortimer, *Romantic Comedy* (Milton Park: Routledge, 2010), 4.

the narrative progression of a relationship, a successful resolution, and elements of both the romance and comedy genres.

I wondered how the elements of romcom narratives could be reinterpreted, and altered, in order to represent nonheteronormative intimacy and how a reordering might create a new, meaningful viewing experience for the queer viewer. There is nothing stated in Mortimer's definition of romantic comedy that explicitly excludes BIPOC people, nor queer people. There is no note that specifies that marriage must be the romantic comedy's resolution, however according to Mortimer, the 'successful resolution' of the 'progressed relationship' narrative is often marriage, or the promise of it, between the two protagonists.¹¹ The genre has needlessly been painted with a heteronormative brush and these heteronormative stipulations push queer intimacies out of the mainstream cinematic sensorium, leading to the creation of hegemonic products.

Hollywood romantic comedies created for mainstream American audiences in present day (2020s) contain tropes from romantic comedy subgenres from the 20th century: the *screwball comedy*, the *sex comedy*, and the *nervous comedy*. These subgenres preceded the popular era of Nora Ephron's,¹² Rob Reiner's,¹³ and Garry Marshall's¹⁴ romcom films of the 90s and came much before the boom of teen and coming of age romcoms of the late 90s to early 2000s.¹⁵ The screwball comedy depicts an unconventional lead who is written as fiercely independent, but by the end of the film will assimilate to normative standards in order to settle into her romantic relationship. In the sex comedy, importance is

¹¹ Mortimer, 2.

¹² *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993), *You've Got Mail* (1998).

¹³ *When Harry Met Sally* (1989), *The Princess Bride* (1987).

¹⁴ *Pretty Woman* (1990), *Runaway Bride* (1999).

¹⁵ Which included *Never Been Kissed* (1999), *She's All That* (2001), *The Princess Diaries* (2001),

placed on the leads of the film landing in sexually suggestive situations as a means for affective bonding and the satisfaction of emotional needs. Even with themes of sexual liberation, this subgenre's narrative usually ends with the couple in a heteronormative partnership. The nervous comedy sees both parties of the couple engaging in existential thought about love and the future of their relationship. These characters speculate about satisfaction, joy, and loss and question the ability for romantic love to satisfy all of their intimate needs. Mortimer cites Woody Allen films¹⁶ as quintessential to this subgenre, suggesting that his lived experience as a Jewish man gives the work a broader cultural point of view over other romantic comedy films from the same era.¹⁷

These subgenres of romantic comedy each represent important evolutions in the genre at large. Screwball comedy normalizes the archetype of the independent woman, the sex comedy presents extra-marital intimate relationships as commonplace and nervous comedy provides its characters the psychological complexity to think critically about their desires outside of sexual and romantic contexts. Each of these iterations of romantic comedy have afforded space in the margins for queer intimacies in cinema, by breaking down barriers between the intimate and the political. Even with these affordances, romantic comedy remains a space that is largely exclusionary of queer and BIPOC characters and narratives.

I turned to a piece of Hollywood's history to find evidence as to why these stories were left out of mainstream cinematic storytelling. In 1934, Hollywood's Motion Picture Production Code¹⁸ was

¹⁶ Namely *Manhattan* (1979) and *Annie Hall* (1977).

¹⁷ Mortimer, 9-11.

¹⁸ Nicknamed Hays Code after Will H. Hays, the president of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America at the time.

imposed on productions for release in American theatres.¹⁹ Screwball comedy's popularity took place during the 1930s when the Code was being most enforced in scripts and on-set.

The general principles of the Code were intended to maintain moral propriety for work produced by the industry. Its regulations stated that the moral standards of motion picture audiences should be upheld and that only 'correct standards of life' should be portrayed, with both natural and human law respected.²⁰ The Code prohibited miscegenation and what was described as 'sex perversion,' which meant that interracial and homosexual relationships were not approved by the code for American audiences. This list of requirements made unproblematic queer representation impossible in mainstream films, with alternative characters often portrayed as villains, victims, sick or in some way othered. Outside of motion picture production, queer sex was an illegal act in most of North America, with homosexuality classified as a mental disorder by the American Psychiatric Association until 1973.

This lack of initial representation is likely to blame for the perpetuation of othering racialized and queer people and is perhaps why until recently romantic comedies – and American cinema overall – do not include racially-blended couples, queer couples, or families outside of heteronormative structures of marriage and parenting. Further proof of these exclusive ideologies include the political acts of McCarthyism and racial segregation in the United States. By the 1950s the rules of the Hays Code were being enforced less frequently on productions and 1968 saw their replacement with the MPAA film rating system, which rates films based on content's age-appropriateness. The rating system

¹⁹ Hayes, accessed October 2020, productioncode.dhwritings.com.

²⁰ Arts Reformation, accessed October 2020, web.archive.org.

cites for each film what illicit content – if any – it contains or discusses and is the system still used to rate films in North America today.

Hays Code aside, romantic comedy resolutions in both the screwball and the sex comedy frequently requires a marriage between straight white couples as a conclusion. The nervous comedy is the first to end in a successful resolution where the lead couple are not together; this could be considered a *queer* ending. It is worth noting that indie films, never subject to the Hays Code because of their separation from the major film studio system, have long catered to showing alternative intimacies in their films, creating space for queer and BIPOC stories to unfold.²¹ This does not necessarily indicate that the independent film industry simply does not hold racist and sexist attitudes, but rather that independently-produced media are not made with the same mainstream audience in mind. BIPOC identity and queerness could in this context be viewed as a threat to the capitalistic interests of large production companies, as stories centering non-white, non-straight characters have no history of ‘selling’ because they have never been produced en masse. Independent writers and directors therefore have the opportunity to make films for more niche markets and take more risks in their storytelling.

All of this considered, one does not have to identify as queer in order to consume narratives that feature queer people. This simple truth confounds big studios whose executives believe that queer protagonists will not be equally successful at the box office as their straight counterparts because their stories only appeal to a minority number of queer viewers. Examples of historic queer performances in

²¹ Recent examples of non-heteronormative relationships on-screen include *Duck Butter* (2018) and *Newness* (2017). As well as many of the production company A24’s films.

touchstone romantic comedies are comedic relief based in incredulity, including scenes of crossdressing as farce. In *Some Like It Hot* (1959) and *Tootsie* (1982), straight white male actors play the male protagonist who dresses up as a woman. This goes hand in hand with the tendency to queer bait – the technique of hinting at homosexual themes without actually depicting them in order to mislead the audience. This perpetuates a problematic view of what it means to be part of the queer community to those outside of it while simultaneously invalidating those living queer existence. The larger conversation here is one concerning whether non-queer-identifying writers, actors or directors should be involved in the development of queer stories. Because *Intimate Spaces* is an anthology series about a network of characters living in queer community, I have injected this into romantic comedy in an attempt to remedy the the misrepresentations of queer and BIPOC people to mainstream audiences.

For many years, openly queer creators have contributed to straight characters on-screen. Queer-in-real-life actor Rock Hudson is featured in many classic romantic comedies from the 1930s to early 1960s.²² Revealing that he was suffering from AIDS-related illnesses although he never officially came out in the media, Hudson’s queerness should be considered as a hidden queer element within these romantic films. The subtext of these films is in a small way retrospectively subversive of heteronormativity through a critical eye, though this is obscured by the heteronormative narrative that his films follow; queerness here remains a probability and a possibility.

Shifting to romantic comedy in episodic form, a prominent example of heteronormativity in television is *Sex in the City* (1998-2004). The series and its subsequent two movies²³ follow the

²² He is especially known for starring opposite Doris Day in *Pillow Talk* (1959), *Lover Come Back* (1961) and *Send Me No Flowers* (1964).

²³ *Sex and the City* (2008) and *Sex and the City 2* (2010).

friendships between four professional straight women in New York City, unpacking their individual reservations about love, intimacy and relationships. At the end series' final film, only one main character finds themselves outside of a heteronormative couple, opting to pursue casual relationships with men indefinitely. Another example of this heteronormativity can be found in the *Bridget Jones* film series.²⁴ Each film ends with the protagonist reconciling with the same man. Although Renée Zellweger's Bridget ends the trilogy married and with a child, the situations presented to her are non-traditionally scripted. For example, in the final film, Bridget is pregnant but is uncertain about the father of the baby because of the serendipitous coincidence of her sexual encounters with two different men, Colin Firth's Mark and Patrick Dempsey's Jack.²⁵

These examples seem to open romantic comedy up as a place for feminist, alternative intimacies yet by their conclusions, they both fall into the trap of the happy ending. The industry presents this as a warranted decision, made so as not to have mass audience backlash. I have for too long given these works the benefit of the doubt because of the respect they are given by media historians. I now believe that pieces like these have a greater responsibility in respect to their contributions to the othering of queer and BIPOC people.²⁶

Romantic Comedy as Genre

Romantic comedy seemed like a fitting genre on which to base my research into fictional scenes of intimacy because of its history as a site for love. Its narratives are often criticized for their

²⁴ Composed of *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001), *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* (2004), and *Bridget Jones's Baby* (2016).

²⁵ A real *Mamma Mia!* (2008) kind of situation.

²⁶ *Sex in the City* (1998-2004) has been accused of transphobic writing and stereotypical writing of gay male characters.

predictability and one-notedness,²⁷ though these films and shows also depict intimate space and interactions between people in romantic courtship, friendships and family dynamics. It is worth noting that over the last fifteen years, including racialized people as part of the romcom couple has become more commonplace in mainstream American film than ever before. Examples of inclusive representations from recent years include *Guess Who?* (2005), *Always Be My Maybe* (2019), and *The Lovebirds* (2020).²⁸ That said, these representations seem to have merely been absorbed into the same white-coded heteronormativity as their predecessors. All of these films stage BIPOC intimacies but place Asianess and Blackness within the heteronormative frame, merely slotting BIPOC perspectives into the existing white narratives.

The recent success of *Crazy Rich Asians* (2019) indicates that stories of wealthy, Asian, heteronormative love do have a place in Hollywood. It should be noted that for the typical white female and white male protagonists of romantic comedies, their financial status is set as comfortable. Most are middle-upper class, meaning that stereotypical jobs like the struggling artist, handyperson or non-professional are passed off to the BIPOC and queer-coded characters.

Additionally, many of the actors playing queer characters on-screen are not queer themselves which creates a disconnect between audience and performer.²⁹ This takes up valuable space which queer people are already underrepresented in. Though Hollywood has demonstrated an interest in telling stories of queer intimacy the storylines remain tragically traumatic, heteronormative, or both.

²⁷ *500 Days of Summer* (2009), *Comet* (2014) & *The Last Five Years* (2015) decidedly tip the happy ending on its head & rearrange the chronology and mix up the realities of the love stories that they depict.

²⁸ Ashton Kutcher & Zoë Saldaña, Randall Park & Ali Wong, and Kumail Nanjiani & Issa Rae, respectively.

²⁹ Although I did not know it at the time, Rupert Evert's George in *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997) was my first time seeing a queer person playing a queer character.

Many of the actors in these roles have no lived experience – at least not disclosed – and are therefore incapable of further imparting queer reality into queer fiction.

There is also a tendency in mainstream American cinema to include scenes of racism and homophobia in films that do center BIPOC and queer people.³⁰ These too are trauma narratives, which is less than desirable subject matter for a romantic comedy, a genre well-known for its light-hearted, feel-good plots.³¹ Said examples imply that there are no possibilities for queer joy, only queer suffering. It is unfortunate that the proposed solution to this is that queer and BIPOC couples adapt to white conceptions of heteronormativity. This is not to invalidate the existence of queer and BIPOC people who subscribe to heteronormativity, but rather to indicate that there is a lack of heteronormative-free content available that addresses queer and BIPOC joy. In hopes of writing representations of queer people's intimate experiences into romantic comedy, I considered how recent films of adjacent genres have approached this.³² Many of these films recognize the importance of having queer people in queer roles because they possess valuable knowledges and experience that can be applied to these characters. As a queer and BIPOC woman, I cherish the privilege I have of participating in queer spaces whether they be bars, clubs or friend groups. These sites created by queer people for queer people make room for the fluidity of identity and community participation.

Queer Intimacies

My research into intimacy in romantic relationships applies Laura Kipnis' *Against Love: A Polemic* to identify problems with heteronormative standards of success, satisfaction and love. I use

³⁰ *Boys Don't Cry* (2003), *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), *Moonlight* (2016), *Boy Erased* (2018).

³¹ Creator Mae Martin's series *Feel Good* (2020) challenges this very notion.

³² *Call Me By Your Name* (2017) a romantic-coming of age film, *The Kids Are Alright* (2010), a comedy-drama, *Happiest Season* (2020), a romantic-comedy-drama and *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* (2010), a romantic-action-comedy.

Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner's "Sex in Public" to describe queer spaces, and this informs how I write fictionalized versions of them. José Muñoz's "Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts" is useful to further investigate the material permanence of queer space. My reading of Jack Halberstam's *The queer art of failure* and "Unbuilding Gender" discuss the metaphorical queer space of living outside of heteronormativity. Finally, Sara Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness* ponders what success for future generations might mean and how that definition can be made more attainable using queer ideals.

To approach writing a fictional series about queer intimacy, I first sought to understand how heteronormativity dominates mainstream awareness. Laura Kipnis points out in *Against Love* that love is an idealistic monolith in American culture about which there is little critical consideration. She explores how romantic love can be defined other than as its common, all-encompassing description of eternal devotion, absolute infatuation and perfect compatibility. Kipnis also explores the rigid constructions of love and intimacy such as marriage, commitment and reproduction. She proposes that the constraints of these areas can be redefined according to the individual, providing each of them agency to be selective in terms of what they take from heteronormative conventions and otherwise. Kipnis alleges that these tired intimate narratives are re-created in the media and in our own lives purely because they are the most recent dominant script. A successful love life is defined by securing commitment and by these circumstances, a relationship failing – whether that be coming to an end or existing with dysfunction – is terrifying. These expectations of intimacy are unrealistic and Kipnis suggests that if love can be redefined by each person individually, people would be more self-aware and feel more stable in their relationships.

Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner describe heteronormativity as such in *Sex in Public*: “[c]ommunity is imagined through scenes of intimacy, coupling, and kinship; a historical relation to futurity is restricted to generational narrative and reproduction. A whole field of social relations becomes intelligible as heterosexuality, and the privatized sexual culture bestows on its sexual practices a tacit sense of rightness and normalcy. This sense of rightness – embedded in things and not just in sex – is what we call heteronormativity.”³³ The authors position intimate situations as a site where community is created. Myopic heterosexual rightness has come to suffocate the sexual for queers, enveloping it in private life exclusively. All other elements of intimate life come to be attributed with normal heterosexuality and it is here that *heteronormativity* is born. The authors define heteronormativity but use it sparingly in their article citing it as a “sense of rightness”³⁴ that is contained in all things, not only sex. Heteronormativity requires that intimacy be shackled to the couple form.

What might be possible when we imagine the pursuit of intimacy free from playing by its rules? Berlant and Warner clarify that to be “against heteronormativity is not to be against norms,” but is rather to imagine what is possible when we stop working to keep up with normalcy.³⁵ To write against heteronormativity is to imagine an intimacy that does not center the couple. Heteronormativity purports that all social relationships subliminally enforce the goal of being part of a couple. Any considerations for the future are by consequence inextricably tied to building the reproductive model of the nuclear family.

³³ Berlant & Warner, 554.

³⁴ Ibid, 554.

³⁵ Ibid, 557.

Romantic comedy narratives replicate and re-present us with these desires to commit and reproduce – the primary relationship being the focus of such plots – with few of the scenes exploring the leads' other relationship dynamics.³⁶ Heteronormativity dependably moves the couple into *happily ever after*. Audiences are led to believe that coupledness is the only feasible way to find success and happiness. No matter what the romantic leads must reconcile with their long term commitment to each other, which further implies that other scenes of romantic love are not possible outside of the prescribed *happy ending*.

Heteronormativity enforces patriarchal structures around heterosexual, committed and monogamous relationships, reinforcing stereotypical and binary female and male gender roles. Heterosexuality is considered the default sexual orientation, exclusionary because its *normal* conceptions of love, intimacy, sex, identity and community are those engrained in the mainstream sensorium. Quintessential examples of these narratives tend to be found in the romance genre of film and novels, most well-known in pop culture today as movies adapted from books, like those written by Nicholas Sparks.³⁷ These films are notably different than those in the romantic comedy genre because they follow more dramatic plots and while the goal remains to get the couple together, this is not done through comedic writing.

In both its intimate and public contexts, heteronormativity removes each member of the couple's autonomy, requiring that they each conform to normalcy in order to find success together, further marginalizing members of queer communities and actively denying the value of queer public

³⁶ *What's Your Number?* (2014), the *Bridget Jones* film series (1997-2016), see: the Bechdel test.

³⁷ The author's best-sellers' and their movie adaptations include *The Notebook* (2004), *The Vow* (2012), *The Last Song* (2010).

spaces. Kipnis says that when living within the confines of heteronormative structures, even if ‘gender equity’ were achievable and not only an abstract concept, it “isn’t necessarily synonymous with greater freedom; it can simply mean equality in submission.”³⁸ This hypothesis astutely cites heteronormativity as an impediment for both the straight man and the straight woman. Furthermore, heteronormativity dismisses non-binary gender identity. Intimate relationships can be found regardless of one’s gender performance and *Intimate Spaces* shows how unmaking these restrictions is beneficial to all people as autonomous beings. It is by living to fit external expectations that we feel trapped.

Representing other, non-heteronormative forms of intimacy – specifically the platonic, parental, grandparental, cohabitant, ex-partner – is important. These scenes work to challenge the soundness and predominance of heteronormative intimacy by displacing the happy ending built for the couple as the primary objective of all intimate scenes. Representing a variety of meaningful relationships prioritizes autonomous thought and de-centers the primacy of the couple form, the nuclear family and reproduction as the only natural continuum. These alternative situations are validating to queer-identifying individuals because they illustrate ways of existing and participating in intimate spaces other than the pursuit of monogamous, romantic and sexual intimacy.

‘Queer,’ previously used pejoratively against LGBTQ+-identifying people, was a term popularized in Michael Warner’s article “Fear of a Queer Planet” where he states that heteronormativity “has a totalizing tendency that can only be overcome by actively imagining a necessarily and desirably queer world.”³⁹ The term has generally been used to describe any person,

³⁸ Kipnis, 16.

³⁹ Warner, 8.

action or activity which ‘disturbs the order of things.’⁴⁰ Warner and Lauren Berlant do exactly this as co-authors of “Sex in Public” where they dream of, promote and explore the possibilities of queer space and futures “when the heterosexual couple is no longer the referent or the privileged example of social culture.”⁴¹ The text works to de-center heteronormativity and discusses the opportunities that queer people create for themselves by collaborating to make queer space and build their own communities.

Heteronormativity prioritizes the idea that intimacy is rooted in the private, domestic space and separates the public and political from the intimate. This is not the case for queer people because political critique is inseparable from queer existence in Western society; *being queer* is seen as a political act. Queer intimacy has historically been pushed into the margins and out of the familial, the monogamous and the domestic. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic (2019-) – the era in which *Intimate Spaces* was written – I was further influenced to explore what queer intimacies might be taking place during this time where domestic confinement is lifesaving, thus making a series that is life-affirming.

Warner and Berlant critique the way that intimate life has been placed outside of political conversations and deemed ‘private life’ under heteronormativity.⁴² Intimate queer space is located both outside of domestic space *and* permanent public space and is instead limited to designated bars, clubs, cruising sites and in transient public spaces. The authors suggest that in queer world-making, intimacy and community building have all come to exist in locations which are not inherently tied to domesticity, family, monogamy or politics, which are all realms dominated by heteronormativity.⁴³

⁴⁰ Ahmed, 161.

⁴¹ Berlant and Warner, 548.

⁴² Ibid, 553.

⁴³ Ibid, 558.

Some examples of queer spaces, of *mobility* and *ephemerality* include drag performances, parades and cruising. Berlant and Warner admit that the temporality of these activities “render them hard to recognize as world making because they are so fragile,” and seen as elective, “paradigmatically trivialized as ‘lifestyle,’” rather than what they are: life-supporting.⁴⁴

Without queer people creating queer space for and with each other, there are no queer intimacies. Each episode of *Intimate Spaces* is set in a different queer space, one in which heteronormativity can be critiqued and intimacy beyond its bounds is centered. José Muñoz further investigates the queer spaces proposed by Berlant and Warner in “Ephemera as Evidence” where he explains the temporality of queerness as defence mechanism put in place for fear of homophobic retaliation. By unpacking how evidence of queer participation has historically been dangerous for the ‘queer subject’ queerness has therefore evolved to exist “as innuendo, gossip, fleeting moments, and performances that are meant to be interacted with by those within its epistemological sphere – while evaporating at the touch of those who would eliminate queer possibility.”⁴⁵ It was mandatory to attempt more permanent queer spaces within the realms of the domestic, the familial and the monogamous for *Intimate Spaces*.

Watching *Intimate Spaces* is intended to leave residual feelings about queer realities, feelings that Muñoz refers to as *ephemera*, that which is “linked to alternate modes of textuality and narrativity like memory and performance: it is all of those things that remain after a performance, a kind of evidence of what has transpired but certainly not the thing itself.”⁴⁶ By using Raymond Williams’

⁴⁴ Ibid, 561.

⁴⁵ Muñoz, 6.

⁴⁶ Muñoz, 10.

description of ‘structures of feeling’ Muñoz refers to emotional reactions to art which are based on shared lived experiences as “material.” This concept of experience as material was instrumental in the employment of *Intimate Spaces*’s written script as a stained-glass through which actors could apply their lived experience tangibly.⁴⁷

“Ephemera as Evidence” highlights queerness, too, as ‘a structure of feeling’ one which “encompasses same-sex desire and other minoritarian sexualities but also holds other dissident affective relationships to different aspects of the sex/gender system.”⁴⁸ In taking an autoethnographic approach to writing *Intimate Spaces*, these explanations of queer engagement and relationality were especially helpful in reinforcing the usefulness and material-making ability of this already-primary part of my practice, one I could now use to collaborate with others.

Muñoz further describes ephemera as “anchored *within* the social,”⁴⁹ this ephemerality as a turning away from dominant forms. These miniscule counter-critiques are ephemeral because their opposition lasts only as long as a viewer interacts with them, before they return to normative, established forms of material. Setting *Intimate Spaces* in the shared global reality of the COVID-19 pandemic grounds its scenes in a permanent material form, tied to temporary disruption of people’s access to public space. Seizing this opportunity, the series’ queer intimate relationships take place in domestic space where they may grow with their newfound independence from the heteronormative physical/political/public space.

⁴⁷ See page 42 in Chapter 3 of this document for how I applied this theory in *Intimate Spaces*.

⁴⁸ Muñoz, 11.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 10.

Intimate Spaces proposes that the representation of queer people and queer intimacy in media can be useful to unbuild heteronormative frameworks of intimacy. By capturing and incorporating the queer joy and sense of community that are usually ephemeral, these narratives subvert normal forms of intimacy. The series is not working to use queer characters as placeholders for hetero ones, but instead presents queer intimacy as liberation from the unreasonable rules of heteronormative intimate relationships.

Public perceptions of queer space seem to be more ephemeral and go unsupported by the heteronormative sensorium because of the differences that they embody. I was interested in exploring the limits of writing queer spaces that existed in domestic, familial, public and fantastical contexts. These would play a huge role in making *Intimate Spaces* feasible to fit into the category of queer media and allow the series to be considered as a queer space itself, one that is accessible to queer audiences. It is my goal as the writer of *Intimate Spaces* to represent queer identity and queer practices in cinematic media so that queer-identifying people and queer-questioning people might have entry points to these discourses.

Jack Halberstam describes in “The queer art of failure” that existing outside of gendered binaries and heterosexuality makes heteronormative success impossible for the queer individual. Queer people will undoubtedly ‘fail’ at being successful because of the prescribed structure of success in Western society.⁵⁰ Halberstam states in “Unbuilding Gender” that we “need distance from dominant rhetoric in order to produce subversive ideas.”⁵¹ In order to unbuild normative conceptions of labour

⁵⁰ Halberstam, 124.

⁵¹ Halberstam, accessed October 2020, <https://doi.org/10.22269/181003>.

and success, individuals must find entry points for queer ideas if they hope to move away from the overwhelming, ever-present eye of heteronormativity. It is only then that new understandings of success and failure might begin to challenge heteronormativity on an individual basis.

While trying to create community for the characters of *Intimate Space*, I found in Sara Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness* how the desire for *success* can be transferred from generation to generation. Parents can live with the failure of life to deliver happiness by deferring the responsibility to their children.⁵² Regarding passing on the potential for happiness Ahmed suggests that this concept is not only applicable to one's relationships with their literal offspring, but also to their potential future selves. Ahmed's words consider how older generations in communities tend to wish their unique definition of success for the generations to come. These themes are explored explicitly in the bookends of the series: first in the familial relationship between Caroline and her father, and later in Mark's relationships with his imaginary grandmother. Contrasting a relationship between father and daughter in episode one with the abstract relationship between Mark and his own subconscious understanding of his grandmother in episode 6, *Intimate Spaces* begins and ends with examples of the eternal transfer of hope and anxiety from generation to generation.

⁵² Ahmed, 33.

Chapter 3: Reimagining Romantic Comedy as Queer Space with *Intimate Spaces*

In lieu of the typical plot resolution of the *happy ending* in romantic comedy, the narratives of *Intimate Spaces* instead depict characters in the inbetweenness of their everyday lives. They are shown living through relationship conflicts resolved through communication and not dramatization.

Intimate Spaces is an alteration of the romantic comedy form, the writing of the episodes choosing not to validate jealousy, miscommunication or physical intimacy as plot points. Instead the series attempts to dive deeper into each of the relationships it depicts, using demonstrable trust and strong communication as tools.

Each episode of *Intimate Spaces* is about an intimate relationship which qualifies the series for the first criteria of romantic comedy proposed by Mortimer; that narratives from the romance genre are about love between protagonists. Every episode sees a different type of intimate relationship presented, rotating protagonists from within the series' network of characters. Unlike in romantic comedy, the intimate is not reserved for only the romantic as the series equally features familial, platonic, and terminated relationships. The series also suggests that relationships do not stay neatly enclosed within one of these specified categories as time goes on. Stories from the comedy genre usually require an emphasis on humour and exaggeration with all conflicts resolved by its end, which *Intimate Spaces* certainly does, albeit with a melancholic tone. Characters reach acceptance, which is intended to be a more satisfying conclusion than the typical, flimsy happy ending.

Using romantic comedy as a rough outline to follow for how to write intimacy on screen, I considered what to uphold and what to diverge from in order to present amendments to the genre. I

could use this new structure of storytelling to write scripts containing conventions from romcom as an experiment in satirical mirroring *and* opposition to these foundational ideas.

Character & Episode Breakdowns

The purpose of *Intimate Spaces* is to explore intimacies other than sexual and romantic between an ensemble cast in anthology form. The writing of *Intimate Spaces* is influenced by my own experiences as a queer, first generation Canadian, Asian-Afro-Caribbean woman living in Toronto. Each episode is focused on a particular relationship within an interconnected network of people who live in the city during the COVID-19 pandemic. This work is written from beginning to end chronologically through time however each episode is stand-alone and can be consumed individually at the discretion of the viewer. The series chronicles relationships in different stages of development and addresses how physical isolation imposes different challenges on social interaction.

Episode one (*You know I love you, right?*) documents a video call between Caroline, a city dweller in her mid-twenties, and her father, a suburban, working-class family man. The two demonstrate their shared sense of humour as they discuss the current events of March 2020. Caroline expresses her anxieties about the pandemic by reminiscing about life before its restrictions. She questions her father about the heteronormative structures that both he and her mother have demonstrated to – though not necessarily imposed on – her throughout her life. The conversation turns when Caroline's father's inquires about her love life and falls apart on the subject of Caroline questioning her sexuality. This episode works to break down the tendency for parents in romantic comedies to problematize their single adult children who are not monogamously partnered and starting a family. Caroline's father is gracious, encouraging and respectful of Caroline's boundaries,

does not continue to pry, accepting of whatever information Caroline is willing to confide in him. Caroline opts to stick to conversation deemed appropriate under heteronormativity.

Caroline carries the torch of the storyline into episode two (*ILY*) which examines her relationship with her roommate and friend Heather. In the first few months of Toronto's quarantine (March-May 2020), the two are watching a romantic comedy when Caroline questions the boundaries of their relationship. Heather, a lesbian, awkwardly deflects the question, but later admits to Caroline that she has thought about exploring their relationship outside of friendship. The two muse about dating standards from their queer and questioning perspectives from their shared domestic space. The intention with this episode was to explore how open communication is conducive to the fluidity of relationships. These characters have experienced platonic and romantic feelings for each other, but have been influenced by heteronormativity to see each type of relationship as mutually exclusive.

Episode three (*Love you still*) sees Heather during the summer of 2020, in her online university class where we meet her classmate and friend Jamie. Both characters are queer – Jamie identifying as a gay non-binary individual – their shared queerness serving as a point of connection for them. Jamie is a dedicated student, who is emotionally processing their breakup with their ex-partner Adam. This episode in particular addresses heteronormative standards that carry over into queer couples. Jamie journals their frustrations about being perceived as the 'more feminine' partner as a result of Adam's 'more masculine' presentation. They cite this as a source of insecurity which – along with their own unrealistic expectations of Adam – have driven this romantic relationship to its end. This episode serves as a guide for how to be alone after the end of a long-term relationship.

Soon after, Jamie and Adam decide to see each other in a socially-distanced meeting in episode four (*Loved: an attachment*) where the ex-couple sink into a familiar rapport. Adam, a gay cisgendered man, comes off flustered at first, only composing himself once the pair move past their small talk. The two discuss the failings of their relationship partaking in a sentimental conversation full of forgiveness. This episode is meant to subvert the reconciliation process of romantic comedies that reinstates the couple's relationship stronger than before. While there is no disdain for one another, both parties accept that the romantic relationship has reached the extent of its exploration. This ending is a narrative choice that demonstrates some of the challenges of being queer in heteronormative-dominant culture. It also examines the rare intimacy found in the relationship dynamic between ex-partners, a space of mutual understanding, awkwardness and nostalgia.

Episode five (*I love you, too*) bounces back to Heather and Caroline in a group setting with Heather's friends Mark and Libby, queer people in a polyamorous, co-habitative relationship. It is now the fall of 2020 and Caroline seems to have further explored her queer identity. She behaves presumptuously toward Mark and Libby and oversteps into their relationship. Once they are alone, the couple discuss their insecurities around their queer identities and how others perceive them. Because the couple are straight-passing their behaviour may appear to be heteronormative, however the dialogue of this episode works to pick apart the problematics of bisexual erasure.

The concluding episode, episode six (*Love you, bye!*) follows Mark to a visit with his grandmother. She delivers heart-felt, personalized advice in response to Mark's anxieties about his current situation, referring to more than just his romantic life. Mark is extremely transparent and honest in his responses, demonstrating a history of a close, supportive relationship with his

grandmother. This episode is representational of queer imagining as we are unaware as an audience of whether Mark is remembering, dreaming or imagining this interaction.

All of the episodes revolve around a network of people with different relationships and histories together. These *intimate spaces* show a variety of intimate circumstances that queer people can find themselves in, even when socially distancing from others. The inescapability of quarantine is the basis of much of the comedy of the series and – like in romantic comedies – is based in sarcasm, banter and hyperbolic language. The dialogue critiques the primary relationship of romantic comedies, while using the core principles of the genre as a basis to write other intimate relationships.

Methodologies

I have written the script of *Intimate Spaces* drawing on my own evolution and lived reality of intimate relationships. These scenes are fictionalized projections of real-life awkwardness, discomfort, miscommunication, immaturity. These narratives are important to share with others on the premise that if more stories about misalignments in love and non-heteronormative storylines are made accessible, individuals' queer self-acceptance could occur much sooner. This collection of scenes therefore serves as a reference for queer viewers to understand how their intimacies are interesting, valid and worthy of representation in mainstream media, when not relegated to private existence.

The representation of queer and BIPOC characters played by queer and BIPOC individuals works to deny problematic stereotypes and the tokenization of queer and BIPOC people in mainstream media. This is an element of *Intimate Spaces* that is sacred to me as it is not my expectation to see anything but heteronormative, white stories prioritized on-screen apart from undeveloped queer and BIPOC supporting characters. Like abiding by heteronormative structures, the tokenization and

stereotyping of queer and BIPOC people, fictional or not, is based on a distaste for these real-life minority groups. This reduces and flattens any differences of the individual to fit into the heteronormative norm. Physical or aesthetic understandings of otherness is muted by hetero-normalcy. *Isn't It Romantic* (2019) is a satirical take on the typical, one-dimensional 'gay best friend' character with Brandon Scott Jones's Donny serving to point out how these characters' are usually only the support system for the straight protagonist, essentially reducing them to their sexual identity. *Intimate Spaces* offers examples of intimacy that are true to the lives of all of the performers involved, as well as myself.

In terms of approaching race in the series, I explore Muñoz's description of the affective relationship as a *structure of feeling*. While it is true that stereotypes are written into romantic comedy, I feel that there is a *modus operandi* that people of colour operate with that aligns us with each other and makes BIPOC cinema relatable to multiple racial minority groups. For instance, even if a character is not explicitly referred to as Asian, I might still align myself with them because their actions remind me of what being Chinese means to me, based on our shared experience of colonization. Through *Intimate Spaces* I wished for racialized audience members to identify with and feel understood by the BIPOC experiences written in, material evidence of self-identification.

In my initial script for *Intimate Spaces* what was important to me, as creator, writer and director of the project was that these characters be taken on by queer and BIPOC actors who were interested in co-creating fictional queer characters and queer spaces. As a production team, we recognize this content as inherently queer and racially coded because the people who originated the work are queer-identified individuals.

My primary desire for the characters of this fictionalized universe was that they would be developed in collaboration with other queer and BIPOC people for the purpose of critiquing the dominant form of heteronormativity in romantic comedy through a work created together. These characters work to be anti-heteronormative while naming the ways that heteronormativity remains a dominant structure in each of their relationships.

For example when Jamie and Adam discuss how they are perceived by others in public spaces, Jamie identifies the feeling of insecurity that comes from the assumption that one of them must be the dominant partner, and the other is submissive. While casting actors, I was searching for contributions of queer experiences to incorporate into the final form of each character. Experiences or opinions pulled from conversations between myself and the actors further developed the characters they were auditioning for. The casting process involved an open call for actors posted to my social media networks. The first audition consisted of a short monologue reading from *When Harry Met Sally* (1989). The monologue from the New Years' Eve reconciliation scene is a great summary of the protagonist's attitudes about devotional love. Billy Crystal's Harry seems to get to the heart of what he considers intimacy as he names things only he seems to notice about his prospective partner. I view it as pathetic and emotional, able to communicate nuanced feelings about intimate attachments, albeit from the perspective of a straight, white, male character.

The callback audition was a one-on-one reading of an episode of *Intimate Spaces* with me and served as an opportunity for me to get to know the actors' and respond to their notes on their script. Using anecdotes from those secondary auditions, I revised characters, infusing and embedding them with notes from and references to the actors portraying them, which moved the cast forward into

production. Two of the actors are playing older: Dad and Grandma. They represent my projections of parental figures based on my own experience and the many mediated representations of these stereotypes that I have come across in romantic comedy specifically. Seeing the youth of these actors changes the dynamic between them and their children in the scenes. Caroline's conversation with her father is borderline irritating and Mark appears to be older than his grandmother. The fact that these characters are being portrayed by actors too young to be a parent or grandparent purposely creates a disconnect between audience and character. This is intended to mimic what I felt between myself and the protagonists from romcoms in my youth. In both Caroline's relationship with her father and Mark's with his grandmother, it is clear that each character has their own already-existing understanding of queer existence which the episode captures them working to evolve.

I deliberately used *radical honesty*⁵³ to explain how I navigated romantic comedies' great miscommunication trope. This is usually the biggest conflict in the story in which the central couple break up and are usually not in contact with each other for an extended period of time.⁵⁴ An example of this is in *10 Things I Hate About You* (1999) when the romantic lead Kat discovers that Patrick's interest in her was initially because he was paid to ask her to prom. Eventually the protagonists run into each other or one reaches out to the other to propose giving their relationship another try. This trope of the genre called the *third-act misunderstanding* has always frustrated me as a viewer because the conflict usually involves one of the leads making ethically questionable decisions.

⁵³ An approach popularized by the sitcom *Lie to Me* (2009-2011).

⁵⁴ Examples include *The Parent Trap* (1998) and *She's All That* (1999).

Radical honesty is therefore an opposition useful in building queer intimacy into the romcom genre in which the protagonists are in favour of approaching their relationship as transparently and openly as possible. Diverging from the melodramatic distraction, I have composed *Intimate Spaces* using radical honesty as a filter through which to recontextualize the intimate relationship, fundamentally expanding what is possible in the romantic comedy plot structure.

Format, Ensemble Cast, & Mis-en-scène

By centering a singular relationship in each episode of *Intimate Spaces*, the audience sees how these people are interconnected by their networks, showing each character from different points of view. The decision to break up the series' large narrative into episodic segments, rather than presenting it as an hour-long video piece, better conveys its anthology content. This style decision was influenced by the series *High Maintenance* (2012-2020), *Fleabag* (2016-2019), and *Crashing* (2016). The episodic format of *Love Life* (2020) also provides an example for how segmented episodes can focus viewers' attention on a specific intimate relationship of a central protagonist. Similarly the series *Easy* (2016-2019), follows interrelated characters within the city of Chicago. These examples were useful to me in creating a structure to build a network of characters who reside within the same city and returning to relationships to show how they have changed over time. It also gives the narrative time to focus on one specific relationship and how it compares to the other five. Keeping the series to six (6) episodes provides a short amount of time to develop characters and necessitates that the audience's understanding of the characters' personalities be cemented early on.

The term *love object* as introduced by Laura Kipnis in *Against Love* was useful in my character creation as it allowed me to explore each character not only as one capable of intimate relationships,

but also as receptive to having love cast upon them. Sara Ahmed suggests in *The Promise of Happiness* that “[happiness] involves affect (to be happy is to be affected by something), intentionality (to be happy is to be happy about something), and evaluation or judgment (to be happy about something makes something good).”⁵⁵ Happiness – according to Ahmed – requires these three elements of perception so placing my characters as love objects unto which intimacy is projected was helpful in writing relationships and connections in *Intimate Spaces*. A secondary definition of *object* is “a person or thing to which a specified action of feeling is directed.”⁵⁶ This further motivated my directorial process, supporting my thinking about characters as reactionary objects who are capable of both reflecting and receiving the feeling being *directed* onto them by their scene partners. The written dialogue works as a kind of stained-glass window coloured by not only the actors’ lived experience but also by the dialogue directed back at them.

In thinking about how intimate experiences are remembered retrospectively in isolation, I came across Douglas Hollan’s text “Dreamscapes of Intimacy and Isolation: Shadows of Contagion and Immunity.” The following description of how one perceives others’ as building blocks of social influence especially captured my attention: “[d]reams capture the fact that from an experiential point of view, all people engage the world through a glass darkly: as people move through the world and engage other people, they do so from a particular perspective, with particular memories and emotional reactions, and with particular imaginative elaborations, which shape how they interpret events and other people.”⁵⁷ This exploration of the subconscious puts forth that one’s perception of others is

⁵⁵ Ahmed, 21.

⁵⁶ *Oxford*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), s.v. “Object.”

⁵⁷ Hollan, 219.

largely a reflection of what they see in themselves. In episode six, Mark is interacting with his grandmother in a dream. This was intended to be a continuation of the self-critical discussion he has with his partner Libby in the previous episode. Mark is imagining his grandmother only through his own evidence of her from their shared reality, this dreamscape a refuge from his heteronormative context into his own personal queer space.

Location & Technical Aspects

Intimate Spaces is set in Toronto during the COVID-19 pandemic. Living through this time was integral for finding the voice that this work has taken on. Any attempts to write intimacy through a pre-pandemic lens made the content unreachable and unrealistic. I wanted to find a way to fictionalize these relationships in the context of quarantine in order to create a relational piece that would reach and resonate with its audience in their present. Creating this series in the context of quarantine required that I use digital tools to surmount the geographical challenges of filming with a cast dispersed around the world because of the pandemic. Recording performances over Zoom grounds *Intimate Spaces* deeply in the context of the pandemic as the medium places the narrative definitively in 2020.

Because all characters are part of one social network the time-based progression of *Intimate Space* is presented chronologically. For the ideal exhibition, all episodes would be available to stream and watched in any order, however watching them in order will give maximum context for the series overall. I had three potential narrative formats to explore: written script only, verbal recital, or table read with video. *Intimate Spaces* at its inception was intended to be a short series shot in-person and edited as a mini-series. Because of social distancing practices and the persistence of the COVID-19

pandemic, this realization was made impossible. I felt that the series should still take on a physical performance form over being only words on a page. Although the series is a table read and not a fully embodied performance, looking back on this piece will certainly transport viewers back to this time. Before deciding on editing these episodes as dramatized table reads, I planned to animate them by hand. This could explain some of the prop and background choices, and why there are some aesthetic elements missing.

Even after the editing process, there are many episodes that have technical flaws baked into them. In episode one (*You know I love you, right?*) (00:01:50) there is a glitch in the Zoom recording – the raw footage – which caused Caroline and Dad’s line delivery to overlap. In episode two (*ILY*) (00:12:17) there is an audio/video glitch remedied by inserting audio to realize Heather’s line. Episode five (*I love you, too*) (00:07:34) uses imported audio again, this time slowed down in an attempt to match the video, thus altering the audio’s quality. Finally, in episode six (*Love you, bye!*) (00:00:46-00:00:51) there is an internet lag during which there is no video for Mark’s character. I chose not to do reshoots for these moments because they are organic souvenirs from the medium in which they were created, one that reveals my dependency on this virtual method of filmmaking. The series is not colour-graded, in order to preserve the differences in aesthetic of the environments around the actors. Recording a series over Zoom was a surprising and interesting substitute to shooting in-person on camera, the biggest difference being that actors were also crew members and camera operators. I am grateful for the opportunity to innovate and play with this medium in light of pandemic safety restrictions.

Conclusion

As an individual who was raised under the heteronormative, dominant form in a compulsory-heterosexual environment, much of my life has been spent thinking in the cisgender and heterosexual mindset. Though the goal of *Intimate Spaces*' is to highlight the intimate experiences of queer people, it was important for me to not write the supporting straight-identifying characters as caricatures of heteronormativity. At first glance Caroline's dad is assumed to be a heterosexual man with all the stereotypes that come along with that role. Throughout their episode, we are made aware that both Caroline and her father have a familiar – if sometimes turbulent – rapport. In many ways having straight characters in the minority was supportive in giving the queer storylines something to bounce off, which would not have been the case if every character in the series were queer. It is worth questioning how queerness might redefine success from generation to generation and how this might alienate these groups from one another. Could one generation's contentment mean their alienation from the precedent one? Being faced with this question provides the opportunity to address intergenerational trauma and tensions between queer people and their norm-abiding ancestors.

I set out with *Intimate Spaces* to portray scenes of love, care and intimacy in various contexts, including romantic, familial and platonic. While I am not against the portrayal of physical intimacy in stories about intimacy, naming and representing sexual intimacy in this series would distract from the central theme of the work. *Intimate Spaces* is a location meant to accentuate intimacy's other powers, whereas representations of sexual intimacy in romantic comedy tend to follow a pornographic script

that is feebly symbolic of a successful resolution or the consummation of love. This choice was made too because queer sex is chronically stereotyped, fetishized and criticized by normative critics.

Iterations of the script of *Intimate Spaces* were shared with friends who also happen to be screenwriters and editors. Initial feedback from this group was that there seemed to be a piece of myself and my outlooks on intimacy in each of the characters in the series. This affirmed my decision to write from an autoethnographic perspective using my personal sense of humour. The most common reaction from cast members of the series was that the events of the scripts felt eerily similar to many of their own personal experiences. While my co-collaborators' histories are individual, their incorporation into *Intimate Spaces* crafts a shared consciousness of what it means to be queer for its audience.

Since the completion of my research and making, I wonder if all the characters that I have created throughout my practice can be classified as queer imaginings, a thread I would like to pick up in future projects. I would like to explore what the fantasy genre affords for queer imaginings through an autoethnographic lens, after this first attempt to fictionalize queer intimacy and queer intimate space.

In the context of a COVID 19-quarantined world I thought the work would be made most accessible over a digital interface. As the quarantine continued to be extended, I toyed with the idea of premiering weekly episodes during the spring of 2021. I decided to upload all episodes to my Vimeo account for the review of my committee only. This allows the series to be consumed asynchronously, with the capability to rewind, to rewatch, to exit, and to watch non-chronologically as one pleases. This interface is made for quarantine conditions and its approach is reflective of the time it was made in, one that has further digitized our social interactions and media consumption.

I am intent on presenting this body of work as proof of how my writing process has evolved in light of this research and the challenge of writing within and around romantic comedy, however I do believe the current state of the project to be an initial foray and work in progress. I would like to reshoot, re-edit and improve the production quality of the work before sharing it with a larger audience. Its production was certainly a large undertaking, especially as a one-person production team and I am grateful for the actors, musicians and music producer for their contributions to *Intimate Spaces*.

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Appendix

The Script of *Intimate Spaces*

Intimate Space

written by

Natalie Chuck

INT. CAROLINE & HEATHER'S APARTMENT - AFTERNOON

Caroline is making breakfast in the kitchen, pyjama-clad, when the envelope containing her CERB application information is put through the mail slot. She opens it and calls her mom. Unexpectedly, her father answers the FaceTime call from her mother's phone.

DAD

Hi, Carrie! Wasn't expecting to hear from you today!
(serious)
Is everything alright?

CAROLINE

Hi, Dad. Where's mom? And yes, everything is fine! Just need my SIN number to apply for CERB.

DAD

Don't you have your card?

CAROLINE

Umm, maybe somewhere?

DAD

Caroline.

CAROLINE

(unconvincingly)
I'm kidding! I left it at home with you.

DAD

Hm, well I'm sure your mom has it written down somewhere. She just ran upstairs to help your sister with something. What did you do today?

CAROLINE

Oh, you know. Just tried to find the will to live... it was impossible so I gave up.

DAD

What a huge day. Is that why you're still in pajamas at 2pm on a Wednesday?

CAROLINE

To that, I propose this, father:
why change out of the clothes you
slept in if you're only going to
have to change back into them again
in a few short hours?

DAD

Well, there's no denying it now.
You're definitely my daughter.

CAROLINE

You sure about that?

DAD

(faux-afraid)

I've... never considered the
alternative.

TITLE CARD:

"You know I love you, right?"

CAROLINE

(a laugh)

How are you holding up? Pretty
crazy that everything's moving
online, eh?

DAD

Yeah, I'm not too worried though! I
kind of like working from home. At
least I'm sure I will until your
mother gets tired of me.

CAROLINE

(hesitantly)

I'm sure that won't happen... any
time soon.

DAD

Hoping to see you for your
birthday. I know we're months out
and we'll probably be fine, but I'm
looking forward to celebrating with
you.

CAROLINE

You're sweet, but that's six months
away! I'm sure we'll be out of this
by then. I miss you both so much.
You know what I was just thinking
about?

DAD

What's that?

CAROLINE

It must've been my 9th birthday, the one when Adrienne got sick and mom took her to the hospital but still wanted us to go out and celebrate. I was so disappointed. But you took me to this fancy Italian restaurant. Maybe it actually wasn't as fancy as I remember it. But I guess anything was fancy compared to our usual East Side Mario's visit.

DAD

I remember that! What was the name of that place again? Trattoria something... I'll ask your mom. Sad that it closed down. We used to go there all the time before you and your sister were born.

CAROLINE

What!? Why didn't we go there all the time?

DAD

It wasn't exactly a kid-friendly place. I'm happy you got to try it at least once, though. What made you think of it?

CAROLINE

I was thinking about everyone's obsession with patios right now and about how that place would've been the first time I sat on a patio. I remember we sat outside on the street and you let me hop around and flirt with everyone. They were probably annoyed by me, but at least I was entertaining.

DAD

I think you almost knocked over a couple wine glasses with your dancing.

CAROLINE

(with a laugh)

I remember feeling so comfortable being myself.

(MORE)

CAROLINE (CONT'D)

And you were right next to me, just letting me do my thing. I remember feeling so accepted for that.

DAD

Well where do you think you get your sense of humour from? Your mom?

They laugh.

CAROLINE

I don't think I've ever thought about it. But I guess your family always thinks of you as the funny uncle. But mom's funny too.

DAD

(conniving)

She's not here, you can be honest. Did she tell you that your cousin Molly is having a baby?

CAROLINE

Yeah! I'm so excited. You know I love a baby. I just started working on a sweater for them.

DAD

Why 'them?' Isn't it a boy?

CAROLINE

Yeah, but we don't have to start gendering them *already*. Would you prefer if I referred to them as 'it?'

DAD

... no. Whatever.

CAROLINE

I don't think any baby should be gendered, but that's besides the point. Can I ask you a question?

DAD

(funny)

I don't know, can you?

CAROLINE

May I ask you a question?

DAD

You may. Are you about to tell me that you're pregnant too?

CAROLINE

No! What I was going to ask was why you were so nervous about me getting pregnant when I was in high school? Like you encouraged me to watch *The Secret Life of the American Teenager* a little too hard. I didn't think I was that boy-crazy...

DAD

I guess I saw how uncle Ray's life changed when aunt Lillian had Molly when they were around that age and I didn't want to watch you go through that. You already had such big plans for university before you were even halfway through high school. They were all just fine, even if their lives were a bit more hectic for a few years. I wanted you to have the best shot at the independent life you always showed me and your mom you were intent on getting.

CAROLINE

That's nice, I guess.

DAD

Any new *dudes* in your life?

CAROLINE

Dad, we're in the middle of a pandemic.

DAD

So just ladies then?

Caroline is taken aback.

DAD (CONT'D)

How's Heather?

CAROLINE

(slowly)

What are you implying?

DAD

I'm just curious if you see yourself marrying a man... a woman... a they..?

CAROLINE

Dad, I don't see myself marrying anyone.

DAD

Ok, I'll take the hint, I'm not going to force you to talk about anything you're not ready to.

CAROLINE

Alright... jeez.

DAD

How are you adjusting to quarantine? That's good that you'll be on CERB. Makes me worry about you being out on your own a little bit less.

CAROLINE

Yeah, it sucks that the restaurants have shut down, and I obviously miss my coworkers and serving. But I'm not jazzed to be serving people on patios so I guess unemployment is my best option.

DAD

That's good. I don't think you can truly love anything without being critical of it. That's why your mom and I joke around so much.

CAROLINE

Are you comparing your long-term marriage to my part-time career in the service industry?

DAD

Absolutely. You're so social, I figured it must be taking a toll on you.

CAROLINE

Thanks, it's a big change, but I'm managing. Living with Heather is helping. I think I'm not as lonely as I could be. It's nice to have each other to lean on.

(MORE)

CAROLINE (CONT'D)

But I feel like I'm in the quarantine slump where I think life is very bad a lot of the time. I wake up most days hoping it'll be different, but then it's just more bullshit. But then there are unexpectedly amazing days that make me feel so ridiculous for ever wishing it would stop, or end, or slow down.

DAD

These things always pass: the beauty of modern medicine. All we can do right now is our best. Don't be so hard on yourself, Carrie. You think too much.

CAROLINE

(uncomfortable)

Yeah... anyway, it's your anniversary in what? A few weeks? How will you be celebrating the big 25th of your shotgun wedding?

DAD

You know it wasn't a shotgun wedding! We didn't know your sister existed when we got engaged. However, we will never live the stigma of that assumption down. Anyhow, we'll probably just make dinner and stay in. Your mother and I are trying to be good. We're working out and eating better.

CAROLINE

Whoa, good for you. That's great, Dad.

DAD

I'm just glad she's chosen to put up with me all this time. We're doing yoga! People think love is freedom from how terrible and sad and painful life can be. To me it's that, but it's also permission to keep working on myself. Having you kids also taught me so much about what I can and can't live without. You know I love you, right?

CAROLINE

I do. I love you too, Dad.

Caroline's mother's phone starts ringing with an incoming call.

DAD

Oh, it's your grandmother calling your mom. I'll have your mom call you back once they're off the phone, is that good?

CAROLINE

That's perfect. Thanks, well, it was nice catching up with you.

DAD

You too, Caroline. Love you, bye.

CAROLINE

Love you. Bye.

The FaceTime ends and Caroline goes back to fixing herself breakfast. She steps out onto her balcony and sips her coffee. There is the sound of a key turning in the door.

THE END.

INT. CAROLINE & HEATHER'S APARTMENT - AFTERNOON

Caroline and Heather are sitting in their shared living room, each nursing a cup of tea while they watch a romcom. It's May 2020 and the roommates are quarantining to help stop the spread of COVID-19 in Toronto. They're sharing a bowl of popcorn. The engagement portion of the film plays.

ROMCOM DUDE

Mary-Lou, will you make me the happiest man alive and be my wife?

ROMCOM GAL

Yes, I -

ROMCOM DUDE

I've loved you ever since you fell off the ski lift, right into my arms.

ROMCOM GAL

And I've loved you since you spilled hot cocoa all over my favourite sweater that my grandma knitted me. It was my prized possession...

ROMCOM DUDE

Is-is that, a yes?

ROMCOM GAL

Yes, yes! Dean, a thousand times yes!

The couple peck and hold their lips together. It's technically a kiss... I guess?

CAROLINE

(abruptly)

Should we get married?

HEATHER

(mouth full)

Pardon?

TITLE CARD:

"ILY"

CAROLINE

(enunciated)

Should we just get married?

Heather sets her mug down on the coffee table and gulps down her mouthful of tea. She pauses the film.

HEATHER

Sorry, I was resisting the urge to do a spit-take. Where is this coming from?

CAROLINE

(suggestively)
Hmm, that isn't a no...

They look at each other for a long moment.

HEATHER

(finally)
Why are you proposing marriage?

CAROLINE

Well, I have this theory that all attraction is inherently sexual, but not necessarily in a monogamous or committal way. It's like those are just containers that we put love into.

Heather is visibly shaken, but *hms* for her to go on.

CAROLINE (CONT'D)

And I'm asking because we are obviously in an intimate relationship, you know, as people who live together... I was... I guess curious about the limits of that. You know, clinically speaking.

HEATHER

(through nervous laughter)
Right well, that feels meta. You should ask Libby and Mark what they think about that...

CAROLINE

(suggestively)
I'm sure we know what their answer would be.

Heather presses play and turns to her phone after receiving a notification. She grabs some popcorn, then laughs - more of an exhale through her nose - at the screen, mouth still full. Caroline can tell from her body language that she must be texting someone.

CAROLINE (CONT'D)
 (faux-passively)
 Who are you texting?

HEATHER
 (around food)
 Umm, Lindsay.

CAROLINE
 Interesting..

Caroline shifts her gaze absentmindedly back to the TV, waiting for Heather to elaborate on the Lindsay situation. Heather, however, doesn't move to perceive Caroline's expression.

HEATHER
 (without looking at her)
 I am feeling some judgey vibes
 coming from your side of the room.

Caroline doesn't turn to look at her.

CAROLINE
 (jokingly)
 Have you considered that you might
 be projecting?

Heather barks a laugh and puts down her phone.

HEATHER
 Hey! You, too, are a little
 promiscuous and I think that's a
 good thing.

CAROLINE
 (sarcastically)
 Wow. For your information, I
 reserve sex for only two kinds of
 people:
 those I want to get to know better
 and those I lie to myself about
 knowing completely.
 It's a fool-proof system because I
 am always aware of where I stand.
 Thank you for calling me slutty
 though, that's the highest
 compliment coming from you.
 Also, I'm trying to watch the
 movie.

She huffs halfheartedly.

HEATHER

(wistfully)

And yet, instead, you're getting read. Ha! I'm so funny... why am I alone?

As if not hearing her question, Caroline takes her turn pausing the movie.

CAROLINE

I've decided, after quarantine, I need to stop hooking up with white men.

She sits up formally and clears her throat to state:

CAROLINE (CONT'D)

(cont.)

#NoWhiteMen2020.

HEATHER

(mocking tone)

That's racist.

CAROLINE

(rolling her eyes
sarcastically)

Yes, I *am* a reverse racist.

Heather has some more popcorn, Caroline follows suit.

CAROLINE (CONT'D)

I always think I'll never be interested in a white guy ever again and in that moment I'm single, independent and accept that fact. And then lo and behold, boom! There I am in another relationship with a dude who I don't trust.

HEATHER

(sarcastically)

Is this a white man issue? Or an all men thing? Because if so: gay?

CAROLINE

No comment.

HEATHER

Moving on... I feel like that's always an issue, even for queer couples. We are a vain, judgemental society. I do, however, support you in this boycott.

CAROLINE
Thank you so much for your ongoing
and unwavering support.

HEATHER
(with a wink)
Anytime, bae.

Caroline presses play for the last time and settles back into the couch.

INT. APARTMENT - EVENING

Caroline notices the bathroom door open, the shower running. She goes to close it and sees Heather, razor in hand, one leg in the tub, still t-shirt and shorts-clad.

CAROLINE
Are you... just shaving?

HEATHER
(frisky)
Ya I'm trying to get some tonight.

CAROLINE
(suspiciously)
Some what? Also, are you shaving
mid-calf down?

HEATHER
Yup, it's cuffing season. As in
I'll be cuffing my jeans.

Caroline laughs and turns to go but first:

CAROLINE
Wait, what are you going 'to get?'

HEATHER
Oh, sushi. From Fushimi down the
street. I was just gonna call in
and then pick up, would you like
anything?

CAROLINE
I'd be happy with some seaweed
salad, I just started making pasta
for dinner.

HEATHER

Quarantine has made me appreciate even more how you don't care about mixing different culture's foods in your stomach. I respect that about you.

Caroline winks and finger guns as she eases off the doorframe.

INT. APARTMENT - LATER

Heather has just finished eating and is placing her dishes in the sink. Caroline enters the kitchen.

CAROLINE

(unhinged)

Hey, you wanna get fucked up tonight?

HEATHER

(faux-concerned)

Are you feeling alright?

CAROLINE

Yes! Hear me out: we are CERB babies - I heard the insensitivity there - who are navigating a global pandemic by quarantining effectively!

I say we deserve a little blackout - I mean - *casual* cocktail night. What do you say?

HEATHER

I was gonna write a bit for school tonight but...

We see Heather considering Caroline's offer.

INT. APARTMENT - LATER

The women are dressed up and dancing around the apartment, obviously not sober. They slow down to a simple side step and pass a joint between them.

HEATHER

Not to be gay on main, but your boobs look amazing.

CAROLINE

Thanks, mama! Your legs were made
for those heels.

They stare intently at each other.

HEATHER

Oh my god, are we about to makeout?

They look at each other for a long moment. Finally breaking to laugh, falling onto the couch. Heather starts speaking but realizes that the music is too loud and the subject matter too serious to yell. She turns the music down using her phone.

HEATHER (CONT'D)

So about earlier, you know, when you - I assume jokingly asked if I wanted to marry you - it made me wonder if, like, have you ever thought about us hooking up? You don't have to answer, but like, in school maybe?

CAROLINE

No, it's okay, I'll answer. It doesn't make me uncomfortable or anything... please don't worry about that.

HEATHER

Okay...

CAROLINE

I think for a long time I pushed away the idea of being anything *but* straight because, you know, *society*.

Heather sighs knowingly.

CAROLINE (CONT'D)

But the older I get, the more open-minded I catch myself being. And I remember how I used to think about gay culture and my apprehension around being labelled as queer and, god, I am so ashamed. But I'm also proud of how comfortable I've become in queer spaces and how much I've opened myself up to being whoever I want to be... and being attracted to whoever I want to be...

HEATHER

(jokingly)

Aw, if you think I'm a good influence, you can just say that.

(genuinely)

I'm really happy for you. It makes me super proud that you feel like you've done the work to get here.

CAROLINE

(shyly)

Yeah. That said, there've been times where I considered if, wow this sounds cliché as fuck, if something was going to happen... between us. But obviously it hasn't because you weren't down and I-

HEATHER

(laughing)

What? I'm always down. And I'm genuinely not concerned that it would ruin our relationship or anything like that... you know, if we both wanted to...

CAROLINE

(after a moment)

That makes me really happy. I think so too.

They sit in a comfortable silence, clumsy smiles on their faces.

CAROLINE (CONT'D)

Do you ever think about how all we do is talk?

HEATHER

Yup. I'm glad we can talk about this more serious stuff though. I love you, dude.

They hug.

CAROLINE

Love you, betch.

They break away from the hug.

CAROLINE (CONT'D)

Since we're being vulnerable and all, can I ask you something?

HEATHER
Eh, sure, go for it!

CAROLINE
(pointedly)
Do you think I'm high maintenance?

Heather considers the question for a moment.

HEATHER
I strongly believe that being 'high maintenance' is something that the patriarchy made up so that women never ask for help. Meaning that men don't have to help them by their own forfeit.

CAROLINE
That... makes me feel a lot better, and you're probably right. Huh, now that's a *suffocated* thought.

HEATHER
(concerned)
Are you trying to say "sophisticated?"

CAROLINE
(clumsily)
Yes. I'm drunk.

Her head rolls to rest on the shoulder farthest from Heather. She holds her phone up to show Caroline an Instagram post.

HEATHER
Yo, look at this. Why do they always pose like this?

She leans in to show Caroline a couple posing in front of a lavender field, the woman's hand on the man's stomach.

ROMCOM GAL
(voiceover)
Happy birthday to this guy! You drive me nuts like, 99.7% of the time but you're still my favourite boy. Thanks for putting up with my mood swings AKA hormonal rage. Love you. Also happy 2 months, like fine wine, you get better with time. Here's to many more with youuuu.

ROMCOM DUDE
(voiceover)
Heart emoji.

CAROLINE
(plainly)
That's wild.

HEATHER
Ouch. That's what you say when you
couldn't care less.

CAROLINE
(defensively)
I do care! Just not that much,
right now... I support you,
regardless.

HEATHER
(quietly)
Ok, thank you...

She continues scrolling on her phone absent-mindedly.
Caroline notices and lunges for Heather's phone.

CAROLINE
Ok, you can't keep giving in to the
Instagram ads! I'm taking this away
from you.

HEATHER
But... it's so cool. Like, look at
that.

CAROLINE
I know.

She holds the phone up so that both of them can watch the ad.
Their drunk smiles melt until they stare blankly. Caroline
takes her own phone out and sees that their food delivery
driver has almost arrived.

CAROLINE (CONT'D)
Oop, gotta head down. You coming?

She hops up and puts on her mask.

HEATHER
Nah, I gotta pee.

CAROLINE
Okay, see you in a minute.

She opens and is about to step out of the door, but turns around at the last minute.

CAROLINE (CONT'D)

Hey, I'm so glad that even though the world is literally on fire, we can still enjoy drunk fast food in the comfort of our own home.

HEATHER

(flattered)

That's not the worst thing you've ever said!

CAROLINE

(faux-offended)

What's the worst thing I've ever said?

She holds Heather's eyes as she steps back slowly, shutting and locking the door behind her. Heather is left alone in the silent apartment. She stands and walks into the bathroom, then considers herself in the mirror.

She wipes the running mascara from underneath her eyes and grabs her glass, taking a sip. She forces a smile that turns into a genuine one. She moves out of frame.

THE END.

INT. JAMIE'S APARTMENT - EARLY AFTERNOON

Jamie sits at their kitchen table on a Zoom call for their online university course. Heather is one of their classmates, her digitized face peering out from the computer screen.

PROFESSOR

... that's why I've made a slight change to the syllabus. At the end of the day, the weight of the project will not be changing because I am changing the participation mark from 15% to 10% and adding a short, reflection assignment for the end of the course which will be worth its own 5%. Does that make sense to everyone?

It's silent over the internet until the professor verbally prompts the class a second time. A few people unmute their mics and confirm their understanding.

PROFESSOR (CONT'D)

To wrap up last week's lesson on supply and demand...

Heather types a Zoom direct message to Jamie.

HEATHER

(voiceover)
I hate it here.

JAMIE

(voiceover)
Ugh, same. Why add an assignment this late in the game?
I thought I was doing well in the participation department.

HEATHER

(voiceover)
It's cause no one's showing up, it's like seat-filling but for university-level economics.
#JustPandemicThings

JAMIE

(voiceover)
At least we'll have the reflection on lock because of our journals.

HEATHER

(voiceover)

Yup... my journal is *totally* almost full. Just so many notes and... reflections, and uh, ideas...

JAMIE

(voiceover)

You haven't started, have you?

"Heather is typing..." pops up under Jamie's dialogue box.

TA BRAD

(voiceover)

You know that even though this says "privately" that I can see your messages, because I started the meeting, right?

Jamie and Heather both freeze, hovering over their keyboards.

JAMIE

(voiceover)

Sorry, Brad.

HEATHER

(voiceover)

Whoops. Hi, Brad!

Jamie sends Heather a text that reads:

JAMIE

(voiceover)

Shit, busted!

TA BRAD

(voiceover)

I kind of had a feeling you two might have something going on. Happy for you!

JAMIE

(voiceover)

Ha-ha, you caught us!

Heather sends some sheepish emojis to Jamie in response.

JAMIE (CONT'D)

(voiceover)

Aw, he doesn't know we're gay... Ugh, the things I would do for a night out at O'Grady's and brunch at The Blake House...

HEATHER

(voiceover)

Amen, my dude. Amen. But we can't go on Saturday cause of the bachelorette parties.

JAMIE

(voiceover)

I'm hot, not stupid.

HEATHER

(voiceover)

This is true. How you holding up?

JAMIE

(voiceover)

Oh, you know - surviving!

HEATHER

(voiceover)

And with the breakup?

JAMIE

(voiceover)

Same, same...

HEATHER

(voiceover)

Hmu, if you need to scream about it.

JAMIE

(voiceover)

Will do, you da best.

HEATHER

(voiceover)

No, you.

The professor finishes their closing spiel and dismisses the class. Jamie leaves the call and closes their laptop. They sit back in their chair and stretch deeply.

TITLE CARD:

"Love you still"

Taking the last sip of what remains of their iced coffee, they reopen the laptop, beginning a new word document titled "Econ Reflection" and placing that week's reflection question about supply and demand at the top of the page.

Jamie starts to respond to the question but their writing takes them to a more self-reflective space concerning their recent breakup with their now ex-partner Adam.

JAMIE

(voiceover)

Consumers... quantity... prices... market... The equilibrium price is agreed upon by producers and consumers... This concept can be applied to human relationships, too.

They continue typing, skipping down a few lines, aware that this is no longer a school-related reflection.

JAMIE (CONT'D)

(voiceover)

The standard to which I wanted to be loved is the result of every romcom I've ever seen. Of every sacrificial and problematic relationship I've ever felt guilty for wishing I had. I wasn't always aware of it, but I wanted your complete self-sacrifice. I don't think I'll ever be able to separate what I want from love, from what our society tells me I should.

Every romcom shows us how to, or how not to, get into relationships. But they don't tell us how to be in them. It's like, what are the appropriate things to do once you've gotten your so-called dream person? It's impossible to keep sacrificing yourself to keep them, and yet things are supposed to stay light and easy?

Doing life with someone is so often mundane and tedious and makes me think that monogamy isn't a feasible goal. Even so, I was never more satisfied than in the moments when I knew I could come to you with anything. It was comforting just knowing that we tolerated each other. There were so many times when all I wanted was neutrality. I was so pleased to just sit in a room with you.

Jamie stops typing, and begins to well up.

JAMIE (CONT'D)

Is love inherently sacrificial? Do I have to love you unconditionally because that's the contract we each have to believe that the other has signed? I wanted to be completely absorbed by you because it meant that I would be worthy of you.

I loved being able to communicate with you. I always felt heard. Maybe that's all that romance is, listening and being listened to.

They rearrange themselves in the chair.

JAMIE (CONT'D)

I've always been uneasy about the scripted courtship techniques, you know that. I'd cringe when people would do shit like tuck my hair behind my ear before I felt like I knew them well enough.

I pride myself on my bullshit meter and hate when people try to be sweet without meaning it. But with you it always felt comfortable, like magic.

I keep thinking that "good" must be a label made for other people. Maybe all labels are for other people. Words made up and defined to explain all of what you are to them in a way that they can understand. We're told that it's more important to be good, confined, or palatable than is it to be ourselves. It's as if when we judge people, we stand in our own way of understanding them.

Jamie moves to sit cross-legged on the couch.

JAMIE (CONT'D)

This year has taught me how to forgive myself. But still, I miss leaning on you. If you were anything, it was reliable. It feels so unnatural to take space from you. How can I accept that it'll never be the way it was ever again?

(MORE)

JAMIE (CONT'D)

I'll probably never tell you this, but I'll always remember that night at Emma's. Before anything ever happened between us. I got anxious about everyone being ready before me to leave for that midnight walk. So I hung back, feeling sorry for myself, thinking that no one would notice that I was left behind.

BEGIN FLASHBACK:

JAMIE

Ten minutes must've gone by before I was ready. I came upstairs and there you were, waiting. I was surprised to see you, but when I did I said "did you forget something?" because I was too scared to admit to either of us that I was happy that you stayed. Overjoyed, really, that you noticed I was missing from the group. I was afraid of what it meant because it was such a patient and purposeful action. You, a patient and purposeful person.

God, I wish I'd been better at vulnerability, but I know I was too young, I *am* too young, to have any sort of grasp on that.

END FLASHBACK.

JAMIE

I hate that I get bossy when I feel like I'm losing control. And I feel like there's something wrong with me every time it happens. But if I'm not in control, who will be? I loved you, but I put you on a pedestal. I lived for you first in so many moments of our relationship.

Jamie starts crying.

JAMIE (CONT'D)

I should've known that you needing space to yourself, space to do your own emotional labour, was never a personal attack on me and mine. I should never have brought you down with me. I've learned that happiness is not always found in truth.

This breakup has shown me that I don't need answers. Even if you or I could supply them, anything either of us could've said or done is not what I'm looking for.

I want to remember loving you and remember that I'm capable of being loved. Loved by someone who felt like they were in my head and knew exactly what I wanted before I even knew that I did.

I've always wanted to be seen so badly, because I thought it would prove that I exist. But that usually means that I'm pretending to be something I'm not for attention. Or that I'm too much of 'myself.' So much so that it's embarrassing.

I hope that when I see you next, we'll both be able to see how we've grown, both together and apart. This pandemic has forced me to ask myself if I was ever actually choosing any of my living conditions. In any case, I'm glad you let me choose you for so long.

Jamie puts their laptop aside.

JAMIE (CONT'D)

(under their breath)

Wow, that was all about me.

They cross back to the kitchen table, retrieving their phone to draft a text to Adam.

JAMIE (CONT'D)

(voiceover)

Hey, I hope you're doing well.

(MORE)

JAMIE (CONT'D)

With phase 2 starting, wanna hit
Bellwoods sometime soon? Please
feel free to say no.

Hesitating before sending, Jamie deletes the last sentence.
They send the message off. They put the phone down and sit in
silence for a few seconds. Their phone dings, notifying them
of a new message.

THE END.

INT. ADAM'S APARTMENT - MORNING

It's June 2020 and Toronto is in phase 2 of their COVID-19 quarantine plan. Adam is pyjama-clad, sitting over the sheets of his bed, typing on his laptop. He writes in an otherwise-blank word document:

"For J.A.L. without whom this book wouldn't exist."

He attaches the file to an already-drafted email and sends it off. He lays down, throwing the blanket over his head.

TITLE CARD:

"Loved: an attachment"

Adam gets a text from a contact saved as 'Jamie Lancaster <3' asking what time they're set to meet that day. Before responding, he edits the contact so as to remove the '<3' emoji. He saves the change and replies 'Is 1 good for you?'

EXT. PARK - AFTERNOON

Jamie walks through the park entrance listening to a cheesy love song.

ROMCOM DUDE/ROMCOM GAL
 But baby, I'd die without you,
 I'll dig my own grave
 Or we could dig each others'
 I'll love you too much, nothing to
 save

They see Adam nearby, already settled on a blanket, elbows supporting him and legs crossed at the ankle.

Jamie takes out their earbuds and spreads their own blanket out approximately 6 feet away and sits down. They are facing opposite directions but looking at each other.

ADAM
 Hey! That's my blanket.

JAMIE
 It's mine now, bitch.

ADAM
 You can have it, I always
 overheated in it anyway.

JAMIE
 (sarcastically)
 You're so generous.

ADAM
 (suddenly nervous)
 How's your day going?

JAMIE
 Oh, you know my quarantine morning routine: coffee, breakfast, coffee poop, scroll through Twitter, then it's time for my one commitment a day.

They gesture toward Adam.

ADAM
 How could I forget!? Sounds relaxing so far.

Jamie lays down on their side and rests their head on their propped up palm.

JAMIE
 What about you? Have you been writing?

ADAM
 My morning was pretty slow... and of course, yeah, *always*. I actually sent a draft off this morning.

JAMIE
 Ouuu, anything about me?

Adam readjusts his legs awkwardly and lets out a single chuckle.

JAMIE (CONT'D)
 (genuinely)
 I'm kidding, no need to tell me. I don't really know if I could take knowing the answer, anyway.

ADAM
 (resigned)
 Ok, then I won't.

There's a brief pause as he pulls up some grass and Jamie observes fellow park-goers.

ADAM (CONT'D)
 How's living with Chelsea?

JAMIE

It's been alright so far. My biggest complaint is that I always seem to be the one changing the toilet paper roll.

ADAM

(sarcastically)

Oh, how the tables have turned.

Jamie laughs, then both people are quiet for a long moment, Jamie fidgeting and Adam watching them intently.

ADAM (CONT'D)

(a bit desperately)

Look, I'll level with you: this is a little weird.

(a beat)

Huh, I thought maybe saying it out loud might take some of the pressure off... nope.

JAMIE

Yeah, I keep catching myself wanting to tell you every single thought I have. This is an adjustment, no doubt.

ADAM

(hesitantly)

Exactly. I honestly wasn't sure that you'd want to see me. I mean the pandemic makes it so easy to make excuses so as to not see people... especially your exes.

JAMIE

You're right about that.

ADAM

It's so lonely, isn't it?

JAMIE

The pandemic? Yes, very that.

Jamie sighs and takes a sip from their water bottle, then places it at their side.

JAMIE (CONT'D)

(flirty)

Did you ever feel lonely when we were together?

ADAM

(plainly)

Of course I did, I think I made it pretty obvious at the end there. I'm sorry for that... Didn't you?

JAMIE

For sure... We tried so *fucking* hard though, didn't we? I thought I was just being insecure whenever I felt distant from you... like, sometimes I thought I didn't know the first thing about you. It was weirdly reassuring, because I could ask you a question or get you started on a story from before I knew you and I'd think, 'here is this person with a whole life before me, how interesting.' Then I'd catch a little voice in the back of my head saying, 'and one after you, too.'

ADAM

(mockingly)

Jamie, that's probably the most beautiful thing you've ever said to me.

JAMIE

(matter-of-factly)

You're full of shit. It was a bit tragic, wasn't it?

ADAM

Not to me. I think this year has taught me that everything in life is temporary. Some things are just more temporary than others.

All we can do is try to find joy; what's best for us. I don't know, maybe that sounds narcissistic, but I really believe it.

(breathlessly)

I loved you because it was exciting and fun and it made sense for both of us for a long time.

JAMIE

It did.

(slow exhale)

(MORE)

JAMIE (CONT'D)

That's the first time I've heard
you say 'loved,' instead of 'love.'
Fuck, how things change.

ADAM

Yup. We'd be kidding ourselves,
though, if we said that things
weren't always changing.

JAMIE

(sarcastically)

Ok, sensei Adam.

(genuinely)

I loved you too, for the record.
I'd like for you to stay certain of
that.

Adam breaks eye contact, turning to squint into the sun.

ADAM

You know I'm not one to get this
sappy, usually. You've been warned.
I think the part of me that loved
you still exists. And that part
will always love the person you
were when we were together.

(monotone)

I made the decision to leave
because it felt impossible to stay
and also become who I'm becoming. I
don't think that's your fault... or
mine for that matter. We're just
growing in ways that don't line up.
And *that's* the most tragic part, to
me.

Jamie hasn't moved or looked away from Adam since he started
talking. They touch the corner of one eye and rub their wrist
against their nose.

JAMIE

Oh, my god. Look at me being
emotional in a public space!

(they sigh)

Classic Jamie. I thought this would
be a nice hangout.

I'm not complaining, I'm really
not. It's just, I thought we'd
worked through everything but here
we are baring our souls.

ADAM

(modestly)

Well, you've always been easy to open up to.

JAMIE

I'd like to share something else. Ok, I don't know why I introduced it like that, that was weird, anyway.

There were times when we were together when I felt like I needed you so much that physically letting go of you when you left for a meeting or when you'd step away from me to grab our coffees, that I'd lose you.

(stuttering)

I felt like the earth would shift and that you'd forget why you'd ever loved me. Now that it's happened, well now that it's over, I feel so stupid for wasting so much time being so irrational about that, instead of just loving you.

ADAM

(moved)

Ok, writer-Jamie! Go off, then!

They share a laugh, Jamie a bit anxiously as they wait for a response.

ADAM (CONT'D)

If it's any consolation, I never *felt* unloved. I think that just shows how much you cared about me... and us. That's kind of, I don't know, reassuring to hear you say? It's funny that you mention shifting because the night that we met, the second you shook my hand, I thought 'who is this person?,' like something changed forever. It felt like we were in a movie. I'd never felt that before. Or since, for the record.

JAMIE

(with a laugh)

Really? You never told me that, you just said that you thought I was hot.

ADAM

(matter-of-fact)

I wasn't lying, that's how I felt. But I was so infatuated with you because I felt like you were going to be important in my life and that you'd be around for a while, that you had things to teach me. That's why I was so intent on dating you, not just because I was trying to fuck you...

JAMIE

(after a moment)

I'm gonna choose to ignore your reference to fucking me.

(faux-glare)

So did I teach you anything interesting?

ADAM

Honestly, you've changed the way I think about absolutely everything. I'm so much more patient with people, and curious about life and my work too.

(earnestly)

Please don't think I didn't appreciate when you listened to me even when my thoughts weren't fully formed.

JAMIE

(through light tears)

I did notice a change. I wondered if you were conscious of it or if you chalked it up to the perfection that is *Adam*.

ADAM

(southern accent)

Aw, you think I'm perfect?

JAMIE

(sarcastically)

See? That's the ego I'm talking about. And I mean I did think so, for a while there.

ADAM

When did that change?

JAMIE

It didn't. That's the hard part. I know you're not *actually* perfect, but you're damn good at convincing people of how capable you are. I still want - wanted - to make it work between us. The last few months have mostly been me remembering how to function without you.

ADAM

(solemnly)

I think that's for the best. Jamie, I care about you so much. I am so sorry for bringing this hurt to you. I want to be very clear and I know my words only mean so much -

JAMIE

No, no. The hurt isn't coming from you. It's just my heart learning how to let go. Thank you for saying that though.

The two people watch the squirrels running across the lawns. They each collect and recompose themselves.

JAMIE (CONT'D)

I know now that there's a difference between wanting to be wanted, and wanting things for myself.

They continue without waiting for a response, perhaps brushing passed their statement on-purpose.

JAMIE (CONT'D)

I always felt like people looked at us and assumed you were the one in control. Because of your books and how you express yourself, I guess. I never said it out loud but, it made me feel so powerless and I definitely resented you for it.

ADAM

I never thought that. Actually the opposite. Like, remember when that Lyft drove up on the curb on King and you threw yourself over me? I *always* felt like you were in control. I liked it, it made me feel safe.

JAMIE

Wow, I forgot about that. It makes me happy to know you felt that way.

Adam lays down and looks up at the sky, body limp in relaxation.

ADAM

I want to give you a hug so badly.

JAMIE

(colonial accent)
Lovely pandemic we're having,
aren't we?

They chuckle. Adam turns to Jamie:

ADAM

Do you think that if we'd talked about all of these things when we were together, we could've saved it?

JAMIE

(sweetly)
No.

Adam turns back to the sky. There's a moment of silence.

ADAM

Me neither. I don't hate myself, but I hate the way I let myself treat you.

JAMIE

I don't hold it against you.

They consider each other, Jamie looks away abruptly.

JAMIE (CONT'D)

(frankly)
It's good to see you.

We stay with them for a long moment, park noises overload the sensorium.

THE END.

INT. MARK & LIBBY'S APARTMENT - LATE NIGHT

HEATHER

... And that's why I'll never go to Crews again.

CAROLINE

She says that now...

HEATHER

I'm being serious. When this is all over, I will not be returning to that establishment.

MARK

What about supporting local business?

CAROLINE

Yeah!

HEATHER

If by local business you mean my business of seeing how many women I can kiss in one night, I am no longer a business woman. Shop's closed!

Heather gives Caroline the side-eye.

LIBBY

What happened to your 'every day is a business day' New Years' resolution?

HEATHER

I think this year has been stressful enough. The last thing I need is to worry about how others perceive me. I'm already a changed woman because of quarantine. I mean, aren't we all?

CAROLINE

(knowingly)

I know I am...

HEATHER

Exhibit B.

(she raises her glass)

To self-reformation.

ALL

To self-reformation!

TITLE CARD:

"I love you, too"

They clink glasses and Caroline checks the time on her phone.

CAROLINE

Not that I, personally, have
anywhere to be tomorrow, but it's
already 1:30. We should walk home
before it gets too late.

LIBBY

I, too, am *exhausted*.

MARK

(mockingly)
Aw, is the early riser tired?

LIBBY

(unapologetically)
Simply: yes.

HEATHER

God, I love you, lil baby Lib.

Heather and Caroline rise and start putting on their shoes and collecting their belongings. Their hosts follow behind them toward the door.

CAROLINE

Oh, I wanted to let you know that I
just found out that one of my
friends is bi. She's looking to
start dating someone new and I told
her about you guys. I know we're
technically still in quarantine,
but I thought I'd mention it in
case you were interested. We can
talk about how we'll handle bubble-
business if it works out.

Mark's eyes wander toward Libby, not wanting to make his discomfort too obvious. He places a hand on Libby's back.

MARK

(politely)
Thanks for letting us know,
Caroline. We'll discuss it.

Heather is already stepping out of the apartment. Caroline begins to follow.

CAROLINE

No problem! Thanks again for having us over, feels so good to be out of the house, and at one of your dinner parties, no less.

HEATHER

(from the hallway)
Byeeeeee!

LIBBY

Goodnight ladies.

Mark steps out into the hall and waves behind them. He steps back into the apartment and locks the door behind him. He starts bringing dishes into the kitchen where Libby is already rinsing some. He moves back into the living room for more.

LIBBY (CONT'D)

(voice raised)
Need anything tossed?

MARK

Yeah, just my salad.

Libby peeks around the corner to look at him.

LIBBY

Right now?

MARK

If you're offering, yes please.

He motions to his half-eaten bowl of salad still on the coffee table and smirks.

LIBBY

You're funny.

MARK

Love you.

LIBBY

(with a smile)
You're insufferable.

Mark enters the kitchen again and sets the last dishes on the counter. He considers Libby who has started washing the dishes. She tosses his salad out.

LIBBY (CONT'D)

Did that make you uncomfortable?

MARK

You mean what Caroline just said? A bit.

LIBBY

Yeah, I'm feeling weird about it.

MARK

What are you thinking?

LIBBY

Well, it makes me a bit uncomfortable that she thinks that all queer people want to date each other.

MARK

I mean, to a certain extent...

LIBBY

Right, you know, it's just weird for someone who also doesn't have a lot of knowledge about polyamory to engage in the way we find partners. Or even to individually try to find us partners.

MARK

(ironically)

What else is new..? I feel like she thinks it's like setting a friend up with another friend.

LIBBY

Yeah, but it was weird that she introduced it to both of us, it's not like we're just running around having threesomes.

MARK

I hadn't thought of that, you're right. I do wish she wasn't going around inviting other people into our relationship. Are you uncomfortable with random people knowing we're poly?

Libby finishes the last of the dishes and switches places with Mark so he can do the cutlery.

LIBBY

No, but sometimes I feel like it takes away our agency.

(MORE)

LIBBY (CONT'D)

And maybe it's problematic for me to want to always be the one who tells people.

MARK

It's definitely strange when people I hardly know, know that I am, that we are.

LIBBY

How did you feel about it, the Caroline situation?

MARK

I'm always flattered when people think I'll like someone and that that person will like me, too.

LIBBY

(frankly)

Everyone loves you, it's true.

MARK

I know polyamory isn't a sexual orientation, but it feels like I'm being outed. Like when the guys in gym class made fun of me for being gay. Little did they know I'd be bi, ha-ha!

He turns off the tap and looks at nothing in particular, deep in thought, shaking the excess water off of the cutlery.

MARK (CONT'D)

I guess what I'm saying is that I feel exposed whenever it happens. Sorry, that was ramble-y, I feel like I'm mansplaining to you.

LIBBY

(sarcastically)

I love it when you mansplain to me, it turns me on, actually.

MARK

(smirking)

That said, I don't think Caroline brought it up in a very appropriate way. I'm sure she only meant well though. Sure, her perception of polyamory is questionable, but I'm sure she'll continue learning more from us and Heather about it.

LIBBY

You're probably right. I just hate it.

MARK

You don't mean th-

LIBBY

I don't mean that, but it's still frustrating. Sometimes I feel like people are begging us to be involved in a love triangle. Like they're rooting for us to break up or for conflict between us.

She crosses over to the doorway as Mark places the cutlery in the drying rack. He follows her into the living room where they settle on the couch.

MARK

What's up with love triangles anyways? Why were we all collectively so obsessed with them in 2010? Is it cause it feels impossible to be wanted by more than one person at once?

LIBBY

I feel like it's this fascination with being wanted by more than one person, ever.

MARK

Right, and we're the weird ones for being in an open, polyamorous relationship...

LIBBY

Mhmm. Speaking of, can we check in? Have you given any thought to seeing someone new? Like, I don't know, virtually?

MARK

(yawns)

Honestly, no. I feel content being in quarantine, with you, and working on my own shit and our cohabitation and work. Less happy about the working bit, but... You?

LIBBY

I feel the same way. Can't believe we've lived here for two years already. As for me, I don't have any interest in going on dates right now, but I am still on Lex but I'm more using it for the community and not for dating.

They sit in a comfortable silence, thinking about how much their lives have changed since quarantine began five months ago.

LIBBY (CONT'D)

When did we become an old, married, currently-monogamous couple?

MARK

Hey! Don't rule out us being swingers quite yet!

They exchange a glance. Libby stands and puts a record on. A love song starts playing.

MARK (CONT'D)

Why are there so many songs about love? But almost none about friendship?

LIBBY

And why are the few about friendship all corny as fuck?

MARK

Yeah!

LIBBY

Maybe that's cause love songs are just expressing how much you care about someone. Like a 'I care about you so much it feels like magic' or 'impossible'... or 'painful.'

MARK

I think you're right about that.

Libby flops limply onto the couch. Mark brushes her hair out of her face and tucks a few strands behind her ear as she closes her eyes.

LIBBY

(contently)

That's nice.

He rests his hand on her upper arm as he, too, settles into the couch. She opens her eyes just as Mark closes his. She looks at him for a long while.

MARK

You ready to go to bed? Or are we thinking nightcap?

LIBBY

(half-mumbled from sleepiness)
Nightcap! Nightcap! Nightcap!...

MARK

Ok, ok, chill the fuck out! Henny on ice?

LIBBY

Yes, I want to never wake up again.

MARK

Lime Whiteclaw it is! I was rude to have even suggested anything different. Be back.

He hoists himself off of the couch and busies himself in the kitchen. He turns around when Libby calls:

LIBBY

Hey, I love you so much. Thank you for getting to know me so well.

MARK

It's been the ultimate pleasure of my life.

LIBBY

Oh yeah? In all your 26 years?

MARK

Exactly that. You win out over everything that's happened in my quarter-century.

LIBBY

(sarcastically)
Wish I could say the same. Let me know how you feel when the next quarter ends.

MARK

Will do.

He finishes fixing the drinks and carries them back to the coffee table.

MARK (CONT'D)
To self-reformation!

LIBBY
To self-reformation!

Their glasses clink.

THE END.

EXT. GRANDMA'S HOUSE - MORNING

Mark stands outside his grandmother's house. He knocks on the door.

GRANDMA

Hello!

MARK

Hi, Grandma.

Grandparent and grandchild embrace.

TITLE CARD:

"Love you, bye!"

INT. GRANDMA'S HOUSE - MOMENTS LATER

MARK

It's so nice to see you.

GRANDMA

Thank you for coming by.

Mark busies himself by putting away miscellaneous items he's brought.

MARK

I brought you some toilet paper and a few little grocery things. Couldn't help but spoil you a little. I know I don't get to come out here enough.

GRANDMA

Thank you. You didn't have to do that.

MARK

I wanted to. I don't come visit you nearly as much as I wish I could.

GRANDMA

I'm happy when you're here. And you're here more than often enough. Plus you call me at least once a week. There's no reason to feel badly.

Mark smiles halfheartedly, guilt painted on his face.

MARK

I love you so much. Please let me know if you ever need anything. Call me for anything.

GRANDMA

I love you, too. Don't worry about me. Live your life. Sit down for a second and let your grandma tell you something. Listen to me, I've seen a lot of things in my life.

Mark sits at the small kitchen table.

MARK

Ok...

GRANDMA

You're doing what you were always meant to do. You don't have to worry and question yourself quite so much. You are more than capable of getting through this.

MARK

It's hard, you know? Sometimes people are annoying and -

GRANDMA

Be careful what you say about other people. Remember, the stories we tell become truth whether we want them to or not. You don't have to wait for anyone to catch up to you, but you gain nothing from putting other people down.

Mark looks up at her, taken aback. His grandmother sits down to join him now, reaching an arm across the table to take his hand.

GRANDMA (CONT'D)

How are things with Libby?

MARK

She's great. I love her very much. I know that she cares about me more than anyone else.

Grandma sits back in her chair.

GRANDMA

Are you afraid of losing her?

MARK
(jokingly suspicious)
Yeah... what do you know that I
don't?

She gently releases Mark's hand.

GRANDMA
Nothing. It's good that you're
scared of losing her. It means you
want to be with her. Just remember
that all things break. Try to give
in to your feelings more. There's
no need to be so rational all the
time.

MARK
Hey! I learned that high-strung,
rational thinking from you.

GRANDMA
And I'm telling you to unlearn it.
It didn't serve me much. If you
feel love, show it. It's the only
way to live with the least amount
of regret possible. True love is
not lucrative, and that's fine.

MARK
I'll keep that in mind.

GRANDMA
Does she provide you with the
support you need?

MARK
(through a smile)
More than I thought I could want.

GRANDMA
Be sure that neither of you are
giving yourselves away. Seeing each
other is not the same as becoming
one, although that always feels
comfortable. Be wary of it.

MARK
It's funny. We're so alike in so
many ways, but there are things we
always debate about. I'm worried
that there are things we'll never
see eye-to-eye on.

GRANDMA

I've found that the more time you spend around the same people, the more like-minded you become. For better or worse. You could look around and find that the person you had trouble connecting with is the only one who really knows you. Only time will tell. Go where you feel that you must.

MARK

I'll be sure to keep you updated. For now I'm content drinking my coffee with her every day.

GRANDMA

That's more than enough. How do you feel now?

MARK

I feel stepped all over. It's like no one is treating anyone with compassion anymore.

GRANDMA

I see that, but if you stick to it, you're bound to find people who think the same way you do. In fact, you probably know a lot of them already.

MARK

You're right, I do. And I know I'm flawed, too -

GRANDMA

True, but you are at your most flawless when you're left to your own devices. Remember that your self-dissatisfaction always comes from other people's opinions of you. You can take care of yourself, but you don't need me to tell you that...

MARK

Thank you for always believing in me. Sometimes it feels like blind faith. I'm sorry for all the stress I caused you when I was younger. It took so long for me to realize who I was and I was so cruel to you.

GRANDMA

I like to think that I raised you pretty well. That's quite alright, I was along for the ride. There's still time to change if you want to. No one is holding you back from or to anything. Life is always going to be different than how you imagine it.

MARK

Still, I acted out so much for no reason. It must've hurt you, didn't it?

GRANDMA

I think pain is just leftover love. It hurt letting go of all of the big plans I'd made up for you. I know that you'd never have been happy in those perfect scenarios, because they're impossible to achieve. It's hard to accept that good things aren't eternal. But that doesn't mean that there isn't always room for improvement.

MARK

I'm getting older and it feels harder now. I believe I'm nothing without other people, so who am I when I'm alone? I feel like I'm constantly reacting to things and that those reactions define me.

GRANDMA

Attachments are sticky. But more than anything else, they're proof that you're alive. It's easy to forget that your feelings and perceptions of other people are just as formative. Unfortunately, you may always feel incomplete, because you'll never be done changing. You must live without your lost parts, just as new ones wait to be found. It's intimacy, Mark, it's about truth.

MARK

I'm scared of losing Libby someday. It sounds ridiculous but I can't imagine what living without her would be like.

(MORE)

MARK (CONT'D)

At the same time, I want her to be happy with or without me.

GRANDMA

To really love something is to love the distance that will always remain between you.

MARK

Hm, and I guess I'd rather be torn up about it than to feel numb. I never want to feel nothing when it comes to her. Like right now, with the pandemic and all of the social change that seems to be happening. I'm hopeful about it, but when it feels all too much and I cry, I feel guilty for it. I don't feel entitled to that pain. But god, does it feel good to get it out.

GRANDMA

You have complete control over when you're vulnerable. It's a courageous act to put your heart out there for other people to see. You've always felt everything, I watch you make the choice to grow a little bit more every day.

MARK

I was taking a page from your book. You always said that education was the most important pursuit because it was the one thing that no one could take away from me.

GRANDMA

That's true. I always wanted you to be good and to do good. I wanted you to be safe and happy and have enough money to be comfortable.

MARK

It only took a lifetime of drilling the point home to get here.

GRANDMA

And I don't regret a thing.

The pair sit in comfortable silence for a long moment. The light changes as the sun seems to be rising outside of the window.

GRANDMA (CONT'D)

Now, you should get going, don't you have somewhere to be?

MARK

I don't think so, do I?

GRANDMA

I'll help you get your coat on.

She does just that and walks Mark back to the front door. She turns around abruptly, remembering something in the kitchen.

GRANDMA (CONT'D)

I almost forgot. I got these for you.

She removes a grocery produce bag of about four kiwis from the fridge and hands it to Mark.

MARK

Aw, man. I remember sharing one of these with you every day when you used to babysit me. We'd each have our spoon. I remember trying so hard to get it out perfectly in one go. That was seriously the highlight of my personal daycare. Do you want to share one before I go?

GRANDMA

No, that's alright. You have them to yourself. I got them for you.

MARK

Well, if you're sure... thanks, grandma. I'll see you soon.

GRANDMA

I'm sure of it.

Mark turns to go, taking one last glance over his shoulder. He steps across the threshold into pure white. He awakes in bed next to Libby. Half-awake he is left wondering whether the interaction was reality, a dream or simply a brain misfiring?

THE END.