

# QUEER FRAGMENTATION AND TRANS URBAN AESTHETICS: FROM CYBERPUNK TO COTTAGECORE

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*Abstract:* Queerness and transidentity have had a durable relationship with cyberpunk aesthetics, reflected in both cultural works and academic reflections. There is an evident attraction in worlds where technological prowess allows one to evolve beyond one's corporeal body, or to change it at will. The noir explorations of themes such as discrimination and sex work are also strong sources of resonance with common trans and queer experiences. Culturally, this aesthetic is indissociable from its urban component, with the serendipity, diversity, and density of the city often at the centre of the stories told. This reflects the observed tendency of queer people to congregate in urban centres, where minorities are present in sufficient numbers to create social communities with freer explorations around gender. This appeared to be one of the central aesthetic currents of the global trans community until the early twenty-first century. However, we now observe a change with the rise of more rural aspirations, exemplified by the recent popularity of the cottagecore aesthetic. There seems to be a growing desire to retreat from society at large and isolate in tight-knit homogeneous communities, replacing co-spatiality with online connectedness. This could be the result of multiple factors, among which two seem central: the assimilation of many queers linked to the dissolution of greater federated queer communities, and

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the increased prioritisation of online interactions. Drawing from human geography, literary analysis and a corpus from Tumblr (a microblogging network) this article thus seeks to explore how aspirational and representational depictions of queerness evolved in tandem with its physical and online practices, transforming the historically close relationship between queerness and urbanity.

*Keywords:* cyberpunk, cottagecore, metronormativity, spatialities, queer fragmentation.

Queer communities have long fantasised about the city as a place of liberation and reinvention (Castells 1983; Bell, Valentine 1995; Ghaziani 2015). Even the darker sides of the city retained a certain appeal, especially when magnified in cyberpunk media, where considerations on transhumanism and body modifications resonated heavily with trans<sup>1</sup> and queer populations. Urban co-spatiality allowed queers to obtain the numbers to form political communities, but it comes with exposure to diversity in both its positive and negative forms. As queers are progressively accepted into mainstream society – although this is partially limited to cis-gender gays and lesbians – the fragmentation of historical communities creates friction. This limits the interest of co-spatiality (Nash 2013) even as new forms of online socialities displace the ones found in queer places.

This article proposes that one can observe the impacts of such a transformation in the aesthetics that resonate most with said communities. We proceed based on literary analyses of cyberpunk works, sociogeographical studies of queer populations, and a corpus of online interactions and reflections drawn from the microblogging service Tumblr. The article is structured with a first section establishing the historical aesthetic links between cyberpunk, urbanity and transidentity, and then the sociological reality of queer urbanity. It then looks at the fragmentation of queer communities during the twenty-first century – especially as they move online. Finally, it looks at how the homogenisation that follows this fragmentation favours separatist ideals, and how those in turn get represented aesthetically.

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## LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY TRANS AESTHETICS AND URBANITY

### *Cyberpunk, urbanity and transidentity*

Cyberpunk as a genre of media and aesthetic heavily centres around urban spaces (often in decay), transhumanist themes, and deviance from contemporary cultural norms. However, cyberpunk as aesthetic and cyberpunk as genre with specific themes are two separate entities, the former stagnant and fixed and the latter evolving apace with societal and technological change.

As with most science fiction, cyberpunk reflected the aspirations and anxieties of its originating era. For purposes of this paper, cyberpunk will be used to refer to media and aesthetics from the 1980s and 1990s when the genre became solidified. Cyberpunk arose concurrently in both Western and Japanese spheres in the late 1970s and early 1980s, most notably with *Akira* (1982/1988), *Blade Runner* (1982), and *Neuromancer* (1984). While William Gibson, the author of *Neuromancer* and many other works, is often credited with the coining of “cyberpunk” and the creation of the genre, there are earlier works which fit both aesthetically and thematically into cyberpunk, such as Phillip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (1968) – which was adapted into the film *Blade Runner* – and John Brunner’s *The Shockwave Rider* (1975).

At its establishment in the 1970s and 1980s, cyberpunk was a genre that could be characterised both by its philosophical themes and by its aesthetic. Thematically it was driven by the rapid acceleration of technological advancement, and our anxieties and excitements as to where it may lead. This was expressed in explorations of, on one hand, hypercorporate disenfranchisement and loss of agency; and on the other, fluidity of identity and the transcendence of human limitations. Accordingly, the aesthetics of cyberpunk were built around dense, hypertechnological urban spaces – spaces often in decay, with a very literal representation of

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a vertical social hierarchy (Graham 2016). These aesthetics were a vision of the future at the outset of the genre, extrapolating from 1980s technology for the “cyber” part of the setting, and drawing from dense metropolises like Hong Kong (Kwok et al. 2018) for the physical urban space the cyberspace was nested within<sup>2</sup>. These urbanscapes were then placed into a state of decay and disrepair, lit by stuttering neon and billboards, to mark the dystopian aspects of the setting. This aesthetic was largely influenced by (and popularised by) *Blade Runner*, which drew many of its visual conventions from early twentieth century noir detective fiction (Doll, Faller 1986).

As time – and real-life technology – marched on, cyberpunk evolved accordingly. Everyday technological developments had in many ways caught up with the technology depicted in cyberpunk, sometimes surpassing it and rendering it quaint and obsolete. As an example, the works of Gibson do not show characters having easy access to instant communication or social media (Bülgözdi 2018). Its shortcomings on how it confronted issues of marginalisation and disenfranchisement had also disenchanted many of its early supporters, and the genre was summarily declared dead in the early 1990s (Easterbrook 1992). It may be useful, however, to position this not as a death so much as a transformation and mitosis into aesthetic and genre as separate entities. With the “death” of cyberpunk, its aesthetic turned retrofuturistic, retaining the decaying urban milieu but also the visual trappings of 1980s and ’90s technology such as clunky tape interfaces and hacker-style console outputs. This superficial glossy coating can be seen in works such as *Cyberpunk 2077* and *Ready Player One*, which rely on nostalgia to create immersion for the “cyberpunk” setting instead of fully utilising the genre’s themes.

Speculative fiction’s engagement with the principal themes of cyberpunk, meanwhile, evolved along multiple paths. One of them was the development of postcyberpunk, a more optimistic sibling genre that loses the assumptions of dystopia and alienation (Person 1999). The setting is still hypertechnological and deals

with the effects of rapid technological change on society, but the characters are integrated into society and try to solve its problems from within rather than bring down the system.

Works of postcyberpunk, due to their relative lack of retrofuturistic stagnation, also frequently have crossover with post-singularity science fiction, where technological growth continues to accelerate uncontrollably and irreversibly and where its effects on society are no longer predictable from our current vantage point (Vinge 1993). Post-singularity science fiction, in its evocations of strong artificial intelligence and the cybernetisation of the mind, inherently grapples with questions of transhumanism, and so can also be viewed as being in dialogue with cyberpunk.

Like much of science fiction, cyberpunk contains escapist themes and a desire to transcend the mundane world. This transcendence plays out on the twin terrains of escape of the mind into cyberspace and mutability of the body (Bould 2010). Many cyberpunk works assert a duality of mind and body, with the mind being the privileged, “true” self which acts as anchor for the identity, as the body is partially or entirely swapped out for new organic or cybernetic parts, or simply abandoned as the disembodied mind moves into a purely data-based space.

The urban setting of cyberpunk walks the threshold between utopia and dystopia. On one hand, the cyberpunk megalopolis acts as a space of limitless possibility, where one can blend in and be unremarked-on. On another, it is a space of loneliness and alienation, where interpersonal ties are mediated by corporations. Bukatman (2017) proposes a critical reading of the urban setting of *Blade Runner* against the metropolis described in Georg Simmel’s 1903 essay *The Metropolis and Mental Life*:

The economic imperatives of the city might hollow out the core of things and flatten distinctions between people and objects, but it was an expansive environment: in the city, “the individual’s horizon is enlarged”. It was easy to get lost in the metropolis; it was also possible to define oneself anew.

The cyberpunk city, by way of providing the individual with this “enlarged horizon”, fulfils their “individual liberty to access urban resources” and their freedom to modify themselves, but is not mutable by the individual actor in turn – its inimicable structure is dedicated to upholding oppressive corporate values. This freedom, therefore, falls short of the individual’s “right to the city” as defined by Henri Lefebvre, and here restated by Harvey (2008):

The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization. The freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves.

The failure of the cyberpunk city to uphold the implicit promise made to its inhabitants mirrors that of the noir city as described by Prakash in *Noir Urbanisms* (Prakash 2010), and commented on in Maurer and Koren-Kuik (2018):

[the] utopian vision of the metropolis is undermined by the grim realities of capitalism’s oppressive forces. The “shadow” that hangs over the city as utopia is expressed by creating “dark visions of mass society forged by capitalism and technology”. However, as Prakash notes, these depictions “did not mean a forthright rejection of the modern metropolis but a critique of the betrayal of its utopian promise”.

This situation is further complexified by the highly stratified social hierarchy of cyberpunk cities: the moneyed upper classes, in addition to frequently being physically elevated into the upper floors of the vertical cityscape, enjoy near-exclusive access to technological improvements, such as body mods and cyberspace, while the destitute lower classes in the lower floors scavenge their leftovers. This denial of access to the resources the city provides to others is a familiar theme to trans readers, closely paralleling

the tortuous path many of us undertake through medical transition, where access to treatment is either predicated on having connections, fitting the “correct” social profile, or is obtained illicitly through the black market. This, combined with the general anticorporate bent of cyberpunk and its themes of transhumanism and the fluidity of identity, especially with the mind taking priority over the body, makes unsurprising the enduring appeal of the genre to the trans community.

Although most cyberpunk works tend to skew toward depictions of cisheteronormative characters or stereotypical depiction of queer individuals, there is a history of queer writers writing queer cyberpunk. Perhaps the most well known example is *The Matrix* (1999) – which the Wachowski sisters wrote and released while not yet openly transgender, but which, according to them, should nevertheless be viewed through a queer and trans lens (Wachowski 2020). Other works include *Trouble and All Her Friends* (1994) by Melissa Scott, *The Fortunate Fall* (1996) by Raphael Carter, an intersex and transgender author, and *Nearly Roadkill* (1996) co-written by Kate Bornstein (better-known as the author of *The Gender Outlaws*). Although these works vary wildly in plot, they share several commonalities of focusing on queer characters and cyberspace, drawing a parallel between economic and sexual marginalisation of their outlaw hacker protagonists (Yaszek 2019).

As discussed above, the dystopian urban setting of cyberpunk resonates well with queer narratives. However, where queer and trans possibility truly finds fertile soil is in the genre’s treatment of mindbody duality and the fluidity of the self. Cyberpunk is not inherently about transgender people, but it is inherently welcoming to transgender readings – being able to freely modify or even fully replace one’s body, or to construct a cyberspace avatar that better represents one’s identity, is aspirational. As an example taken from one of the aforementioned works with transgender authors, the character of Switch from *The Matrix* was originally supposed to present as a different gender in cyberspace as opposed to

the physical world (Wachowski 2020). This was not, in the end, shown on screen, but Switch’s name and androgynous presentation remain as residual references to this original concept (in a parallel to the Matrix concept of the “residual self-image” that drives the difference between one’s appearance in the real and digital worlds).

Cyberpunk and postcyberpunk persistently maintain that one’s physical substrate is modifiable, replaceable, even disposable, and it is the mind that matters. These issues are engaged with in a multitude of works of cyberpunk across various media: video games, animated and live-action television shows such as *Ghost in the Shell* and *Altered Carbon*, and tabletop roleplayer games such as *Eclipse Phase* (Fleming 2020). Not all examples of these themes follow narratives explicitly written as queer and/or trans, but many of the characters are queer-coded in their interaction with these themes, such as Major Motoko Kusanagi of *Ghost in the Shell*, whose complex relationship with embodiment and sexuality rewards a queer posthuman reading (Kim 2015). Some works, however, which do explicitly feature trans elements and narratives – such as *Cyberpunk 2077* – can still fail in their representation by playing into fetishism where the trans person is still presented as an anomaly in a city filled with binaries (Henley 2021).

### *The historic urbanity of queerness*

After examining their representations in cyberpunk, we shall now focus on the historical links between urbanity and queerness. Considering geographic space as a set of techniques (Lévy, Lus-sault 2013), and assuming that the technological revolutions were urban products as well as producers of the urban (Santos 2002), we can consider the city as an important space where technologies of social reproduction are originated, such as the regulation of sexuality through the domestication of the educational system, the industry and prison (Foucault 1975; Foucault 1994), industrial

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and technological revolutions, and birth control for suburban families or interventions in urban architecture for post-war heterosexual masculinity (Preciado 2013; Preciado 2020). This means that most of the technical development of societies is based on urban institutions, be they universities, institutes, companies, etc., where actors from different social, cultural and political contexts are in a regime of co-spatiality. This also means that the encounter of these different contexts in everyday life is one of the – perhaps greatest – engines for the emergence of new problems, new forms of expression and conviviality and, consequently, new social paradigms. Following this thought, we would argue that the constitution of a politically aligned queer group – politically groups or social movements in general – was made possible by the contact of distinct realities, contexts and demands in the same daily life, characteristics of urbanity for Lévy (1999).

On the other hand, we notice that the aforementioned social contexts were not always so diverse. The contemporary Western city and its creators have always been built around affluent able-bodied white men. This is not a new observation: Henri Lefebvre (1974), based on Marxist criticism, spoke of the male gaze in the production of city space. Despite the limited repercussion of this criticism in Lefebvre's work, Michael Brown (2005) rescues and enriches it with an analysis of the aesthetics of American urban centres based on advertising, where sensual and erotic representations of female bodies played the role of making the city landscape more attractive and intelligible to the heterosexual male gaze of the second half of the twentieth century.

Still, the city created and maintained by and for the white man also creates possibilities for fractures where dissenting expressions can be found. The places where gay bars and nightclubs came to be were usually abandoned places in urban centres, devalued and cheaper, then reappropriated (Sibalis 2004). Through its density, urban space is fertile ground for the confrontation of lives, including by the creative resistance of the marginalised who can imagine another world. In addition, the anonymity made pos-

sible in urban space, whether by the constant movement and flow between places or by social diversity and density, allowed and still allows queer places to exist, often out of the spotlight and without publicity.

Urban space has thus always been important for homosexuals (or pederasts and sodomites), recorded for at least three centuries in Paris (Sibalis 2004) and, in a broader sense, for queer populations in US cities (Castells 1983; Stryker 2008). Such communities, which spread to other US cities and simultaneously developed in other countries<sup>3</sup>, arose from the need to create safe and sociable spaces for gays and lesbians in a city made for and by straights (Castells 1983; Sibalis 2004).

The formation of communes and social enclaves provided housing and recreational spaces, but their communes included only a small number of gays and lesbians. Within American cities, most queers lived in straight spaces outside these communities and dealt with prejudice and queerbashing (Bell, Valentine 1995).

The historiography of queer communities focuses heavily on gays and lesbians – especially in San Francisco – making it seem that trans people were not part of the same shared spaces like bars, nightclubs, and book stores. However, according to Susan Stryker (2008), part of this absence is due to terminological issues. Until the early 1990s, terms such as “transgenderal”, “transgenderist” and “transgenderism” were conceived in a conceptual in-between position within “transvestism” and “transsexualism”, each having a distinguished yet fuzzy meaning at the time. Transgender denoted possibilities of gender antinormativity and antiassimilation, and for that reason was felt closer to “queer”. Associated with queer, the singularities of transness were blurred, not least because the “T” was then misconstrued as a sexual orientation – related to kink and fetishes. What Stryker calls “homonormative deformation” expresses this background where trans was considered a sexual category rather than a gender modality that intersected with sexual identities. This made it easier to exclude trans people, both from queer political movements and

sometimes from the spaces where such movements arose – despite the central role of many trans people of colour in those movements, the most famous example being the Stonewall Riot (Stryker 2008).

Differences in income, gender and race were also fundamental in the formation of queer communities. In an article entitled “Why are the gay ghettos white?”, Charles Nero (2005) discusses the integration of white gay men into urban and suburban culture as represented in television. Better off economically, white gay men had more power relations in their favour to form communities, including allying with straight men to maintain the aesthetic of the ideal urban and suburban as naturally white, creating a role of “impostor” for the untrustworthy black gay man in the city. Women had fewer economic resources than men, except for the impact of the AIDS crisis on gay men getting mortgages and life insurance because of “commercial paranoia” (Bell, Valentine 1995).

Urban space does not attract queers only for the possibility of living in spaces with other queer people, but also for a variety of needs: personal, social, economic. Those can include specialised trans healthcare which generally is only found in major agglomerations (Teti et al. 2021), but also access to more common needs such as pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP). The city is not just a place to move into, but also a place that welcomes those who get away from their past lives, especially trans people who recently transitioned. The extreme case of this is trans people who decide to “go stealth” – living life in a way that eliminates all references to their assigned gender at birth, sometimes cutting all ties with their past (Giammattei 2015). Being able to enjoy anonymity in a space where people do not initially have affective, historical ties or kinship lineages is one of the biggest slogans of queer migration from the countryside to the city.

When Bell and Valentine (1995) talk about the migration of queer people from rural to urban areas, it does not actually mean that all these people went to live in gay and lesbian neighbour-

hoods – also called gayborhoods<sup>4</sup>. Their economic conditions rarely allowed it and they were part of the queer majority that lived in straight spaces in American cities. Space was being (re)produced in a way that resisted the straight structure, but still according to other spatial norms (Lévy, Lussault 2013), such as the racialisation and gendering of space (on top of economic constraints).

In addition to within-community ghettoisation and erasure of transgender queers and queers of colour, mainstream queer narratives and studies have largely been driven by a metronormative ideology which asserts that a fulfilling queer life is only possible in an urban environment, and that the main and only thing a queer growing up in a rural area can do is flee to the nearest city in order to survive. The rural is, in fact, positioned as the closet, and moving to the city is synonymous with coming out and being free to live queerly. This is a reductive and binarist view of queer spatiality which has been recently criticised by a number of authors (Halberstam 2005; Gray et al. 2016; Edgecomb 2021; Besnier 2021; Parrinello 2021). Edgecomb (2021) provides a good illustration of how this urban/rural dichotomy can influence the queer experience, while the spatial experience itself can shape queer views of space:

in the contemporary United States, queerness has been diluted, particularly within the urban milieu where it remains primarily associated with activist communities or the educated elite, disseminated through networks with limited access dependent on privilege, whether economic or locational. Because the American rural is so often presented as a culturally deficient antithesis to the American urban, it is assumed to be a cultural opposite of queer *as* cosmopolitan. Ironically, the act of post-traumatic distancing for queers migrating to the city inherently queers the rural as an ambiguous, Othered space that exists outside of the sight lines (and security) of the city.

So, while noting the general trend of queer migration to cities in search of community and opportunity, we must also remain

aware of the very large contingent of queers that either remain and make a life in their rural communities of origin, or migrate back to rural life from the city they initially fled to (Conner, Okamura 2021). For these populations, the homonormative paradigm of the city may not feel true to their experiences, and the binarity of closet theory may be too rigid to accurately describe the nuances of the living situation and relationships of rural queers (Edgecomb 2021; Parrinello 2021).

The concentration of queer socialising spaces reached its peak in the early 2000s, after the AIDS crisis in the 1980s and 1990s. With the spread of Pride Parades, the advancement of gay and lesbian rights, and the advent of gay tourism, several cities came to be considered gay destinations thanks to the spread of exclusive or inclusive gay and lesbian establishments (Ghaziani 2015). However, recent evolutions have reversed this trend: whether for the purpose of finding affective partners, friendships, or knowledge exchanges, including the possibility of being even more anonymous – physical spaces for queer socialisation seem to lose some of their audience and meaning (Greenhalg 2017; Villarreal 2020). The next section of this paper analyses this evolution, its links to the emergence of online communities, and the impact this has on queer urbanity and aesthetics.

## QUEER DIVIDES ON- AND OFF-LINE

### *Fragmentation of communities*

Whether urban or not, queer communities were never fully integrated or homogeneous, even within themselves, and the very notion of queerness might even be antithetical to such homogeneity (Edelman 2004; Browne 2006). However, for most of the twentieth century, many queers still belonged to large interrelated groups and communities that influenced each other (Trevisan 2018; Grattan 2019; Stockdill 2018). This commonality – some-

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times centred on the word queer – has diminished over the last three decades (Nash 2013). Three factors seem particularly relevant to explain it: the generational-cultural divide brought upon after the AIDS crisis, the disappearance of certain physical queer spaces, and the complex effects linked to the move to online socialities.

Despite and because of all the suffering it caused, the AIDS crisis of the 1980s was also a moment of solidarity for queer communities. What had been barely tolerated as long as it was hidden was suddenly in the spotlight and subject in certain countries to policies (or absence of policies) that facilitated homophobia without improving the survival rate (Weston, Berridge 2018; Duyvendak 1996). As the external pressure increased, making life harder outside of gayborhoods, so did the necessity to present a politically united front. The last two decades of the twentieth century were a time of strong affinity between queers of different stripes, from lesbian blood drives for HIV-positive people (Lister 2018) – lesbians were also directly affected by the epidemic (Richardson 2000; McHugh 2021) – to the creation of major political associations such as ACT UP (Stockdill 2018). This also led to the appearance of LGBT populations as a non-negligible political constituency that could propose legal changes (such as civil partnership and then gay marriage, transgender and intersex rights, or assisted reproductive technology for lesbians).

This effect, however, partially faded with time with the depoliticisation of a fragment of the queer population (generally the ones that were closest to assimilation, led by cis white gay men<sup>5</sup>), sometimes starting just after the AIDS crisis, as in the Netherlands (Duyvendak 1996), and often picking up speed after major milestones (such as marriage equality) (Duggan 2012; Walmsley 2015). The loss of a significant part of the most active members of the community (from AIDS, exhaustion and queerphobia) might also have played a part in this split, which is now most visible between generations (Emmer 2012; Russell, Bohan 2005; Musto 2014).

A major element that compounds this generational gap is the evolution of queer urbanity. As stated above, since the middle of the twentieth century, physical queer spaces have played a central role in the elaboration of both queer culture and queer political projects. The spaces were often centred around gay men who had a more defined territoriality – at least when compared to lesbians (Ghaziani 2015). The physical proximity of gayborhoods was necessary to attain the sufficient critical mass to attempt to defend the community against physical aggressors. For decades, those spaces were oppositionally defined against heteronormative norms. Thus, as the queer umbrella – or quite often the gay umbrella – defined the out-group (the queerphobic rest of society) from the start, it forced an alliance between populations that are now seen as more distinct than they used to be.

Queer spaces often had an explicit project of having a “queer inclusivity”, where queers of all kinds were supposed to be welcome. This was variably applied, especially when it comes to queer ethnic minorities and trans people – but still constituted a “safer” space than most (Nash 2011). These spaces then allowed for a certain amount of diversity (within the queer umbrella, and subject to the same issues mentioned previously), especially on the generational front. They were also political hotspots for the community at large, places of debate that were at the centre of activist movements, fostering mutual understanding if not allyship. With the flip side of queers now being tolerated outside of gayborhoods, some communities fell below the critical mass that allowed survival (especially economically). This is especially true for lesbian bars, whose numbers fell by more than 90 per cent since the 1980s in the USA (Marloff 2021), with similar evolutions in France and Canada (Breton 2016). Although they are also in decline<sup>6</sup>, gay bars have fared better for multiple reasons, including the relatively higher economic power of gay men and the fact that they are often associated with sexual practices (such as the availability of backrooms), giving them a competitive edge over most straight (or non-denominational) bars.

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Finally, the third element that reinforces the previous effects is the gradual switch to online modalities. Just as protagonists in cyberpunk media took refuge in virtual spaces, queers adopted the Internet and made it a central element to their lives, one potentially free from the queerphobia present in their physical lives (Brady et al. 2018). This was commented on very early in the twentieth century, as gay men's sexual practices in particular quickly integrated online tools<sup>7</sup> into the hookup culture. One can also mention here the queer online parties that emerged during the Covid-19 pandemic and the new questions about queer space, such as how to apprehend the different spatial and digital typologies and the potential antinormativity of queer spaces for the neoliberal city (Keays 2020).

Here, one might want to dissociate two use-cases: online communication as a form of socialisation and community-building, and online communication as a tool to find romantic/sexual partners. As a tool to find partners, they were initially seen as supplementary to the existing spaces (such as gay bars, backrooms and saunas), and didn't immediately dislodge them (Weatherburn et al. 2003), although habits have slowly evolved over the last two decades, with apps like Grindr now playing a central role and being blamed for the disappearance of gay bars (Greenhalg 2017; Villarreal 2020). The second use-case is the more interesting one for our purposes, as it represents a non-trivial shift in socialities – although there was a permanent back and forth between the online space seen as legitimate by itself, or only for its ability to broker physical encounters (Miles 2018). The development of queer subcultures on different networks (listservs, subreddits, Tumblr communities associated with tags) changed their nature. From being places where one could meet partners or get basic information (especially when one didn't have access to physical queer spaces), they expanded into communities where users would co-create new queer identities (Beemyn 2014). From an introductory hallway where one transits into the queer world, they became a place where one simply is.



Such social networks became increasingly central in queer social habits over the last few years, especially as online socialities progressively shed the stigma of being “inferior” to physical ones, which Covid-19 only reinforced as physical socialities were drastically curtailed. In the next section, we will look into one particular social network which has played a central role in such evolutions over recent years, Tumblr (Byron 2019; Robards et al. 2020; Feraday 2016). The appendix features archived links and information for all the cited Tumblr posts. Two major elements that made us focus on this platform is that its central interface is a feed from one’s chosen peers (as with Facebook or Twitter, unlike Reddit), but this feed is generally chronological and not algorithmically sorted to skew towards more popular posts. This uniformises the popularity of posts and allows more quantitative analyses.

One important aspect of online platforms is that they are partially age-segregated. Whereas Facebook is used by all age-groups, it is not as central to younger generations. Certain platforms are strongly associated with certain age-groups (such as TikTok for people younger than 20 and Tumblr for people aged 20-35) (Jenzen 2017; O’Connor 2020; Gruzd, Mai 2020; Tumblr 27). Moreover, due to the nature of social networks, they tend to favour the creation of homogeneous groups or clusters (sometimes referred to as filter bubbles or echo chambers in their extreme cases) (Little, Richards 2021). Unlike many physical spaces which generally have a non-negligible influx of external members, and where co-spatiality guarantees some diversity, an online community that starts focusing on itself will have no direct pushback. The way these networks are built can encourage cult-like behaviours (Tumblr 2) and eliminate any dissent by pushing members to block any offending parties (thus preventing them from defending themselves by presenting different narratives) through virally spread callouts that sometimes extend to everyone associated with the initial target (Tumblr 17, 28). Due to the unerasable trace of the exchanges on certain networks, it also makes it harder to change one’s position as the past can be brought up at any point



(and apologies dismissed as not being authentic) (Tumblr 10, 21). This also tends to favour users with more social capital, as opposed to various minorities (Tumblr 24). This all tends to make large groups devolve into homogeneous restricted networks, which also makes propaganda and false flag attacks easier to carry out (Tumblr 19; O'Connor 2020).

### *Fighting for words*

The massive switch to online modes of socialisation has given rise to multiple complex phenomena that reinforce the fragmentation mentioned above. Central to this is a fight on the terms used, related to several attempts to homogenise the queer vocabulary. A first structuring element is that many of the social networks used by queers are USA-centric, and use English as a default language, not only in the interface but also between users (unless they discover they are part of the same linguistic minority). This means that queer individuals can be isolated from local queer groups while still cultivating a sense of belonging to a transnational queer movement (the fault lines between groups then switching from being geographic to generational). Although this has many benefits, it also means that social issues that are strongly dependent on local cultural norms tend to be reinterpreted with an American lens – and sometimes a British one, to a lesser extent (Hochuli 2020). Reciprocally, the pushback that seeks to de-centre the USA sometimes prevents or derails discussions among US minorities (Tumblr 11).

This lens is particularly visible when it comes to the words used to describe individuals and communities, which are inevitably political as they are often reclaimed from former insults. However, the process of reclaiming is by essence rooted in a given society, which gives rise to incomprehensions between activists of different countries, aggravated by the US-centrism. Let's start with the example of the word *travesti* in Brazilian Portuguese,

which one could attempt to literally translate as “transvestite”. Although some authors would translate it as “transgender” or would include it in the trans umbrella, it is more commonly written in its original Brazilian form *travesti* to accentuate how it cannot be dissociated from local queer culture and social fights and does not naturally match either of the English alternatives (Rizki 2019; Vergueiro 2015). This solution solves some problems, but fails in other languages such as French, where the exact same word and spelling of *travesti* exists with a similar initial meaning, albeit with a different social and political history (and a reclaiming process that is still just emerging without the full support of the trans community) (Espineira 2018). The struggle between a universalising English vocabulary (and associated culture) and local minority cultures is being fought in many fields (Wilson, 2008), but on such online battlefields, the globalising tendency is apparently winning to the point of sometimes erasing previous community knowledge.

A focal point of this struggle concerns the word “queer it-self”. Although, as mentioned above, this word resists any fixed definition, it is strongly associated with the rejection of norms of all kinds – with a focus on gender and sexuality – with a tendency to “weird” relationships and weaken the borders and binaries by making them fuzzier. However, this goes against certain attempts to make the wor(l)d understandable by creating identity categories that are well defined (and ideally stable through time). This endeavour is increasingly visible on websites such as Tumblr, where queers are being pressured into adopting precise (and fixed) identities (Tumblr 22), with little allowance for apparently contradictory identities, such as trans men lesbians (Tumblr 29, 32). Certain identities are also questioned to prevent impostors (Tumblr 31) – by way of stating “no true X would say this”. This is not uniquely an online phenomenon and has also been observed in many groups fighting for social rights (Jolivéte 2014; Koch 2008). However, the online version changes the question from “does this person still belong in the community after saying/acting

like they did” to “has this person ever truly been in the community, or have they been lying to us” (Tumblr 14).

Within the Tumblr ecosystem, this struggle against words that are inherently fuzzy is sometimes openly in favour of fragmentation (such as the “get the L out” campaign) (Tumblr 7, 14, 18; Braidwood 2019). The push for precise identities and full online disclosure (Tumblr 35, 37, 39) is also associated with queer disidentification, and with a campaign against the use of the word queer, in favour of tagging it “q slur” (Szuba 2018), with the justification that – unlike words like “gay” – it was used as a slur (Tumblr 36, 38). Older queer members quickly condemned this as ahistorical – illustrating the generational divide in terms of words used – while attributing some of this campaign to radical feminists (Tumblr 1, 3, 9, 34, 38). Those older queer members also analyse the impact of the switch to online spaces and how they tend to form more homogeneous communities than physical spaces – sometimes through gatekeeping (Tumblr 25) – which can then be weaponised against various minorities (Tumblr 14, 15, 30, 33). Queer populations, after moving online, then seem to split into smaller homogeneous groups. At the very least, the platforms provide fertile ground for the development of small homogeneous groups that become increasingly isolated. As those drift further apart from each other and as the desire for purity and homogeneity grows, so does a certain form of isolationism (Tumblr 4).

The city was the main place where one could be publicly queer and yet anonymous. As Western society becomes more tolerant of trans people, the risk of living outside of the city diminishes (going from very real physical threats to at most awkward relationships with neighbours, if one chooses their destination correctly) (Millis 2021; Friedman 2015). The usefulness of queer spaces also diminishes if one feels that they are filled by members of the outgroup, and their role is replaced with online socialities. It then becomes imaginable to retreat from the city, from queer co-spatiality and political activism – especially when feeling burnt out (Chen, Gorski 2015). This retreat might be associated with

the goal of creating rural queer households – which are sometimes freed from the historical requirements of attaining a critical population threshold to be able to defend themselves (Yurcaba 2020).

We might then see a rise in a rural desire, where one can keep in touch with one's wider – global, online and homogeneous – community, while removing the daily confrontations of urban life. The next section will focus on such a change in aesthetics, including its historical precedents. However, two caveats must be mentioned. First, part of this aesthetic shift is linked to the increased visibility of queer rurality (which was partially ignored for decades in a display of metronormativity) (Blackwood 2020). Second, this shift is coincidental with a more general shift in society with renewed critiques of urbanity (which Covid-19 magnified greatly) (Whitaker 2021; Alraouf 2021).

The next section, then, does not seek to establish a quantitative difference in aesthetic appeal of urbanity versus rurality in queer circles. Instead, it tries to show that, whereas the urban component was often left unsaid but still central to queer culture and aesthetics, contemporary queer and trans aesthetics are now at least partially decorrelated from urbanity.

### *Physical and aspirational retreats*

The depiction of a desire to live in harmony with nature or return to a pastoral lifestyle is not a new concept in literature. From Virgil's pastoral poetry to Walden by Henry David Thoreau, people have expressed the aspirations of living a "simpler" life away from cities. Frequently this is driven by conservative ideals, and the idea of the city being a place of sin and immorality. Most notably, anti-urbanism in inter-war Germany was closely intertwined with Nazi ideology, but the trend was also present in other countries. For instance, despite Britain's apparent political opposition to Germany – having in fact just triumphed in a war against them

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– it also developed a conservative back-to-the-land movement partially inspired by the German one (Dietz 2008).

However, the conservative impulse to escape the moral decadence of modern society is not the only one that can drive these anti-urban aspirations – queer movements such as the Stonewall Nation project, radical faeries, and various separatist lesbian communities have also sought escape from city life and return to nature for various reasons (Carter 2013; Morgensen 2009; Sandilands 2002). The radical faeries, for instance – a movement composed chiefly of gay men, although membership was not explicitly limited to such – saw rural retreats as an opportunity for gay liberation. The members of a faerie gathering bonded via mutual reliance on each other for food, shelter, and community. The radical faerie ethnography by Morgensen (2009) notes that many faeries used their experiences in rural retreat to try and enrich their life in their urban communities, so the escape to pastoral life was not necessarily a physical one-way journey — but it did serve as an ideological framework for their life goals and aspirations.

Partially inspired by these movements, a new current emerged in the late 2010s under the name (and hashtag) of cottagecore (Brand 2021) and became prominent during the Covid-19 pandemic (Pardilla 2020). Some of its main features are shared with its predecessors: an elevation of a simple life, anti-urbanity and bucolic isolationism, a valorisation of nature. Some other aspects, such as a focus on (generally white) femininity – often in the form of floral prints and flowy dresses – were less prevalent in these predecessors (Alvarado 2020). However, at least one central aspect is unavoidably contemporary: the fact that physical isolationism is compensated by a virtual interconnectedness. The aesthetic is not focused on simply being cosy in a cottage and baking bread, but on sharing these activities with one’s friends through social networks (Luu 2021). This is exemplified in video-games like *Stardew Valley* and *Animal Crossing*, which resonated strongly with the adepts of cottagecore (Wilson 2021; Deane 2020). The latter sold nearly 40 million units during the pandemic and is cen-



tred on living on a tiny island with up to 10 anthropomorphic animals (non-player characters), decorating one's home, and inviting friends from other islands to come visit. In a way, it is a pseudo-physical manifestation of cyberspace ideals: the bodies (and their gender expressions) become secondary, and contact with people outside of one's immediate social circle is opt-in. If many works of cyberpunk can be seen through a modernist lens – stressing certain dangers of technological progress in a capitalist framework without necessarily questioning the reality and legitimacy of progress in itself – the evolution we now observe<sup>8</sup> seems to fit within post-modernity (Aylesworth 2015). The loss of meta-narratives makes progress meaningless, just like fighting for a better world. The main option left is then escapism – either physical or through virtual worlds which are not subject to any meaningful evolution.

However, the colonialist and patriarchal roots of the aesthetic are still present and have led to criticism (Tumblr 6, 8, 13). The desire to return to a “traditional” agrarian life is often framed within the white-centric imagery of homesteading and farming which overtook traditional practices of farming in the Americas (Schultz 2021). It also simplifies the reality of rural life, especially for minorities (Klotz 2021). Furthermore, the white nationalist ideology that was historically invested in such imagery – often linked to fundamentalist Christianity and neo-paganism (Mikkelsen, Kornfield 2021; Kieser 2019) – is still active in the form of a desired exodus from “impure” non-white cities (Kay, Wood 2021). The consumption of content related to cottagecore can lead to accidentally stumbling into conservative spaces – which is often called the “tradwife pipeline” – where conservative women discuss their hobbies of canning, sewing, gardening as well as their political views, while sharing pretty images and DIY tips. This proximity is sometimes acknowledged even by queer and queer-friendly adherents, in ways that also recall lesbian separatism (Gillespie 2020):

The politics of cottagecore are thoughtfully prelapsarian: what if we could go back to a time before the planet was ravaged

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by industry, except with added protections for marginalized queer communities? What if we all lived like tradwives, minus the husbands? Despite these issues, this aesthetic has appealed not only to white women – and separatist white lesbians – but also to marginalised queers. One element showing the extent to which cottagecore is being reclaimed by queers is the development of multiple minor xeno-genders (Feraday 2016) based on its aesthetic (LGBTQA Wiki 2022; Tumblr 16). It is also being reclaimed by queers of colour, albeit often with an accent on femininity (Alvarado 2020; Vize 2020; Sinclair 2020).

As it appears in queer communities' real-life goals and aspirations, so does this anti-urbanist trend find reflection in genre fiction. The genre of "green utopias" emerged in the 1970s and 1980s as a response to the burgeoning environmental and climate crisis, with examples of the genre being *Always Coming Home* (1985) by Ursula K. LeGuin and *Pacific Edge* (1990) by Kim Stanley Robinson (Garforth 2005). Even though market concentration is reducing the diversity in many publishing markets (Hawthorne 2014), there is a growing acceptance of queers and people of colour in traditionally published Western speculative fiction (Barbeau 2020). Moreover, the US-centrism of the mediascape is partially compensated by the internet-facilitated ease of access to literature published in other countries and cultures and the increased ease of self-publishing both on- and offline (Obadia 2020). Thus, we are also seeing more queer and non-Western perspectives on the spatiality of futures, such as the novel *Triangulum* by Masande Ntshanga, which is commented on by Burger (2020):

Advocacy of a return to traditional and rural ways of life can potentially be conservative, a way of ensuring the continued reproduction of heteronormativity and other entrenched ideologies. The queerness of *Triangulum*'s narrator, however, complicates the association of the rural with the heterosexual and the conservative. Rather than conservatism, the novel's return to the past has more in common with Munõz's argument that a queer, utopic future can be imagined by returning to the "no-longer-conscious".



The South Africanness of the novel and its settings also means that its rejection of Western conceptions of linear time and progress has decolonial implications. The overlay of temporality on spaces and the resultant view of some spaces as being more progressive than others is, after all, a legacy of colonialism. For Triangulum to reject the ideal of the city as represented in dominant queer and science fiction narratives is to reject Western views of what constitutes the future.

For a more pointed comparison, we will reduce our scope from anti-urbanist ideals in genre fiction in general to those reflected in a specific subgenre. If cyberpunk, as an essentially urban aesthetic and genre, reflects the urban focus of 1980s queer communities, then the pastoral backlash to it can be seen to be embodied in the aesthetic of cottagecore and the speculative fiction genre of solarpunk. Solarpunk is one of the many derivative genres of cyberpunk that rapidly multiplied in its wake, such as steampunk and dieselpunk. Most of these -punks do not retain the nuances of the radical anti-establishment philosophy that defined cyberpunk, and instead focus on a shallow retrofuturistic aesthetic, sometimes to the point of becoming defined solely as aesthetic-based subcultures with no particular critical themes underpinning them (Danahay 2016). Solarpunk is a rare example that retains the anti-establishment ideals of the original (Steinkopf-Frank 2021).

Solarpunk itself has roots in biopunk, a derivative subgenre of cyberpunk which focuses on the dystopian implications of corporations having control of biological engineering methods and technologies and therefore potentially the actual bodies of individuals. Biopunk grew out of the posthumanist aspects of cyberpunk, which already featured advanced prosthetics and body modification, but it was more specifically a response to the rapid development of biotechnology and genetics in the 1990s and 2000s, and the anxieties derived from that (Schmeink 2017). Biopunk subsequently combined with concerns about runaway over-exploitation of our ecosystem to produce ecopunk, a genre

focusing on sustainability, ecological restoration, and conservation.

Atop this mindful foundation of damage control and repair, writers once again turned an eye to the future, exploring what a civilisation relying on sustainable and renewable resources might look like. The solarpunk genre was first proposed in 2008 by an anonymous blogger, with a focus on sustainability tied to renewable energy sources and hope toward the future (Republic of the Bees 2008). Since then there have been efforts to establish a philosophy behind solarpunk for engineering, visual arts, and literary works that draw from a variety of sources. There also have been efforts to retroactively declare speculative fiction works as “solarpunk” because of their focus on sustainability and themes of living close to nature. Examples of works that have been described as solarpunk despite being written prior to the creation of solarpunk include *Dune* (1965) by Frank Herbert, *Ecotopia* (1975) by Ernest Callenbach, and *Parable of the Sower* (1993) by Octavia Butler (Wenstrom 2021; Williams 2018).

The first speculative fiction specifically calling itself solarpunk was published in 2013 in a Brazilian anthology, *Solarpunk – Histórias ecológicas e fantásticas em um mundo sustentável* (Albani 2016). Since then, a plethora of solarpunk anthologies has seen print, on themes ranging from dragons to disability in the future. The return-to-nature approach of solarpunk can be potential cause for concern due to the possibility of reproducing white nationalist and colonialist ideology, as is the case with cottagecore. Solarpunk, however, presents a diversity of marginalised perspectives, including queers, people of colour, and intersections thereof, and generally results in a more well-rounded and well-informed treatment of issues of colonialism, class and gender (Johnson 2020).

Two examples of queer solarpunk works are the webcomic *Facing the Sun* by Tesslyn Bergin and the novella *Psalm for The Wild-Built* by Becky Chambers. These two works use the aesthetics and themes of solarpunk – such as renewable energy, sustaina-

ble living, and an overall anticapitalist bent – while subverting solarpunk optimism to discuss alienation, mental illness, and societal responsibility. In *Psalm for the Wild-Built*, the main character rejects city life in favour of nature due to the pressures of society and finds freedom and healing. In contrast, the main characters of *Facing The Sun* chose isolation due to trauma and grief and do not find healing in nature, since the world is dying and their main profession is to use solarpunk-aesthetic technology to attempt to provide for the remnants of humanity. These two approaches reflect the tonal range of the genre as well as critical lenses that the genre can be viewed through.

## CONCLUSION

Queers of the late twentieth century saw echoes of their lives in cyberpunk, whether they aspired to a world where bodyparts are fungible or were forced into precarity by their inability to fit in the standard corporate mould. Their aspirations had in common an urban component often left implicit – where else could one find one's peers except in the diversity of the City? – as did their lived experiences, or at least the ones that were publicised. Although the specific books and authors that resonated varied with the local cultures, this general tendency was present globally.

As queers got progressively accepted into mainstream Western society, the split between outgroup and ingroup resorbed itself, facilitating internal dissensions. This led to queer fragmentation – happening along different lines depending on the countries considered – which coincided with the emergence of the Internet not only as a tool to find peers but as a place to be queer.

This led to the emergence of global queer communities and sub-communities. As the importance of online socialities grew, queers started pruning the groups of people they interacted with online to avoid harassment. This occurred as physical queer spaces were disappearing, thus reducing opportunities for co-spatiality

and contact with queers outside of one's network (and of other generations). As online socialities allowed new forms of isolationism, queers laid claim to some aesthetics – and the corresponding ideologies – that reflected these emergent desires, from cottagecore to solarpunk. If being queer means challenging social norms, this raises the question of how one can be queer outside of society. There is no question that queers also deserve escapism and a respite from a hostile world where their very existence is often debated. However, one should be wary of uncritically adopting lifestyle aesthetics without examining the underlying ideologies. Taking inspiration from solarpunk rather than cottagecore, we should ask how to limit the failures of the insulated communities and how to build upon this model of small interconnected communities to effect changes at non-local scales.

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The authors order is alphabetical as all authors contributed equally.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> We use trans here as an inclusive term following Stryker et al. (2008).

<sup>2</sup> The pan-Asian aspects of the cyberpunk aesthetic are due not only to architectural inspiration, but also western anxieties about the rapid development of Asian technologies, which manifested in a techno-orientalist vision of the future that was dominated by Asian corporations (Roh et al. 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Often with influence from those initial communities: France's main gayborhood, the *Marais*, developed in 1978 around a bar named after NYC's Greenwich Village, one of the earliest gayborhoods (Sibalis 2004). The History of some Latin American cities, for instance, is intrinsically linked to the history of sexuality and, more broadly, sex (Arcos 2014; Gemetro, Figari 2009; Laguarda 2010; Simonetto 2017a; Simonetto 2017b; Trevisan 2018; Vela 2015). So, when this model of sociability and spatiality arrived in the region, it was appropriated, but mainly imposed, in distinct and even contradictory ways, creating new urban configurations.

<sup>4</sup> The British spelling gaybourhood would be consistent with the rest of this article, but it seems nonexistent.

<sup>5</sup> The assimilation of homosexuals into heterosexual life standards, in addition to expressing new meanings of what it is to be homosexual (homonormativity), also gave life to the incorporation of sexuality into geopolitical relations between States, as explained by the concept of homonationalism (Puar 2018).

<sup>6</sup> Another factor that could play a role is the increasing awareness and denunciation of the central role given to alcohol and drinking venues in the community (Villarreal 2019, 2020).

<sup>7</sup> For example, if we look at the British gay scene of 1999, the proportion of gay men using internet to find partners was 48 per cent, whereas less than a third of the British public was using it for non-professional reasons at the time, with a much higher proportion in London (Weatherburn et al. 2003).

<sup>8</sup> We can put this in contrast with postcyberpunk works which often resolve this loss by positing post-singularity societies.

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