

**Communal Joking: Creating New Worlds Through Rhetorical Engagement with *The People's Joker***

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## ABSTRACT

*The People's Joker*, directed by Vera Drew, serves as an example of collaborative rhetorical creation through a genderpunk lens, establishing a critique of cisgender normativity by parodying DC Comics's *Batman* franchise. Using sociohistorical analysis, film analysis, and community engagement research, I argue that the film creates and displays this rhetoric through its collaborative production practices, emphasis on the role of community embodied by the Red Hood Gang, and the resultant impact and social media presence developed among fans and critics of the film. My argument consists of a written component and a digital WordPress website, whereas I choose to engage a mode of scholarship that seeks to emulate the collaborative nature of the film. Through this website, the argument not only reaches a broader audience through accessible means, but additionally creates a platform for fans and others to collaborate on analyses of the film.

The website can be found through this link: <https://communaljoking1.wordpress.com/>

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## CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

Superhero comics, and resulting adaptational or inspired media, have occupied a contested cultural space since their inception, drawing a myriad of sardonic jokes, nostalgic references, and identifiable fanbases both inside and out of American popular culture. As someone growing up both on the Internet and through the emerging Marvel Cinematic Universe, I can distinctly remember the continued clashes between self-identified “real” superhero fans (often cisgender men) and those they identified as “fake” fans or poseurs. Being marked as a poseur could come from a number of supposed fandom crimes: not having read the right comics (with the “right” comics ranging and shifting with each conversation), being a fan from a minority community (particularly women, but Black fans, queer fans, and other identities or configurations are not immune), being a Stucky<sup>1</sup> shipper, and many more. This sort of exclusionary behavior has always existed within mainstream fandom, with Gwendelyn S. Nisbett noting that “This group of geek men, who are often marginalized themselves, are trying to hold onto and perpetuate their form of hypermasculinity by belittling and marginalizing female fans” (183), later writing that this, in part, comes from a perceived “lack of fandom knowledge” (183) attributed to female fans. Regardless of whether or not these (often) young, white, male fans exemplify the traits valorized by white supremacy, patriarchy, and other systems of oppression, they point to minoritized communities as not being able to truly inhabit fandom spaces either through the aforementioned lack of knowledge or from the perceived corruption of these narratives. Comics fandoms, however, are not the only communities that may discriminate against marginalized communities, as noted by the racist backlash against Halle Berry portraying

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<sup>1</sup> “Stucky” referring to a popular ship name for Steve Rogers (“Captain America”) and Bucky Barnes (“Bucky/Winter Soldier”) (“Stucky (fandom)”).

Ariel within 2023's *The Little Mermaid* (Romano). These fandom communities often similarly cite a fear that “woke” studios or artists will corrupt their beloved characters into bastardized depictions through altering a purportedly static quality of the character or narrative for their own purposes.

So what happens when a film debuts from an artist with the intention of purposefully reimagining beloved characters from DC Comics through the lens of their own experiences? How do communities both overrepresented and underrepresented in fandom spaces react to the gleeful anarchy of parody and coming-of-age tale? What happens when the heroic Batman becomes threatening, when the Penguin represents a semi-leftist figure in the alternative comedy scene, or when the Joker moves from a misanthrope affiliated with misogynistic violence to a trans woman anarchist who might just save the city? Here enters *The People's Joker*, a film created by comedic editor Vera Drew.

Vera Drew's guerilla production of *The People's Joker* allows her to debut an unabashedly queer production in which the Batman mythos becomes parodic fodder to analyze her own lived experiences in conversation with online transgender/queer communities. Described as a “revolutionary DIY parody film” (“The People's Joker”), Vera's film depicts the story of a closeted trans girl moving to Gotham City in order to pursue her passion for comedy, where she deals with a stifling transphobic family, comes into conflict with a fascist Batman, and negotiates with a flawed but salvageable society. Joker the Harlequin combines character qualities from the Joker, his former (at least, within DC's current comic continuity) lover/accomplice Harley Quinn, and Drew's own autobiographical impressions to create a character who satirizes alternative comedy, fandom culture, and queer cultural texts with reverence and irreverence in equal strokes. Joker the Harlequin's Red Hood Gang features

beloved characters from Batman's rogues gallery, rendered through different mediums, in an underground community. Within this universe, the mainstream comedy scene of *UCB Live*, the only legal comedy show tightly controlled and enforced by the far-right, state-sponsored Batman, has rejected them. From starting her own "anti-comedy club" to becoming "super-sane" and ascending to the Fifth Dimension, Joker the Harlequin's journey throughout the psychedelically colorful landscape of Drew's *Gotham* depicts a narrative of creating a community of freaks in order to resist the normative state-sponsored violence and appropriation found within the entertainment industry and the Internet.

In order to properly contextualize *The People's Joker* within a landscape of queer creation and criticism, I must establish the contentious situation this little independent film finds itself within in respect as an "unlicensed film." *The People's Joker*, directed/edited/starring/co-written by Vera Drew, emerges as a project from Drew's downtime during the COVID-19 pandemic, as her job in writing and editing for creators like the duo Tim (Heidecker) and Eric (Wareheim) and companies like Adult Swim pulled back. Inspired by her initial project of re-editing Todd Phillip's 2019 *Joker*, Drew worked with over 100 artists to create a transformative work utilizing live action elements in addition to animation (both 3D and 2D) and a little bit of puppetry thrown in, financing the film in part through crowdfunding and with a loan. Making her feature film debut at the Toronto International Film Festival (also known as TIFF), Drew later publicized a conflict between the legal team of Warner Bros. Discovery and her own legal team (backed by TIFF), and although she's made it abundantly clear within interviews that the correspondence did not contain a cease-and-desist letter, it "*does* convey the disapproval of a multimedia conglomerate with the rights to the film's characters" (Grode).

While Drew was able to premiere the film for one screening at the festival (although the film was pulled from other screenings at TIFF), *The People's Joker* has been able to enjoy a (limited) theatrical release in addition to physical and digital media releases, including the opportunity to own the film on VHS ("The People's Joker"). I was able to enjoy seeing the very transgender, very transgressive film at Knoxville's own Central Cinema in April 2024, immediately latching onto the film both as a long-time comic/superhero fan as well as a transgender audience member. While I identify as both genderfluid and transfeminine, I could see myself represented in the chaotically vibrant, almost hallucinogenic film where medium and identity intersect and fracture together to create an elusive but bold declaration for Drew's trans identity. What was a recommendation from my roommate quickly became one of my favorite films of the year, and one that led me to question my own participation within fandom, particularly in how I interacted with other fans in relation to my own queer identity. *The People's Joker* embodies resistance against both rigid definitions on how to participate with media franchises (and the fandom cultures born from them) and normative notions on gender and identity. The scope of my research, then, extends to how the film performs a specific rhetorical strategy that emphasizes pushing the boundaries of respectability and conformity within a cisgender society.

Within this work, I will be formulating *The People's Joker* as a film that engages in "genderpunk" rhetorical practices, drawing from scholars like Tof Eklund and authors like Justine Norton-Kerston who formulate a genre where it is a standard "practice of fucking with and purposefully mocking traditional ideas of gender identity, gender roles, and gender presentation that assume one's sense of self, social roles, and sexual orientation are all predetermined by sex assignment at birth" (Norton-Kerston). Norton-Kerston utilizes a rich

tradition of “-punk” storytelling to envision a genre practice that seeks to push against a rigid, dystopian hegemony that articulates a predestined formulation of bodies and minds. Genderpunk, within this context, has roots within media formulated around queer and/or transgender identities and presentations, but with the specific intent to revolutionize the societal framework that oppresses these identities. Utilizing this formulation, as well as literature expounded within this review in trans studies, media studies, and rhetorical studies, I hope to showcase *The People’s Joker* as not only a genderpunk film, but as a project that speaks in conversation to digital communities in a Frankenstein-like body of social media communication/identification, fandom culture, and evocative potentials for gender and queerness.

I will argue, both within this written half in addition to a web component (“communal joking” found here at <https://communaljoking1.wordpress.com/> as well as in the abstract), the importance of community to *The People’s Joker* and the genderpunk rhetoric it espouses. I aim to link both the film and its practice to the communities it interacts with and impacts (including mine). From the production practices utilized by Drew and co., the narrative’s emphasis on the Red Hood Gang’s “anti-comedy,” to the social media commentary/identification/controversy, the emphasis on communal practices in relation to personal “growing pains” of coming-of-age narratives demonstrates the psychic impact of cultural shared spaces, for good or for ill. However, within this genderpunk formulation, the pain of fraught and/or violent relationships does not deter one from continuing to reach for community. Instead, what *Joker the Harlequin* exemplifies is that personal identity exploration comes hand-in-hand with experience, brought about through forming connections with other freaks both similar and dissimilar to yourself. As a hopefully welcome elaboration on genderpunk storytelling and rhetoric, we move from completely emphasizing the individual experience and towards an emphasis on the necessity of

relationships in any coming-of-age experience. Without a strong emphasis on communal relationship-building, genderpunk moves from a liberatory model that emphasizes autonomy from oppressive systems to the individualistic lack of awareness of how axes of discrimination affect society. Confronting society, as any Joker does, requires strong support as much as it might delight in the “chaos” feared by any hierarchical system.

In order to build this argument, I begin with a literature review (Chapter 2) that covers arguments within trans studies, scholarship around the *Batman* franchise, and media studies to detail the engagement within theories of transness in relation to the development of the film and its rhetorical positioning in a genderpunk structure. Chapter 3 details the methodology I used, from the three-pronged approach I took in analyzing the development of the film, the film itself, and its impact, as well as the approach I took to create the digital component. Chapter 4 contains the bulk of the argument surrounding community, with three sections: one detailing the creation and distribution of the film, one detailing the film and how it develops Joker the Harlequin’s narrative journey, and one detailing the online communities responding to the film and how the website interacts with those discourses by creating both curated and spontaneous interaction between potential users.

## CHAPTER 2 - LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent years, the expansion of transgender, or trans, studies has rapidly expanded throughout the academy, despite the growing pains that accompany such theoretical work as it distinguishes itself from other fields and integrates itself into new interdisciplinary frameworks (Bey 6-7). Trans studies moves beyond static definitions and frameworks of identity to explore the raw, often messy, potentials that the state of transgender being can exemplify within the self, broader culture, and the interconnections of us all. This chaotic evolution works well together with *The People's Joker*, decentering “transgender” as a stable, fixed identity (exemplified by the “born in the wrong body” rhetoric, however valid that may be within individual lived experiences (Bey 166)). Trans studies and its discourse challenges cisgender and heterosexual normativity, questions institutional complicity in assimilation and other forms of systemic violence, and reimagines the possibilities of trans life through theory and practice. Trans studies contributes to worldmaking both for the individual and the broader community one lives within, much as how Joker the Harlequin creates a new, better world with the puppet Mx. Mxyzptlk (who uses they/them pronouns).

While beginning with a retrospective piece may seem counterintuitive, Susan Stryker's "More Words about 'My Words to Victor Frankenstein'" offers an opportunity for analysis regarding a wide timeline within trans studies, as she revisits her germinal 1994 essay to reflect on the transformations in trans theory over the past quarter of a century. Stryker's original essay, which ‘spoke back’ to Shelley’s novel and what Stryker terms as “unstated cisnormative bias in queer theory” (40), articulated the transsexual body as in direct opposition, and directly victimized, through rhetorical associations with artificiality and monstrosity (41). In her follow-up published 25 years later, she critiques both the nature of queer theory’s tense

relationship with respectability within the academy and her own complicit theorization that reinforces white, colonialist rhetoric, such as her affirmation of Karen Barad's critique by stating, "I inadvertently perpetuate the racist trope of imagining blackness as the unmarked and unacknowledged condition on which the existence of whiteness depends" (42). Stryker's retrospective analysis not only allows for an overview of key critical thought within trans studies, but also highlights the complexities in which the body/mind connects and disconnects through social formulation, highlighting the continued relevance of trans being as a site of resistance rather than mere assimilation. In relation to the film, Stryker's reevaluation emphasizes the anti-assimilationist rhetoric of *The People's Joker*, stepping outside of established identity norms but additionally reflecting the body, particularly Joker the Harlequin's body, as a site of conflict and reimagining. Additionally, Stryker's emphasis on anti-assimilation does not focus on rejecting all community, but instead the entrenched, rigid frameworks that demarcate everyone as either normal or different.

Of course, the field of trans studies remains fraught in its own field, as G. Patterson's work exemplifies. Their essay "Entertaining a Healthy Suspicion of the Ally Industrial Complex in Transgender Studies" provides an incisive critique of institutionalized allyship and its complicity in reproducing cisnormative power, particularly in how allies can "gain access to and personally (and unevenly) profit from trans spaces, people, and perspectives" (147). Despite the ways in which cisgender allies within the field of trans studies (and outside of) might communicate their intent to resist the cisnormative hegemony found within/out academia, the emphasis on their own theoretical work while disregarding trans issues or needs reaffirms the hegemony that they seek to critique. Patterson denotes their "suspicion" as a form of epistemological vigilance—a way to question the motivations, frameworks, and effects of cis-led

trans allyship within academia and activism when it comes at the cost of actually listening to trans voices and foregrounding trans praxis. They cite the concept of the "ally industrial complex" from Indigenous Action Media in order to showcase how trans studies often centers cisgender narratives, garners institutional capital for cisgender individuals, and demands palatability from trans researchers and subjects in cisgender articulations as they are "rhetorically crowded out" (148-9). In Patterson's intervention, they call for co-conspirators instead of allies, pushing for cisgender co-conspirators to push aside their own validation and respectability in favor of the amplification of trans experiences and communication in addition to protecting them, "leveraging their privilege" (150) as Patterson puts it. More trans voices should be centered within the field of trans studies, and this requires a move from a cis-dominated discourse. Following Stryker's call against the inherently confining drive against respectability, Patterson's argument asks cisgender scholars to set aside institutional gratification for work that pushes against these boundaries.

However, a strictly identity-based formulation of trans studies is not rendered unproblematic, as Marquis Bey deftly articulates the relationship between Blackness and transness within their work. Marquis Bey's "Other Ways to Be: Trans," in response to Patterson's provocation, posits transness as not merely a question of gender identity but as a modality of being that resists legibility, order, and containment particularly in how it manifests within racial conceptions (166-7). Bey pushes against the fixity of "transgender" in relation to "transness" as an identity category, instead proposing transness as a practice of refusal, of slipping through categorical regimes and embracing incoherence. Particularly, they draw from the ways in which Black women are hypermasculinized in contrast to white women whether or not they are cisgender, and Bey clarifies this critique "to say that the subjective nexus of Black and woman,

for example, irrespective of an identified trans gender, also experiences the surveillance and invasion of their bodies” (166). Drawing from Black feminism, Bey situates transness within an expansive, fluid state, suggesting that while transgender studies might benefit from the foregrounding of transgender voices, that transness expands beyond identity to formulate action and reaction between bodies as the body continues to be articulated through gender. Bey's response to Patterson does not seek to destabilize transgender identity completely, but to understand this: gender mediates differently throughout various amounts of transgression based on factors of race, disability, class, and more. Thus, to restrict trans studies to a strictly identity-based orientation holds certain assumptions around “the binary” fixed. This framing destabilizes the borders of gender while simultaneously refusing the assimilationist pull of inclusion into existing structures of power.

In "Trouble Genders: 'LGBT' Collapse and Trans Fundamentality," Bey furthers this critique by interrogating the neoliberal consolidation of LGBT identity politics. Bey argues that the acronym's flattening effect undermines the radical potential of transness by subsuming it into a liberal politics of recognition and rights. The essay contends that transness, rather than merely being one letter in the LGBT acronym, represents a fundamental disturbance to the very foundation of gender and sexuality categories, by having their “primary argument of trans fundamentality, that transness—gender transgressivity in this context, or troubled and troubling gender—rests at the fundament of the acronym, the letter that in a variety of circumstances brings the other letters and their indexed demographics into a kind of legibility” (6). Transness and the identity of “being transgender,” then, becomes a paradigmatic rupture. This critique opens the door to a rearticulation of queer and trans politics that is anti-normative, abolitionist, and deeply critical of the logics of liberal inclusion, particularly in how we represent gender

transgression when transgression is at the heart of the discourse. Bey calls for a politics rooted not in representational equity much like the criticism of “rainbow capitalism” but in dismantling the cisheteronormative frameworks that structure our society.

The field of trans studies, of course, is not limited to these authors, but Stryker, Patterson, and Bey offer key critical concepts to guide an analysis regarding the rhetoric of *The People's Joker*: sociopolitical awareness of the multiple axes of oppression working in tandem with transphobia, acknowledging the pressure to assimilate while firmly rejecting binary thinking, and understanding the importance of community for liberatory work. While Joker the Harlequin is specifically a transgender woman, her work as “the people’s Joker” involves disrupting the entire system rather than focusing on her own individual liberation. In order to understand the genderpunk rhetoric of the film, transness needs to be understood as a liberatory mechanism through which the world can be changed.

While I could spend all day articulating more work in trans studies, there needs to be a focus on the traditional representation of the Batman mythos as a whole and the various queer eruptions that remain possible within both the extended franchise (consisting of comics, movies, television shows, video games, and more) and the cultural conversation surrounding it. In one sense, this serves as a sort of intellectual legacy that artists like Drew can draw upon, but furthermore, these queer eruptions represent a marginality that, by shifting various cultural milieus about, draws further engagement and examination into how we represent heroism and villainy. Furthermore, how can the ties between the two, particularly within Drew’s hands, articulate complex relationships between acceptable or unacceptable presentations, such as their respective costumed identities and actions?

Will Brooker's *Batman Unmasked: Analyzing a Cultural Icon* offers a cultural history of Batman, arguing that the character functions less as a coherent persona and more as a palimpsest onto which cultural anxieties and aspirations are projected, as a result of how "he has now transcended the role of institutional product and could survive independently, albeit in a different form, as twenty-first-century myth" (20). Brooker traces Batman's iterations from the 1930s to the early 2000s, analyzing the way the character evolves alongside shifting societal norms around gender, power, and morality. Central to Brooker's argument is the notion that Batman is not a stable identity but a series of interpretations, each one shaped by its historical context in addition to the various levels through which one can access the text, officially or not (25-6). Brooker also examines the character's complex relationship to masculinity. Batman is at once extremely masculine and emotionally reserved, but also deeply intimate in his male relationships, particularly with Robin. Furthermore, the intersection between his homosocial relationships and his romantic dalliances with women becomes a fraught cultural struggle as audiences facilitate between queer and normative readings (93-94).<sup>2</sup> Brooker suggests that this duality opens space for queer readings of the Batman/Robin dynamic while simultaneously affirming heteronormative ideals through the absence of explicitly acknowledged queerness. Batman becomes, in Brooker's analysis, a cipher for exploring both repressed and expressed cultural desires, particularly those linked to male identity and the performance of control (122-124). For the Batman of *The People's Joker*, this becomes particularly critical as he controls the social and legal structures of Gotham City largely, in part, to curated media appearances. These appearances emphasize a performative heterosexuality to contrast with his pedophilic grooming of Mr. J, Joker the Harlequin's first boyfriend and eventual abuser.

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<sup>2</sup> Never mind the corporate desire to project a certain image of Batman that remains sexually "vanilla," such as Warner Bros/DC not allowing *Harley Quinn* to reference him performing cunnilingus (Otterson).

Moving towards explicit consideration of repressing desire, Jeffrey A. Brown's essay "Batman and Sexuality: Secret Identities, Lust, and Romance" takes up the question of eroticism and sexual repression in Batman narratives, focusing particularly on how secret identities function as metaphors for repressed desire. Brown argues that the franchise's consistent avoidance of overt sexuality—especially in relation to its central characters—produces a subtext of erotic tension that is frequently read as queer. Brown highlights the historical moral panic surrounding Batman comics, particularly Frederic Wertham's infamous 1954 critique in *Seduction of the Innocent* (additionally referenced in most material here), which accused the Batman/Robin relationship of promoting homosexuality. In response, DC Comics and affiliated companies restructured its narratives to include more heterosexual romantic subplots, a move that Brown reads as a reactionary effort to suppress queer subtext rather than eradicate it (55). The result is a paradoxical dynamic: the more the narratives attempt to affirm heterosexuality, the more they reveal their anxieties about queerness. Importantly, Brown situates this tension within the broader genre of superhero fiction, arguing that secret identities, double lives, and costumed performance often function as allegories for closeted sexuality and queer identity formation (74). While *The People's Joker* is certainly not the first to represent a potentially romantic/sexual relationship (or overtones) between Batman and another man (or, in this case, boy), it blatantly rejects the safety of that closeted space that the mask can represent.

In a move towards understanding the Joker as a character, *The Joker: A Serious Study of the Clown Prince of Crime*, Robert Moses Peaslee and Robert G. Weiner's edited collection, curates a series of essays that explore the Joker as a figure of cultural contradiction. The Joker is read variously as anarchist, trickster, terrorist, dandy, and queer icon, and he becomes a being of excess whose refusal of stable identity places him outside conventional moral and

epistemological frameworks. Across the anthology, scholars like Tosha Taylor and Ryan Litsey discuss how the Joker functions as a critique of normative ideals in addition to his symbol of aberration (226-227). His flamboyance, theatricality, and violence violently puncture the boundaries between what is considered shameful and healthy, with Litsey describing the Joker with “He merely seeks chaos of the current order” (228). Whereas others scholars posit Batman to have a containing quality despite his queer potential, the Joker flaunts excess in everything he does to destabilize societal “order.” Scholars in this collection link the Joker to camp aesthetics, queer deviance, and even anti-capitalist critique, with Michael Goodrum stating:

Batman could be seen to represent the forces that hold society together, the Joker those that constantly threaten its fragmentation. As long as society exists, at least in its current Western form, these opposing forces will constantly be in motion and will find a mode of expression. The myth of a stable society is precisely that: a myth (281).

The Joker’s queer potential throughout this collection pools in his ability to willfully transgress against any establishment of coherence or proper conduct. His character works by violently resisting whatever frameworks might try to define or adhere to him. Joker the Harlequin’s gender variance and anarchic status, while potentially more morally palatable, draw inspiration from a long history of Joker characterization and fandom.

Chris Richardson's *Batman and the Joker: Contested Sexuality in Popular Culture* offers perhaps the most direct engagement with the queer implications of the Batman/Joker binary. Richardson builds upon psychoanalytic and queer theory to argue that the relationship between Batman and the Joker is underwritten by an erotic subtext that transcends good-versus-evil dynamics. The Joker’s obsession with Batman, and Batman’s emotional entanglement with his nemesis, is read as a homosocial attachment that frequently veers into queer desire. Richardson

extends this analysis by suggesting that the Joker represents a kind of queer possibility that Batman must constantly repress. While Batman functions as the guardian of normative masculinity and civic order, the Joker enacts chaotic resistance through performative excess, particularly in how “The Joker disturbs gender expectations by easily adopting traditionally masculine roles—a knight, a police chief—while also espousing feminine characteristics such as painted lips and elaborate costumes” (43). In this way, the Joker becomes a figure of queer jouissance—the pleasure of undoing, disrupting, and transforming. What makes Richardson’s contribution particularly compelling is his insistence that the Batman/Joker dynamic is not simply a matter of reading queerness into the text, but of recognizing how queerness structures the very grammar of their interactions, stating that “I believe the pleasure for readers comes not from asking whether Batman will be turned forever crooked or the Joker forever straight, but in seeing how each will find vulnerabilities in the other’s self-presentation and watching what they will do in response” (52).

While not an exhaustive list into the scholarship surrounding queer readings into the Batman mythos, I highlight these sources to showcase the aforementioned intellectual legacy that Drew draws upon, in addition to non-academic cultural commentary. At the time of writing this, Archive of Our Own, notable online fanfiction repository, has 50,538 works within Batman (All Media Types) that are tagged as a male/male ship (Works). Homophobic critics marked *The Lego Batman Movie* as “pro-gay” propaganda for making a joke in which Batman “breaks up” with the Joker as the hero to his villain (Gonzalez). Harley Quinn and Poison Ivy, both notable female figures within Batman’s rogues gallery, have been in romantic relationships across a variety of Batman media, such as the animated Harley Quinn show (Jaffe). Queerness, within a conversation around Batman, cannot be escaped, but each of these sources showcases fraught

relationships between Batman, queerness, and community, instead working through subtext and cultural anxieties for most of the character's publication history.

Moving into more media/rhetorical studies in relation to queer theory and trans studies, I want to move towards micha cárdenas's *The Transreal: Political Aesthetics of Crossing Realities* because of the emphasis on transness in relation to other types of media. cárdenas proposes the "transreal" as a framework to understand the intersection of trans identities, augmented realities, and digital technologies, claiming "that an understanding of building and working with multiple realities is essential for artists and political actors who wish to be effective in a post-contemporary field of proliferating realities" (24). Drawing from performance art, gaming, and mixed-reality installations, cárdenas argues that the boundaries between virtual and physical experiences are increasingly blurred, and that for trans individuals, these digital spaces become powerful platforms for self-expression and survival, with her noting that she's "a shape-shifter, a dragon, and a light wave" (30-31) to resist conventional ideas of her identity. cárdenas contends that the transreal is a political aesthetic that enables new forms of embodiment and world-making, a tradition that *The People's Joker* takes up with gusto. The production through a variety of computer-generated animation, in addition to the consistent engagement with digital media throughout the text, showcases the creation and recreation of the world in a vision of Joker the Harlequin's transness. Joker mediates the transreal in order to work liberatory change through identity exploration and formulation.

Moving toward the niche *The People's Joker* occupies, Halberstam's work in *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* and *The Queer Art of Failure* figure well into the conception of art that *The People's Joker* occupies. Halberstam's focus on subcultures, punk scenes, and transgender bodies frames queerness as a temporal and spatial deviation,

rejecting the normal “milestones” in a cisgender/heterosexual context, like birth and marriage. In doing so, Halberstam offers a powerful tool for analyzing queer media that embraces ephemerality, failure, and non-linearity, stating that “‘Queer time’ is a term for those specific models of temporality that emerge within postmodernism once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance” (14). Halberstam further challenges normative metrics of success, arguing that failure can be a productive and radical stance for queer and trans people. Drawing on film, animation, and popular culture, Halberstam identifies failure, passivity, and silliness as tactics for resisting capitalist, heteronormative, and ableist imperatives of progress and achievement. This resonates with DIY media aesthetics, camp, and genderpunk performance, emerging in a constellation of texts and responses that connect to each other through literal and digital space (67). Additionally, this ties to Jonathan Gray’s notion of the “paratext” found in *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*. Jonathan Gray argues that media meaning is shaped not just by the text itself, but by a network of “paratexts” consisting of promos, trailers, DVD extras, and fan discourse that orbit a media object. Paratexts serve both as marketing tools and sites of ideological framing, often controlling audience expectations before engagement with the primary text and mediating response afterwards (33-34). The text, in both Halberstam and Gray’s arguments, relies on additional cultural sites in order to communicate and be communicated with, either through artists or fans who mediate their own engagement with other members of the community. Furthermore, this ties to the extended media presence of *The People’s Joker*, particularly with the guerilla marketing campaign performed by Vera Drew and fans in order to acquire distribution.

José Esteban Muñoz theorizes in his monograph *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* that "disidentification" as a survival strategy and aesthetic practice utilizes "disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture" (31). This argument rests upon the assertion that, in Muñoz's focus, queer people of color subvert and reimagine mainstream societal mores and texts through disidentification, creating modes of resistance that may not directly run in conflict with mainstream society's ideologies (white supremacy, heteronormativity, etc). Instead, they run counter to it, becoming a survival mechanism and mode of expression. Remixing and reshuffling cultural texts to create transformative works fits well with Michael Warner's notion of the "counterpublic," which "maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status. The cultural horizon against which it marks itself off is not just a general or wider public, but a dominant one" (86). These positions allow for the opportunity for queer excess and critique. The counterpublic, then, is not merely a space of victimhood, but a subversive community that remains aware of its position within a larger social framework as opposed to larger discriminatory mechanisms that exist to regulate behavior and social coherence. Without this awareness and queer potential, these counterpublics lack the ability to critique, to renegotiate, and to reimagine the world, but armed with this ability, like Joker, they can rewrite the world.

Drawing from trans studies, Batman scholarship, and queer media studies showcases an ongoing conversation both within the academy and without that focus on the inherent queerness and trans exploration that undergirds a variety of fandom's interactions with popular culture. However, what becomes most apparent within reviewing these sources, particularly within a focus on transformative works, is the disconnect between trans studies emphasis on liberatory

work and the queer media/rhetorical studies emphasis of social mechanisms upon the individual subject. Even in the Batman scholarship, queerness might exist within the palimpsest that is the Batman character, but one that exists through excess of varying degrees of the character that have been interpreted and reinterpreted. For *The People's Joker*, and particularly for the understanding of genderpunk rhetoric, one must then ask how might a creative work emphasize production practices and narrative choices in order to move from the imposition of hegemonic oppression to the potential for something greater, something within and outside of the system at play. Guiding this broader question, then, is the central question of how can the film emphasize community through an individualistic coming-of-age narrative? Furthermore, how does an emphasis on community enable further change for the narrative and the surrounding cultural conversation around it?

### CHAPTER 3 - METHODOLOGY

In approaching this project, I struggled with trying to understand how to render the argument within the strictures of a conventional academic thesis, particularly in terms of accessibility. Although I have previously completed an undergraduate thesis for my Bachelor's degree at the University of Tennessee Knoxville, I could not help but to wonder how the argument for community-building within a genderpunk framework would remain accessible, particularly in acts of potential online conversation, when it remains rendered in a strictly academic format. Following Lehman and Tienari's understanding of rhetorical audience awareness in saying "we extend this to who we write for: the reader evoked in the writer's mind in each stage of crafting texts" (470) in regards to academic accessibility, I additionally thought about the types of readers I wanted to engage discourse with. One type, being, other scholars who may benefit from the structures of the academic thesis, but I cannot help but to think about other audiences like the online communities that engage with the field. I wanted to display my argument in a way accessible to these online communities in order to foster further conversation in regards to the film's genderpunk rhetoric, allowing online users the opportunity to engage with my argument. I sought to complete a digital component to the project, bringing an online interface through which to foster these sorts of connections. I approach this work through two major reasons: the implementation of digital, multimodal platforms allow scholars like me to reach out to their audiences such as public fan culture, and the demonstration of more scholarship that includes multimodal composition to underline an argument in ways that traditional academic writing may not.

Both the written component and the website detail a three-pronged approach to the communal impact within *The People's Joker's* genderpunk rhetoric. The first approach displays

the crowdsourced and interpersonal production practices that enabled the indie film to be created and distributed, primarily through a sociohistorical lens that draws from a variety of interviews and statements from Vera Drew and other contributors. The second approach consists of a combination of a more traditional film and rhetorical analysis, particularly in the relationships displayed by Joker the Harlequin among the Red Hood Gang, her family, and more. The third approach details a rhetorical analysis among actors online regarding the film, primarily drawing from social media and reviews for the analysis. Each are threaded together to argue that, for the film's rhetorical effect to establish a basis for trans exploration and resistance, the communal creation, development, and engagement are necessary to produce the potential for a trans worldbuilding.

In order to approach the context of the digital component, I must first offer my rationale to how I'm engaging with digital rhetoric. Digital rhetoric, both as a practice and a site for study, has undergone rapid changes with the continually shifting landscape of the Internet. These changes, whether through social media, further computational developments, or technological shifts, ensure that digital rhetoricians adapt to the new opportunities. In an interview conducted by Jim Rodolfo, Stuart A. Selber notes this continual development, stating that "Digital rhetoricians also modify classical Western concepts to help give them modern relevance" (2). While the emphasis on classical Western concepts is limited as a frame, it can additionally be applied to the growth exhibited by the Internet because of the increasing need for adaptational relevancy. The traditional, Western concepts that Selber cites are not rendered obsolete, but instead facilitated through additional strategies and technologies available to the rhetorician. However, the drive towards development cannot be the only pursuit for rhetoricians, for the acceleration of digital platforms and content rapidly ensures that knowledge is lost. Selber

advocates for a bifurcated approach, noting that “I find it profitable to be able to accommodate and resist classical Western concepts, including both in the same project.” This project, then, becomes an opportunity to extend the argument through a digital, more communal space, both as a development for accessible writing and for the rhetorical imperative to adopt digital strategies to participate within digital spaces. Furthermore, the opportunity to combine this written component in addition to the digital component offers the project a hybridized potential longevity, stored within WordPress’s servers as well as through the Tennessee Research and Creative Exchange (TRACE) database.

Understanding different audiences is a crucial aspect in digital rhetoric, however, because it ensures that multiple audiences can situate themselves within the text. Different audiences bring unique values, expectations, and cultural contexts that shape how they interpret digital content, much the same as traditionally written academic works, but the emphasis on juggling multiple modes of text creation allows for broader access. Particularly through the advent of social media, audiences engaging with digital platforms expect a variety of approaches within a text’s presentation. In “Social Media as Multimodal Composing: Networked Rhetorics and Writing in a Digital Age,” Stephanie Vie notes “The choices that multimodal composers may make have become more complex thanks to the broadened reach, greater rhetorical velocity, and wider and more varied audiences prevalent in social media. Writing is happening all the time in social media” (122). By considering audience expectations through a variety of lenses, rhetoricians can choose the most appropriate tone, language, medium, and design elements as part of their argument’s presentation. Without considering the multitude of ways that I can present my argument, I ultimately lack the opportunity to even engage with discourse with online communities because I’m not thinking with them in mind. The necessary aesthetic and accessible

decisions in rendering any digital component then pare down to understanding what the community you seek to engage needs.

However, engagement and persuasion are simply not enough in the establishment of online communities. Taking cues from constitutive rhetoric, understanding community is essential because it is through the interactions and developments of community that identities are shaped, maintained, and mobilized. Constitutive rhetoric refers to the way discourse creates a collective identity for an audience, inviting individuals to see themselves as part of a larger whole (224-225). Shira Chess describes it in her research in casual gaming among women and says, “Ultimately, constitutive rhetoric helps to position a now complicated relationship between speaker and audience. It moves rhetorical theory away from thinking that an audience member is persuaded by an act of speech, and towards the notion that different audiences are primed differently to constitute a larger sense of ‘community’” (226). This process is not merely about persuasion but about the formation of shared meaning, values, and a sense of belonging, and within digital spaces, this presents the opportunity to form new connections.

When rhetoricians attempt to address a group, they often invoke a sense of community to create solidarity, establishing a series of connections among audiences, both in-group and out-of-group. The audience, in turn, becomes more than just a passive recipient of a message; they are interpellated into a role or identity that carries ideological weight. To understand the role of digital rhetoric within community-building, one must recognize that communities are not fixed, static entities. Audiences form shifting, dynamic relationships to both the text and their fellow users. By understanding that “Our technologies (and their paratexts) construct us—hail us—as communities” (Chess 230), we further understand the necessity of understanding the audience in our own work. Language and other constitutive parts of the texts play a pivotal role

in drawing the boundaries of who is included and who is excluded from a community, drawing from shared narratives, cultural references, and internal homogeneity or diversity. When rhetoricians engage with these nuances, they can acknowledge and reflect the complexity of communal identity that fosters stronger bonds and motivates collective action. Understanding community is not just a strategy but a responsibility, shaping how people come to see themselves and each other in relation to broader social and cultural narratives. In the pursuit of this digital component, it becomes my responsibility ethically to foster a community that engages in more transformative building of ourselves and our relationships.

Some admissions are necessary, however, in understanding the status of the website at the time of writing. I aimed to offer the website as a proof of concept, an ongoing site for development that exemplifies potential for communal building among fans of the film and fandom as a whole. I, however, am only one person and not particularly trained in the creation of a website. Therefore, what is offered as a website is essentially a prototype, or something that can/will be changed throughout its development as an independent project. This is based on the affordances I had due to general accessibility of website-building platforms, my admittedly limited skills in programming and digital creation, and the necessary constraints of time. While it would be nice to have a spiffy website to completely revolutionize the web, I hope you as a reader can accept my web component for the rhetorical choices I make, rather than the limitations in web development on my end.

In the process of creating the website, I began to try and formulate how best to convey my argument through my web component. Over a series of conversations with my thesis committee, we worked through several ideas on how I could best develop such a project, providing enough material to illustrate the argument while also leaving room to grow.

Open-source tools utilized by a variety of academics and non-academics alike, such as StoryMap through Knight Lab, provided interesting alternatives to the theorizing of the project. However, I found that each tool that we discussed represented a specific approach to the project that would ultimately limit it due to my research goals. For example, the StoryMap tool would provide an interesting analysis into a spatial representation of the film, and I would very much like to see future research on the topic of space within the film. However, there exists no map of Gotham City as depicted in *The People's Joker* (unlike, say, Westeros of *A Song of Ice and Fire* or Narnia), and creating a map would fall outside of the scope of the project. Perhaps I could create that for a fun personal project.

In the process of deciding which website or digital component to include, the use of Communalistic allowed for compiling data regarding who was contributing to discourse around the film and how users interacted with each other. These datasets for platforms like Reddit allowed me to only see comments from the past week, specifically for searching for specific subreddits. Based on initial research through a search query involving *The People's Joker*, I began to curate lists of subreddits that had interactions with the film, like “r/movies” and “r/mtf,” in order to begin curating datasets. These initial prompts allowed for opportunities to view interactions between the users through commenting and post creation, allowing me to spread out organically to users’ posts on other subreddits and, in some cases, other platforms. However, the supplementation of Communalistic did not feel enough like an accessible way to present the information to a wider set of audiences.

Once we had agreed to my trying to create a website in order to build the interactive component, we tried to theorize what could be possible for the project. My favorite idea from this ongoing conversation involved the creation of a sort of “queered” Batman fansite: one that

would present like an older fanpage for the Batman mythos<sup>3</sup> before delving into webpages that showcased examples of fan interaction with the film. It was with this mindset that I began researching the available tools for me in order to start working on this website, and with some recommendations, I started to experiment with WordPress.

With WordPress, however, came particular hurdles that shaped the course of the project, narrowing the digital component to become more akin to a submittable blog rather than the decked-out fansite I had dreamed. Primarily, the issues revolved around the fees necessary to implement WordPress's full functionality. WordPress offers a free plan for subscribers to develop their own website, and this allows users to arrange a series of posts and different webpages, with posts being cross-referenceable through a series of tags on each post. However, the paid plans have an increasing amount of additional features and customization options, making the free plan limited to a specific function and range of designs. In order to make a custom domain that does not reference WordPress or your initial username based on your email address, one must agree to pay for a subscription. In order to access a broad number of templates and customization elements for those templates, a subscription is needed. Even to allow for no ads, faster service from a support team, or features like video uploads, WordPress requires a subscription. While this may not provide an issue for some, I am a graduate student working a part-time job in addition to my duties as a graduate teaching associate in order to make rent.

The website was designed in order to approximate as closely as I could to an older site with the free version of WordPress. This included utilizing the retro "Pixl" template, although this allowed for only a certain stylistic approach, including fonts and colors that cannot be changed. All of this to say, the web component offers a series of blog-styled posts referenced

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<sup>3</sup>Inspiration for this idea came through interactions with websites like *1966 Batman Pages*, a website made in order to serve as a tribute to the 1966-68 series *Batman*.

through a series of tags in order to provide an accessible opportunity to read the entries describing different facets of my argument. These pages each contain a comment function, to allow conversation to develop in reaction to my argument that, potentially, may provide a closer, more manageable site of discourse. Additionally, the implementation of a potential “Submissions” page (<https://communaljoking1.wordpress.com/submissions/>) offers visitors the opportunity to submit their own posts (if they feel inclined) to allow for greater variety in the blogspace. While I will not be anywhere near as rigorous in my submission standards as any academic journal, I established a Google Form for two reasons: to enable anonymity if the author desires it, and the opportunity to regulate posts that may prove detrimental to the community that could be built. The “communal joking” website is meant to serve as a bridge between the thesis and a broader series of discourse communities, performing the work of the thesis by ensuring that the general argument as displayed within this text becomes enhanced through online user interaction.

The written component, then serves in part as a launching point for the digital component, tracking not only the argument made in terms of how *The People’s Joker* performs genderpunk rhetoric through an emphasis on community, but to additionally create a digital platform as a means of performing community work myself. In this manner, I have tried to work within the WordPress platform to establish a website that ensures that the film’s production practices, narrative, and social impact are highlighted within an accessible space. Furthermore, I want to invite users to view the text, and potentially more media, through the lens of their own experiences with gender and transness.

## CHAPTER 4 - JOKER THE HARLEQUIN'S JOURNEY: FROM AN EDIT TO A HASHTAG

Each section of this chapter emphasizes a different section of my three-pronged approach, detailing a separate, yet interrelated, aspect to how the film utilizes community structures. I present the framing in a mostly linear fashion, moving from production/distribution to the film itself, finally ending with community impact. Each section contains a different approach, focusing on the type of research and results it produced.

### **Production Practices and Distribution Nightmares**

In order to emphasize the formation of a collective genderpunk rhetoric, we must start with the collaborative nature of the development of *The People's Joker*. The production practices of the film offer a radical deviation from traditional film industry standards, both in terms of structure and ethos. As a project conceived during the COVID-19 pandemic, *The People's Joker* began as a solo editing experiment by Vera Drew, based off of a commission that she received from her friend (and eventual co-writer) Bri LeRose. LeRose paid Drew to create a comedic edit of Todd Phillips's 2019 film *Joker*, as the director had critiqued ““woke culture”” for making comedy a more difficult genre to work within, choosing instead to work based on films like those of Scorsese as inspiration (Shachat). Drew began to edit before realizing that she had more to add to the project, resulting in the beginning of *The People's Joker*. Drew's background as an editor laid the foundation for a highly referential, genre-fluid aesthetic, one that utilizes a variety of different media, like 2D animation or puppetry, to tell the story. However, the film could not have been made without both the funding endeavors undertaken by Drew, including crowdsourcing, and a variety of other artists creating their own additions to the film, creating a kaleidoscopic text that transforms just as much as it references. Through each stage of

production, the emphasis on ethical collaboration and mutual creation informs the final film as much as visibility on Drew's personal narrative.

Beginning with the context of Drew's work in the moment, the COVID-19 pandemic, as any post-2019 article will tell you, dramatically affected the world and continues to impact people, either through the virus itself (as anyone who's immunocompromised might tell you) or through the structures undergirding our state, our economy, or our entertainment. During the pandemic, the global entertainment industry scrambled to restructure production and distribution in response, mobilizing amid the political controversy generated throughout the United States and outside of it. Murat Akser, in his introduction for the Fall 2020 issue of *CINEJ Cinema Journal*, describes the state of film production past the beginning of the pandemic, saying "Film production was also negatively affected. There are now new protocols in place to keep the actors and crews safe. Yet even with the best of intentions new reports indicate that the virus is spreading across the globe on film sets too" (3). COVID at that point meant that many lost jobs and opportunities for work, but Drew remained self-employed with a loan to both assist her work and help to fund the project. Additionally, both money and the conditions during COVID influenced Drew's filming for the film, which took place over five days, and the manner through which she was able to connect with a variety of artists to work on the project, like Tucker Wooley, digitally. Wooley created the romantic animated scenes between Joker the Harlequin and her paramour Mr. J, and they mention the culture that discourages this kind of collaboration, saying, "'you're kind of encouraged not to reach out. That's seen as a faux pas or a look of desperation...But it goes a long way to be earnestly interested in something and reaching out and sharing that with somebody. That is how connections are made'" (Molloy). Wooley's experience

in animating sequences for the film relies on alternative rhetorical strategies, focusing on sharing appreciation and interest within an artistic collaboration.

In order to film, however, there needed to be money for the production, as Drew's loan had been spent. Turning to crowdfunding, the project raised \$25,000 in order to complete the five day shoot, and the filming was complete. However, in order to properly compensate the variety of artists who wanted to work on the film and to have enough time to edit the film, Drew took out a "huge loan." She specifically states that "I never wanted people to work on it for free, because the movie was so much about how exploitative and shitty show business can be. I didn't want the behind the scenes of it to embody that in any way" (Molloy). A vast majority of the art utilized for the film, such as Tucker Wooley's work, followed an improvisational spirit, as Drew shares that "the mantra from the beginning with this movie really was 'Yes, and'" (Shachat), allowing for a variety of media utilized within the film. For example, K. Kypers animated through the lens of *Batman: The Animated Series* (developed and produced in part by Bruce Timm), pulling inspiration from the aesthetic of the animation in order to create the fight scenes in which Joker the Harlequin confronts Batman. She specifically cites the inherent subversion of gender within these scenes, saying "The Bruce Timm aesthetic is really super gendered...It was a task to try and show the trans characters in particular in a way that wasn't cis-iffying them and yet still trying to make them read as Bruce Timm's" (Shachat). However, with Drew's collaborative production, these ideas grow from simply her own experiences rendered fantastically onscreen to an intersection of ideas. Drew mentions in an interview that "'I knew my hand was going to be all over this to an obnoxious degree — to a degree that I would feel uncomfortable just putting out there if I didn't have all these other very clear, and often very queer differing perspectives'" (Shachat). While *The People's Joker* is a deeply personal film, the

production switches from a spotlight solely on Drew as some sort of auteur and instead into a deeply collaborative process. There would be no film without the creative exchanges between many artists, not just those aforementioned, and without Drew embracing flexibility in vision. It showcases that art doesn't need institutional approval to be powerful, and that the internet can function not just as a place of consumption but as a site of radical creation and solidarity.

As previously mentioned, *The People's Joker* was pulled from screening at TIFF due to the potential legal dispute between Warner Bros. Discovery and Drew. This sudden interruption within screenings and distribution created a cult mystique around the film, which was only helped by the social media mission that Drew embarked upon with #FreeThePeoplesJoker (Grode). For months, the project was effectively untouchable through traditional channels, with many mainstream distributors largely avoiding the film due to the potential threat of litigation over its use of recognizable DC characters and iconography, even though Drew and her legal team maintained the project fell under fair use protections as a parody. However, *The People's Joker* was soon picked up by Altered Innocence, a distribution company that prides itself upon being "dedicated to releasing LGBTQ & Coming-of-Age films with an artistic edge" ("About") and released on a limited theatrical run in addition to physical and digital media distribution (Grode). Ultimately, the distribution of Drew's film was defined by its ability to fall within the letter of the law while finding room for transformative rebellion. Instead of a wide theatrical release or major streaming debut, it circulated as much through word of mouth as it did online, even if it had a somewhat snarky hashtag of #freethepeoplesjoker. This decentralized, community-supported model reflects the film's own narrative values: resistance to authority, prioritization of queer identity, and a commitment to shared cultural subversion.

Each stage of the production process, then, renders the action of collaboration outside of individualism a necessity. This action renders the hegemonic conceptions that determine how movies are approved, made, and distributed one that aligns within a genderpunk rhetoric. Of course, collaboration is not the only form of engaging multiple creators and participants within artistic expression and creation; it merely exposes an already underlying web of connections necessary to experience creative action. Vlad Petre Glăveanu, in his book *Distributed Creativity Thinking Outside the Box of the Creative Individual*, defines creativity as “distributed between multiple actors, creations, places and times...it renders visible the network of people, actions and relations that make creativity possible and that might be obscured when we focus exclusively on the ‘high-end’ of this phenomenon” (2). As a direct response to the argument of auteurism, Glăveanu highlights the necessity of understanding the material/financial and social support, or lack thereof, within any creative process. Regardless of whether or not Drew was able to fund and develop her film within the fraught entertainment industry post-COVID, the necessity of allocating funding and additional labor to complete the film highlights the decision by Drew to engage within more horizontal collaboration. She could have stripped the idea down, softening it to appeal to more influential studios and distributors, but in focusing on her style of additive collaboration, the production practices layer together to serve as their own commentary on the process of creating film outside of the mainstream studio system. Furthermore, these production practices inherently affect the text, as “in distributed creative acts we cannot easily disentangle the psychological from the physical, the social from the individual, nor should we be concerned with such segmentations” (Glăveanu 26). These practices emblemize community because they focus on collaboration, showcasing a variety of queer practices that Drew alludes to within interviews conducted for the film’s release.

Creative action flows with this form of genderpunk rhetoric because it embeds the practices directly corresponding to this anti-oppressive text, but it furthermore allows the interaction between Drew's specific lens of trans celebration to the project. Glăveanu notes that "Creative action is an excellent illustration of distribution since it clearly engages the individual and his/her psychological processes but does so in view of materialising or externalising these processes into cultural artefacts, always in collaboration with other people" (82), establishing the integration of these rhetorical lenses within the text produced. Whether it draws from Drew's personal experiences or, such as in the example with Kypers, the necessary subversion of other aesthetic choices, the rhetorical effect of the text becomes tied to the manner through which the artists were able to collaborate on the project. Glăveanu later expands on the necessity of such a framework for creative action, noting:

"We need a theory of distributed creativity in order to acknowledge the fact that the creative agent is multiple without making any single individual less of a 'creator' in his or her own right. If creative experience requires, in essence, 'a will to expression, and to communication with others' (Negus and Pickering 2004, p. 22), it means that creativity itself is outward-looking and its privileged domain is the space between people and cultural artefacts" (89).

Through *The People's Joker's* production practices, the film composes a specific site of discourse within the text itself and the opportunity to engage with the text. Without the community to build the film, the film itself could not depict community within gender-based critique and exploration or provide the contexts through which online actors could produce discourse.

### **Narrative Analysis**

Beginning with a collaborative production, it becomes necessary to see these opposing queer voices and their impact within the narrative, particularly as we move toward how the film's narrative and aesthetic elements impact a variety of audiences. While I offered a brief description of *The People's Joker's* narrative earlier, I want to familiarize my audience with a brief synopsis of the film. The film is set in a dystopian version of Gotham City, where comedy is regulated by the government and the only legal comedy comes from a corporatized television program called *UCB Live* (short for the United Clown Bureau), intended as a parody of Saturday Night Live with Lorne Michaels included as the showrunner. The narrative follows Joker the Harlequin, a trans woman and aspiring comedian, as she moves from her small hometown of Smallville in order to pursue her dream of performing at UCB. Raised under conservative values under her overbearing mother, Joker was subjected to gender-based conversion therapy as a child through Smylex, a drug meant to ensure she always had a smile on her face despite her dysphoria. Joker the Harlequin escapes to Gotham where she quickly realizes her dream of performing in *UCB Live* requires participating within a system that misgenders her, facilitates censorship, and preys upon aspiring comedians through an Illuminati-esque series of trials and financial donations. Meeting Oswald Cobblepot (known to comic fans as the Penguin), she forms an underground comedy troupe in order to learn and perform her craft, running into the characters of Mr. J, a transgender man and her love interest, and Batman, the enforcer of Gotham City's comedy restriction.

Her romance with Mr. J develops as he begins to validate her gender identity exploration and formation, and he soon reveals after her transition through jumping into a tub of estrogen brings Batman into their lives that he was a Robin named Jason Todd. After Batman adopted him, he funded Jason's gender-affirming transition and groomed him, which led to an abusive

sexual relationship. This revelation marks Mr. J's shift into further abusive tactics himself, such as deadnaming Joker without the film's usual censoring, finally culminating in the pair's break-up after he refuses to acknowledge Joker's pain after her mother was injured by a BatDrone. Taking a personal vendetta against Batman, Joker the Harlequin is able to join *UCB Live* as a host by hacking into their broadcast, and despite her training to become "The People's Joker" with Ra's al Ghul, she quickly realizes that Lorne Michaels, the aforementioned producer of *UCB Live*, plots to utilize her as a diversity hire. In order to increase their ratings, Michaels plans to pump Smylex into the crowd, forcing them to laugh at anything Joker says. Joker the Harlequin resists Michaels's plan by going "super-sane" through intense consumption of Smylex, ascending beyond her timeline and into the Fifth Dimension. There, she meets the godlike Mx. Mxyzptlk, a nonbinary imp from the Fifth Dimension, who helps her rework the timeline (through a song) in order to recreate the world to be better than the Gotham she left. For herself, she asks for one good memory with her mother, and the film ends as she remembers singing-along with her mother on a car ride as a child. My argument regarding the necessity of community rests within the interactions Joker the Harlequin has with the other characters of the film, framing her exploration into her own identity through the relationships she accepts or rejects throughout the film. Beginning with her mother, and moving out to the community she enters and begins to form, I will argue that Joker the Harlequin's own genderpunk rhetoric rests within the formation of each of these dynamics.

In Joker the Harlequin's mother, we find a seemingly contradictory characterization of cisgender parents of transgender children, someone who messily informs Joker's emotional development while struggling within a framework of cisgender normativity. Joker's mother, never referred to by name, begins the film intensely controlling Joker's behavior, critiquing both

her dream show and berating her when Joker jumps on the bed. When Joker asks her mother “Was I born in the wrong body” (Drew), her mother declares that there is something wrong with her, later taking her to Dr. Crane of Arkham Asylum for a prescription of Smylex. Yet, despite the tyrannical characterization of Joker’s mother within her childhood, we see that after her various conflicts with Joker, she holds onto regret, being pained when Joker declares that they have no happy memories with her. What we do not see within the film, however, is the mother’s perspective. According to Niall Richardson and Frances Smith, a majority of mainstream films depicting narratives centering transgender experiences are “written and directed from the perspective of cisgender adults, amplifying the distance between the subjects encountered in these texts and their creative personnel. It is perhaps for this reason that the trans child’s cisgendered parents are often granted disproportionate narrative priority in films where the trans experience ought to be central” (111). Within these films, the parents are given greater focus on their struggles on their binaristic journey to acceptance or denial, reflecting the development of the text through the lens of cisgender writers and directors. What *The People’s Joker* is able to capture, then, is the cinematic dynamic between a cis parent and their trans child through the eyes of the child in question, and to showcase the messiness inherent between the expectations of cisgender normativity and trans expression. Joker the Harlequin performs the narration and framing for the audience, depicting their experiences entirely through their perspective. Her relationship with her mother influences the entirety of the film, but her mother is neither an unrepentant bigot or a tolerant ally. Instead, she is messy; the audience, through Joker’s growing dynamic with her, witness the turmoil between her expectations centered through cisness and her desire to love and be a good mother to her child. However, her perspective remains out of the spotlight precisely because this coming-of-age story is not hers to tell.

Neither is it Mr. J's. When Joker the Harlequin starts her anti-comedy troupe, her crush on Mr. J allows her space to develop within her gender identity. His character operates as both romantic interest and psychological antagonist to Joker the Harlequin, embodying the contradictions and vulnerabilities that often characterize early romantic experiences, especially for those navigating gender transition and identity formation (Richardson & Smith 142-4). Introduced as a charismatic, aloof, and alluring figure, Mr. J at first appears to be a source of emotional validation for Joker the Harlequin. Their relationship initially offers what seems like a refuge from the oppressive structures of Gotham's hyper-controlled comedy system and Joker's alienation from family and society. However, this intimacy quickly unravels into emotional manipulation and instability as Mr. J, despite his outward sensitivity, reveals himself to be deeply insecure and emotionally unavailable, weaponizing affection as a tool of control. His behavior oscillates between affectionate and distant, nurturing and neglectful, particularly (and as he informs Joker) as he is a victim of Batman's abuse. Rather than simply villainizing Mr. J, the film presents him as an emotionally scarred individual, wrapped in self-loathing and performance as a victim of abuse.<sup>4</sup> However, the film pointedly, through Joker the Harlequin's narration, does not condone the abuse inflicted upon Joker, as she details signs to tell when your partner is abusive. Furthermore, the gaslighting scene is rendered through a hypnagogic trance utilized by Mr. J to emphasize his trauma, with Mr. J wielding a gas lamp in order to berate Joker. Ultimately, Mr. J's impact lies in how Joker the Harlequin learns to let go of him. The act of moving beyond their relationship is pivotal to Joker's personal evolution, transforming Mr. J from a central romantic figure into a symbol of emotional growth and necessary detachment.

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<sup>4</sup> Particularly grim considering the increased rates of Intimate Partner Violence faced by transgender people, and while emotional abuse is not as strongly heightened as sexual and/or physical violence, it is still higher than in cisgender relationships (Peitzmeier et al, e11).

While both Joker's mother and Mr. J present tense and harmful dynamics for the protagonist throughout the film, it is her established community in the Red Hood Gang that enables the sort of community-building through genderpunk praxis. In *The People's Joker*, the Red Hood Gang functions as both a literal group of outlaw comedians and a symbolic embodiment of genderpunk resistance. The gang emerges from the underbelly of Gotham City as a radical collective that rejects institutionalized norms, not just of humor but of identity, gender, and self-presentation. Genderpunk, as described by theorists like Tof Eklund, is a mode of engagement that reclaims monstrosity, contradiction, and nonconformity, and it resists assimilation by celebrating the unnatural and the stylistically anarchic (81-82). Each member of the gang presents a visual and performative rejection of hegemonic gender and social codes: Poison Ivy is non-binary and rendered through 3D computer animation, the Riddler appears through greenscreen entirely as though through a livestream, and even Mx. Mxyzptlk is a non-binary puppet. Importantly, the gang functions as a group of individual misfits, even developing their own rivalries and heckles for each other, but they are cohesive as a collaborative unit, embodying the horizontal ethos of genderpunk. Each has been pushed to the margins of Gotham City, but they are able to come together to help one of their own in fighting back against the oppressive Batman. What once were aberrations to be feared become the very people who help propel Joker to the Fifth Dimension, allowing for a new world to be born.

### **Online Engagement and communal joking**

Having established both the collective vision of the film and the necessity of the Red Hood Gang within the narrative, we can now see how audiences receive the film through particular social and communal lenses. Through any study regarding the engagement surrounding the film, it becomes necessary to understand the backlash surrounding the film. A

thread titled “The People’s Joker broke me” on r/KotakuInAction, a subreddit promoting anti-woke activism particularly in relation to GamerGate, is one potential site of backlash faced by *The People’s Joker* as a reactionary digital space. The original post by user UncleNecroFTR serves as a review for the film, arguing that “This is a shit film. I don't care how hard they worked on it. I don't care if it's autobiographical or personal. I don't care if it was made by someone from a ‘marginalized’ group. IT'S SHIT. IT SUCKS. IT'S ASS. And I hate people pretending it's good because a ‘marginalized’ person made it.” The comments generally agree, some saying things like “The peoples joker lol sounds woke as fuck.” The comments continue with claims that echoes sentiments of political influence with comments like how a user saw the film as a “sponsored post from ‘Queer Majority.’” While I could go on about each of the ways that various users disparagingly interact with the film, the most fascinating aspect comes from the perceived intent of the film among communities like this subreddit. With the original post, each instance of the word “marginalized” appears with quotation marks, implying a false narrative being purported about the status of marginalization faced by transgender people. Additionally, a variety of comments derive a sort of institutional power to the film, pointing to a sinister activity where those within power are funneling resources into promoting this film. In this sense, *The People’s Joker* becomes a perversion of the institution of Batman through a lens of perceived cultural clout, evolving with Nisbett’s conception of preserving fandom currency to be wary of any sort of existential threats.

Of course, anti-woke feedback was not the only engagement the film received. #freethepeoplesjoker serves as another potential site of discourse, representing both a guerilla attempt to help the film find distribution and a way to develop interactions with fans of the film. The hashtag is not only a campaign to support Vera Drew’s film; it is an expression of

collaborative queering, a communicative strategy that branches from showcasing fanart and reviews to organically branching out to movements like the WGA strikes in 2023 (“#freethepeoplesjoker”). In embracing an online trend for underground marketing, this movement transcends conventional online interaction, becoming a site of queer defiance, collective authorship, and stylistic rebellion. Rather than relying on appeals to legality or polite discourse, the movement thrives on memes and challenges to conventional intellectual property. Many X users would participate in behaviors like tagging James Gunn’s profile, as he recently began appearing as the head of DC’s attempt at another live-action universe, or the users would share local acts to their screenings of the film (“#freethepeoplesjoker”). Through the internet buzz, the film was able to find a distributor, but additionally, the engagement in this hashtag became a way to call out larger holders of intellectual property and begin their own artistic endeavors around the film. In this way, the hashtag itself became an extension of the film’s participatory ethos. Furthermore, users like @cm\_mccambridge pointed to forms of “review-bombing” that *The People’s Joker* faced on IMDB, pointing the controversy around the film to broader conversations around transness and transgender identity within American culture. Their point that “we’re somehow at the center of this broader, asinine culture war and many places are afraid to put their foot down in either direction - but especially in support” showcases not only an analysis regarding the film’s controversy, but furthermore highlights how critically necessary such a film is.

While these both remain examples regarding two opposing reactions to the film, they both implement community-building responses to the provocative nature of *The People’s Joker*. In order to participate within this community-building, the “communal joking” website was created, ensuring both an ongoing archive of this thesis as well as providing an opportunity for

fans to begin experimenting with their own writing and analysis. The primary justification comes from the interaction of digital studies with cultural studies, with scholars noting that smaller online communities allow for users to access a purpose that larger communities subsume:

This hyperspecificity of topical focus of the community is a major factor that permeates every aspect of the community. Frequently, participants seemed to join and follow communities that appealed to a specific purpose or goal they had in mind; that is, they specified narrow slices of content types on a topic by following smaller communities that were offshoots of larger ones covering the topic more generally (Hwang & Foote 10).

Additionally, the site offers access to connection without creating opportunities for ad hominem attack through moderation, and further allowing a compendium of resources in relation to the film. While the site is in beta, the original focus allows for broader conversations to begin from a single point.

## CHAPTER 5 - CONCLUSION

The key, then, to *The People's Joker* expression of genderpunk, more than just a subversion of gendered expectations faced by the protagonist, is through participation, communication, and collaboration. By creating a film in which the premise revolves around the Joker as a transgender woman, Vera Drew facilitated a cinematic project, a narrative, and an online movement that showcases the destabilizing power of trans conceptions of community. In traditional views of cinema, authority tends to rest with the director or a small production team, often leading to a rigid top-down structure of control. In contrast, *The People's Joker* rejects auteur-centered authorship in favor of a more horizontal approach. Drew co-created a space in which dozens of artists, animators, writers, and performers could express their own perspectives and styles, allowing for similar and dissimilar ideas to coalesce into a vibrant, shifting narrative. Through the use of open calls on social media, Drew invited collaborators to join a collective cinematic experiment, creating new threads of interaction that enabled users to forge community through their acceptance, or rejection, of the politicized narrative. This form of collaborative authorship renders itself as a rhetorical act that embodies genderpunk because it relies on aesthetic and narrative cues to showcase a collective call for liberation.

Through “communal joking,” I sought to bring the film’s genderpunk rhetoric to life, creating a collaborative blog to enable analysis and creation through the lens of the film. *The People's Joker* teaches us to value stories that are disruptive, personal, and community-made, and through a community built through productive discourse, this allows the personal storytelling for any fan of the film (or any fan at all) to mesh with the expressive excess of the film. By establishing articles that seek to engage with the audience, this collaborative approach disrupts traditional production models that privilege elite expertise and gatekeeping and invites

the user to contribute through their own experience. Additionally, by instilling a lens of transness and gender nonconformity, I hope to engage with users, both those who identify as transgender and not, through their own experiences with gender, inviting a critical lens through which to understand their own participation within fandom and media consumption.

If there's anything to learn from *The People's Joker*, it is that the "freaks" can't do it alone, and that we as trans and queer communities must engage in community-building through storytelling. In a media landscape where queer and trans characters are often tokenized, flattened, or portrayed through cisheteronormative lenses, *The People's Joker* insists that queer people must not only be seen, but also be the ones doing the seeing. It demonstrates that authentic, complex representation cannot materialize from the cisgender imagination: transness must be made at the center of the creative process. For our broader society, this means recognizing that inclusion isn't just about visibility; it's about power, authorship, and narrative control. Furthermore, as shown through the most recent American election, we cannot allow control of the narrative around queer and trans communities be in the hands of those who orchestrate political and societal action against us. If we are to change anything, we must be able to build those connections between our disparate communities and seek to understand not on our individual terms. Like with #freethepeoplesjoker, exemplifying grassroots digital organizing and underscoring the importance of fair use and cultural parody as tools of critique and expression, we need to be able to mobilize our own experiences with storytelling to push back against a confining narrative.

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## VITA

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