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Singing to the Most High for those below: the construction of gay male identity and the motifs in Josiah Wise's "*cherubim*"

Alejandro Gouin

A ravenous gay mainstream seeks control ... of the very ways we represent our own identities. The radical potential of queer identity lies in remaining outside – in challenging and seeking to dismantle the sickening culture that surrounds us.

Bernstein Sycamore

Introduction

- 1 This paper takes a look at queer music and at how music has entered a new wave in which LGBTQ+ people can openly create and expose characters and life situations that are their own. In writing, or should I say, composing the many facets of queer identity, it is important to note that queer identity is much more than one's attraction to a sex or another, even though that is what it is usually summed up as. It has social and political aspects that have led queer folks to create their own subcultures. As with many minorities that have come to develop their own subcultures the LGBTQ+ community has fostered its people and has created a thriving literary, musical and overall artistic culture. What has drawn me to write this paper is the emergence of queer music (or musical pieces with queer undertones) into the mainstream. With teen movies such as *Blue is the Warmest Color* (2013) and more recently *Love, Simon* (2018) and the prevalence of queer representation on screen, gay representation has begun to emerge more and more from the shadows and is starting to share the spotlight within pop culture. For queer music, the progress is apparent, but relatively slow. Some queer

artists are still struggling to come out of the closet or are generally unsure of what it would do to their image, whereas those who are openly queer may choose not to “politicize” their music or touch on queer topics. Artists have begun surfacing from within the social media pool such as YouTube or Instagram, examples such as Troye Sivan, Sam Smith and Keiynan Lonsdale (part of the Love, Simon cast) comes to mind. Instead of holding straight female pop stars as their idols (what Brett calls a “diva culture”¹), queer musical culture is effectively experiencing a turn in the modern era when LGBTQ+ people create their own mainstream narratives, whether it be in art or in the media. In queer music history, the only currently noted instance where openly gay males formed a band was in 1991 with the emergence of a new group that later called themselves the Pansy Division, there were other queer artists at the time but they were usually women or deep into the “glass closet,” where everyone suspected they were gay but it was never confirmed. The glass closet is a troubling concept for queer politics as it on the one hand creates a door for queer people who want to enter the mainstream music scene but at the same time it halts the progression of the queer movement for acceptance. Pansy Division’s group leader Jon Ginoli has stated that one of his reasons for starting the band is that he was tired of knowing that some artists were gay and never had the courage to come out, in a sense he wanted to start a new wave of artists who were openly queer and indeed not afraid to flaunt it, and so he did. The Pansy division is known for its playful, hypersexualized songs that fell into a type of light queercore, a movement that was slowly developing underground at the time. What must have made the band’s fame is their opening for a Green Day concert in 1994, at the time when the band was about to make it big. That day they were exposed to hundreds of Green Day fans who heard the Pansy Division’s songs and were both mystified and shocked by their lyrics. One of the songs they sang, *Groovy underwear*, starts with “Tight briefs on your sexy butt/White fabric surrounding your nuts/Bike shorts put it on display/ You’re wearing it to the left today”. The lyrics do not hide their homoerotic themes and do so in a very visual and sexualized way, borrowing from the style of their punk predecessors the Sex Pistols; they made tunes that were both catchy and overtly political. From here on, the queer music scene has become more courageous, and modern-day musicians such as Sam Smith, Frank Ocean, Perfume Genius, ROB.B, Bronze Avery and many more have started to construct a musical representation for queer males. The question here is: what does this shift from underground to the mainstream imply and how do queer males represent themselves in music?

- 2 In this paper I would like to analyse closely a particular artist in contemporary queer music that goes by serpentwithfeet. A more detailed study could have focused on representation in different music genres, such as Pansy Division (queercore), ROB.B (hip-hop/rap), Troye Sivan and Sam Smith (pop), and examined how these identities complement and oppose each other. I have decided, however, to undertake a close analysis of a song that belongs to the experimental gospel genre and show how this opposition between form and content creates rupture and subversion. While doing this I will analyse the emerging motifs and representative schemes to then draw out how exactly queer culture is constructed and defined in this particular song through music composition, lyrics and style, the recurrent themes and characteristics of this mode of expression.

Case study: “cherubim” by serpentwithfeet

- 3 Link to the song: “cherubim” by serpentwithfeet
- 4 The song “cherubim” was released in the album *soil* in 2018 (no capital letters according to the artist’s choice), and was composed and sung by serpentwithfeet, otherwise known as Josiah Wise, a New Yorker who has a background as a gospel singer and is openly gay. His aesthetic as well as his fashion are quite avant-gardist in nature and experimental in form. He tries to shock, sensitize and bring people to question the values they have established, by dressing in both a feminine and masculine way which could be defined in terms of choosing to polish your nails and wear make-up but also not having any hair and sporting a beard. This is neither drag or redefining gender but actually blurring the lines between what is masculine and feminine to neutralize both these social constructs. This desire to neutralize gender and unapologetically erase the values that restrain and suffocate us is extremely present in this particular song in which the composer, utilizing many semiotic features and symbols, has achieved a degree of lyricism that both shocks and seduces in a rather uncanny way. He is known for mixing the erotic with the spiritual and he merges gospel and electronic music. Working with Bjork in 2017, he was able to reach out to a wider crowd and become much better known.
- 5 Here are the lyrics of the song:

[Intro]

I get to be devoted to him
I'm like his cherubim
Cherubim

[Chorus 1]

I get to devote my life to him
I get to sing like the cherubim
I get to devote my life to him
I get to sing like the cherubim

[Verse 1]

Boy, every time I worship you
My mouth is filled with honey
Boy, as I build your throne
I feel myself growing
Sowing love into you is my job
Sowing love into you is my job
Anything else is a weak curse, oh²

Between Heaven and Hell, Sin and Salvation

- 6 One of the notable aesthetics here is linking the religious to something otherwise seen as profane or sacrilegious. One of the other music artists we could have explored more in depth, ROB.B, also utilizes a religious motif to design his CD cover for his rap album *Eleven Eleven* in 2013, where he poses with a halo over his head, which is customary in classical western Christian paintings to depict saints or angels. Often times, queer artists as a subversive strategy and as retaliation against attacks towards their sexual orientation utilize this junction between the new and the old to combat conservatism

or arguments against homosexuality routed in the rhetorics of tradition and religion. By mentioning that homoerotic relationship have existed since Ancient Greece under the form of pederasty and other forms of male apprentice/teacher relationships, queer artists use this to their advantage as a counterargument. That being said, using iconography or motifs that directly relates to history or religion acts as a political argument against such a commonly brought up discourse. Aside from the political dimensions, although ever present, the use of the religious motifs embellishes the song, stylizing it not only as a gospel song in its subject matter but linking this passion that is celestial to one of the flesh, to carnal desire.

- 7 The theme of the flesh is represented in the lyrics, formally through the music and is represented through dance if we were to bring the music video into our analysis. Within the use of the word themselves, in the couplet, he starts “Every time I worship you/ My mouth is filled with honey” mentioning the mouth here adds a degree of sensuality and paired with something sweet such as “honey” “filling” it adds a moving image of a resolved recurrent event within the listener’s mind. The word choice is careful and deliberate, feigning at both candid innocence and ravenous lust, if one would replace “honey” with “you” or “body” the message would be more explicit. Additionally, the vocalist uses a pronouncing vibrato when he sings “honey”, dragging the /i/ sound with a shrill that comes in quivering, needy layers as if the vocalist, through mimesis, was emulating the sweet lightness of honey, the /i/ sound phonetically defined in poetry as a bright vowel becomes a perfect tool to pair this vocal technique that gives texture and colour to the word sung as well as a yearning for the said honey to come to him.
- 8 Furthermore, the phrase “Everytime I [...]” increases the expectation for said honey if a previous condition is fulfilled. The chorus, sung by a myriad of voices, hauntingly chants “I get to[...]/I get to[...]” noting not only the devotion to the addressee but the exceptional importunity being able to love or in this case, adore someone. In terms of homosexual politics, this line is important in the song formally and ideologically. Formally, as it is part of the chorus and thus is meant to be repeated throughout the song so the message is intensified and drilled within our mind.
- 9 Ideologically it refers to the current status of LGBTQ rights where a man may be able to love another man legally and ethically, that is to say without being seen by many as evil. The chorus of this song, outside of its intra-textual context, takes the form of a celebration of the LGBTQ rights advancement. By drawing the flesh closer to what is spiritual and divine, Josiah Wise attempts to erase the frontier religious has built between carnal desire and “religious” passion, the body and the spiritual form. Another thing worth noting, in the spirit of the analysis of the links between gender politics and the motifs used in the song. “Cherubim” is the word that we use when we want to talk about one or two of these celestial beings according to an online dictionary upheld by Collins Harper ³:

noun, plural **cher·ubs** for **3, 4**; **cher·u·bim** [**cher-uh-bim**, -yoo-bim] /'tʃɛr ə bɪm, -yʊ bɪm/ for **1, 2**.

1. a celestial being. Gen. 3:24; Ezek. 1, 10.

2. *Theology.* a member of the second order of angels, often represented as a beautiful rosy-cheeked child with wings.

- 10 Also following this line of thought, one theory by Robert Alter, a professor of Hebrew and a translator, suggests that etymologically the term “cherubim” may be different from how we perceive it:

The cherubim, a common feature of ancient Near Eastern mythology, are not to be confused with the round-cheeked darlings of Renaissance iconography. The root of the terms either means “hybrid” or, by an inversion of consonants, “mount,” “steed,”⁴[...]. (Robert Alter, “The Five Books of Moses,” 2004, commentary on Genesis iii.24)

- 11 My argument here is that Josiah Wise used the term “cherubim” to allude to the being’s potential for duality or “hybridity”, as people are able to be both male, female or none. Cherubs, like most celestial beings, are genderless, and as such become an adequate metaphor to both define genderless people and elevate their image to an icon such as the cherubim. This aspect is reinforced by the vocalist’s ability to sing in a high falsetto that would be closer to a feminine attribute and with the tribal, cult-like, deep voices, closer to the male’s, that sing the chorus.

Our voices: daemonic or angelic, passion or lust

- 12 In our modern times, there still exists a chasm between both the terms passion/ lust; and devotion/obsession that is difficult to breach. To explain the difference between these terms is a matter of great subjective and self-reflexive skill. The song begins with an intro: “I get to be devoted to him/I’m like his cherubim/ Cherubim. [percussions begin, chorus ensues]” then the song starts with what sounds like an introduction or a literary incipit in which the singer prepares us for the otherwise brutal and frontal subject matter of the song. The initial verse is sung with a soft warm melody whose acoustic sounds like the inside of a church, accompanied by a piano. The last word is said flatly as if to introduce the title of the song, the song plays and we do not hear the piano again. In this part of my analysis I wanted to take proper care to analyse the voices in the chorus that seem to play a central part in the musical dynamics of the piece. When describing the voices in the chorus some writers have settled to label them as “sounding like demons”⁵, this is not far from the truth as these chanting voices do sound as if they are invoking spirits or supernatural beings. However, the deep, throaty voices, at least at the beginning of the song, do not sound ominous, disturbing or aversive but seem to haunt, seduce and enchant. The harmonies between the different voices (as well as its polyphonic features) paired with the different tones give the song texture and interest. The singer mixes his own high-pitched style to the deep voices in the background, creating a medley of voices that both clashes and intertwines in an elaborate melody.
- 13 In Brady’s article “*Oh, Boy! (Oh, Boy!): Mutual Desirability and Musical Structure in the Buddy Group*” she writes about polyphony being a component of the avant-garde in Kristeva’s research on the ‘transgressive’ novel and how this same polyphony can be opposed to the overall rhythm of the song not only enhancing it but creating meaning through the very differences between the rhythm of the music, of the many voices and the lyrics:

[...] instead of assuming that music gives meaning to words by enhancing the musical features of speech, I start from rhythm in the song as a material semiotic that produces meaning by the differences it sets up from the spoken rhythms of speech. It is as if the musical ‘setting’ makes explicit the semiotic as an aspect of language separate from the symbolic, foregrounds it, and explores the differences.

- 14 Building on this idea, I propose that the polyphony in “*cherubim*” acts as melodic discourse that adds to the semiotic value of the song but that also plays a part in constructing and disrupting the rhythm, which in turn plays a part in one of the subversive strategies of Wise’s experimental music and its desire to erase heteronormativity. The polyphonic qualities intensify in the last chorus when new voices are added to the already present voices in the chorus. Each sings “Boy” at different intervals and harmonizing in parallel keys, one of the voices singing in a higher key and one lower. This creates a back and forth motion, a yank and pull movement that compels the listener’s attention here, there, and everywhere all at once. This is paired up with the string instruments in the background that hold deep, long notes that, like their strings, seem to pull and entrance us into the movements of the song. Due to this characteristic of the song we are brought to empathize with the character’s attraction towards these voices that seem to be his own, chanting “boy” in his head, as this is all he can think about. The presence of many voices in a piece is also a distinct trait of a gospel choir, in his article *Mapping Subversion: Queercore Music's Playful Discourse of Resistance*, Dechaine talks about Hebdige’s concept of *bricolage*⁶ as a punk subversive tool that “describes a process by which objects and musical forms are appropriated and reconstructed”. Similarly, in this song, Wise appropriates the form of gospel and its content, subverting it by adding another meaning to “Him”, the pronoun formally used to denote God by capitalizing the first letter. Where in form and isolation it sounds like a eulogy to God but it is not, rather it is the idolization of another boy and this where the play on subversion lies.
- 15 The song “*cherubim*” achieves varying degrees of semiotic engagement as it vacillates towards discourses on gender politics, homoeroticism, religion and questions of lust, in contrast to passion, it pulls our attention towards questions of losing one’s self into love as being potentially fulfilling but at the same time destructive without proposing any answers to set questions. In terms of the identity it creates for gay males, it proposes a gender-neutral narrative for he who experiences love when falling in love with a male, by blurring the gender of he who loves, he elevates the love above worldly dogma, apart from being overtly sexual and painting an image of vulnerability and slave-like devotion for gay males the song still achieves a degree of mysticism and aesthetic that goes beyond sex.

Conclusion

- 16 One can assume that modern queer music, or at least male generated queer music, appears to be either hypersexualized or tentative. In this way, portraying one's self in terms of musical sentiment and displaying one's sexuality becomes a leap of faith in which one either talks about it overtly like the Pansy Division or serpentwithfeet or one can attempt to negotiate, creating music that can be interpreted as queer without troubling the tranquil waters of the heteronormative music scene. Evidently, the issue here is: how far one can go? And what exactly needs to be discussed when talking about homosexual identity? Is it the essential element the “sexual” (i.e. homo’sexual)? That being said, it still is not viable or fair, to characterize an entire community under one identical premise, although this premise is what owed them lives living in secret and fear, can one just summarize queer identity and thus its representation by sexual escapades and unquenchable lust? Only so much can be represented in a single song, it

is hard to demand a perfect song that tracks all aspects of queerness and such a song would perhaps be too laborious to listen to and would not prove to be effective, rather what is being denounced here is the image of a caricatural, unhinged, and lust-driven queer that is created by such songs. This is not the case for the song “*cherubim*” but it could be for songs by the Pansy Division for instance, even if it is queercore. Many queer people in the community find themselves having to place themselves apart from a gay culture that is too anchored in excess, debauchery, hypersexuality and drug use.

- 17 What defines “gayness”, down to the very essence of what stems from it and namely its artistry, is all reliant on the homosexual (emphasis on the sexual) part of the experience of living as a gay person. Artists could indeed focus on other parts that forge or influence the community, such as its role models or its day to day struggles, besides just coming out but perhaps staying “out,” as it were. This paper sought to draw out the content of queer elements in songs written by queer men for queer men and an area for further investigation would be to examine why the content of these pieces are either so heavily reliant on sexual features (as opposed to just homoromantic desires) or why queer music is being “straight-washed”, that is to say where the queer element is almost imperceptible unless one knows the singer and their sexuality. As much as entering the mainstream music scene has proven to be a step forward one can inquire: “at what price?”.

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ABSTRACTS

This paper seeks to take a closer look at the construction of queer male images through music. Queer music has been around since queer people have begun making music, taking various shapes and evolving along with the social climate. It has moved from being invisible to the naked "ear", so to speak, to being more overt and subversive. This paper will take the form of a case study of a particular song by Josiah Wise entitled "*cherubim*," that paints a picture of queer identity in quite an interesting way. By utilizing close-listening, thematic and stylistic elements this paper will describe and analyse the motifs hidden beneath the words and the notes to then explore how exactly this song fits into the general discourse of current queer politics.

INDEX

Subjects: Music, Dance

Keywords: queer music, queercore, LGBTQ+, gay culture, queer identities

Mots-clés: culture gay, identités queer, LGBTQ+, musique queer, queercore

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