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Book Review: Levy, Helton. *Globalized Queerness: Identities and Commodities in Queer Popular Culture*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2023.

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***Book Review: Levy, Helton.
Globalized Queerness: Identities and
Commodities in Queer Popular Culture.
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Globalized Queerness takes a critical look at the global media landscape to examine whether queer and trans representations become homogenized or flattened as they seek to reach a wide, transnational audience. Levy defines “globalized queerness” as a series of media strategies emerging mostly from Western and Anglophone metropolises, which “have capitalized on queer life to sell products and homogenize ideas of queerness” (197). This mass commodification of queer representation emerges at the expense of racially minoritized, impoverished queer communities, particularly those from the Global South, as their localized experiences of doing LGBTQIA+ art and politics are erased from the media landscape. The book is careful, however, not to portray globalized queerness as an all-encompassing media landscape, as it tracks the frequent ruptures of local politics into global narratives, particularly in the hands of more critical queer and trans media producers.

Levy deploys a wide variety of methodologies to make his case, carrying out ethnographic interviews, analyzing social media and news articles focused on LGBTQIA+ issues, and delving into the public personas crafted by iconic queer artists from around the world. The most innovative aspect of Levy’s approach is using “Latent Dirichlet Allocation,” a statistical model that allows Levy to

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algorithmically extract frequent themes emerging from large, multilingual data sets of news articles and YouTube videos. Levy admits that this method inevitably introduces its own biases, but he argues that he “consciously sought to queer those methods out of masculine assumptions of exactitude and correction” (140). The purpose of Latent Dirichlet Allocation, in *Globalized Queerness*, is to present some overall themes emerging from the data, and then introduce a more nuanced discussion of the data’s variability. Levy points out that the Covid 19 pandemic significantly impacted his ability to carry out traditional ethnographic or archival work, so he had to rely on alternative methodologies to carry out his research for the book.

The Introduction and Chapter 1 outline Levy’s complex theoretical schema, introducing how “globalized queerness” operates and the ways it has shaped the media landscape. In the span of a few short decades, we have swung from a relative dearth of queer and trans characters in mainstream media, to an explosion of LGBTQIA+ shows and themes on television, streaming networks, social media and news articles, despite significant political backlash to LGBTQIA+ rights. Western media preferences, however, reinforce a very normative LGBTQIA+ representation that is reproducible and consumable across many media markets. The paradigmatic example Levy provides is *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, a television show that has become a transnational behemoth, as the show became a franchise with “local” versions of the show being produced in a dozen different countries or as international competitions, but always following the format of the U.S. version of the show. Levy argues that shows like *RuPaul’s Drag Race* colonize performances of “sincerity and authenticity” in the name of profit (53), demanding that participants carefully craft globalized stage personas that erase the participants’ local pasts or political commitments. In a later chapter, Levy suggests that drag, as an art form, might be a particularly powerful tool for “dislocating oneself” from the local as one strives for globalized queerness, given that drag encourages performers to create characters that are distant from one’s origins (95). I found that concept of drag as dislocation to be fascinating and I wish the author had delved more deeply into a critique of *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, perhaps dedicating an entire chapter to the topic.

Chapter 2 uses Latent Dirichlet Allocation to analyze more than three thousand news media articles from ten different countries focused on queer and trans artists, celebrities or influencers. Levy’s analysis demonstrates that white Western celebrities like Ian McKellen or Kirsten Stewart have an outsized representation in global news articles, reinforcing an epistemological erasure where local, non-

Western and racially minoritized LGBTQIA+ folks are rarely recognized as newsworthy. Global journalism, he argues, follows the lead set up by Western media empires and ends up reinforcing who counts as globally queer. When Levy provides some examples of the most frequent topics covered by journalism in Table 2, however, we see a more interesting variety of topics being featured, especially in Asia, such as media appearances by popular Filipino and Japanese celebrities, as well as news articles focused on LGBT issues in Korea and China (78). The book, in general, seems to always return to examples from Europe, the U.S. and Latin America, largely ignoring the vast LGBTQIA+ media landscape in East and Southeast Asia (with a few exceptions), which represents an important blind spot for this scholarly work. I also wonder whether the study's focus on artists, celebrities and influencers performs an erasure of its own, ignoring traditional political activism that might get a lot of local coverage, and which might create important counternarratives to Western globalized queerness.

Chapter 3 provides a more complex portrayal of how individual queer and trans artists negotiate the local and the global, and how they can engage in politics as well. European artists like Phia Ménard or Cristiano Malgoglio, have garnered global audiences without necessarily giving up their attachment to local concerns, and they really value their close partnerships with other artists who share their nationality and language. Certain artists, Levy argues, have become “queer national treasures” and are thus able to center their work in a particular nation while still garnering international prominence (107). More interestingly, Brazilian artists like Pablio Vittar and Linn da Quebrada engage in a remixing of musical and aesthetic styles that “reverses the cosmopolitan tendency to elitism” (111), and challenge the hegemonic race and class hierarchies in Brazil, thus paying tribute to their humble origins. Both artists are also unafraid of engaging in politics, as both have been vocal about criticizing the government of Jair Bolsonaro, and they occupy hegemonic media spaces in Brazil and internationally without “adjusting or whitewashing” their discourse (113). As a scholar of trans and *travesti* social movements in Brazil, I wish Levy had contextualized Pablio Vittar and Linn da Quebrada's work within that larger movement that enables them to make these risky political and aesthetic choices as artists – the context really matters here and the surrounding political groundwork in Brazil is what makes it possible to challenge the normativity of globalized queerness.

Chapter 4 again makes use of Latent Dirichlet Allocation, this time to analyze the content created by trans influencers in YouTube. Levy chose a diverse sample of trans content creators from around the globe, and by transcribing the spoken content from several of their videos, was able to create interesting word clouds and word maps to visually represent the most common themes covered in these videos. Like in the previous chapter, Levy finds that despite certain evidence of “algorithmic censorship” (147), trans content creators are still able to offer an important public service where they defend their own identity from transphobic attacks, educating the public on their day to day experiences surrounding dysphoria, transition and medical access. Levy uncovers a global network of knowledge created by trans YouTubers, one that is crucial for disseminating information across borders, without erasing the specificity of localized gender diverse identities, such as *travesti*. Despite demonstrating a “united front” against transphobia, Levy is skeptical that this YouTube content “could lead to palpable agreement and community rather than algorithm-prompted dissent” (154). Sometimes Levy seems so concerned with proving the strength of globalized queerness that he seems to discount the very real diversity of viewpoints in global media that challenge efforts to whitewash or flatten queer and trans representations. Additionally, I am not sure that trans people desire global agreements or global community in the first place, especially because it could erase local forms of gender diversity that are very important to them.

Chapter 5 in many ways is my favorite chapter, because it is the only one based on ethnographic insights, and thus it is also the most nuanced chapter in the book. Based on twenty semi-structured interviews with queer artists who are active on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, Levy argues that these artists were very careful not to appropriate cultures that were not their own, and they were critical of what made them visible to a global audience. One artist, for example, remarked that in order to sell his artwork, he first had to gain followers by posting “thirst traps” that showcased his “fit and white” body, and thus gain the visibility he needed to sell his art. Another artist of Southeast Asian descent mostly got famous by photographing nudes of slender, fit, white men from London and across the United States. Although Levy only hints at the racial dimensions of these examples, it is clear here that whiteness becomes a consumable form of capital for queer artists that are trying to gain more followers, reproducing the normative Eurocentric beauty standards that plague globalized queerness. Even artists not looking to capitalize on their whiteness, like an Italian baker who creates photographic, nude self-portraits with religious and philosophical dimensions, finds it frustrating how much his body is sexualized by people online, who mostly miss the local and

historical references that makes his photographs meaningful. Levy utilizes Goffman's notion of "facework" to analyze how queer artists "gain points" within a media ecosystem based on competition and who financially rewards those with the most followers (189).

In the Conclusion, Levy returns to global celebrities like Nas X, Harry Styles and Dylan Mulvaney, critiquing them for the ways they have "capitalized on queer life to sell products and homogenize ideas of queerness" (197). TikTok, Levy warns us, "fuels the myth of one being queer without culture, history or past... Being queer demands content, empathy and a following" (205). I am skeptical, however, of these blanket statements that flatten the complexity of any specific celebrity or any social media platform. Levy is definitely onto something when he critiques globalized queerness, but perhaps global queer and trans representations are not as homogenous as he leads us to believe, and counter-discourses and ruptures have always broken through. Part of the problem with Levy's argument is that he sets up a powerful strawman in the first and second chapters, portraying globalized queerness as a commanding force shaping all media consumption, but the following chapters undermine Levy's own argument by providing more nuanced portrayals of how people consume queer news media, queer art, and queer social media. One issue in Levy's approach is not differentiating television shows like *RuPaul's Drag Race*, which are highly structured and thus more easily sanitized and homogenized, from the far more complex media landscapes of news articles, social media or artistic production. It would be fairly easy to read NasX or Dylan Mulvaney as much more transgressive artists than Levy imagines them as, or to find examples from TikTok that undermine Levy's argument that this platform ignores queer culture and queer history.

This is not to say that algorithms are innocent or unbiased – algorithms definitely reinforce existing biases about what forms of queerness and transness are beautiful or desirable. Levy's work is at its strongest when it demonstrates, as it does in Chapter 5, how whiteness shapes the global patterns of who gets more followers on social platforms and thus shapes what kinds of queer and trans content are consumed. It is in this context that the work of artists like Pablllo Vittar and Linda Quebrada becomes even more laudable, because they were able (thanks to a massive social movement behind their rise) to break through the mainstream forms of globalized queerness and present compelling political and artistic alternatives. Similarly, the micro-political work of trans content creators, posting

about their own lives in order to disseminate accurate knowledge and dispel the transphobic misinformation that is also propelled by social media algorithms, shows that social media cannot be reduced to an either/or analysis. Algorithms and media landscapes are tools that are highly dependent on the humans deploying them, both on the production side and on the consumer side of media.

In the Conclusion, Levy imagines a future “homecoming” that lives beyond globalized queerness and returns to local concerns, creating “reflective and politicized stances that prevent the ultimate capitalization of experience” (210). I wonder if this homecoming has always been present in decolonial critiques of mainstream media, one that is evident in the work of contemporary artists like Linn da Quebrada, but which very much predates their work. Black queer artists and scholars like James Baldwin and Audre Lorde long decried the unbearable whiteness of mass media representations, which effaced critical Black perspectives and replaced them with consumable stereotypes. Their own work sought to decolonize those representations of Blackness and present alternatives that fully recognized queer and Black forms of flourishing. Globalized queerness is an extension of a much longer history of whitewashing, and needs to be placed within that history for us to appreciate how media landscapes becomes arenas where racialized, sexualized, classed and gendered bodies are given value or rendered valueless. The complex give and take of media landscapes is fraught with relationships of power, and our attachments to queer and trans celebrities, social media influencers and artists is never straightforward, but rather always filtered through these longer histories of embodied inequalities.