

## Contents

<b>1 "My Body Feels Like It's Coming Off": Cisgender Erotics In <i>Love Is Blind</i></b>	<b>1</b>
1.0.1 <b>TODO ADD introduction: subjectivity &amp; reading practices</b>	1
1.0.2 <b>TODO TRANSITION</b> <i>LiB</i> 's transgressive premise . . . . .	5
1.0.3 <b>TODO ADD</b> citations to recent reporting on AI . . . . .	6
1.0.4 the method . . . . .	8
1.0.5 the outputs . . . . .	11
1.0.6 <b>TODO ADD</b> close reading: approximating average sensations . . . . .	18
1.0.7 cis and trans futures . . . . .	18
1.0.8 <b>TODO ADD</b> toward new solidarities . . . . .	19
1.0.9 bank . . . . .	20
1.1 Works Cited . . . . .	21
1.2 Appendix 1: Pods Model Outputs . . . . .	22
1.3 Appendix 2: Postpods Model Outputs . . . . .	23

### 1 "My Body Feels Like It's Coming Off": Cisgender Erotics In *Love Is Blind*

#### 1.0.1 TODO ADD introduction: subjectivity & reading practices

1. DRAFT sedgwick, knowledge -> method Over 25 years ago, in the midst of the first wave of the AIDS epidemic and the government's neglect for those (mostly Black people and gay men), whom it affected, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick wonders about the point of doing critique in the first place. Even if one could prove the the government's indifference or disdain for people of color and for gays, that "the lives of African Americans are worthless in the eyes of the United States; that gay men and drug users are held cheap where they aren't actively hated... Supposing we were ever sure of all of those things," Sedgwick writes, "what would we know then that we don't already know?" (*Novel Gazing* 3-4).

For me, this question catalyzes a shift in methodology around reading practices, which shift from an orientation around knowledge ("Is a particular piece of knowledge true?") toward method: "What does knowledge do—the pursuit of it, the having and expressing of it?" (*Novel Gazing* 4). And this shift to method, first posed at the cusp

of the information age, is more urgent today. Not only is all of the evidence (of neglect, of wrongdoing, of injustice by those in power) at our fingertips; it is also self-generating and self-perpetuating in the algorithmic processes that fill our feeds. We are distended with it, all the proof, the polarization.

2. masculinity/femininity is So I have sought a new reading method that responds to this moment, to information overload and to automation. I trained some Large Language Models (LLMs) deliberately to study it, trained them on text datasets representing totally polarized perspectives.<sup>1</sup> ,<sup>2</sup> I scraped the data for training these models (a process explained in detail below) from articles in the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and the Heritage Foundation.<sup>3</sup> Then, I asked these biased models questions about gender. At first, they responded in predictable ways. For example, the ACLU model generated the following outputs about "Masculinity" and "Femininity":

Masculinity is a matter of love and celebration.  
Masculinity is a space for hope and liberation for all.  
Masculinity is not defined solely by the beauty of our bodies,  
but by the beauty of our experiences.  
Femininity is a celebration of beauty, feminine liberation,  
and femininity.  
Femininity is our joy, our struggle, and our fight is our strug-  
gle.  
Femininity is about allowing people to express themselves  
without government interference.

The outputs align with what one might expect from a perspective that affirms gender diversity and expression. They frame gender as a celebratory phenomenon, characterized by empowering language like "liberation," "beauty", and "joy".

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<sup>1</sup>Both of the models are openly licensed on Huggingface.co. See Calado, *gpt2-heritage\_foundation-gender*, and Calado, *gpt2-aclu-gender*.

<sup>2</sup>For those who don't know, training models happens in various stages. To train this model, I used a base model, which is already trained, called gpt-2 (an open source model). I re-trained the base model on the gender datasets. This is technically called "fine-tuning", and its much easier and less resource intensive than training the underlying base model.

<sup>3</sup>The training data and code used to scrape the articles can be found on [github.com/gofilipa/anti-trans](https://github.com/gofilipa/anti-trans).

Meanwhile, in a similarly predictable way, the Heritage model, associates "Masculinity" and "Femininity" with what are typically conservative ideals based on tradition.

Masculinity is the cornerstone of Western civilization.

Masculinity is the fruit of patriarchy, and patriarchy is the heart of conservatism.

Masculinity is defined by the ability to produce sperm, eggs, and live children.

Femininity is an enduring American tradition.

Femininity is defined by means of the relationship between the sexes, the ability to raise their children, the capacity to provide for their own reproduction, the capacity to provide for their own children, the ability to provide for their own.

Like the ACLU model, these gender terms are positive. However, unlike the ACLU, the terms here affix to notions of culture, tradition, and reproduction—things that suggest stability.

3. **TODO** ADD definitions of "gender" from exec order & progressive side However, there is something peculiar about these results from the Heritage model, which centers on a particular, term, "subjectivity."

Masculinity is a subjective self-perception, not a universal concept.

Femininity is a subjective, internal sense of self.

The gender binary is a subjective, malleable, and often incorrect idea.

The gender binary is a subjective, internal, and often transitory concept.

The gender binary is a subjective, grammatically incorrect and illogical concept that conflates sex and gender identity.

Unlike the other outputs, these examples do not describe the far-right viewpoint on gender—that it is based on the biological truth of two sexes INSERT QUOTE FROM THE TRUMP EXECUTIVE ORDER. Rather, these examples are closer to the progressive view of gender, which asserts that gender describes identity, based on social behaviors, roles, and expression, among other things. INSERT GENDER DEF FROM WHO(?) OR OTHER PROG ORG.

4. **TODO** ADD amin & butler on subjectivity The concept of "subjectivity" offers a nexus around which gender suppressive perspective congregates. To them, it represents a serious contradiction in the argument for gender rights. If gender is in fact not rooted in biology, but a subjective, internal phenomenon, then why would does *the body* need to be changed to reflect it? Why is gender transition necessary? CITE JUDITH BUTLER WHO IS AFRAID OF GENDER

Kadji Amin has offered an alternative to this thinking about gender. Rather than a subjective, internal sense of self, gender is an external expression, verifiable in presentation and behavior. CITE AMIN ON GENDER BEING A PHYSICAL THING. So that, physical aspects of the body matters the most in gender. Not only physical aspects of the body, but the difference from the norm that these physical aspects make.

5. text generation as a reading method To counter "paranoid reading" practices, Sedgwick offers the method of reparative reading. Reading reparatively is about reading productively, for what associations a bit of text can generate. Sedgwick takes "shame," an affect that is traditionally seen as repressive, and examines how it creates productive and effects in text. She describes shame as:

“a kind of free radical that (in different people and different cultures) attaches to and permanently intensifies or alters the meaning of—of almost anything: a zone of the body, a sensory system, a prohibited or indeed a permitted behavior, another affect such as anger or arousal, a named identity, a script for interpreting other people’s behavior toward one-self” (62)

I’m interested in this move that she makes, of taking reading as a process that is ultimately *generative* and *productive*.

This project takes this prospect quite literally: it uses text generation as a reading practice. It takes what is typically seen as a contentious, the concept of gendered embodiment between the conservative and progressive poles, and sees how one might do something productive within it.

6. the ML process aggregates perspectives on subjectivity The reason we get these outputs for subjective, is that this particular term, "subjective" does not reflect the conservative position from the Heritage Foun-

dation data. Rather, it reflects a conservative frame for the progressive position. In other words, it represents what a conservative thinks a progressive person thinks gender is—as something insubstantial, as a feeling. In the outputs then, we see not just a single perspective of gender, but a *flattening* or *aggregation* of perspectives into a single statement. The ML process underlying the language model takes these distinct viewpoints and aggregates them into an apparently univocal utterance.

My project reads polarized perspectives to explore how they might intersect. To explore what is held in common between polarized points of view.

We will use this aggregative method to study cisgender experiences of embodiment. What we will get at is a kind of cross section of what the cis and the trans might have in common.

#### 1.0.2 TODO TRANSITION *LiB*'s transgressive premise

The point of going on the show, as one participant puts it, "to be loved for who I am on the inside," (Season 2, Episode 3, "Love in Paradise"). However, the show's main gambit, that "love is blind," suggests a transgressive premise that undergirds an ultimately heteronormative teleology. Despite the promise of marriage and happily-ever-after, something non-normative is happening here. And that something has to do with the body, and what happens to the body when it falls in love from behind a wall.

This paper explores, in the words of Micah above, how "touch" can be, for cis people, their "worst nightmare." I take readings of normativity from Trans Studies and apply them to an analysis of cisgendered subjects from the show. I examine what this situation, where visual access to the beloved is denied, does to the self-perception of the body of the participants. I find that this "blind" dating experiment places participants in a state where their own bodily coherence fractures, which has consequences on their romantic trajectory and aspirations. While firmly anchored to their cisgendered identities, the participants undergo a split in the physical body, which begins to accrue investments to integrity and wholeness that inevitably go unfulfilled once they are united with their beloveds.

Throughout this process, I argue, they enter a version of what Jay Prosser calls the "transsexual trajectory" (6). For Prosser, this trajectory "bring[s] into view the materiality of the body," in particular the internal "body image" that is distinct from and contained within the external, physical body

(12). For trans subjects, the body image is related to feelings of bodily dissociation and dysphoria, which is not the case for these cis subjects, who are (apparently) anchored to their sex-gender identities throughout the show. Nonetheless, these subjects, sequestered from the sight of their beloved, undergo a bifurcation within the body. The wall which separates their embodied feelings from the vision of the other places them, temporarilly, on the "route to identity and bodily integrity" (6).

To analyze this trajectory in LiB, I created a tool that surfaces the participants speech about their bodies and their experiences of embodiment. Using the transcripts from the show, which I scraped from the internet,<sup>4</sup> I built a text generator that mimics the speech of the participants. I use this text generator, which synthesizes common patterns and shared investments in language (a process I explain below), to analyze characters' perspectives of embodiment throughout the show, from their experience in the pods up until the wedding day.

#### 1.0.3 TODO ADD citations to recent reporting on AI

Although this method makes use of machine learning (ML) technology, it does so deliberately to resist dominant uses of that technology today, particularly what Gael Varoquaux et al. describe as the "bigger-is-better mentality" that drives ML development.<sup>5</sup> This mentality has to do with the belief that more data (scraped from the internet) and more "compute" (Graphical Processing Units, or GPUs, sourced from deep Earth minerals) will lead to better performing models.

The drive for larger models has spurred more and more investment, which has inflated the economy to what many project are bubble-bursting levels (CITATION), as many tech companies like OpenAI are running on pure investment and do not project to be actually profiting from their product for several years (CITATION). Additionally, as recent research points out, this bigger is better drive is counter-intuitive: Large Language Models actually have a ceiling in terms of size and how it affects performance; that ever-increasing compute does not yield comparable returns in terms of the quality of model outputs (CITE Varoquaux and another?). Which makes the tech

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<sup>4</sup>To scrape the transcripts, I wrote a web crawler using the *scrapy* library in the Python programming language. This program allowed me to "crawl," or paginate through, the transcript episodes stored on this website: [https://subslikescript.com/series/Love\\_Is\\_Blind-11704040](https://subslikescript.com/series/Love_Is_Blind-11704040). The code used to create the crawler and the transcripts themselves are saved on my github account, under the "gofilipa/love\_blind repository," (see Calado, "love\_blind").

<sup>5</sup>I do not use the term "AI," but machine learning.

companies all the more desperate to protect their investments at all costs. Perhaps why OpenAI is lowering safeguards for ChatGPT, allowing it to create porn (CITATION).

Together, general ignorance about so-called "AI" and market incentives combine to fuel what Emily Bender and Alex Hanna have usefully termed "AI hype" (*The AI Con*). Hype is a self-reinforcing and perpetuating mechanism driven by ignorance about how models actually operate (the race after "intelligence") and capital's desperation for profit above all else. This creates a self-perpetuating pressure to adopt the tool that infects every level of the workplace: CEOs feel it, managers feel it, mid-level and entry-level workers feel it.

What I offer, by contrast, is a methodology that rejects this high consumption mentality, opting instead for small models and datasets, and for deliberate attention to the mechanism's operation under the hood. The LLMs that I use for this project, which I jokingly call "small language models," were trained on a single laptop, over a single afternoon.<sup>6</sup> The dataset which I used for training (more on this process below) was similarly small in size, containing the transcripts from one season, 13 total episodes, of the show.<sup>7</sup>

My analytical approach turns on the specifics of the prediction process, as I explain below. The current emphasis on using machine learning as a tool for productivity, to generate *new* content, while serving extractive and monetizing purposes, misses the fact that these tools are primarily *self-reflexive*. As Wendy Chun points out, predictive tools are good for studying existing patterns in data, and might be used to study patterns so that they can be resisted or avoided. Her work, which carefully traces the racist, specifically eugenicist, origins of statistical processes,<sup>8</sup> which forms the foundation of machine learning technology today, proposes that these tools be used for

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<sup>6</sup>For example, this project uses GPT-2, which is initially trained off only 8 million web-pages and released under an open license. Compare that with the most recent version of GPT, GPT-5, which is trained on something like the entire internet and is over 600 billion parameters in size, a number that cannot be confirmed due to its closed and proprietary status.

<sup>7</sup>The code, training data, and models developed for this project are openly licensed on the Github and Huggingface platforms. I use the GPL 3.0 license, which allows users to freely run, modify, and distribute the project while ensuring that all modified versions remain free as well. (See Calado, *love盲* code repository and Calado, *LoveIsBlind\_Pods* and *LoveIsBlind\_Postpods* model repositories.)

. published under [https://github.com/gofilipa/love\\_blind](https://github.com/gofilipa/love_blind) and the models are published under <https://huggingface.co/gofilipa>

<sup>8</sup>Include some of this eugenicist history of stats tools. Can be brief.

revealing patterns that are harmful or otherwise undesirable, so that one might act differently. She offers the example of one area which already does this work, climate change modelling. Here, she asks: "How can we treat machine learning systems and their predictions like those for global climate change? These models offer us the most probable future given past and current actions, not so that we will accept their predictions are inevitable, but rather so we will use them to help change the future" (26). My approach takes a similar shift around machine learning, using it as a tool for creating new objects toward "productivity", but to better understand the data that we already have.

Prediction, in addition to being a descriptive mechanism, is also a normalizing one. Within the prediction process itself, protocols find and amplify *frequent patterns* of word usage. This mechanism of amplifying what is frequent or common in language data distils the dominant tendencies and perspectives within show transcripts into the generated outputs. The predictions, then, will represent an approximation of what is most typical or natural in training data. As a kind of normalizing mechanism, then, Prediction, is an apt tool for studying shared desires—in my case, with the *LiB* subjects, for studying a shared desire for marriage.

Normativity, and desire for what Andrea Long Chu describes as "a normal fucking life" is one place where trans subjects intersect with cisgendered subjects (Chu and Drager 107). The element of normativity is where many Trans Studies scholars differentiate Trans Studies from Queer Studies. Jay Prosser, for example, in his seminal work *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (1998), explains that trans stories seek embodied normativity as a *telos*. Prosser's argument, which I examine in more depth below, reads how the experience of embodiment factors in a material way into the stories of trans subjects, which he calls "transsexual trajectories". While queer subjects move against "the apparent naturalness of sex," trans subjects, by contrast, "seek very pointedly to be nonperformative, to be constative, quite simply, *to be*" (32).

#### 1.0.4 the method

I will now demonstrate how this normalizing mechanism works in depth, using examples from the model that I trained from the transcripts of the show. I prompted this model with the phrase "Marriage is." It then generated the following outputs:

Marriage is not an easy decision.

Marriage is not a celebration.

Marriage is a lifelong commitment. (Appendix 2: Postpod prompts)

None of these sentences appear in the transcripts of the show. Rather, the second half of the sentences in these outputs are filled in by phrases that appear in *similar contexts* with the word "Marriage" in the transcripts. Instead of reproducing verbatim expressions, the model generates approximations of expressions within the transcripts. These approximations are a result of calculations, a series of statistical calculations, which determine the word that is most likely to appear next.

In order to understand how this statistical calculation works, one must first understand what happens to words themselves, and how word meaning is represented within the model. The model represents words in a numerical form, which is technically called a "word vector." Word vectors are how a machine learning knows what words mean individually, they comprise the model's internal dictionary, so to speak. The vectors themselves consist of a large and complex list of numbers, representing probability scores. Each of the numbers in the vector represent's a given word's association to another word in the dataset. For example, "marriage" may have a high probability score with the word "committment," and a lower probability score with the word "apple." Once a word is quantified into a word vector, its meaning can be then be calculated by the machine. One can do math with words.

In order to compile word vectors, however, the model must first be trained on a dataset, such as the transcripts of the show. There are three steps to the training process: their technical names are (1) hypothesis, (2) loss, and (3) optimization.

First, in the hypothesis step, the model takes a sample sentence from the transcript, like "marriage is not easy" and it blocks out the second half of the sentence, so that only "marriage is" remains (*Love Is Blind*, Season 2, Episode 14). It tries to guess which word or phrase should go in that second half, "Marriage is an apple." Moving to the second step, loss, it checks its prediction against the actual sentence, "Marriage is not easy." In this case, loss represents the mathematical difference between the vector for "not easy" and the vector for "apple." Then, it moves to the final step, optimization. Here, the model uses an algorithm to calculate the smallest adjustment possible that it can make to the vectors so that they are just slightly closer to the actual result. The adjustment must be minuscule, but it is precise. At each training step, the model slowly closes the gap between the prediction and the actual result.

The model will repeat these three steps over and over, making guess af-

ter guess after guess. It will try out many words, perhaps every word in the dataset, until it is sure of those that are most likely to appear together. With each guess, the model makes very slight adjustments to its own representation of word meaning (this constant iteration, and the computer processing required to do it, is why language models take lots of time, energy, and computer hardware to train). By the end, the list of probabilities will reflect a kind of average of that word's association to other words.

For example, in the prompt, "marriage is," the model will ascertain possible completions for this phrase, given other words that are associated with "marriage" in the dataset. One actual completion it gives, "not easy," reflects an implicit association between "marriage" and commitment. In the show transcript, the phrase appears during the period of the show when the couples are living together, prior to the wedding. Here, one participant, Jarrette, describes his difficulty adjusting his lifestyle to the new commitment:

Marriage is not easy. Over the past couple of months, like, I've definitely been struggling with coming in late, um, and just overindulging when I'm out. I haven't been the best at prioritizing us. And, uh, it got to a point where Iyanna moved out.  
Season 2, Episode 14

This context influences the model's interpretation of the word "marriage." This means that in the model's internal representation, the vectors for words like "struggling" and "prioritizing" will be strongly associated to the one for "marriage," while other words, like "apple," will fall out of favor. The effect is that when prompted, the model will generate completions like,

Marriage is not an easy decision.

Marriage is not a celebration.

Marriage is a lifelong commitment. (Appendix 2: Postpod prompts)

These completions are not exact, verbatim examples from the show transcripts: "Marriage is not easy" is slightly different from "Marriage is not an easy decision." Generating outputs that exactly resemble the training data is undesirable model behavior (technically called "overfitting," which I discuss in detail below). The goal, rather is to generate *plausible* outputs, given the context of the training data. I read this guessing mechanism, which approximates word meaning from a variety of samples, as a kind of normalization of language. The model generates language by approximating what is most likely, most plausible, based on its training data. As such, it is ideal for studying shared or common among the participant experiences on the show.

### 1.0.5 the outputs

The show contains two stages, the pre-engagement stage, where participants date each other from separate "pods" where they can hear but not see the other, and the engagement stage, where participants finally meet and proceed to live together in preparation for the wedding. In partitioning the romantic experiment into pre-engagement and engagement segments, the show poses the presence and role of the body as the variable that ultimately determines the viability of long-term commitment. In other words, it sets up an examination of how the body may affect normative trajectories and desires.

To explore the differences between these periods of the show, I trained two separate models on each of these periods: the first model is trained on the transcripts from the pods episodes, and I call it the "pods model"; the second model is trained on the episodes following the pods, and I call it the "postpods model."

Then, I prompted both models with input phrases about the body and touch to see how each of them would respond individually to the prompts. When prompted with phrases like "When I touch you," and "Physical touch is," and "Physically," the pods model generates the following outputs:

When I touch you, I feel it.

When I touch you, I feel your energy, and it is, like, I'm just so happy.

When I touch you, I can feel your soul, your heart, and your soul aligning so well.

When I touch you, I feel you, and I feel you, I feel you, and I feel you.

Physical touch is important to me.

Physical touch is the most important thing.

Physical touch is so sexy.

Physical touch is like a glove.

Physically, we are so happy.

The model's prediction mechanism can create all kinds of quirks in the outputs. Repetitions like, "When I touch you, I feel you, and I feel you, I feel you, and I feel you," are expected (though undesired) behavior in text generation models, especially those that are small and relatively underdeveloped,

like this one. Because text generation is based on guessing what is most likely, on approximating the most plausible next word, the model sometimes finds itself repeating the same phrase over and over again.

While models are good at prediction, they are not at all good at being creative, at innovating. A model can only generate what it has already seen before. Even a phenomenon like "hallucination," that a model spews text that has no bearing in reality, is based on the tendency of models to repeat what they've already seen. They hallucinate not because they are creative or random, but because they are designed from statistical processes to produce what is most plausible rather than most accurate.

The rest of the results, then, reflect what is most plausible given the information from the transcripts. Because these transcripts are from a period of the show when no actual touching occurs between the couples, the model associates touch with non-tangible phenomena, like "soul" and "energy." In addition, touch—being foreclosed from the participants during this stage of the experiment—is elevated as something highly desired, to an "important," "most important," and even "sexy" quality. Finally, the last two examples, "like a glove" and "we are so happy," suggest an association between touch and compatibility, in the sense that the couples "fit" together, so to speak.

The outputs with those from the postpods model, however, put touch in very different contexts:

When I touch you, I feel like I'm in my head.

When I touch you, like, I feel like I'm literally in my head.

When I touch you, you just feel like it's so weird.

When I touch you, it feels like a jab.

When I touch you, it feels like something I'm about to get up and walk away.

When I touch you, I feel like it's like I've just, like, left the room.

When I touch you, the thing that's scary is, like, it's a physical thing.

When I touch you, you're like "I'm blinking."

Unlike the pods model, these outputs present touch as a not pleasant experience. Touch is "so weird," "like a jab," suggesting a strange and even disruptive aspect to touch. Furthermore, touch is associated with physicality, which is "scary." At the same time, touch signals location and movement:

"in my head," "walk away," and "left the room." While in the pods, touch drew the characters together, evoking non-tangible phenomena like the soul and energy, here it seems that touch repels the characters from each other.

Turning to the transcripts can help to inform some of these outputs. For example, the concept of touch being scary emerges in one scene between Paul and Micah, a newly engaged couple who are one day into their pre-wedding romantic getaway, in Mexico. They are swimming in a freshwater pool, when Micah notices a fish, which she mistakes for a small shark,

Micah: Is that a shark?

Paul: What do you mean shark? Oh, they're catfish. They look like baby, like, tiny nurse sharks.

Micah: Okay, this is kind of scaring me. It's my worst nightmare if one touches me.

Paul: These little catfish?

Micah: Yeah.

Paul: You're not their mommy.

*Love is Blind*, Season 4, Episode 5, "Paradise Lost"

Here, the word "touch," which appears in the same sentence as "my worst nightmare," accrues association with fear and revulsion. It is also, interestingly, associated with the concept of motherhood, in the statement from Paul, "You're not their mommy." At the end of the show, Paul rejects Micah directly on the altar. The reason, he later explains, is because he "struggled with... envisioning Micah as, like, you know, a mother" (Season 4, Episode 12, "Eternal Bliss?").

Most of these outputs represent approximations, but also direct quotes taken from the transcripts. The phrase that says, "I'm blinking," is actually taken directly from the show, and is an example of an undesired but not uncommon blip in the prediction process. In machine learning, this blip is referred to as "overfitting," when a verbatim section of text from the training data, in this case, the show transcripts, is generated in the output. "Overfitting" means that the model is too accurate: that it has slipped from making predictions that are plausible to repeating exactly the data it has been trained on. A model overfitting in its outputs is generally a sign that there isn't enough training data or enough variation in the training data, meaning that the model has less examples from which to approximate and generalize. So, it resorts to simply reproducing direct examples from its training.

For my purposes, however, overfitting is not only a blip, it also points to a specific scene in the show, which highlights a tension between the sensory modes of touch and sight. The original reference to "blinking" appears in a scene with the newly engaged couple, Zach and Irina, when they meet each other for the first time in person. The doors open, and they awkwardly approach each other down a red carpet. After exchanging their first greetings, they have a conversation about their reaction to each other's appearance:

Zach: Do I look like what you thought I'd look like?

Irina: I had no guesses of what you looked like.

Zach: Oh!

Irina: You have, like, the blankest stare in your eyes.

Zach: Really?

Irina: I'm just kind of taking it all in.

Zach: Me too.

Irina: You look like a fictional character. You look like something out of a cartoon.

Zach: I know.

Irina: You have to blink!

Zach: I am blinking.

Irina: You don't blink. You look like this.

Zach: I am blinking. I will try not to be too intense. (Season 4, Episode 4, "Playing with Fire")

Zach seems a bit insecure of his appearance, asking if he looks how Irina imagined. And Irina, in turn, seems put out, describing him as a "fictional character" and demanding that he blink. Blinking is, of course, a way of stopping the entry of visual data, of occluding it from perception. For Irina, the request for Zach to blink might indicate her own sense of overwhelm at his physical form, at his sudden incorporation before her eyes. Perhaps, the reality of his physical form is too much, so that, projecting her own feelings of overstimulation, she asks him to blink.

In the story of Zach and Irina relationship, it is clear that the catalyst for their breakup is a lack of physical attraction on the part of Irina. Later in the same episode, Irina explains her feelings to Micah, the same Micah from the "shark" scene, who is coupled with Paul.

Irina: And so, Zack. I feel like is my type on paper. Has, like, brown hair, brown eyes, like, chiseled face. Like, I really like dark features. And the moment I saw Zack, it was like, "I don't know who this man is." And I was like, "Maybe it's just scary, and it was a lot." Like, hopefully it's gonna grow, but I've noticed every time he does, like, touch me, I get, like, major ick. When he puts his arm around me at night, I literally was like—like, my heart stopped. And I literally go... But not, like, in an excited way.

Micah: I wanna, like, relate to you in a way, but it's always, like, so different.

Irina: How was it with you and Paul?

Micah: The thing with me and Paul is, like, we both, like, had such an immediate understanding as best friends.

Irina: Yeah, Paul's gorgeous. (Season 4, Episode 4, "Playing With Fire")

Zach supposedly has physical aspects which Irina finds attractive, "brown eyes, chiseled face," but something about him nonetheless repulses her. When he puts his arm around her, she recoils, "get[ting]... major ick." While she claims her feeling of disgust have nothing to do with his physical appearance, Irina simultaneously conjures appearance with the phrase, "Yeah, Paul's gorgeous." To Irina, Paul's "gorgeous[ness]" explains why Micah and Paul had an "immediate understanding."

I want to propose that Irina's physical repulsion to Zach results from the experience in the pods, from the forclosure of the visual sense within the pods. Irina asks Zach to "blink" in attempt to relieve her own feeling of being overwhelmed by the sight of him. This sensual overload related to sight also relates to touch: she is repulsed by his physical touch, his closeness; there is something about touch which similarly overwhelms her.

That is because, sequestered from the sight of the other within the pods, the participants experience a kind of bodily split in which their own physical senses materialize in new and surprising ways. They experience not only the physical body, the material reality of their physical body which they've always known, but something like what Jay Prosser refers to as the "body image," an internal perception of the body. Despite being internal, the body image is a physical, sensual phenomenon, which "clearly has a material force for transsexuals," according to Prosser (69). For trans subjects, this "material force" often manifests in the trope of being "trapped in the wrong body" and feelings of dysphoria. The sensory deprivation of being in the

pods, I argue, subjects these cisgendered participants to something akin to Prosser's bodily split, from which the body image emerges—for a time.

For these subjects, I argue, the body image manifests in a heightened sensation of the body, which paradoxically creates a feeling of the body's dissolution. When prompted with the phrase "My body," the pods model generates the following completions:

My body feels like it's coming off.  
My body feels heavier.  
My body feels so different now.  
My body feels weird.  
My body makes me feel like it's real.  
My body feels torn between two different people.

Across all the samples, there is an increased awareness of the physical body. Due to the denial of visual access, the body's physicality comes into apprehension in a novel and visceral way, which makes it seem all the more strange. Perhaps due to the absence of the visual sense, the body feels "weird" and "so different now." Weighted by this new somatic "heaviness," the body even "feels like it's coming off," an image that evokes Prosser's concept of the bodily split between the physical body and the body image. Perhaps, the reference to being "torn between two different people" not only refers to actual people, to dating multiple characters on the show, but to a single person with two bodies in tension. As Prosser explains, the body split creates "conflict... between sentient body image and insentient visible body" (70). For these straight, cisgendered participants within the pods, the body image may be coming into sentience in a way that is not possible when they are fully integrated, outside the pods. And this may be the first (and only) time that they experience this level of bodily sensation and awareness.

But it is not a feeling that lasts long. In the postpods model, the body appears to be re-integrated. The "insentient visible body," the outer body, comes into view when the participants are finally given visual access to each other. Here, the language about the body shifts into notably more visual and positive descriptions:

My body is gorgeous.  
My body is so cute.  
My body is so pretty.

My body makes me feel lighter, more confident.

My body makes me feel warm.

My body makes me feel like I've missed my train.

The outputs address the body in concise and flattering terms: the body is "gorgeous," "so cute," "pretty." Now that the visual sense has been re-incorporated to the body, it becomes the dominant sense modality. Perhaps, because the couples can see each other, the body feels "lighter" and "warm," offering coherence where before was weirdness and weight. In the last output, however, there is a suggestion of something not quite right: "My body makes me feel like I've missed my train." This statement, with its slightly nostalgic undertone, suggests that even when coherence is gained, something is lost.

What is lost comes into view when the model is prompted with statements about touch, the sense modality that has been forsaken for the visual:

Physical touch is everything that I've wanted in a wife.

Physical touch is everything that I've ever wanted in a partner.

Physical touch is a big part of what I want.

Physically, there's so much potential here.

Physically, it was the perfect opportunity.

Physical touch is described in aspirational terms: it is "everything i've wanted," "everything I've ever wanted," and "what I want." The past perfect tense here, and the reference to unfulfilled opportunity is indicative: even after meeting in person, the desire seems to freeze in place. The restoration of the visual sense, the re-integration the previously fractured body, then, does not offer completion or culmination.

Being restored their visual sense heals the LiB participants from the bodily split, but it does not save them from the aftermath of their investments. When the couples finally meet in physical forms, they remain plagued by the possibilities for physical connection that they felt in the pods. And these expectations are what, for some of them, prevents their ability to accept their partners as they are. Due to their experience in the pods, the significance of touch is inflated to include other, perhaps practically unattainable, desires. Although they exited from one trajectory, they remain stuck with the desire for a kind of touch that is "everything that I've ever wanted in a partner" (Appendix 1). Considering that the characters are now reunited with their physical bodies, there is something almost cruel in this denouement, a "cruel

optimism," in Lauren Berlant's formulation, which describes the attachment that drives desire even while it wears out the desirer.

Or, more specific to their bodily predicaments, the characters experience a version of what Hil Malatino describes as "future fatigue" (20). Like cruel optimism, future fatigue generates "intense anticipatory anxiety" that "impede[s] flourishing" (Malatino 20). Unlike cruel optimism, however, future fatigue concerns trans subjects who are invested in "the promised moment of harmony between the felt and the perceived body" (Malatino 27). Despite being cisgendered, these subjects in LiB experience a bodily split, during which they develop romantic feelings and attachments. And most of them, when they leave the pods, cannot fulfil these aspirations within their embodied lives.

#### **1.0.6 TODO ADD close reading: approximating average sensations**

#### **1.0.7 cis and trans futures**

The disruption of bodily integrity has ramifications that last well beyond the pods. Recalling the case of Paul and Micah, Paul eventually rejects Micah because he wanted more evidence of maternal qualities. In his own words, he "struggled with... envisioning Micah as, like, you know, a mother" (Season 4, Episode 12, "Eternal Bliss?"). At the end of the season, when the host of the "Reunion" episode prods him on the topic, he struggles to articulate his reasoning:

Paul: You know, she didn't feel comfortable with showing that side of her.

Host: I thought she said she did. She just talked about it from since the pods up until your wedding day.

Paul: It wasn't evident to me... That wasn't there.

Host: You wanted actions. Like, you wanted her...

Paul: I just wanted to be able to see it, I guess. Like...

Host: What would make you see that? I'm sorry. Just so I understand.

Paul: I think... It's a little bit ineffable, right? So, it's kind of an exuding, a nurturing presence. It's something that you feel. There's not really, like... tangible, kind of like, things, I don't think. (Season 4, Episode 13 'The Reunion')

Paul claims that he failed to "see" evidence of Micah's motherly nature, but when asked to explain what this evidence would look like, answers that it is "ineffable." He supposedly wants someone who can be a mother, but cannot describe what a mother looks or acts like. What he wants Micah to have expressed, he cannot express himself. At the end, he takes refuge in the sense of *feeling*, in the gravious untraceability of felt sensation.

But, the reader will know, that feeling and touch, in particular, does occupy a very real and traceable sense modality—one that is emphasized especially when another, like sight, is diminished. Clearly, Paul's answer demonstrates that some cis people, besides being firmly anchored to their genders, are not okay in their bodies. That being said, however, I am not interested in a critical analysis that redeems them or their bodily experience. After all, cis-hetero bodies are already well represented and redeemed. What I am interested in, rather, is the study of normativity, and how alignments between cis and trans experience might further this study.

Which brings me to my final point: that I intend for this critical method, which approximates language as a means of surfacing shared investments, to push back against the polarization that characterizes the current discourse in the US, and specifically that about trans rights. In this paper, I deliberately isolated the body as a potential vector of connection that flows through and between gender and sexual identities. I believe that machine learning, with its tendency to amplify what is most frequent, might reveal something shared about the body, even across very different embodied experiences.

#### 1.0.8 TODO ADD toward new solidarities

- this revelation might offer groundwork for new solidarities between trans and cis subjects; solidarity based on the strange feeling of "the body coming off"
- bring back the reading of "reality?"

This is an attempt to expand Trans Studies by applying its interest in the body beyond the proper or conventional areas and objects. And Trans Studies offers no dearth of theorizing on the body and its desires. I close with one quote from a study by Cassius Adair that explores "t4t erotics." Here, Adair asks, "Why can't the erotic be a site of producing trans identity or practices?" (46). He points out that, after all, "cis people do it all the time: all erotic desires might be sites of identity formation, for anyone" (47).

Yes, cis people do it all the time. But what they tend not to do, and which Trans Studies does so well, is to question the perimeters of their own

bodies, to explore how desire and attachments manifest in material ways on the body. And perhaps, as I hope this paper has shown, that Trans Studies theorizing might open up such thinking about the body, "for anyone."

#### 1.0.9 bank

1. sedgwick quotes "for someone to have an unmystified, angry view of large and genuinely systemic oppressions does not *intrinsically* or *necessarily* enjoin on that person any specific train of epistemological or narrative consequences. To know that the origin of HIV *realistically* *might* have resulted from a state-assisted conspiracy—such knowledge is, it turns out, separable from the question of whether the energies of a given AIDS activist might best be used in the tracing and exposure of such a possible plot. They might, but then again, they might not" (*Novel Gazing* 4).
2. homophily: negative feelings are a tool for polarization Chun - Homophily: Negative feelings are a tool of polarization, a way of aligning people around a cause, but in a way that also keeps them separate. For example, incels. Explained via magnetic polarization: "polarized filings both repel one another and stick together through their overwhelming attraction to their opposite pole" (Chun 85).
3. introducing study of normativity in Trans Studies —a crucial area of interest for Trans Studies, as Andrea Long Chu puts it: "Trans Studies requires that we understand—as we never have before—what it means to be attached to a norm, by desire, by habit, by survival" ("After Trans Studies" 108).
4. focus on LARGE language models is reinforcing research patterns "The bigger-is-better norm is also self-reinforcing, shaping the AI research field by informing what kinds of research is incentivized, which questions are asked (or remain unasked), as well as the relationship between industrial and academic actors." (Varoquaux et al).
5. normativity quotes

Prosser:

This desire normativity leads to a consideration of the body.

- Goal is to then read materiality into the transsexual body: "To bring into view the materiality of the body" (Prosser 12).

- Prosser: Critique of Queer Studies and gender performativity, that it elides the specificity of the trans body.
  - "Gender Trouble cannot account for a transsexual desire for sexed embodiment as *telos*" (Prosser 33).
    - \* gender crossing is essential to performativity, but not the actual material body.

Queer v Trans subjects:

- "There is much about transsexuality that must remain irreconcilable to queer: the specificity of transsexual experience; the importance of flesh to self; the difference between sex and gender identity; the desire to pass as "real-ly-gendered" in a world without trouble; perhaps above all, as I explore in my next chapter, a particular experience of the body that can't simply transcend (or transubstantiate) the literal" (59).

And this attachment to normativity, in fact, is one way that trans studies has distinguished itself with regard to queer studies, at least according to some scholars.

"trans analytics have (historically, though not universally) a different set of primary affects than queer theory. Both typically take pain as a reference point, but then their affective interest zags. Queer relishes the joy of subversion. Trans trades in quotidian boredom. Queer has a celebratory tone. Trans speaks in sober detail."

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## 1.2 Appendix 1: Pods Model Outputs

Prompt: "Love is"

Outputs:

"Love is really important to me."

"Love is what I need in my life."

"Love is everything that I've been looking for."

Prompt: "When I touch you"

Outputs:

"When I touch you, I feel it."

"When I touch you, I feel your energy, and it is, like, I'm just so happy."

"When I touch you, I can feel your soul, your heart, and your soul aligning so well."

"When I touch you, I feel you, and I feel you, I feel you, and I feel you."

Prompt: "Physical touch is"

Outputs:

"Physical touch is important to me."

"Physical touch is the most important thing."

"Physical touch is so sexy."

"Physical touch is like a glove."

Prompt: "Physically,"

Outputs:

"Physically, we are so happy."

Prompt: "My body"

Outputs:

"My body feels like it's coming off."

"My body feels heavier."

"My body feels so different now."

"My body feels weird."

"My body makes me feel like it's real."

"My body feels torn between two different people."

### 1.3 Appendix 2: Postpods Model Outputs

Prompt: "When I touch you"

Outputs:

"When I touch you, I feel like I'm in my head."

"When I touch you, you just feel like it's so weird."

"When I touch you, it feels like a jab."

"When I touch you, like, I feel like I'm literally in my head."

"When I touch you, it feels like something I'm about to get up and walk away."

"When I touch you, I feel like it's like I've just, like, left the room."

"When I touch you, the thing that's scary is, like, it's a physical thing."

"When I touch you, you're like I'm blinking.'"

Prompt: "My body"

Outputs:

"My body is gorgeous."

"My body is so cute."

"My body is so pretty."

"My body makes me feel lighter, more confident."

"My body makes me feel warm."

"My body makes me feel like I've missed my train."

Prompt: "Physical touch"

Outputs:

- "Physical touch is everything that I've ever wanted in a partner."
- "Physical touch is everything that I've wanted in a wife."
- "Physical touch is a big part of what I want."
- "Physically, there's so much potential here."
- "Physically, it was the perfect opportunity."