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GENERAL ARTICLE

Que(e)rying Youth Suicide: Unpacking Sexist and Racist Violence in *Skim* and *13 Reasons Why*

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Abstract

This paper troubles positivist and pathological discourses surrounding youth suicide through critical engagement with young adult fiction: *Skim* and *13 Reasons Why*. These texts offer opportunities for readers to dwell on and question youth suicide prevention and intervention through an engagement with affect, gender, queerness, and race. *Skim* (2008, Groundwood) and *13 Reasons Why* (2017) counter ‘it gets better’ stories: they interrogate the inevitability of bullying, question the predictable approaches that schools take in their response to violence, and assert that the issue at hand is more systematic. Together, these analytics que(e)ry youth suicide by asking: how does the biopolitics (or necropolitics) of livability fit into popularized understandings of youth suicide? Read together, *Skim* and *13 Reasons Why* provide opportunities to meaningfully question livability through the characters of Skim and Courtney—two Asian girls who bear the brunt of racist and sexist violence. *Skim* becomes a ‘project’ of white girls’ anti-suicide campaign and Courtney is barely living as she attempts to secure the platform of ‘model minority.’ Both girls are queer, too. In its entirety, this paper argues that popularized models of suicide intervention continue to ignore the pressing needs of queer Asian girls—such as Skim and Courtney.

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I think there are a lot of ways to be marked. If you are ugly, like Natasha Cake who has no eyebrows and doesn't wash her hair, then you are marked to be treated like crap for life. I have eyebrows and wash but I think I am also marked to some degree (biologically) as a weirdo for life. ... I think everything you do and everything people do to you leaves a mark, or at least it affects who you are—Skim¹

Introduction

With the release of the popular Netflix show *13 Reasons Why* in 2017 came a reinvigoration of public and scholarly discourses around prevention and institutional responses to youth suicide. *13 Reasons Why* is an adaptation of Jay Asher's novel of the same title, which recounts thirteen explanations for a young girl's (Hannah Baker's) suicide as addressed to specific peers and adults in her community that have harmed her, via recordings on cassette tape. The show has gained popularity and is now in its third season. The cultural resonance of the show is perhaps best encapsulated by 18 year old Reina who features in a Fine Brothers Entertainment YouTube video called *Teens React to 13 Reasons Why*: 'I can't tell you how much this show has affected my life'.² This paper contributes to the critical conversation of youth suicide and utilizes two young adult texts: *Skim* by Jillian and Mariko Tamaki—a part-memoir graphic novel set in Toronto which depicts main the character Skim's processes of coming to terms with her own queer identity and how she is coping with the suicide of a rumoured-to-be queer teen boy from another school—and Brian Yorkey's Netflix adaptation of *13 Reasons Why*, which is set in a generic American small town.

These texts offer an opportunity to critically and empathetically engage with stories revolving around youth who have taken their own lives. In addition, this paper is interested in uncovering how youth suicide is read through queerness, girlhood, and race: we put forward a reading of both *Skim*/Kim Cameron (henceforth *Skim*) and Courtney Crismon. *Skim* is a fat, goth, Wiccan practicing, lesbian Asian girl who has been the 'project' of her school's anti-suicide, bullying prevention campaign; *13 Reason Why*'s Courtney Crimson, a conventionally attractive, Asian femme girl who experiences same-sex attraction. Both *Skim* and Courtney are suicide-adjacent, or form part of their peer-network with other youth coming to terms with youth suicide.

These two texts are popular materials created for and about youth that take issues of depression, inequality, and simply 'fitting in' seriously. The utility of these texts lies in their ability to analytically and meaningfully engage with youth suicide as a real decision that some youth contemplate—and sometimes succeed in—as a form of coping with quotidian violence they encounter. Finally, these texts work well together because they both straddle the textual/visual divide. People from all demographics are consuming *13 Reasons Why*—youth want to watch and engage with it, while institutional responses to it, especially in the K-12 school system, have ranged from passive non-engagement to outright bans.³ *Skim*, as a potent visual text that grapples with the same set of questions, makes an excellent pair with *13 Reasons Why* because it mounts a parallel critique of the K-12 school system's institutionalized (and, in both texts, paltry) response to youth suicide. We pose that these texts be read together

and across one another for the ways they address relationships between gendered violence, institutionalized racism, and cisheterosexism. These texts tell a larger story about how Asian girls and (queer) youth suicide are imagined within dominant and marginal spheres, and invite us to ‘dwell’—to linger—on what it means to be proximate to (queer) youth suicide while occupying particular identity categories⁴.

In an effort to highlight the complicated critiques of youth suicide prevention and intervention in *Skim* and *13 Reasons Why*, we first situate the texts’ critique of normative suicide prevention and intervention through a sociocultural understanding of suicidialogy. Next, we offer a brief introduction to each of these texts, including a discussion of the particular critique that each text mounts as well as the censorship that both texts have faced. Following that, we embark on a reading of how *Skim* and Courtney, as characters, add nuance by way of adding a voice that is often excluded from ‘dead girl’ narratives surrounding youth suicide. Finally, we consider what these texts can tell us about who is deserving of care and intervention, asking: which stories, as they pertain to suicide, are culturally produced as worthy of attention? The paper in its entirety offers an opportunity to significantly engage with young adult texts on and about youth suicide—gesturing to their important critiques, and engaging with the mundane, uncomfortable, even taboo subjects they cover.

Sociocultural Critique of Suicidology

Our critical approach to this paper and its critique of popularized discourses on/of suicide is operationalized through mad studies as a uniquely distinct form of inquiry that challenges sanism and the pathologization of individuals and groups through the use of bio-medical diagnosis.⁵ As LeFrançois, Menzies, and Reaume note, mad studies is:

*critical of psychiatry from a radical socially progressive foundation in which the medical model is dispensed with as biologically reductionist whilst alternative forms of helping people experiencing mental anguish are based on humanitarian, holistic perspectives where people are not reduced to symptoms but understood within the social and economic context of the society in which they live.*⁶

Through this article, we utilize mad studies to resist medicalized, top-down understandings of suicide, which have historically over-relied on perceived links between mental disorders and suicide,⁷ or have tended to focus predominantly on personal pain and suffering at the cost of a detailed examination of suicide as intimately bound up with both the social and the cultural.⁸

Indeed, these saneist understandings of suicide are operationalized through professional fields such as psychology, psychiatry, and clinic social work whereby the problem of ‘suicide’ is operationalized as a deficit—something in need of fixing, curing, or stopping. As Kouri and White note, under the auspice of suicide intervention adult ‘professionals’ are often preoccupied with and mandated to address suicide through the lens of *prevention*⁹. Kouri and White argue that this focus on ‘prevention,’ which can preclude helping professionals from engaging with the everyday inequalities’ youth are required to live within and endure, often constrains the ways psychologists, psychiatrists, and clinical social workers can address structural and cultural domains of suicide.

Alongside White, Marsh, Kral, and Morris, we note that suicide, like other complex phenomena, is a social and cultural problem, which require necessary attention.¹⁰ Yet we highlight through *Skim* and *13 Reasons Why* that neither the texts youth engage with, nor youth themselves, are involved in ‘understanding’ the complexity of suicide. Thus, there is not

one cause or effect of suicide; suicide is a multidimensional response to repetitive trauma. Our mobilization of a sociocultural critique of suicidology is, in turn, supported by our particular object of study: though the authors here are invested in such a critique, it is less a critique that we bring to *Skim* and *13 Reasons Why* and more a critique brought forward by those texts that we, find compelling.

Textual Critique and Public Responses to Youth Suicide

Skim and *13 Reasons Why* offer a critique of the way that schools, and the adults that run them, respond to youth suicide, one that extends to the institution both in the form of policy and more explicitly in their depictions of adult-youth relationships. Each text offers a slightly different critique: in *Skim*, Skim is over-policed by both teachers at her school and peers for being visibly marked as ‘other’—both her fatness and her Asian-ness are held against her at various points in the text. In the first season of *13 Reasons Why*, adapted from Ashers novel, the supports that Hannah Baker—the youth who takes her own life, and around whom the narrative revolves—is met with when she actively seeks guidance counselling are underwhelming, partially because of the ways sexist discourses around sexual violence and abuse become normalized in girls’ lives, and partially because Hannah appears to ‘have it together,’ or to not be an immediate risk to her own health and well-being. Regardless of their positionalities, the girls’ experiences of bullying and violence become normalized—girls are expected to put up with sexism they experience in and out of schools.¹¹ Racialized girls (such as Skim and Courtney) are constructed as ‘other,’ and are required to endure multiple forms of oppression: sexism *and* racism.¹²

Skim and *13 Reasons Why* address serious problems with the way schools respond to youth suicide. To sum up the problems from the view of Skim and Hannah, we understand Hannah’s guidance counsellor (who is Black) to be suggesting that because he is bound by the school’s policies, there is nothing he or the school can do about the sexual assault and rape that Hannah reports to him, while Skim takes issue with her guidance counsellor’s proclamation that all ‘goth’ kids are depressed, especially fragile, and thus in need of extra attention.¹³ We understand these texts to be interrogating the struggles that Skim and Hannah (and, as we will discuss later, Courtney) face in part by framing them as subjects that are predominantly made legible on the surface of the body. This framing differs slightly between texts, as each seeks to balance an institution’s understanding of one respective student with a more nuanced picture of those subjects by providing their own narrative perspectives.

Skim’s school responds negatively to her bodily and aesthetic differences—to her ‘goth’ attire and her fat body— but her internal narrative complicates that reading. For example, Skim chooses to skip gym class and is smoking outside when Ms. Archer—the English teacher she develops a relationship with—walks by. Skim’s internal dialogue shows her attempts to understand and balance her various motivations: ‘I try to go to gym but am forced to skip class whenever balls are involved. I have this thing about balls. Especially airborne balls. Besides, you can’t play golf with one arm. So there I was, thinking and stuff, when Ms. Archer walked up’.¹⁴ Here, Skim is playing off her queer attraction to Ms. Archer as if it were simply an aversion to gym class, or perhaps a product of her broken arm. Skim’s situation is already one of over-policing: her guidance counsellor, her peers who had previously bullied her, and even her closest friend Lisa all criticize her goth aesthetic, and what they read as her depression in the aftermath of a suicide by John Reddear, a boy from her Catholic girl’s school’s parallel boy’s school. This over-policing is occurring as rumours that link Reddear’s suicide to his assumed queerness circulate. Beyond her injured arm and the unequal power

dynamic between teacher and student is a hovering sense that queer desire itself is a problem, and one sutured in unclear terms to suicide. *Skim*'s self-narration allows her to maintain some control, however minor, over the dialogue that takes shape around her body, desires, and aesthetic, which is otherwise controlled by the institution of the school, and by peers who have bought into the school's mode of crisis mediation.

Hannah's school, on the other hand, responds to her in a way that underscores that she is 'conventionally unconventional'; she is angsty, but nothing about her behaviour provokes a 'red flag' response for the adults around her. Instead, her angst is read as 'regular' teenage behaviour. Contrary to *Skim*, Hannah is able to 'fall off the radar' because coping with cisheterosexist violence is completely normalized in her particular school setting. Dialogue between Mr. Porter—the guidance counsellor—and Hannah from when she seeks support after being raped by a peer, Bryce Walker, exemplifies the normativity of sexism in the lives of girls, and the implicit and insidious violence in the hands-off approach that her school takes:

Mr. Porter: Look, something happened, Hannah. I believe you. But if you won't press charges and you won't confront him, you need to consider the possibility of moving beyond this.

Hannah: Move beyond this?

Mr. Porter: Is he in your class, Hannah?

Hannah: He's a senior.

Mr. Porter: So he will be gone next year.

Hannah: You want me to move beyond this. . . . Thank you, Mr. Porter.

Mr. Porter: Hannah. Wait. You don't need to leave.

Hannah: I think I'm done here. . . . I got what I came for.

Mr. Porter: I think there's more we can talk about, Hannah.

Hannah: No, I think we've figured it out. I need to move on and get over it.¹⁵

This excerpt critiques the institutions (schools and the legal system) and the adults who run them that victim blame girls for their experiences of violence.

Skim and *13 Reasons Why* both find it valuable to visibly represent girls' bodies as stories they tell, but also to underscore, and often to counter those visible representations with first-person narrative, creating a fuller, more refined and complicated picture of what it means to be a girl in contemporary North America. We find these critiques to be cyclically bound up with the contention that each text faces: they critique schools for their approach to youth suicide, but also the discourses surrounding suicide prevention and intervention more generally. Both girls' bodies are subject to violence in similar yet different ways. Schools have sometimes taken issue with these texts, oversimplifying the work that they do in the name of protecting students from texts that they claim 'glorify' suicide¹⁶; young people are leading the response by re-asserting the importance of talking about youth suicide without over-simplifying the issue, including by engaging with texts like these.

Both texts represent, in complex terms, queer relationships, which further complicates this cycle. There is an overall trend in ‘institutionalized homophobia’¹⁷ in book selection and censorship in K-12 education in North America, and *Skim* is a commonly recommended text for teachers who want to push back against this trend by including lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ) content in the classroom. In 2010, the American conservative media watchdog, NewsBusters, used *Skim* as an example of the American Library Association’s supposed ‘agenda ... [to stock] library shelves across the nation with pro-homosexual books that inevitably fall into children’s hands.’¹⁸ We note that in even the most direct calls to censor *Skim*, *Skim* is read as *only* queer, which erases other important facets of her identity (for example, her race or size), and conveniently side-steps the larger critiques the text deploys. The impetus to read *Skim* and Hannah (and Courtney) as simplified, flat characters, or as only through a single facet of identity, is reductionist and common in calls to censor or control access to these texts.

The controversy around *13 Reasons Why* has been more pointed and sustained. For example, several schools in Canada and the USA have banned the Netflix show, and in one extreme case have banned all discussion of it¹⁹—a dialogue that was deemed important enough to the lives of young people that it has been covered extensively in the magazine *Teen Vogue*. In one *Teen Vogue* feature on the show, Kate Walsh, the actor who plays Hannah’s mother, declares that it ‘should be mandatory in schools to watch [*13 Reasons Why*] and talk about it and have education around it’.²⁰ The conversation about *13 Reasons Why*, then, is not only polarizing, but big enough that it has seeped out of high schools and into broader media spheres.

While there is much media attention directed toward vilifying *Skim* and *13 Reasons Why*, some adults and youth have more complicated responses to the texts they encounter. As Morgan Slade notes, ‘*Skim* tells us a lot about why conservative, mainstream anti-bullying and suicide awareness campaigns fail. They fail because they ignore gender, race, and sexuality, preferring to talk about everyone as though they’re a straight white thin man.’²¹ Moreover, as noted in *Graphically Inclined*, ‘This is not a ‘coming out’ story, and *Skim* does not agonize over the possibility of her being lesbian’.²² Both of these readings suggest that *Skim* should not be read solely for its content, rather, as a graphic novel that pushes the boundaries of form in order to represent a more nuanced teen girl experience, and to thoroughly examine the violence inherent for *Skim* and others like her in simply trying to move through spaces, and discourses, that have historically been occupied by white, cisheterosexual people. It represents on the page a queered relationship of the body to space and time, which lays out for the reader the possibility of a non-normative relationship to narrative and plot.

Skim subverts both formulistic and narrative closure. There is much commentary on the productive possibilities of *Skim* as a discussion of suicide prevention for marginalized youth, racialized queerness, and ‘fitting in’. *Skim* is a text that ultimately starts and finishes with the suicide of a (queer) boy that *Skim* has never met, and, in depicting *Skim*’s innermost thoughts without shying away from the marginalization and social ostracization she experiences—it is, after all, a ‘diary’ text—as a result of the form that her school’s response to that suicide takes, the text mounts a clear, nuanced critique of the state of those discourses for *Skim* and her peers.

Youth and adults alike are responding to the censorship imposed onto *13 Reasons Why*, which in season two includes a warning regarding the triggering content present within the show. On Twitter, @m3gggg_ posted:

13 Reasons Why is exactly what the world needs to be watching. It is not glorifying suicide or mental illness; it is not glorifying rape or rape victims. It is simply showing you THE REAL WORLD and the tremendous consequences that actions have on others. ... It is supposed to make you uncomfortable.²⁴

In a popular YouTube Video, Justin Prentice (the actor who plays Bryce Barry Walker in *13 Reasons Why*) reads aloud an anonymous letter from a survivor of sexual violence:

Watching this show tested my strength as a survivor and I think it has brought out the side of me that wants to further advocate for survivors of traumatic assaults. You have all inspired me to speak out about my story and try to release the shame I feel about the abuse. Again, I cannot thank you enough for showing the truth, for showing raw, painful, and powerful scenes to help end the stigma ... Thanks again for saving my life.²⁵

While the call for bans of *13 Reasons Why*—and the prohibition of discussions of the text—cite the depiction of rape and suicide on screen, for many viewers the show is opening up meaningful dialogue with regards to the sexual assault and the violence girls (and women) encounter everyday.

Is 'It' Getting Better for (Queer) Asian Girls?

These texts also take seriously the possibility of (queer) youth suicide and the multiplicities of violence all youth endure. However, social programs like 'It Gets Better' (IGB) do not seem to be inherently at risk of the kind of dismissal that *Skim* and *13 Reasons Why* have faced. The IGB movement is a text that has received mainly positive feedback from youth, adults, and educational institutions alike. Jasbir Puar wrote an important piece regarding the suicide of Tyler Clamenti, a student at Rutgers University in New Jersey, United States of America, whereby he faced homophobic cyberbullying.²⁶ Puar notes that the global campaign IGB (based in the United States) that asks the general public to mourn Tyler and other gay or queer teens is misguided since it directs attention to the future of queer youth, rather than their current, interlocking, and pressing needs. Puar notes that these interventions such as IGB often reduce multifaceted problems to 'homophobic bullying' or 'harassment' and ignore the inequitable conditions that queer youth of color face and are required to live within, causing more harm than good. Rick Mercer, a prominent Canadian 'out' public figure and comedian, urged the public to consider the immediacy of LGBTQ youth suicide, suggesting that 'it's no longer okay to tell kids that it is going to get better, we need to make it better now'.²⁷

Patrick Grzanka and Emily Mann note that the larger moral concern with queer youth suicide and the IGB campaign often centralizes the liberal 'homonormative' queer subject.²⁸ While the IGB campaign raises concerns of the productive possibility of queer youths' future, it has the potential to normalize the inequalities experienced by queer youth are required to live within in hopes of the world (and their lives) 'getting better'. Critics of the IGB movement²⁹ note that the campaign often relies on normative, white, and neoliberal articulations of gender and sexuality, including within what Ahmed calls 'happiness scripts'. Happiness scripts are readily available, generally normative life narratives that paint happiness as accessible to all if only individuals make the correct choices, where 'choices' may include such things as object choice and career, generally include marriage and childrearing, and which are always tied to the individual and never to systems. In the case of IGB, 'happiness scripts' include those things that can only come into being after young people have exited the K-12 school system, including movement through the world that does not require proximity to homophobic or misogynist peers.

Focusing on these particular symbols of success fails to address the everyday, often mundane, violence LGBTQ people face, and negates the ways equalities are unequally distributed. There is a trend in the IGB campaign and ethos surrounding many youths' experiences which inadvertently frames the high school system as the proper site to which homophobic (and other forms of) bullying belongs; 'it gets better' only once young people have survived and exited that system.³⁰ This expectation of violence or pain produces the violence young people endure into a culture where they are expected to conform to cisheterosexual norms or die—a grim future if these are indeed their only options. Schools seem fine with *this* outcome, but equally seem to have trouble when the critique is shifted to implicate the behavior of helping professionals in their response to the bullying that is framed as inevitable.

As Tavia Nyong'o points out, the IGB movement seems to enact a 'queer salvific wish,' which 'is the fantasy that if we just regulate our own conduct and affairs properly, we can somehow save our people through the example of our moral fortitude';³¹ thus, pressure is placed on LGBTQ youth themselves, rather than on systems, or on those people with power and privilege within those systems. As Eve Sedgwick notes, the conditions that make life unlivable for LGBTQ youth are erased; instead, it is the repetition of queer death that is made visible but left unaddressed that produces the 'long Babylonian exile of queer childhood'³²—a reference to a biblical period after the Israelites were released from slavery, but before they are awarded their own land, during which they experience a certain degree of freedom but are fundamentally strangers in a foreign land. The second season of *13 Reasons Why* offers a direct critique of the IGB movement, one that is spoken by Cyrus, a straight-appearing or passing, white, male student who is also a goth, and who exists on the margins of the school population:

Ms. Paul: We're going to be watching a very interesting film. ... It's about life after high school, and how it gets better.

*Cyrus: That's great, but what the hell are we supposed to do until then?*³³

Cyrus' voice is used here as a mechanism to highlight the need to transform current 'it gets better' mantras in favour of an approach that considers the now—high school sucks for a lot of youth.

Both *Skim* and *13 Reasons Why* offer a counter to normative 'it gets better' stories: both texts interrogate the inevitability of bullying, question the predictable approaches that educational systems take in their response to violence, and assert that the issue at hand is more systematic than only top-down or peer to peer. They reify what Nyong'o describes as one of the failings of the IGB movement, which is 'a melancholic to work through the grief that might come with the recognition that it doesn't always get better.'³⁴ We locate the productive potential of *Skim* and *13 Reasons Why* partially in their engagements with negative affect which we will further link to racialized girls' experiences navigating a white supremacist world that treats them as objects. These attachments and investments in affect will be used to push against the centrality of 'happiness scripts' and 'dead girl' narratives, and the normative notion that things can get better.

Critically Engaging with Suicide Texts: *Skim* and *13 Reasons Why*

Noting that youth suicide does happen, and some youth respond to life and death differently, we offer that the critiques *Skim* and *13 Reasons Why* deploy be meaningfully engaged with within the broader context of suicide prevention and intervention. We posit that a reading of these texts that brings together *Skim*'s protagonist Skim and Courtney of *13 Reasons Why* can make further visible the nature of the critiques that these texts put forward, and contribute to the body of scholarship concerned with an overall lack of consideration of the intersection of identity categories (race, gender, social class, disability) in studies aimed at understanding suicide.³⁵ Skim and Courtney are, in some ways, diametric opposites: Skim is a quiet, somewhat withdrawn, goth girl, and the 'natural-born' offspring of straight, divorced parents.

Skim's conflict circulates around social exclusions that precede the suicide of John Reddear. After John takes his own life, Skim's school goes into overdrive, enforcing mandatory grief management exercises, and hosting a remembrance service where death is a taboo topic; the school guidance counsellor frames the memorial ceremony, during which 'all the grade ten girls released white balloons with messages of hope for all the victims of suicide/peer pressure/depression' as being 'not only for the victims of suicide, because ... we are not here to focus on the negative (dead people).'³⁷ A group of popular girls take it upon themselves to form an anti-suicide club, dubbed the 'Girls Celebrate Life' club, and they make Skim their special project based on their (notably unqualified) assessment that Skim's goth appearance and generally quiet demeanor means that she is depressed and at risk for suicide. Later, we learn that the increased surveillance that Skim faces is policed by Julie Peters—a white, middle-class, popular girl with a normatively slender body—who 'is the instigator of one of the worst racist experiences in [S]kim's life'.³⁸ The school and its faculty put their support behind Julie Peters, making Skim's challenge one that involves trying to build a livable life, trying to make any sense at all out of John's death, and also, trying to steer clear of this multifaceted surveillance project aimed at policing her movement and behaviour. Part of the effective affect at the heart of the text comes in the form of Skim's silent musings. Skim is the only student at her school who takes issue with the lack of mention of John's rumored queerness at the ceremony ('surprise, surprise'³⁹), or who wonders about the more nuanced layers of John's life; while Julie tells the Canada Broadcasting Corporation that 'it's not about dwelling on past tragedy. It's about celebrating the living spirit!' ⁴⁰ Skim notes an important absence from the discussion: 'P.S, No one knows if the boy from the volleyball team loved John back ...'.⁴¹ The conflict here centers around queer love and desire, suicide, and institutional power, and the school itself, with its marked turn away from the nuance of John Reddear's life and death—including his possible queerness—and its embrace of the 'celebrate life' model that mirrors the empty platitudes of the IBG project amounts to what Rob Cover names as a 'failure of tolerance'.⁴² Later, we will discuss the way that discourses of race both complicate this picture and underpin some of the assumptions under which Julie and the school more broadly operate. Within *13 Reasons Why*, Courtney, like many characters, is racialized: while all characters in the novel are racially unmarked, and so are assumed to be white, the cast of the television show is multiracial, and Asian actress Michele Selene Ang plays Courtney.

Courtney's queerness in the television show is made a spectacle through her's and her peers' discussion of her sexuality with other characters (mostly the boys who inflict seemingly everyday sexist violence upon Hannah), both sexualizing her for it and poking fun at her 'being in the closet' as the show progresses. Nothing is left up to the imagination of the viewer—the scene in the novel where Courtney and Hannah bait a peeping Tom with a slightly erotic, but mostly ambiguous back rub is made much more explicit in the Netflix version: Courtney and Hannah giggle, remove their shirts, and share a kiss. This moment is caught on camera and shared around the school. Later, when confronted about it, Courtney will claim that the photograph is of Hannah and someone else. This deflection of attention to Hannah, when Courtney's sexuality is questioned, brings to the forefront the ways horizontal violence plays out in racialized queer youth's lives; that is, even marginalized youth can participate in oppression—in this case, slut-shaming Hannah. Courtney, at least in the show, is struggling with her sexuality. In season two, she is 'forced' to come out as she testifies with regards to her relationship with Hannah, saying: 'Hannah was a good friend,' a line that feels cold in light of how poorly Courtney treated her when she was alive. In the pages below, we highlight the need to engage *Skim* and *13 Reasons Why* through the characters Skim and Courtney, as these East-Asian girls, offer an opportunity to rethink and ultimately critique normative and pathologizing suicide prevention and intervention.

Reading and Seeing Race

Having laid out a basic introduction to these texts, and their Asian characters, we consider the way that race complicates these stories, and we begin from our understanding that Asian people in North America are under theorized, and their lives are taken less seriously in and outside of the academy.⁴³ The sites of conflict in these young women's lives are entirely reversed: for Courtney, conflict is manifested—sometimes by herself—at school, while her home life is relatively stable: she has two white, gay dads in the show, who are depicted as caring, involved parents. While for Skim, the school is one site of conflict, though her struggle is also internal to both herself and her home. Skim and Courtney's stories do, however, have some things in common. Most notably, their bodies both bear particular markers of race, though we will soon see how this apparent similarity is more complex than only that—it is a lens that reifies various multiplicities, and which gestures to how geographically specific lived histories reverberate through contemporary stories, characters, and media. Courtney's character is situated on America's West Coast, and decisions about her race and representation are the result of the collective work of the *13 Reasons Why* writing team, while *Skim* is located in Toronto, Canada, and has race in common with the producers of her text. Despite these important differences, Skim and Courtney have in common their position in a history marked by paltry representation that is shaped by seemingly contradictory forces. Both 'the politics of the visual—a set of bodily attributes'—and a concomitant invisibility have meant that 'until the last two decades or so, Asian [people] have been almost invisible in mainstream North American public and cultural spheres'.⁴⁴ In light of these differences and histories, Asian characters like Skim and Courtney within popular North American visual texts must be taken seriously as girls who take on differing relationships to race, gendered violence, queerness, and suicide. As characters they disrupt the normativity of whiteness within the genre of young adult fiction, which routinely marks (through an absence of marking) characters as white. Racialized girls like Skim and Courtney are, to some degree, representations of divergent, complex Asian identities—and that matters in a world that

pigeonholes Asians into essentialist, stereotypical categories.

Skim and Courtney differ in their access to spaces and ease of movement through their respective worlds. *Skim* opts to move through the space of her school quietly, aiming to be as unseen as possible because she is at risk of being made the object of bullying, ridicule and extreme surveillance after the suicide of John— top-down pressures enacted by the school itself or by members of the ‘Girls Celebrate Life’ club, which mainly patronize her. Courtney is a relatively powerful girl in her school: she moves freely through hallways and extra-curricular events (including non-school events such as parties), and even enlists the servitude of others, including Hannah, under the guise of friendship. The movements made possible for each girl can be read as standing in metonymically for specific histories for Asian peoples.⁴⁵

The over surveillance that *Skim* encounters is similar to the over surveillance of the earliest Chinese and Japanese immigrants in North America—specifically, the head tax on Chinese railway labourers, laws limiting the travel of Asian Women, and policies that restricted the development of Asian communities to ethnic enclaves, for example China Towns.⁴⁶ These historical constraints placed upon Chinese and Japanese people, and within the contemporary context with regards to Filipino live-in caregivers, make it so *Skim* constantly second guesses her actions, while simultaneously feeling policed for being anything but small, quiet, and reserved.

Both characters opt to challenge conventional and normative constructions of Asian girlhood; specifically, they both defy normative scripts that are sutured to their bodies, scripts that would otherwise force them to encounter racism as they navigate school and interact with peers. Courtney’s narratives implicate her in a particular set of struggles around fitting in, though her non-cisheteronormative sexuality is the only one of those struggles that is named in the television show. There are a few things that Courtney’s characterization and narrative make visible, in the series, namely: her seemingly attainable model minority status —‘quiet, hard working, isolated, and obedient’⁴⁷—as a pressure that bears down on her. Courtney’s investment in being good, or being perceived as welcoming, kind, collegial, and non-threatening exists through multiple axioms: she appears to come from an upper-class cosmopolitan queer family that places extreme demands on her in terms of education and social success, and her success is cyclically bound up in her likability and cultural capital. Based on these and other investments, Courtney appears to occupy the space of an ideal American neoliberal subject, one who must erase her Asian difference in an effort to be part of the group—even if it costs her. While we are asked to think about Courtney as queer, we do so at the expense of fully engaging with her as a racialized girl. For example, many fans of *13 Reasons Why* have voiced disgust at Courtney’s treatment of Hannah, gesturing that she should just ‘come out’. However, embedded in this fan hatred of Courtney is an erasure of her as Asian—this stance suggests that all queer girls, regardless of their race, can easily ‘come out’ equally. As a character, she too is required to erase any reminiscence of being ‘Asian’ in exchange for access to space and cultural capital in this way is a metonymical relationship to history as well; in this case, the history of the model minority discourse.

Courtney is made to bear the burden of these pressures—of the model minority status that comes along with certain iterations of racialization, the double-pull enacted by patriarchal pressures and feminist impetus in a manner that becomes visible in her interactions and demeanour. For example, she delivers the lines: ‘No objectifying comments, okay? We have to stick together. Girl power, right?’, with a tight-lipped, unenthusiastic expression, as if she is going through the motions.⁴⁸ Later, she throws Hannah under the bus in order to deflect

attention away from herself and the impetus to ‘stick together’—one of the flaws within the regime of ‘girl power.’ Shauna Pomerantz and Rebecca Raby argue that the girl power narrative has become consumed by girls across the world, and functions to depoliticize feminist movements, replacing them with defanged neoliberal practices.⁴⁹ Courtney’s consumption of popularized feminism can be read as converging with discourses of the model minority, which demands docility. To be a model minority, many girls of colour must accept the realities of racism and sexism in their lives; challenging structures of power would disempower Courtney in her promising potential for success. Post-feminist ideals produce Courtney as a character who has an earnest, burgeoning on excessive desire to avoid conflict by maintaining the status quo, which in this case, means encouraging her female classmates to attend the school dance she is organizing by offering up pseudo-feminist sound bites. Courtney evokes a positionality that seeks to undercut some elements of the model minority discourse—she is neither quiet nor isolated—but which also underscores other elements; she opts to carry the burden of overachievement and hard work in accordance with the cisheteronormative model minority formulation, and cannot bring herself to disrupt the social order that makes these demands of her. There is an important link to the historical here: the realities of Japanese internment camps continue to have negative intergenerational impact on Japanese North Americans.⁵⁰ In order to live one’s life unscathed, Asian people more generally, must be docile: they are required to be submissive in order to avoid racism (and historically, deportation). Sitting uncomfortably next to this seeming requirement are intense feelings of shame within Japanese communities with regards to the historical impact of the same meekness during and prior to internment.⁵¹ Present here too, then, is the possibility that Courtney’s relative docility might be linked to affect, and especially to shame.

There is a moment in *Skim* that bears a trace of the same history, but one that speaks most directly to Skim’s refusal to carry the burden of fitting in to which Courtney is so dedicated. A formative moment for Skim is represented in a flashback/memory scene: while attending the birthday party of Julie, Skim and her classmate Hien—the only Asian girls at the party—are suddenly thrust out of the party by the others as they shout ‘Air Raid! Everyone out!’ in chorus.⁵² In this scene, Skim and Hien are visibly marked as different in three ways: they are both Asian in the midst of an otherwise all-white party, they are both fat in the midst of a group of visibly thin girls, and they have chosen costumes that do not fit in with the status quo: Hien is dressed as a soldier and Skim as the Wizard of Oz’s Cowardly Lion, when all of the other girls are dressed as conventionally cisheteronormative ballerinas and figure skaters. Moreover, in this moment there is a convergence of factors that cannot escape notice: the shouts of ‘Air Raid!’ precede an evacuation of the Asian population at the party, echoing Japanese internment during WWII in a manner that both weaponizes history as a tool for mockery and underscores the effect of white supremacy.⁵³ This moment represents a coming together of Skim’s desire to resist the norm and the pressures of assimilation that are applied to her.⁵⁴ The scene that directly follows this one shows Skim’s subsequent commitment to a certain set of refusals: it is after the party that Skim produces the earliest ‘strikethrough’ in her diary, declaring that she has chosen to walk home rather than wait for her mother because ‘it was scarier stupider to sit outside’.⁵⁵ This moment marks a particular turn in Skim’s character development: from this point forward, she refuses the burdens of assimilation and normative white girlhood, and instead positions herself in relation to her social group through her chosen lenses of difference, but also refuses to invest in sports or enforced mourning/happiness.

Courtney's family dynamic is explored only in snippets, predominantly in the 'tape' dedicated to her betrayal of Hannah as a friend and lover (or crush); viewers get a single glimpse of a family interaction that occurs over a power-breakfast at the local café. Courtney's dads, addressed only as 'Dad,' are smartly dressed, and framed in what we see as a surprisingly complex fashion considering the brevity of the scene: they are gentle towards her in a manner that shows deep compassion, but they also seem to enact a down-to-business approach to what might otherwise be viewed as family bonding time. Their conversation and mannerisms have a certain efficiency to them: one of Courtney's dads reads over an essay of hers and offers feedback, while the other reminds her of an upcoming social engagement to which she will need to bring a friend. Courtney herself is engaged in a group chat text message chain that revolves around the anxiety of those implicated in the 'tapes,' though viewers are aware of what Courtney is actually doing, her behaviour appears, on the surface, business like—she would not be out of place in a board meeting.

Happiness scripts come into play in this scene as well. After Courtney has been reminded of the upcoming social event, she suggests that perhaps she will bring her opposite-gender friend, Marcus. One of her fathers responds to this by saying 'He's a good one. You'd make beautiful babies'.⁵⁶ The show supplies an immediate critique of this statement that, somewhat fittingly, comes from her other father: 'Dear God, honey you cannot say that ... It's racist and it's sexist.'⁵⁷ Notably absent from this critique is that the statement 'you'd make beautiful babies' is also cisheterosexist: it both assumes that Courtney is straight and able to procreate, and applies some pressure to her about what Ahmed calls 'reproducing the line,' the pressure to produce children is, for Ahmed, tied to patriarchal understandings of lineage, and is just one of many ways that compulsory heterosexuality circulates in the world.⁵⁸ Pressure to 'reproduce the line' is linked, too, to happiness scripts, which 'encourage us to avoid the unhappy consequences of deviation by making those consequences explicit'.⁵⁹

What is made clear here, and which is a common thread through Courtney's larger narrative, is that Courtney's queerness poses the risk of disappointing at least one of her dads. Important here is that it does not matter if both of her fathers would be completely accepting of her queerness, as that pressure and risk are already felt by Courtney, and already inform her behaviour. *Skim* and *Courtney* offer us opportunities to consider the connections between Asian girls' experiences of racist and sexist violence; and, importantly, the ways we are asked to respond to their characters, as living melancholic subjects must be read alongside suicide stories like Hannah and John's.

When Queer Asian Girls Speak

Fiona Nelson describes a perceived set of cultural effects of what she calls the 'dead girl' story—young adult fiction told from the perspective of either definitely dying or definitely dead young women—the popularity of which she finds to be in parallel to a global increase in youth suicide by young women.⁶⁰ We challenge Nelson's argument; it sits within an ideological framework of moral panic, and understands girls as innocent and unintelligent.⁶¹ For Nelson, young adult texts told from the perspective of dead or dying girls are a contributing factor for young women's suicide. While Nelson's argument may negate a post-structural analysis of power and the agency of girls themselves, we find her work intriguing, especially in our

common goal to address and end youth (girls') suicide globally. We find something useful in her opening question: 'what narrative and imaginative purposes are served by dead girls that could not be served by live ones?'⁶²

We utilize this question to prompt a radical rethinking of dominant youth suicide tropes presented in *13 Reasons Why* and *Skim*. Courtney's 'tape' is the one that best shows the issue from multiple angles: Hannah's narration rightly calls her out for telling the lie, and Hannah is able to assert herself:

*I want to be your friend, Courtney. I have been a friend to you, and this thing you're scared for people to know about you doesn't matter to me. Okay, it doesn't fucking matter. And I'm sorry if you're scared, but I'm not your shield, okay? You don't get to hide behind me. You don't get to fuck with my life because you don't like who you are.*⁶³

The present day narrative, however, provides a fuller picture, one that does not undercut Hannah's rage, but which frames Courtney's actions as coming out of self-preservation; this is accomplished through a combination of Courtney and Clay's interactions, but also through the movement of the camera. Various shots depict the way that the boys, whose behaviour Hannah later calls out as misogynist, have made Courtney and Hannah into objects for their own desire: the young men show that they feel entitled to Hannah and Courtney's bodies when they press up against them while dancing, make lewd comments, and outright invite the girls to sexual activity in a disrespectful manner. Being recognized as the girls in the photo has instantly made the school an unsafe place for Hannah and Courtney, which is underscored by visual 'cuts' between scenes on the dance floor that depict the girls being harassed, and two men who are dating at the DJ booth, whose movement through the space of the school and community is relatively free even given their relationship status and sexuality. In this context, Courtney's behaviour is, while still reprehensible, more understandable: she is framed as a girl struggling with queerness coupled with her racialized identity. Her behaviour seems even more understandable near the end of the episode, when viewers see Clay attempting to punish Courtney by delivering a speech similar to Hannah's. Courtney articulates that part of her shame comes from both having witnessed the past discrimination that her dads have faced, and also from a desire 'not to do that to them,' a comment that references the earlier conversation that she has with her dads about dating and childbearing. Moreover, we believe related wholeheartedly in Courtney's desire to uplift herself as a racialized girl who 'has it together,' despite the on-going racism and cisheterosexism she endures.

Courtney's experience with queerness is fundamentally shaped by what Michael Warner describes as 'a primal encounter with shame,'⁶⁴ as well as her adherence to certain happiness scripts; her actions come down to matters of livability, or survival. This piece of the narrative reifies the systemic nature of gendered and racialized violence in the text: just as Clay's calling out, which mirrors Hannah's in its content, is virtually indistinguishable from the misogynist, cisheterosexist, and racist violence that Courtney would face if she had not started the rumour, so too is the starting of that rumour virtually indistinguishable from the misogynist violence that Hannah had already been facing.

Skim and *13 Reasons Why* offer a radical reframing of Nelson's 'dead girl' concept. In response to the question about the usefulness of dead girls as narrative devices, we pose a counter-question to folks engaged with Nelson's work: why are we asked to submit to the idea

that some people are unworthy or undeserving of ‘the good life?’ In trying to obtain this ideal, ‘we’ are seemingly required to exist as ‘miserable beings’ in exchange for life itself. This biopolitical (or necropolitical) construction of life itself is situated within affect; certain lives are deemed livable while ‘others’ are not, and as such, potentially ungrievable. Nelson’s criticism as deeply embedded in white feminist ontology.

We contend that the livability of Hannah be an important facet taken up by consumers of *13 Reasons Why*, however, this should not negate larger criticisms of the ‘good life,’ one which Courtney has a hold of, yet is unfulfilled due to existing inequalities she encounters and experiences. We note that one reading of Courtney is that she is alive and yet dead inside: in order to maintain her outward appearance and gain access to relative markers of class and social status, she gives up on queerness, and finds herself engaging with paltry social discourses, like liberal white feminism, that ultimately undercut her own claims to social power. Hannah, on the other hand finds a way to live with herself by articulating how the quotidian violence she endures resulted in her suicide—she embraces death as a way of killing her inner deadness and as, more importantly, as the only option for someone whose life has been made thoroughly unlivable through everyday encounters with cisheterosexism and misogyny.

In *Skim*, we find a productive work-around that has its roots in *Skim*’s various and deliberate refusals. *Skim* is not a traditional ‘dead girl’ narrative, in part because the dead character is a young (queer) boy, John. However, we find some narrative links between *Skim* and the ‘dead girl’ genre. John haunts the text, appearing in spectral form—visible only to the reader—after *Skim* and her friend Lisa believe they have failed to contact him by séance.⁶⁵ John’s presence, both in this spectral appearance and in *Skim*’s working-through of his death can be read as representing queer kinship: even when it is stifled by the violence of exclusion it remains, if only in traces. *Skim* becomes interested in John’s death, because of his queer potentiality, and begins to think about him differently, while simultaneously negotiating her own queerness as she navigates queerphobia with Lisa. *Skim*’s desire to learn more and connect with queerness is amplified when she develops a deep connection with Katie, the ex-girlfriend of John, who attempts to take her own life in the aftermath of his death. After storming angrily out of a ‘Girls Celebrate Life’ club event that aims to paint over the real pain of grief and loss with hopeful platitudes, Katie and *Skim* strike up a relationship: they become oriented towards one another in their disorientation from the main social fabric of the school. Theirs is a relationship born of exclusion, but one that finds purchase equally in *Skim* and Katie’s shared outsider status and their refusal to care about ‘fitting in’. *Skim* and Courtney, when read together and across one another, provide opportunities to challenge simplistic, normative, cisgenderonormative, and white readings of ‘dead girl’ texts, since they consider how the connections between everyday violence, affect, institutions, and social norms play out in racialized girls’ livability. As texts that take youth suicide, misogynist violence, queerphobia, and intergenerational racism seriously, and centre the lived experiences of Asian girls, *Skim* and *13 Reasons Why* radically subverts and challenges ‘dead girl’ genres and discourses. These texts offer opportunities to centralize the experiences of Asian girls—who are often overlooked, under theorized, and white washed. *Skim* and *13 Reasons Why* offer nuance to ‘dead girl’ stories, insofar as they centre, albeit differently, racialized queerness. Indeed, both texts highlight the need to think critically of popularized and pathological suicide intervention and prevention frameworks that erase *Skim* and Courtney. For *Skim*, her encounter with

Wegmann prompts needed self-examination, and pointed criticism of her school climate surrounding 'the celebration of life,' rather than naming and making visible the conditions that make life unlivable. Courtney shows the larger social cost in ignoring the same conditions Skim criticizes, while simultaneously, locating her 'good behaviour' within a cultural nexus of historical, gendered, and racist violence. Focusing on suicide alone, and vilifying the productive possibility of 'dead girl' stories, seems to ignore the everyday violence Asian girls endure, and erases the ways they too are embedded in cultural scripts that make life unlivable even when they are alive.

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