

# Queer Circles: Spiritualism and Role-Playing in Sarah Waters's *Affinity*

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper traces the connection between the rise of the Spiritualist Movement and feminism in the more general context of the ghosting of female identity and sexuality in Sarah Waters's (b. 1966) lesbian romance Affinity (1999). Spiritualism is presented as a space open for transgression, where women can express their fears, desires and will for power. The role of the medium and the relationship with audience is analysed with regard to the shifting and transgression of Victorian standards of masculinity and femininity.*

## KEYWORDS

Sarah Waters, *Affinity*, spiritualism, gender identity, role-playing

The Victorian era is known not only for classifications and definitions of sexual identities but also for a rapid rise of mysticism and theosophy. This tendency towards the metaphysical can also be connected with the advance of feminism. A large portion of the female population sought an outlet for their creativity and sexuality in the Spiritualist Movement, a space where they could voice their hopes and fears but more importantly, impose authority. These so called dark circles were scorned by the men of science, as meetings often involved physical contact between the medium and one or more members of the audience. The touching or kissing disguised by the trance as innocent and spiritual could, however, develop into a highly sensual or erotic experience, affirming the assertion of feminist, philosopher and cultural theorist Luce Irigaray that women often had to turn "elsewhere" for satisfaction of their erotic needs: "That 'elsewhere' of female pleasure might rather be sought first in the place where it sustains ek-stasy in the transcendental."<sup>1</sup> [sic]

The influence of spiritualism on Victorian gender identity and ghosting of female sexuality plays a primal role in Sarah Waters's spiritualist lesbian romance *Affinity* that consists of two respective narratives: the diary of Miss Margaret Prior, an insecure upper middle class closeted lesbian who remains on medication after a suicide attempt; and a diary of the orphaned Selina Dawes, a spiritualist medium from the lower classes who is imprisoned for an assault on a young girl during a dark circle session. While Margaret discloses present events, Selina's confessions shed light on her past. The women meet at the London Millbank gaol, which Margaret frequents as a lady visitor; their two stories and lives intertwine and complement each other.

As a lesbian, Selina realized the potential power of spiritualism, a movement which attracted women from across social classes. Seemingly conforming to the Victorian ideal of femininity, she foregrounds her physical frailty, soft ladylike features and passivity, claiming that a controlling spirit determines all her actions. As historian and gender critic Alex Owen puts it: "Passivity became, in the spiritualist vocabulary, synonymous with power."<sup>2</sup>

1 Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 77. Emphasis in original.

2 Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 10.

While Selina masquerades her passivity and helplessness, she consciously uses the unhappy and frustrated women who approach her to deal with their personal losses on both a financial and physical level. Her life changes when the middle-aged Mrs Brink invites her to live with her to evoke the spirit of her deceased mother. Yet it soon becomes clear that a medium in the dark circles will not be the only role Selina is to perform. Mrs Brink makes the girl wear her mother's clothes and perfume as well as sleep in her bed: "[...] she kissed me. She did it, saying 'I suppose I may do this now?'"<sup>3</sup> Selina thus understands that she should be more than just a spiritual medium for the lady: "[...] hearing Mrs Brink stepping about the floor of her room, then getting into her bed & waiting. Then I knew who she was waiting for. I went to the stairs and & put my hand to my face, & Ruth looked at me once & nodded. 'Good girl', she said."<sup>4</sup> Selina thus learns the price of being treated as a lady and being allowed to stage her spiritualist performances.

Culture studies scholar Sharrona Pearl highlights sexual experiences during the spiritualist sessions:

By providing the means to control women's bodies, mesmerism also allowed men to control their sexuality. Women entered ecstatic states under male physical direction, leading to potentially compromising situations. Consequently, the intimate relationship between mesmerizer and mesmerized led to suspicion about the morality of the experience.<sup>5</sup>

Yet as Selina naturally avoids male attention and provides her services to women only, this, ironically, increases her credibility as she seemingly excludes any possibility of physical intimacy between her and the audience. The potential promise of erotic ecstasy was thus playing in favour of queer<sup>6</sup> media, particularly lesbian. Mediums in these rituals were rarely accused of inappropriate conduct, at least not in public, as the victims were either too ashamed or too satisfied to reveal the real course of events. Moreover, spiritualism also served as a tool for gender identity transgression. Soon after moving to Mrs Brink's house, Selina claims to have been visited by her spirit guide Peter Quick and constantly highlights his dominant masculinity, especially his beard and controlling behaviour, using him as a shield and potential scapegoat if something went wrong during her séances. While male spirit guides were possible at the time the novel takes place – in the 1870s female mediums produced "materialized" spirit forms of both sexes – they were not common.<sup>7</sup>

Peter Quick is presented as extremely powerful, masculine and controlling. During the dark circle meetings, he remains almost invisible to the crowd; only his eyes and moustache come out in the dim phosphorescent light. His deep voice, controlling attitude and choice of submissive women for his experiments only supports his dominance, which stands in large contrast to the physical powerlessness of Selina, whose hands and legs are tied by a rope. It is Peter's idea to bind the medium, which should raise her credibility. Yet as the ropes are quite tight and Selina on the verge of fainting, the procedure serves as a source of erotic pleasure for Peter.

3 Sarah Waters, *Affinity* (London: Virago, 2012), 118.

4 Waters, *Affinity*, 194–95.

5 Sharrona Pearl, "Dazed and Abused: Gender and Mesmerism in Wilkie Collins," in *Victorian Literary Mesmerism*, eds. Martin Willis and Catherine Wynne (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), 163.

6 For the purpose of this essay, "queer" is used as an umbrella term for all non-heterosexual identities.

7 See Owen, *The Darkened Room*, 11.

As is revealed later in the novel, Peter Quick is performed by Mrs Brink's maid, Ruth Vigers. When Selina introduces her male spirit guide, she emphasizes the fact that spirits do not have traditional genders: "'He, she, you ought to know that in the spheres there are no differences like that. But this spirit was a gentleman on earth & and is now obliged to visit me in that form.'"<sup>8</sup> The spiritualist séances provide Ruth with an opportunity to make use of her invisibility as a servant to incorporate an extremely powerful man who sexually and mentally controls other women. As she has a thorough knowledge of Mrs Brink's friends and their servants, Selina is fast gaining a reputation as a credible medium. While she employs her natural passivity and intelligence, Ruth performs a dominant masculine role and thus challenges the Victorian gender hierarchies. As Alex Owen observed:

Mediums surrendered and were then entered, seized, possessed by another. In this sense female mediumship was a re-enactment of prescriptive notions of the female sexual role. At the same time, however, the diverse sexualities expressed through the vehicle of possession countermanded all that was signified by the closed definition of orthodox femininity.<sup>9</sup>

Vigers is, what would be nowadays referred to as a butch, i.e., a person overtly masculine in appearance or behaviour. She creates rules and chooses the victims of her dominant sexual passions. One of the young girls, Madeleine, refuses to be sexually abused by Ruth / Peter Quick and when Mrs Brink discovers the reason of her wild shrieks, she dies of a heart attack. Selina blames the spirit, but she is accused of assault and sent to prison. Vigers then searches for another wealthy woman that can be manipulated into providing financial support and helping Selina to get out of prison. She finds the perfect victim in Margaret Prior, who is mentally fragile, has a history of lesbian relationships and frequents Millbank prison as a lady visitor. Ruth becomes Mrs Prior's maid and thus gains access to Margaret's room and private life. She can thus not only provide Selina with intimate information but also serve as the invisible spirit messenger and bring small gifts into her mistress's room, while Margaret believes that all her knowledge and items are signs of Selina's power and love.

After Margaret finally admits to herself her feelings for Selina, she starts to avoid the prison: "'I have only kept away because, I feared—' *Feared my own passion*, I might have said. But I didn't say it. For I was visited again by that gross vision, of the spinsters'."<sup>10</sup> This is one of Margaret's recurring images of herself, as an old lonely woman "pale and plain and sweating and wild."<sup>11</sup> Such prophetic visions heighten her sense of insecurity and non-belonging, as she is aware that she is not mentally strong enough to come out to her family.

The novel could thus be categorized as modern "closet literature", which according to literary critic Reed Woodhouse presents homosexuality as "defining indeed, but horrifyingly so."<sup>12</sup> The invisibility and instability of the lesbian identity often leads to

8 Waters, *Affinity*, 191. Emphasis in original.

9 Owen, *Darkened Room*, 218.

10 Waters, *Affinity*, 244.

11 Waters, *Affinity*, 240.

12 Reed Woodhouse, *Five Houses of Gay Fiction: "A Canon of Gay Fiction, 1945–1995"* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), 2. For a more detailed classification of homosexual fiction, see Roman Trušník, *Podoby amerického homosexuálního románu po roce 1945* [Faces of the American Gay Novel After 1945] (Olomouc: Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci, 2011), 80–83.

what gender scholar Patricia Smith has labelled “lesbian panic,”<sup>13</sup> a condition which can lead either to submission to the heterosexual norm or identity fragmentation. To avoid the consequences of her desire for women, Margaret comes up with a series of personalities distinguished by different names. She uses Miss Prior as her name in public and at the prison to emphasize the detachedness granted to her by her social rank, Margaret for her mother and family, Peggy when she dreams of her father and regresses into childhood states, and, eventually Aurora, the name she used when she was in a lesbian relationship with Helen, her former lover who married her brother. Aurora is also the name she eventually wants to be called by Selina.

By assuming different names Margaret hopes to remain invisible and protected, as she is aware that her desires are seen as eccentric and inappropriate. She finds hope and comfort in spiritualism, feeling closer to her dead father and platonic lover Selina. Gender scholar Terry Castle in her study *The Apparitional Lesbian* (1993) claims that the crucial metaphor in literary representation of lesbianism is the spectre: “The kiss that doesn’t happen, the kiss that can’t happen, because one of the women involved has become a ghost.”<sup>14</sup> In *Affinity*, spiritualism thus serves as a cover for various non-heterosexual practices as it encompasses the irrational, invisible, and secretive yet haunting qualities of non-recognized passions that need to be hidden from the public eye.

Margaret herself is invisible to her family and to society. She is doomed a spinster and eccentric hysterical woman who defies the Victorian notion of a femininity, as she does not enjoy socializing, preferring to spend her time alone in her room reading or writing a diary. She greatly misses her father, who used to take her to the public library. Then she was his daughter and Miss Prior, yet within a year after his death, she changes into Mrs Prior, as she is there alone, without male company. Unlike Helen or her sister Priscilla, she is thus no “angel in the house” as was expected.

As her romance with Selina gains in intensity, Margaret increasingly yearns for both spiritual and physical proximity and starts turning into a ghost: “I gaze at my own flesh and see the bones show pale beneath it. They grow paler each day. [...] My flesh is streaming from me. I am becoming my own ghost!”<sup>15</sup> As she embraces her lesbian identity, albeit in secret, she becomes able to actively oppose her mother and gain more independence. At the same time, she starts disappearing socially, even physically. She begins to envision herself as “dry and pale and paper-thin – like a leaf, pressed tight inside the pages of a dreary black book.”<sup>16</sup>

On the other hand, Ruth Vigers is not only invisible as a woman, lesbian and maid, but also equally voiceless. Her utterances are limited to answering her mistress and then one last sentence of the novel. The only time she can verbally and sexually express her true identity is when she performs the role of Peter Quick. Unlike Margaret, who lives in constant anxiety and self repression, Ruth uses her invisibility to her advantage and manipulates the course of events, unsuspected and unseen, confirming feminist Harriette Andreadis’s supposition that the silence and invisibility surrounding the lesbian identity can be understood as a positive value. In cases when female homoerotic and homosexual relationships were not explicitly defined, they did not lead to social

13 See Patricia Smith, *The Lesbian Panic: Homoeroticism in Modern British Women’s Fiction* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 1997).

14 Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 30.

15 Waters, *Affinity*, 289.

16 Waters, *Affinity*, 201.

stigmatization. She thus claims that women deliberately hid their desires to avoid labelling and that this strategy was an effective strategy in the “erotics of unnam[ing].”<sup>17</sup>

Even Selina at first cannot see Ruth, the real ghost in the house: “And as I thought that I *did* turn & *did* look at the door, & there *was* a woman standing looking at me! [...] But it was only Mrs Brink’s maid, Ruth. She had come quietly [...] like a ghost.”<sup>18</sup>

Ruth manages to remain out of sight and beyond comprehension also for Madeleine Isherwood, the victim of her sexual assault. Unlike the police, who suspect Selina of having sexual relationships with her clients, Madeleine cannot remember what exactly happened to her. Both Selina and Ruth have learned how to make use of the spiritualist emphasis on spirit over the body to receive pleasure and the economic independence they desired. To make their victims more submissive, they made them recite a special mantra:

“[I]et your spirit be used, your prayer must always be May I be used. [...] You must take off your gown now & you must grasp Miss Dawes.” [...] Then Peter said “Now you see my medium uncl[othed]. That is how the spirit appears when the body has been taken from it. Put your hand upon her, Miss Isherwood. Is she hot?” Miss Isherwood said I was very hot. [...] “You must also become hot [...] you must let my medium make you hotter. You must take off your gown now & you must grasp Miss Dawes.”<sup>19</sup>

Madeleine became frightened only when she felt a rough cold hand on her body. She had not even noticed anything uncommon in the relationship between Miss Dawes and Mrs Brink: “It was only friendly [that they] sat near one another, and sometimes, Mrs Brink held Miss Dawes’s hand and touched her hair on the face’.”<sup>20</sup> The charge of sexual abuse thus could not be proved, as there was no one to testify.

Selina claimed that her séances were meant to cure women who would come to her with certain symptoms and that her procedures worked. The ladies that she treated were complaining of weakness, nervousness and tension. Together with Ruth the two women were providing a miraculous cure for these symptoms then commonly understood as hysteria. Most of the women were grateful for the treatment:

“And it involved – what? Rubbing? Shampooing?” – “There was a certain amount of laying of hands.” “Rubbing and shampooing.” – “Yes.” “For which your visitors were required to remove certain articles of clothing?” – “Sometimes. [...] Any doctor of medicine would ask his patients to do the same.” “He would not, I hope, also remove his own clothes.”<sup>21</sup>

The absence of the granted identity of a lesbian, the lack of being seen as a subject then precludes the impossibility of renouncing it. As philosopher and feminist Rosi Braidotti emphasizes: “One cannot deconstruct a subjectivity one has never been granted; one cannot diffuse a sexuality which has historically been defined as dark and mysterious. In order to announce the death of a subject, one must first have gained the right to speak

17 For more details concerning same sex female relationships of the period see Harriette Andreadis, “Theorising Early Modern Lesbianisms: Invisible Borders, Ambiguous Demarcations,” in *Virtual Gender: Fantasies of Subjectivities and Embodiment*, eds. Mary Ann O’Farrell and Lynne Vallone (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 1991), 125.

18 Waters, *Affinity*, 119.

19 Waters, *Affinity*, 261–62.

20 Waters, *Affinity*, 140.

21 Waters, *Affinity*, 145.

as one."<sup>22</sup> Moreover, the invisibility of a lesbian is related to the extent she can fall into and/or embrace a prescribed femininity as defined and promoted by the heterosexual majority. These received assumptions are even embraced by some critics, as Eve Sedgwick claims:

[t]he diacritical opposition between the 'homosocial' and the 'homosexual' seems to be much less thorough and dichotomous for women than men [...] an intelligible continuum of aims, emotions and valuations link lesbianism with other forms of women's attention to women: the bond of mother and daughter, for instance, the bond of sister and sister, women's friendship, 'networking', and the active struggles of feminism.<sup>23</sup>

The moment lesbians become visible and distinguishable is when they emphasize their masculinity, or openly express desire for the members of the same sex. Though Sedgwick admits to certain discontents within the continuum, including "much homophobia, with conflicts of race and class," she at the same time adds that this "intelligibility seems now a matter of simple common sense."<sup>24</sup> She thus upholds the legacy of Adrienne Rich and her concept of a "lesbian continuum" which represents a body of women who promote the interests of all women, including lesbians.<sup>25</sup> This shared solidarity and resistance can be only expected when the lack of access to power is limited by patriarchal structures.

Such presupposed unity, though partially represented in practice, reflects rather an ideal state, almost a female utopia, as bonds between women rarely cross the line dividing closeness and desire. These feelings are repressed and become a source of anxiety and fear, often evoked within a heterosexual context. These transgressions of expectations and norms are features that exclude lesbians from Sedgwick's continuum. There is a significant difference between female bonding and romance, depending on the level of intensity and reliance on each other. As literary critic Sharon Marcus observes:

[f]riends differed significantly from female lovers who threw themselves into obsessive passions or lived together, functioned socially as a couple, merged finances, and bequeathed property to each other. Indeed, although the lesbian continuum posits female friends and lesbian lovers as united in their opposition to patriarchal marriage, many nineteenth-century lesbian relationships resembled marriages more than friendships.<sup>26</sup>

Marcus also presupposes the union of women against patriarchal oppression and like the previously mentioned critics seems to ignore power structures and distribution within female relationships, including homosexual ones.

Yet as cultural anthropologist and gender activist Gayle Rubin argues, homophobia and hatred towards homosexuals is caused by the same system that has established the

22 Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 122.

23 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire," in *The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory 1900-2000*, ed. Dorothy J. Hale (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 588.

24 Sedgwick, "Between Men," 588.

25 See Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, eds. Henry Abelove, Michelle Aina et al. (New York: Routledge, 1993), 227-54.

26 Sharon Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 29.

oppression of women.<sup>27</sup> If this could be applied to women as well, that is to ascribe homophobia among women to their support of the patriarchal social system, then it would mean that certain women feel threatened by lesbian behaviour, even though this feeling is not a fear caused by potential rivalry over men but social consequences. This sentiment can be seen in the example of Margaret's former lover Helen, who admires Margaret for her bravery and admits that she never could be her official partner; while Mrs Prior is more aggressive, reminding her daughter of her place within the family:

"You should be here, beside your mother, to greet our guests when they arrive..." So she went on. I said she would have Stephen, Helen – that made her voice grow even sharper. No! She could not bear it! She could not bear to have our friends believe me weak, or eccentric – she almost spat the word at me. "You are no Mrs Browning, Margaret – as much as you would like to be. You are not, in fact, Mrs Anybody. You are only Miss Prior. And your place – how often must I say it? – your place is here, at your mother's side."<sup>28</sup>

In *Affinity Waters* challenges and undermines the utopian ideal of female unity and resistance against dominant male power structures by diminishing the significance of male characters in the novel. Margaret's father is dead and only his ghost-like presence influences Margaret's thoughts and behaviour, while her bother Stephen loves her but does not really see or understand her. Therefore unlike other novels with lesbian or other queer characters the women do not struggle against particular men as such but rather against the male authority and power embodied by other women who are supposed to guard the established social order. The men do not represent any sexual danger and do not force the characters into respectable, that is, heterosexual conduct; it is the masculinized authoritative women in charge who need to be opposed and confronted, be it the prison matrons or Mrs Prior.

As the male characters play only a minor role within the novel, the masculine is thus to be found within the feminine structures, including the prison, which is identified as another powerful female: "'She's a grim old creature, ain't she, miss? [...] some nights, Miss Prior, when there ain't a breath of wind, I have stood where you are standing now and heard her groan – plain as a lady'."<sup>29</sup> It is the female prison, which is "'a place for ,palling up,' as the creatures call it."<sup>30</sup> This is seen as another feature of criminal femininity, explained either as a proof of the disgraced nature of such women, or described as situational homosexuality.

Margaret becomes an easy victim of the female power structures, as she is only able to effectively defend herself in her own mind, in her intimate Aurora self: "I thought: *Damn you, you bitch!* – I heard the words hissed very plainly in my head, as by a second, secret mouth."<sup>31</sup> Yet even Margaret transgresses the concept of domestic, obedient woman, though not to such degree as Ruth or Selina. She keeps a diary, which was not uncommon, yet her mother believes that "it was unhealthy to sit at a journal so long; that it would throw me back upon my own dark thoughts and weary me."<sup>32</sup> Margaret even fails on

27 Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes Toward a Political Economy of Sex," in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna R. Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), 168.

28 Waters, *Affinity*, 252–3.

29 Waters, *Affinity*, 312.

30 Waters, *Affinity*, 42.

31 Waters, *Affinity*, 264.

32 Waters, *Affinity*, 70.

the social level, by not being able to say who she really is, hiding her identity behind general, apologetic comments:

I said I had a brother that was married, and a sister who would be married very soon; that I was not married. I told her I sleep badly, and spend many hours reading, or writing, or standing at my window looking out upon the river. Then I pretended to consider. What else was there? I think you have it all. There is not much.<sup>33</sup>

Even though Margaret feels protected by her social status of an upper class lady, this is at the same time the source of her oppression, as relying on patriarchal concepts does not work well within the all-female environment. Those groups she considers inferior, including servants and prisoners, at the end enjoy a greater degree of freedom than she does. Yet Margaret believes that only noble women like herself can bring about changes in the society: “Women are *bred* to do more of the same – that is their function. It is only ladies like me that throw the system out, make it stagger—”<sup>34</sup> therefore she cannot understand Selina, who tries to persuade her that love is not based solely on social or biological differences:

“[T]he guides are neither and both; and the spirits are neither, and both. It is only when they have understood that, that they are ready to be taken higher.’ [...] ‘How could it be? It would be chaos!’ ‘It would be freedom.’ ‘It would be world without distinction. It would be world without love.’ ‘It is a world that is made of love. Did you think there is only one kind of love your sister knows for her husband? Did you think there must be here, a man with whiskers, and over here, a lady in gown?’<sup>35</sup>

Margaret does not seem to be able to transcend her personal limitations and as such presents danger not only for the family but also for herself. She is under constant supervision by women both at home and in prison. Her mother and Vigers watch every step she takes and Ruth then reports all Margaret’s conduct to Selina, so that she can perform her role as all-seeing and all-knowing master of the spirits. She even understands the constant gaze as being deserved: “All the world may look at me, it is part of my punishment’.”<sup>36</sup>

The relationships among women are thus far from the cooperative continuum or communion that is joined against shared oppression. While at the end, the trusting and hoping Margaret is willing to leave her whole life behind for Selina. She withdraws from the bank all the money she has, buys clothes and train tickets and arranges passports. In the end she is grossly cheated by Ruth and Selina, who take her possessions and identity and leave for Italy. Yet, this unromantic ending is partially balanced by the last sentence of the novel, uttered by Ruth: “Remember [...] whose girl you are.”<sup>37</sup> These exact words had often been used throughout the novel by Margaret’s mother, who pressured her daughter to remain with her, making her believe that a future is unimaginable outside the family. These comments were always manipulative and restrictive, used as a magic formula to raise the ghosts of fear and oppression. The last sentence thus indicates

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33 Waters, *Affinity*, 46.

34 Waters, *Affinity*, 209.

35 Waters, *Affinity*, 210.

36 Waters, *Affinity*, 47.

37 Waters, *Affinity*, 352.

that Selina was attracted to Margaret, though she eventually follows her dominant partner and remains in her submissive role.

*Affinity* can be classified as a romance, yet Waters avoids the sentimentalization of lesbian love affairs. Instead, she challenges the utopian vision of shared womanity and uncovers the power structures of various interfemale relationships. In *Affinity* spiritualism serves not only as a metaphor for ghosting of female (including lesbian) identity but at the same time as a space which allows women to challenge the Victorian notion of femininity using invisibility, passivity and helplessness as empowering devices in the expression of gender and sexual identities.

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