

“Realistically Queer”: Queer Connection and Interdependence in *Russian Doll*

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Abstract:

By examining the ways that Nadia and Alan—the two protagonists of Netflix show *Russian Doll*—experience gender, madness, and interdependence, this article argues that *Russian Doll* encourages open normativities and highlights the importance of relations beyond hetero- or homonormative coupling. While both Nadia and Alan fail at gender and fail to properly accept help for their mental distress, their growing ability to connect to their surroundings and to the other characters allows them to heal from the trauma of living and of dying. Using queer theory, including understandings of vulnerability, interdependence, and gesture, I argue that even though both main characters are seemingly heterosexual, *Russian Doll* is “realistically queer” in its insistence on queer temporality. Key words: *Russian Doll*; queer theory; open normativities; temporality; interdependence.

1 In a recent article for *Them*—an online platform run by Condé Nast—two queer married women who took part in the making of *Russian Doll* “explain how they helped the Netflix hit become realistically queer” (Bendix n.p.). Such a statement may be confusing for anyone expecting *Russian Doll* to centre the relationships of women with women or men with men. In fact, the two main characters, Nadia and Alan, do not ever have a relationship with someone of the same gender, have sex with someone of the same gender, or even discuss the possibility of having sex or a relationship with someone of the same gender. Nadia, a cisgender woman, has relationships and sex exclusively with men, while Alan, a cisgender man, has relationships and sex exclusively with women. It would therefore be easy to argue that the show is realistically heterosexual, as relationships between men and women are normalized—through these two protagonists—while other side characters engage in other kinds of sexuality. For example, Lizzy is “fucking a 22-year-old” named Jordana (“Nothing in This World Is Easy”), and finds herself “mixed up in something very nice,” or what Nadia calls “a fuck pile,” a collection of mostly naked bodies in the corner of Maxine’s living room (“The Great Escape”). On the surface, it would appear that heterosexual relationships are centred and queer existence is sidelined in *Russian Doll*.

2 Unlike many other shows, however, *Russian Doll*’s two main heterosexual characters do not end up in love or even in lust. Rather than representing heterosexuality as the solution to the

problems that unfold in the show, alternative kinds of relations are encouraged. Like the article in *Them*, I argue *Russian Doll* is realistically queer in the broadest sense of the word *queer*, disconnecting sexuality from the sexual act itself, and queering relations in and through time. By extending queerness beyond sexuality, queerness is defined not necessarily by relationships between two people of the same sex, but by many alternative kinds of relationships, including those between humans and animals, humans and fruits, and even humans and inanimate objects. Unrealistic queerness would therefore be defined next to or in relation with heterosexual relationships, as homonormative sexual or romantic experience between two people of the same sex/gender. *Russian Doll* is realistically queer, not because it represents same-sex couples, but because it highlights the shared vulnerability and interdependence that exists in all relationships, beyond sexual or romantic feelings.

3 This article explores queer theory to argue that *Russian Doll*'s insistence on relationality¹ makes it a realistically queer story, even if it maintains heterosexuality as normal through its two main protagonists. The realistic queerness that the show encourages is one that looks beyond homonormativity that might imagine queer experience through monogamous non-heterosexual relationships, instead encouraging love and connection in and through relationships between all things. This queerness also challenges representations of grief and madness through a representation of gender done wrong. Both main characters challenge conventional representations of their own gender, stretching normative perceptions of gender. I begin by looking into gender within *Russian Doll*, arguing that Nadia and Alan's connection marks an undoing of gender that encourages what Alexis Shotwell calls "open normativities" (139). I follow by examining the ways that madness connects to gender performativity, demonstrating that the characters are called mad because of the gender undone; this madness is in part a manifestation of grief that can only be resolved with connection to others. Finally, by examining the shared vulnerabilities of the characters, including the nonhuman animal characters and the nonanimal objects, I demonstrate that interdependency, not normative heterosexuality, resolves the problems of the characters. *Russian Doll* pushes the boundaries of relations between all beings, making it challenge hetero/homonormativity, and closed normativities that would act as resolutions to mental distress, and the linear nature of time. *Russian Doll* is realistically queer

¹ Relationality here refers to the many relationships that are highlighted in *Russian Doll* that emphasize the interdependence between all living beings.

because of its insistence on gender failure, its challenge of conventional solutions to mad distress, and its emphasis on relationality within and against time.

“It is a long story involving multiple deaths” (“The Great Escape”).

4 From the Netflix trailer, *Russian Doll*’s plot seems similar to that of *Groundhog Day* (1993), as Nadia finds herself back at her 36th birthday after being hit by a car and dying. Indeed, many critics have compared *Russian Doll*’s time loops to *Groundhog Day*’s time-warp (see for example McGovern 2019). However, unlike *Groundhog Day*’s protagonist Phil Connors, Nadia cannot repeat each day by falling asleep. Instead, Nadia stays alive overnight or as long as it takes before she dies again, and returns to the birthday party. Halfway through the season, we are introduced to a second character that also dies and relives each day, Alan. The two characters, female and male, must uncover the mystery behind their dying and returning. Both characters struggle with gender norms, as Alan is dumped by his long-time girlfriend on the same evening he was planning to propose—and the same day he dies— and Nadia is more in love with her cat Oatmeal than any man or any child. Nadia is “the most selfish person” that Alan “has ever met” (“The Way Out”), while Alan is so “sensitive” that his girlfriend has put off breaking up with him, in fear that he might harm himself (“Reflection”). These transgressions of norms—that women should not be selfish and men should not be sensitive—are ones that are highlighted and emphasized for the audience.

5 Queer theory has had a specific interest in gender norms, arguing that women are not necessarily oppressed particularly because of their gender, but that womanhood or femininity is associated with norms that contribute to oppression (see for some examples: Wittig 1998; De Lauretis 1999). Judith Butler has been at the centre of many of these debates, famously arguing that gender is performative—and differentiating this performativity from gender as performance (*Gender Trouble* xiv). Butler argues that normativity is a process, rather than an individualized experience (*Gender Trouble* 34). Individuals cannot do gender wrong, as it is only within a collective understanding of gender that one person might be doing gender incorrectly or correctly. These characters are therefore not necessarily individually doing gender wrong; rather they are experiencing gender within a system that upholds certain norms, with other characters expecting their gender to be presented and experienced in specific ways.

6 Gender, for Butler, is inextricably linked to sexuality, as doing gender correctly often means doing gender within the bounds of heterosexuality (*Gender Trouble* 30). Heterosexuality is not confined to women being sexually attracted to men and men to women. Rather, heterosexuality is also an unattainable standard, where women gain femininity through their relationships with men and men gain masculinity through their relationships with women. This dependence between the genders demonstrates the way that heterosexuality is—as Butler articulates—“imitation of itself,” and is set up to fail (“Imitation and Gender Insubordination” 314). Gender within *Russian Doll* is represented, in many ways, as failure. Nadia’s obsession with her cat Oatmeal prompts her one-night stand, Mike, to ask her “what do you want me to do, call you a Sad Cat Lady so you could say you aren’t one?” (“Nothing in This World Is Easy”). Instead of rejecting the title of “Sad Cat Lady,” Nadia replies by arguing that being interested in cats has never been “sad,” and calls Mike an Uber so she can design video games in peace. Nadia’s interest in video games and casual sex alerts the audience to Nadia’s failure to properly desire men and to properly present herself in relation to femininity.

7 Meanwhile, Alan is trying to do masculinity right by keeping his apartment clean, working out, and marrying his college sweetheart. His plans to control the situation fail, as Beatrice, his girlfriend, has actually been seeing Mike all along. Alan’s masculinity is positioned in relation to his ability to keep a heterosexual monogamous relationship. Without his girlfriend, Alan’s masculinity is put into question and he feels like a failure, so much so that he jumps off a building. Similarly, at the middle of the first episode, Nadia runs across the street after finding Oatmeal and is struck by a car, dying for the first time. She dies because of her failure at womanhood, represented by her need for a cat instead of a child. Similarly, Alan’s first death, suicide, is directly related to his breakup; his manhood is questioned and therefore he must die.

8 Jack Halberstam’s analysis of queer failure is relevant here, if only because the time loop that acts as the main conflict in *Russian Doll* is based partly in the ways that both characters fail at gender. Halberstam argues that many pieces of popular culture can teach us about failure and gender, and the ways that these failures allow for alternative kinds of living. Halberstam’s claim that “under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world” is demonstrated by the failure of gender that takes place in *Russian Doll* (Halberstam 2-3). Because of Nadia and Alan’s failure at gender, represented by Alan’s suicide and Nadia’s

search for Oatmeal, time also fails, and the two characters must live and relive their last night on earth many times. Nadia and Alan's many deaths can be taken as many failures that allow gender to be undone, redone, and undone again. While the first deaths indicate that Nadia and Alan are failing at gender, they do not proceed to do gender correctly. Unlike *Groundhog Day* which highlights the main character's incorrect gender performance in order to end on the correct gender work—which of course involves a monogamous couple and their plans to live with children in the suburbs—Alan and Nadia are still strangers to each other by the final episode of the first season. While their previous partners, Alan's Beatrice and Nadia's John, both have children by the end of the season, Alan and Nadia do not. This refusal of the child represents a kind of open normativity made possible by the "box of timelines" they find themselves within ("Ariadne").

9 Alexis Shotwell argues that while most of queer theory positions normativity as a negative thing that queerness must challenge, not all normativity is negative (138). Calling normativity inherently negative erases the potential for new kinds of normativities that challenge the restrictive position of heteronormativity and more recently, homonormativity. In taking seriously Butler's claims that normativity is created through social interactions, rather than fixed understandings of "real" gender/sex, Shotwell argues that queer understandings of the world are necessarily normative ones, but normative in a way she calls "open normativities" (139). If normativity is "the process by which people claim that a given way of being is good or beautiful, or to be endorsed," then arguing for a queer liveability is arguing for an alternative kind of normativity (139). Shotwell argues that open normativities name the normativities that prioritize flourishing without writing futures in advance, clarifying:

When I use flourishing as a goal for open normativities, I mean it to name the contingent, without-guarantees partially shared world that recognizes both ethical entanglement and irreducible difference. (155)

Her clarification mirrors the experiences that take place in Nadia and Alan's world of looping death, as Alan's claim that "we become what we repeatedly do" ("Alan's Routine") is challenged throughout the series, especially by Ruth, Nadia's aunt and guardian, when she says "[h]olding two incompatible ideas in your head at the same time and accepting both of them—that's the best of being human" ("Superiority Complex"). Rather than searching for the correct way of doing

gender between each death, the characters must hold onto the two incompatible realities of being both living and having died.

10 While the characters begin by failing at gender, according to Halberstam's definition of gender failure, this gender is never fully resolved. Rather, the characters explore what it might mean to experience gender more openly. Nadia's initial obsession with her cat is less obsessive by the end of the season, while Alan accepts a flowery scarf from Lizzy's girlfriend in the final episode, unflinchingly softening his masculinity. The characters support an open understanding of normativity, with no hetero-monogamous coupling taking place to wrap up their struggles, or even any homonormative ending that might uphold the same kind of heterosexual normativity. Instead, the characters depend on each other in death and in life, highlighting how interdependence, not individual gender performance, creates and sustains gender normativity—and that it is possible for this gender normativity to be open. The ending also opens heterosexuality, challenging the impossible standard of correct relational experience by having both heterosexual male and female main characters remain strangers, not lovers by the end. In doing so, it challenges the closed normativity of monogamous heterosexuality, and the closed normativity of proper feminine or masculine performance. Unlike *Groundhog Day*, which ends with Phil performing a masculinity that finally entices a woman, *Russian Doll* ends with two characters that still do not perform gender in a way that would entice the other into romantic attachment. Even if the loops begin because of gender failure, the loops do not end because of gender success.

“Now I’m stuck with a body that is broken in a world that is literally falling apart and a mind that wants to kill me” (“The Way Out”).

11 If the time loops are not resolved by gender success, they are resolved through a resolution of mental distress, rather than gender performance. Feminist analyses of madness in literature and film have often critically examined claims of ‘crazy’ women and men, pointing to how these claims have supported power around gender. Madness has also been examined through other lenses, for example through disability studies and Mad studies, which have largely taken these claims seriously, while also acknowledging—in ways that feminism sometimes lacks—that mental distress is a reality, rather than just a metaphor for patriarchy. Elizabeth Donaldson, for example, argues that feminist analyses of madness often present madness in

literature as a metaphor for radical resistance to gender norms. She argues that feminist claims of madness acting as a radical resistance to patriarchal control erase the realities of mental illness as a real embodied experience (112). However, it is important to note that mental distress, mental illness, and madness² are often controlled or managed through medical explanations and institutions without recognizing the social impacts on feelings and behaviours. I disagree with Donaldson, because I take seriously the social aspects of diagnoses and diagnosable behaviours, feelings, and experiences. A bodymind is never a neutral object. If mental distress is embodied, then it also is connected to bodily norms as to proper gendered behaviour and feelings.

12 *Russian Doll* not only undoes gender, but also challenges normative portrayals of madness, especially narratives that say a particular kind of help is required if someone is experiencing mental distress. Mental illness is presented as a solution to the impossibility of the loops that Nadia and Alan are experiencing. At first, before the audience is introduced to Alan, Nadia must fiercely uphold her sanity, rejecting the many people who call her crazy or ask—as a drug-making doctor asks her—whether she has a history of mental illness in her family. In the first two episodes, Nadia struggles against the implication that the loops she is experiencing is based in her own insanity, repeating that she is not crazy and that not everything has to do with the ways that her mother exercised self-harm and eventual suicide. The history of mental illness in her family is represented as a justification for calling her crazy too, as the inability to conform to proper gendered behaviour is passed on from her mother onto her.

13 From the first episode, the audience positions Nadia's 36th birthday as connected to the ways that her mother killed herself before turning 36. Nadia's "family history of mental illness" is therefore not only genetic, but also part of intergenerational trauma, foregrounded by her grandparent's experiences as Holocaust survivors. Nadia must uncover how the past is connected to her potential future, with a queer understanding of time. Because of her mother's history as well as her grandparents' history, suicide is presented as a possibility for her, but one that she never seems to want. In contrast, Alan's suicide is connected to his own normative understandings of gender and compulsory heterosexuality—that is, queer failure for him leads to death because he is unable to imagine another future. In a subsequent time loop, Alan goes to

² I use these three terms to highlight the many ways we can refer to mental health. Many scholars argue that the ways that we discuss these experiences speak to whether we align ourselves with the medicalization of mental distress (see for example Reaume (2006); Burstow (2013)).

talk to his mother, a Black woman, about his mental distress, but instead lies to her, telling her that Beatrice has agreed to marry him. The second—and third and so on—chance of living again, for both characters, becomes a chance to live differently, to live queerly, even if that life includes the reality of mental distress through trauma.

14 For both, the trauma of failing at gender, and the reality of intergenerational trauma, is also a trauma of death itself and of grief. Nadia is still grieving her mother's suicide and feeling guilt over her mother's death that she thinks she partially caused by leaving her when she was a child.³ This might be a representation of mad grief, as Jennifer Poole and Jennifer Ward describe it, as it has lasted for years (Poole and Ward 94). The prolonged grief that Nadia experiences could be diagnosed as "Prolonged Grief Disorder" (PGD) under recent recommendations for changes to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). Thus, Nadia struggles to be recognized as sane, even if time loops create a reality for her that is not aligned with others, because she desperately needs to imagine a different future for herself, one that does not end in suicide.

15 This struggle to be recognized as sane is not uncommon for women who are deemed to be doing gender wrong. Throughout history, women have been more likely to be diagnosed with a number of psychological or psychiatric disorders and there is a great deal of feminist literature that is invested in challenging the pathologization of gender undone (see for example Chesler 1972; Ussher 2011). At the end of the second episode, Nadia finally seems to agree with the people in her life who call her crazy, telling her former guardian, Ruth, who is also a psychologist, the safe word that they agreed upon when she was growing up, asking to be put into a psych ward. Once in the back of an ambulance on her way to the closest psych ward, she realizes her mistake, as three white men decide whether her behaviour or feelings merit admission to the psych facility. When the men ask her to remove her necklace—a gift from her mother—she struggles against the three men and the confinement that will follow, but they attempt to sedate her, crashing the car and restarting her loop as she dies once again. Alive again at her birthday party the day before, Nadia says, "nobody locks us up" ("The Great Escape"). This moment can be read as Nadia's connection to her mother, as she holds the necklace close as

³ When Nadia was ten years old, she decided that her mother's behaviour, including smashing mirrors and eating nothing but watermelon, was too much for her to live with and she asked her social worker to place her in Ruth's custody instead. A year later, her mother committed suicide, leaving her feeling as though she was partly at fault.

she says the line. Nadia thereby rejects a medical understanding of her madness, while also highlighting the connection she has to others in this moment: the “us” of this statement foreshadows Alan’s mental distress that could so easily be medicalized, and his refusal to get help.

16 Indeed, both characters not only do gender wrong, but also refuse the proper actions that should be taken if experiencing mental distress. While Nadia is convinced by the end of the second episode that she needs help, it quickly becomes clear to her that this help should not take place in medical systems that see incarceration as a solution to being mentally unwell. Alan is equally resistant to the medicalization of mental distress, repeating that he does not “do therapy” (“Superiority Complex”). Again, this is perhaps for good reason, as Black men have often been represented as dangerous to themselves and others, with many Black scholars challenging these representations (see for example Pickens 2019). While Alan’s resistance to therapy may in part be part of Alan’s struggle for masculine control—as he listens to “affirmations” rather than taking advice from others—Alan admits to Beatrice in his final scene with her that he has “let somebody help” him (“The Way Out”). The help that he is referring to is not in the form of a therapist or psychiatrist—as he is referring to Nadia’s support in this moment—, but this support nevertheless helps him work through his mental distress. He locates his distress in both his body and his mind, saying:

No matter how much we think we’re fooling people, our bodies, they can’t keep lying the way that our minds can... mine stopped lying a long time ago. For years, I’ve just been I’ve just been hollow. I thought if I worked hard enough, if I kept putting the time in, and if I kept my head down, you know, did everything right... this aching, gnawing feeling of being an absolute failure would just go away... and now I’m stuck with a body that is broken and in a world that is literally falling apart and a mind that wants to kill me. (“The Way Out”)

Alan’s realization that the world is “literally falling apart” is in part because of his own (gender) failure that allows him to let go of this failure. Alan’s mental distress is resolved when he lets Nadia help him, and he acknowledges that everyone else is also trying and failing to live. Nadia’s mental distress is also resolved, not through talk therapy or medicalization, but through Ruth’s help, whose friendship and support allows her stop having to repeat claims of sanity. *Russian Doll* therefore makes claims about mental distress that do not involve medicalized or pathologized “help” or “therapy,” instead advocating for community support.

17 Often these claims for community support come through Ruth, as she makes a number of claims throughout *Russian Doll* that challenge a conception of mental distress as medical, including a conversation she has with one of her clients. She tells him that instead of talking, he should aim to be held. This challenge to the idea of talk therapy, instead advocating for touch therapy encourages an embodied understanding of mental distress that does not necessarily support the medical model of mental health. Ruth's encouragement to touch as a means of therapy connects to how Juana Maria Rodriguez writes about queer gesture as a matter of queer futures. While Nadia and Alan struggle throughout the series to access a future that they keep failing to acquire, Ruth is always encouraging her clients to gesture or feel their way through the past and into a future—as a way of healing from mental distress. Rodriguez writes that “thinking about queerness through gesture animates how bodies move in the world, and how we assign meaning in ways that are always already infused with cultural modes of knowing” (2). In other words, touch acts as a way of healing and traveling into the past and into the future. In Alan's final conversation with Beatrice, he tells her that she did tell him about her infidelity with Mike: “every time I touched you, and you gently pulled away” (“The Way Out”). Gesture tells us about affection and love. By engaging in touch beyond romantic or sexual touch, Nadia and Alan learn about the world around them, and how they can unloop their timelines through a queer relation to time and to others.

18 Gender and mad failure appear to disrupt time within the world of *Russian Doll*, forcing both characters to return to the past as their present and their future. Time becomes challenged in part because of both characters' failures to adhere to gender norms and to mental health norms. In refusing to get help as defined by the other characters, they must discover the help that does work for them. The help that does work is a queer kind of help, one that emphasizes their relations to others within their present, past, and future. Time becomes part of their queer experience throughout the show, shaking their understanding of mad progress and their relations to humans, non-human animals, and non-animal humans.

“Your friends can't help you if you don't let them, as I have said before” (“The Great Escape”).

19 Nadia and Alan struggle with gender failure and a failure to heal, but they both also struggle with time failure. The appearance of children in *Russian Doll*, as representations of the

future, could represent gender failure in Nadia and Alan: both characters watch their former lovers connect with children that are not theirs. However, another way of seeing children is through the work of Lee Edelman, who contends that because homosexual relationships cannot lead to procreation, queer people have been represented as advocating for “no future” or for death (30). Rather than challenging this concept, Edelman takes seriously the representation of children as the future, pointing to the queer alternatives to children and to futures without children. Advocating for queer death and for no future means challenging closed normativities that might only focus on children as the future, rather than the queer adults of now. In *Russian Doll*, a television show that centers on death, children represent a connection to the past, present, and future, as the show queers temporality. Nadia’s hesitance to meet John’s daughter, Lucy, for example, represents her inability to see a future with her ex-partner John, but also to see a future where she becomes her mother. Throughout the show, Nadia’s own mother comes through as the past that Nadia must not allow to become her future. Similarly, while Alan tries to fit into the position of fiancé and future father, he does so in part to show his mother that he is capable of happiness. However, Nadia comes back from the past in the form of the child she once was. The future she must challenge also includes herself as a child, reappearing in the present. Unlike neoliberal media that represent children as representations of normative, closed futures, children in *Russian Doll* do not necessarily represent a normative future, so much as they represent a connection to the past. Through a twisted temporality that focuses on “multiple deaths,” *Russian Doll* encourages the audience to see children as representations of the future, the present, and the past.

20 Indeed, this twisted temporality acts as the most realistically queer aspect of the show, as Nadia and Alan must imagine their futures to be unstuck or open to radical change, because of a universe over which they have little control. Instead, they keep going back to the past, with their present not necessarily going forward. This universe explicitly connects the experiences of Nadia and Alan to their surroundings in a way that supports Butler’s theories of vulnerability and interdependency. Butler argues that vulnerability is necessary to make connection with others:

I have suggested that we rethink the relationship between the human body and infrastructure so that we might call into question the body as discrete, singular, and self-sufficient, and I have proposed instead to understand embodiment as both performative and relational, where relationality includes dependency on infrastructural conditions and legacies of discourse and institutional power that precede and condition our existence. (“Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance” 21)

In many ways, *Russian Doll* mirrors this call to pay attention to the infrastructural and social supports in place that permits lives to be lived. The series begins with this encouragement, with her friend Maxine telling Nadia in the second episode: “Your friends can’t help you if you don’t let them, as I have said before” (“The Great Escape”). This statement is mirrored back to Alan later in the series, as his friend, Faran tells him “No one can do anything by themselves” (“Alan’s Routine”). While both Nadia and Alan try repeatedly to accomplish life with independence, they are pushed into the arms of their friends and family. While both struggle to ask for help—and not without reason, as both have experienced coercive mental health help—they ultimately need to recognize their own interdependence before they can live.

21 Interdependence has been an increasingly important concept in feminist theory, as theorists like Butler advocate for a more political understanding of vulnerability. More recently, disability theory has also been interested in understanding the potential conflicts between feminist understandings of care or help and anti-ableist understandings of care or help. Nick Watson et al. argue that while feminists have largely critiqued models of care from the point of view of the carer, disability scholars have critiqued models of care through the perspective of the cared-for (331). While both positions are vulnerable to abuse, as the carer could be inadequately compensated for their labour, while the cared-for could receive inadequate or coercive care, there is also a potential mutual benefit in arguing for interdependence. If both sides are vulnerable to abuse, both sides can also benefit from mutual care. In *Russian Doll*, it is only through mutual care and interdependence that the characters can be free of their looping timelines.

22 When Nadia first connects with Alan, she realizes that her experiences of dying and living are not only her own. She describes Alan as “basically a child that the universe has tasked me with babysitting” (“Superiority Complex”). This description points once again to Alan’s failure of gender, as he is less a man and more a child that Nadia must care for. However, there are moments before the two meet that highlight how both characters experience interdependence, even if it is not with each other. For example, in the first episode, Nadia notices that many of Maxine’s fish disappear between timelines. When she asks Maxine about the missing fish, Maxine responds that she “always had two fish: ketchup and mustard” (“Nothing in This World Is Easy”). In the second episode, after she dies repeatedly by falling down the stairs, Nadia enlists Lizzy’s help to get down the fire escape steps. Later, Maxine also helps her down the stairs. Meanwhile, fish and other non-human animals are disappearing, alongside some non-

animal objects as well. Alan leaves the bathroom one morning to find that his fish is missing, and as we know from the first episode, Nadia's cat Oatmeal is lost as well. Mirrors are suddenly gone in one timeline, while Alan's engagement ring is not returned to his bag after he throws it into the ocean in one loop. Finally, fruit, vegetables, and flowers have been wilting and dying since the first loop. These moments of missing objects represent the queering not only of the two main characters, that both fail at gender and madness, but the entire universe in which they exist.

23 The seventh episode acts as the climax of missing objects and animals, as Nadia and Alan realize that humans are also going missing. Nadia forces her friends Maxine and Lizzy to come with her to the deli because she is afraid that they will go missing too. The episode intersperses these moments with flashbacks to Nadia's childhood and her experiences of a mother frantically in need of as many watermelons as possible. This child, Nadia from when she lived with her mother, begins appearing in adult Nadia's time loops. Her mother's insanity is suddenly solidified as the main cause of all of the death and living, as Nadia admits that she feels responsible for her mother's death. Her mother had her promise "don't ever let them tear us apart" when she was a child and that promise is coming back to haunt her in the form of a smiling child version of herself ("The Way Out"). The watermelons of the past are also mirrored in the looping present, through the decaying fruit. The mirrors that go missing are missing because her mother broke all of the mirrors in the house. However, Alan's apartment also becomes emptier, as other objects also begin to go missing. While Nadia is haunted by her grief through the missing mirrors, decaying fruit, and child-version of herself, Nadia's inability to forgive herself and forgive her mother is thus also connected, not just to the mirrors or fruit, but to all structural parts of the universe in which she finds herself.

24 Thinking through time as a nonlinear and relational concept necessitates thinking through sexualities in non-Western ways. Kim TallBear, a citizen of the Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate nation, is an Indigenous scholar whose work traces Indigenous sexuality studies and the possible open normativities that could encourage seeing sexuality as inherently connected to non-human animals, non-animal objects, and other humans in many different kinds of relations. She argues that sexuality is not just about the sexual attraction between two consenting adults, but about the connections between humans and the land, between humans and their relatives, between humans and non-human animals, between non-human animals and the land, etc (TallBear 160-161). The connections between us and everything else that we can experience through touch, through

spirituality, and through love can make up an alternative kind of sexuality that is extremely counter to normative hetero- or homonormativities (TallBear 163).

25 In “Making Love and Relations Beyond Settler Sex and Family,” TallBear explicitly argues that settler understandings of monogamy and sexuality have impacted otherwise more fluid normativities within Indigenous community. Instead of advocating for “a return” to a more “traditional” Indigenous sexuality or relationality, TallBear writes:

Rather, we might consider that the goal is to disaggregate so-called sexuality not back to tradition, not forward into progress, but into and back out into that spider’s web of relations. (Or any visual that works for you.) That is a web or net in which relations exchange power, and power is in tension, thus holding the web or community together. (160-161)

TallBear’s explicit mention of temporality is especially useful when discussing *Russian Doll*, as she rejects a fixed or closed understanding of sexuality, and a fixed or closed understanding of time. Nadia and Alan must not move forward or backward in time, but instead must recognize their relationality and their interdependence with the objects, nonhuman animals, and humans around them. In order to resolve the time loops that they find themselves in, Nadia and Alan must recognize that they are not alone. In fact, Alan asks her in the final episode: “will you promise that if I don’t jump, I’ll be happy?” and Nadia answers “No, absolutely not, but I will promise you that you will not be alone” (“Ariadne”). This claim, that Alan will not be alone, is enough to stop him from killing himself in the final moments of the show. The show advocates for its audience to recognize that we are all not alone, because of the humans, nonhuman animals, and objects around us. These all have the potential to show us our connections and relations.

26 In the final episode, Nadia and Alan find themselves alive, back with the humans, non-human animals, and objects that had previously disappeared. However, they also find themselves alone once again, as they are in separate timelines; Nadia finds Alan drunk and without any memories of the previous deaths, and Alan finds Nadia about to have sex with Mike, also unable to remember the previous deaths. Nadia must convince Alan not to kill himself, while Alan must encourage Nadia not to waste her evening on Mike. This uneven work is also representative of the general uneven storyline of the two characters: Alan’s time loop is resolved when he has an adult conversation with his ex-girlfriend, while Nadia must literally confront a younger version of herself, and the potential that she caused the suicide of her mother. This unequal distribution

of personal growth, with represents the ways that women do more emotional labour for the men in their lives, upholding masculinities as well as being held accountable for femininity. However, this unevenness is also perhaps part of the open normativities that the show encourages, as women are rarely represented as full characters, outside of their relationships with men. This reversal of roles represents a potential encouragement for women to live queer lives, that is, to live full lives without making the story all about men.

27 In fact, Nadia rejects the idea that Mike is at the core of the time loops, arguing that the sex was “mediocre at best” and that Mike’s sex could not have “set off a whole world-bending multiverse wonderland fucking splitting-level shit” (“Reflection”). Mike’s ability to get women to sleep with him is therefore not the cause for time to move differently, instead, it is presented as an annoying reality that women want to have sex, and that he is there. Nadia does not need to align herself with misogyny in order to end the time loops. Nadia rejects Mike even in the last episode when she has no memory of dying, as Mike tries to explain that Alan’s behaviour is completely in relation to Mike’s actions. Nadia’s rejection of misogyny and of mediocre sex, demonstrates that other kinds of connection are more fruitful.

“One night, something miraculous happened: they made it through alive” (“Aradne”).

28 *Russian Doll* encourages its audience to imagine queer relations in and through time. The two main characters, although both seemingly heterosexual, refrain from falling in love, instead struggle to heal from the trauma they are forced to rehearse. In the process, they live queerly, exploring relations with other humans, non-human animals, and non-animal objects. These aspects, that I have fleshed out more fully throughout this article, highlight the many ways that *Russian Doll* is realistically queer.

29 *Russian Doll* has allowed me to revisit queer theory and connect it to disability theory, feminist theory, and Indigenous sexuality studies. The television show is “realistically queer” because of its encouragement of alternative kinds of gender and sexuality, because of its challenge to normative solutions to mental distress, and because of its emphasis on interdependence as the only solution to problems of mental distress and failing at gender. While the show also centres on the experiences of heterosexual relationships and heterosexual sex, these aspects are overshadowed by the emphasis on community and collective healing. Collective healing, as represented through the returning objects, people, and plants, involves an

understanding of interdependence. Without the other characters, the other animals, and the other objects, Nadia and Alan would never be able to re-place time and finally face death. Nadia and Alan must also recognize the ways that their lives intertwine, not as romantic or sexual partners, but as beings sharing the same world.

30 In the future, more should be written about this show, especially since it has been picked up for a second season. For example, this article did not allow for the space to fully examine the ways that race plays into the experiences of the characters. Studies of suicide, death and dying might be especially useful as well, alongside a growing examination of gendered experiences of suicide. Finally, a psychoanalytic reading of Nadia's relationship to her mother, as well as Alan's relationship with his mother, but there are endless possibilities for this "long story involving multiple deaths" ("The Great Escape").

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