

# **Performing Queer Time: Disrupting Heteronormativity with Representations of Working-Class Sexual Minorities in Michelle Tea's *Valencia* (2000)**

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## **Abstract:**

This article argues that Michelle Tea's *Valencia* (2000) advocates for sex-positivity and queer ways of being to resist heteronormative life markers and capital accumulation that fuel hypergentrification which, in turn, displaces queer communities and people of color (and those at the intersection of these identities) from their neighborhoods. In the first section, I posit that Tea, through her documentation of working-class sexual minorities in the 1990s San Francisco Mission District, uses the feminist tradition of memoir writing to form social and political community. I then utilize Jack Halberstam's notion of 'queer temporality' to demonstrate how Tea constructs queer spaces occupied by sexual minorities who, removed from financial wealth and inheritance, inhabit a temporality that insists on the present moment. Employing queer time, Tea's work encourages sexual minorities to imagine alternate life possibilities that subvert heteronormative institutions. To underline the significance of queer spaces, I conclude this paper by interrogating Tea's inclusion of an interlude outside of the Mission District when Michelle (the narrator) and her lover, Iris, visit Iris's Georgia family. Examining heteronormativity's limits and highlighting the importance of spaces in which queer sexual minorities can perform and imagine lives outside of heteropatriarchy, I offer Tea's *Valencia* as a text that disrupts the idealization of access to heteronormative institutions and the rise of homonormativity to push for a transformational politics that critiques capitalist power structures.

1 Set in mid-1990s San Francisco, Michelle Tea's *Valencia* (2000) catalogues her escapades as a young, 20-something 'sexual migrant' in which she participates in a variety of sexual behaviors: prostitution, casual sex with numbers of women, group sex, S/M, and making pornography (Tea 51-56, 179-184, 16-19). Writing in the time and space of the mid-90s' Mission District, Tea's memoir is emblematic of the sex-positive, third-wave feminist movement that seeks to revitalize the discussion of sexuality within politics and create a more expansive feminist movement that values the political power of women's erotic and sexual pleasure.<sup>1</sup> This reinvigoration in the 90s was particularly crucial as the ramifications of previous feminist generations' discussions of sex, as bell hooks explains, silenced many sex-radicals who were "pushed into the background by the puritanical violence of antisex conservative gender rights

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<sup>1</sup> See Merri Lisa Johnson and Nan Bamer-Maglin and Donna Perry (Johnson 4-7; Bamer-Maglin and Perry xvi).

propaganda” led by privileged white feminists such as Catherine MacKinnon (hooks 93-94). Tea, a queer working-class writer, is part of this ongoing revival and is the “most prolific writer of her generation” (Wlodarczyk 144).<sup>2</sup> Her second memoir, *Valencia*, documents the raucous dyke scene of the Mission District and was a popular, impactful text that, even decades later, resonates with punk-queer subculture and serves as nostalgia for a community that, through hypergentrification, no longer exists (Clarke and Topiary Landberg 171). Although Tea is a productive writer with a dedicated following, only three scholars, Justyna Wlodarczyk, Guy Davidson, and Geneva M. Gano have written specifically about *Valencia*. Whereas Wlodarczyk and Davidson focus largely on the nostalgia and subcultural capital present within the text (Wlodarczyk 145-150; Davidson 122-124), Gano’s article, published in 2017, argues that Tea’s work is a neoconfessional that, through its absence of race and singular focus on the self, participates in the gentrification and erasure of the working-class Latino neighborhoods of the Mission District (363). While I agree with Gano’s criticism of Tea’s portrayal of her characters and community, her article, in its analysis of Tea’s memoir as removed from the larger socio-political context, minimizes Tea’s involvement in the sex-positive scene of the Mission District and her participation in the feminist tradition of utilizing memoir to form social and political communities.

2 As scholar Su-Lin Yu states in her work on third-wave feminist narratives, “third-wave stories are not solely about the individual but are connected to longer traditions of feminist theorizing and practice” (875). Tea’s social group constitutes a collective who, because they are outside heteronormative communities and families, “end up competing with other low-income groups for the limited supply of cheap and moderate housing” which produces racism, homophobia, and violence between traditionally working-class communities of color and the (often) white LGBTQ sexual migrants (Rubin 160, 162). Considering this, I argue that Tea’s depiction of her community and sexual endeavors insists on a political context that critiques white, middle-class heteronormative patriarchy which, as radical feminists of color such as Cherrie Moraga and Audre Lorde note, is a violence that threatens and displaces both working-class people of color and LGBTQ sexual minorities.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, Tea has published five memoirs, numerous novels, a tarot reading guidebook, produced a film version of *Valencia*, and is a spoken-word poet who started the traveling sex-positive performance group, Sister Spit (“About Michelle Tea” n.p.).

<sup>3</sup> See in particular Moraga’s essay, “La Guera” (29-33), as well as her preface to *This Bridge Called My Back* (xiii-xix) and Lorde’s “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” (98-101).

3        *Valencia* disrupts narratives surrounding gender and sexuality to construct a sex-positive feminist manifesto that illustrates queer working-class women's sexualities to reveal middle-class heteronormativity, with its investment in marriage, reproductivity, and inheritance, as harmful and limiting. Using a fast-paced style, incorporating sexually-diverse working-class characters, and documenting her cycle of love, sex, and rejection, Tea's memoir deploys what Jack Halberstam calls "queer time" (2-4). Through this temporality she exposes the production and artificiality of heteronormativity.

4        I first explore Tea's memoir as a performative political act that builds her queer, sex-radical community in San Francisco's Mission District. Next, I interrogate Tea's representation of her fast-paced, unpredictable life as well as the working-class sexual minorities she encounters that composes queer time, which, as Halberstam explains, "creates a new emphasis on the here, the present, the now, and . . . squeezes new possibilities out of the time at hand" (2). Lastly, I examine Tea's rendering of patriarchal, middle-class heteronormativity as a force that impedes her sexual development and personal identity to demonstrate the significance of spaces, like the 90s' Mission District, for sexual minorities. With the erasure of these spaces through hypergentrification that impacts working-class people of color and the LGBTQ community, we see the necessitation of what Cathy Cohen terms a queer "transformational politics" that critiques dominant norms that harm all marginalized people (419-420). Underscoring the need for transformational politics, I conclude that *Valencia* serves as a text that disrupts heteronormativity and also cautions against the contemporary push for homonormativity, what Lisa Duggan explains as "a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them" for LGBTQ people (50).

### **Performing Sex, Writing Community**

5        Tea's memoir writing is largely influenced by her experiences as a regular performer and organizer of spoken-word poetry events in the mid-90s Mission District and her work centers her sexual experiences. Tea describes her writing process as "just slamming a bunch of messy, crazy, fast life into my notebook" and Davidson explains that Tea's involvement in poetry events "is inextricably linked to her work as a writer" (Tea 8; Davidson 127). The spoken-word genre depends upon speed and reflects Tea's experiences as a queer working-class person, and her

transition to memoir writing embodies this performative legacy and informs her work. As she details in the introduction of the 2008 version of *Valencia*, she produces in a manic state and when she felt this mania subsiding as a poet, she began writing longer pieces to revive this energy: “I could write about my own life as if I were creating a character in a novel, letting my mind capture all the details it craved to capture, not giving a shit about how I or anyone else looked” (7). Inherent to Tea’s writing and performing are her candid musings on romantic relationships, sexual encounters, and drug-and-alcohol binges, with nearly every chapter opening with discussion of a romantic interest and featuring a sexual encounter (Gano 362). Tea acquaints the reader with her provocative style immediately, opening with the scene of Michelle seducing Petra, an older butch lesbian, by drunkenly slamming into her in a mosh-pit and engaging in the S/M activities of knife-play and fisting for the first time three pages later (11-15). When Petra asks what she prefers sexually, she says, “Oh god, how the fuck do I know? I had no more reference points for sex. Petra had destroyed them. I had never had sex before. Not if this was sex” (16). Beginning her work with a quickly consummated relationship that shatters Michelle’s preconceived notions of sex and acceptable sexual practices, Tea crafts a memoir that grips readers and challenges their perceptions of suitable sexuality.

6 Tea’s use of self-writing to challenge acceptable sexual practices serves a sex-positive political purpose. Gano argues that *Valencia* is a neoconfessional that “emphasizes the protagonist’s success in overcoming personal hardship while minimizing a broader historical and social contextualization of individual struggle,” however, although Tea fails to acknowledge the displacement of working-class people of color by predominately white working-class sexual migrants, Tea’s work is hardly removed from social or political context (363).<sup>4</sup> Third-wave feminism of the 90s, as Merri Lisa Johnson, Nan Bamer-Maglin, and Donna Perry note, sought to engage discussion of sexual pleasure and freedom with politics (Johnson 4-7; Bamer-Maglin and Perry xvi). The revitalization of sex-positive feminist discussions during this period was a

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<sup>4</sup> It is also important to note that gentrification of the Mission started before Tea’s documentation in *Valencia*, beginning in the 1980s and accelerating rapidly in the dotcom boom of the 90s and 2000s (Zuk and Chapple 25-27). While Tea, as she acknowledges in the article, “San Francisco Has an Evil Twin” (2013), participates in the displacement of the Latino communities with her move to the Mission, the hypergentrification process was well underway and the Mission already had a substantial queer community that lived and worked among working-class families of color. This is not to assume that these populations were two distinct groups: it is vital to acknowledge that there are people at the intersection of these identities in these communities. With this article, I emphasize that, rather than criticizing Tea’s participation in gentrification, it is more transformative to critique how heteronormative capitalism fuels hypergentrification that displaces working-class people of color and sexual minorities and examine life possibilities, presented in *Valencia*, that resist these norms to imagine other ways of being.

particularly dangerous task, especially considering the ramifications of the feminist Sex Wars that began in the early 80s in which “pro-sex” feminists, such as Dorothy Allison and Patrick Califia, who defended S/M practices and pornography were consequently attacked by “anti-sex” feminists (Allison 107-109; Califia 14-17).<sup>5</sup> Additionally, hooks also points out that “patriarchal-dominated mass media” will quickly distort radical feminist discussions of sexuality to produce man-hating, anti-sex narratives about feminists, demonstrating the continued risk women face when discussing sexuality in their own terms (86-87, 93). Moreover, sexual minorities continue to be targeted in 1990s San Francisco. As Jill Nagle explains, even looking like a “whore” could result in real consequences, like imprisonment, as the city, in a 1996 law, gave “police officers the power to arrest someone for *appearing to intend* to exchange sex for money” (5, italics in original). Tea’s work details her experiences performing S/M activities, participating in the production of pornography, and engaging in sex work to display the sex radical scene of the Mission that was populated by sexual minorities. While sexual minorities could form a community and have more safety in the space of San Francisco than society-at-large, they were still at risk for discrimination and violence from (anti-pornography/anti-sex) feminists, mass media, and the legal and criminal justice systems. Documenting these experiences, Tea commits a political act and forms a space for a sex-positive, queer community.

7 Writing about her exploits in the Mission, Tea provides a landscape of sexual freedom and possibility that unveils how integral sex is for her as a queer young woman and centers the significance of community for sexual minorities. Third-wave feminists’ personal narratives, as Yu notes, build from the second-wave tradition of sharing personal stories to generate political change, but these narratives further embrace multivocality and work against a notion of a universal, unified feminist experience to theorize new possibilities that represent more diverse women (877, 881-884). Tea’s Michelle makes the pursuit of love and sex essential to her identity and accentuates that she “was an artist, a lover, a lover of women, a warrior really” to explain why staying in bed with a new lover was more important than going to work (56). She has over a dozen affairs with girls and Tea moves through these relationships quickly, both in a sexual sense and also in the way

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<sup>5</sup> The 1982 “Towards a Politics of Sexuality” Scholar and Feminist IX Conference at Barnard College unleashed a debate, known as the Sex Wars, between anti-censorship feminists and anti-pornography feminists, or pro-sex and anti-sex feminists, respectively (“Pro-sex Feminism” 259). The term pro-sex refers “to a segment of the women’s movement that defends pornography, sex work, sadomasochism, and butch/femme roles, but it also recuperates heterosexuality, intercourse, marriage, and sex toys from separatist feminist ideals” (260).

she compounds the affairs into an endless “blur[sic] so that Petra merges into Gwynn, Liz, Edie, Willa, Iris, Joey, Scrumptious/Stella, Fate, Cecilia, and others who remain nameless” (Gano 370). Fashioning a space where she can explore and perform her sexuality, Tea establishes the significance of sex in women’s lives, and furthermore, the importance of sexual freedom and possibility and how they shape identities. When women freely experiment with their sexuality and can celebrate their desire, as sex-positive feminists such as Carol Queen remark, they experience empowerment and new possibilities for sex and life which challenge heteronormative conceptions of acceptable sexuality (176).

8 Utilizing performance and memoir, sex-positive feminists encourage community formation. Tea participates in the feminist tradition of using personal narratives to develop feminist communities and challenges capitalist conceptions of personal success (Siegel 51; Yu 875-877). Importantly, Tea’s text serves as a sexual performance piece like those of Annie Sprinkle who writes, “If I performed who I wanted to become, I would become it. I could also help shape the future of the world” (169). Centering her varied sexual relationships and writing in a fast-paced style that is reminiscent of her slam poetry performances, Tea’s memoir adopts a performative aspect that encourages new sexual and life possibilities. Through performance, feminist writers and artists cultivate community that supports more self-understanding, and also permits them to reimagine and expand their individual and communal futures, an act that Michael Warner describes as essential for queer politics in confronting heteronormative institutions (8). In this memoir, Tea creates sexual possibilities and ways of being for herself and her community, and so renders empowering what mainstream, heteropatriarchal society classifies as sexually deviant. Sexually empowered, Tea and her community forge opportunities outside of heteronormative, capitalist institutions that perpetuate hypergentrification.

### **Constructing Queer Time, Imagining Community Possibilities**

9 Through her depictions of hurrying through relationships, jobs, and social circles, Tea employs a temporality Halberstam refers to as “queer time” to express her sexual self and forms a community that thrives in a queer temporality (2). Queer time, as Halberstam explains, “is . . . about the potentiality of a life unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing,” because “queer subcultures produce alternative temporalities by allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of

those paradigmatic markers of life experience” (2). With its disregard for heteronormative “life markers,” queer temporality inspires people to build subcultural communities that offer possibilities outside of heteropatriarchal expectations. Gano argues that Michelle’s lovers “enter and exit so quickly that they leave little lasting impact on the story” in a way that highlights Tea’s personal narrative at the expense of acknowledging historical and social context (371). While Tea does introduce Michelle’s lovers in quick succession, I assert that, with the swift pace of Michelle’s sexual trysts, the author dislodges readers from ingrained heteronormative expectations of linear “repro-narrativity,” in which an individual matures, settles down, and establishes a committed relationship that will eventually lead to reproduction and inheritance (Warner 7). Through the flurry of these relationships, Tea crafts a queer way of being for her readers, establishing a temporarily that shows readers that what mainstream society and some feminists consider sexually deviant behavior is only sexually different behavior. Exposing the formation of socially acceptable sexuality, Tea ultimately challenges middle-class, patriarchal heteronormative institutions, such as marriage and the nuclear family, and, moreover, critiques the preeminence of capital accumulation and inheritance that heteronormativity maintains through reproduction and which negatively impacts both poor queer people and working-class people of color.

10 Michelle’s lovers are sexually diverse, but each character is either working-class or else removed from their family’s wealth and inheritance, illustrating that Tea’s sexual migrant community shares economically precarious positions that inform their sense of queer temporality. Tea, as Wlodarczyk observes, is a working-class writer who prefers relationships with working-class women, and Tea’s Michelle is often quitting jobs, failing to appear, and abusing the few privileges she has as a low-tier employee, such as when she hosts late-night zine-making parties at the Industrial Workers of the World office she briefly works at, exhibiting her disregard for participating within an economy that values stability and inheritance, even when employed at an anarchist union group (Wlodarczyk 144; Tea 61-63). In *Valencia*, each of Michelle’s girlfriends occupies an expendable economic position, such as bartender, sex worker, waitress, and bicycle messenger (79, 80, 91). Notably, they share traumatic pasts that stress their separation from family, community, and wealth:

Laurel had smoked crack and had been a speed freak plus had grown up poor in Maine picking potatoes with a crazy mother . . . Willa had been institutionalized and had parents she called ‘educated poor’. . . Iris was from the South, where she was persecuted in high

school and put on Prozac . . . Suzanne . . . had been a heroin addict . . . I of course had been a prostitute . . . and [had] a peeping Tom stepfather. (83-84)

Through her portrayal of her friends and lovers' pre-San Francisco pasts, Tea features what she calls their 'defining' stories that accentuate the violence and trauma they, as queer women, experienced in their heteropatriarchal families. In their communities, where privileged sexuality is "heterosexual, marital, monogamous, reproductive, and non-commercial," these women were classified as outcasts and deviant, and faced consequences, such as institutionalization, or endured their misfit status by taking addictive drugs (Rubin 152).

11 Without the benefits of family support, the characters are put in economically tenuous positions, and, in the case of Michelle, find additional (sexually) marginalizing avenues to address their instability and poverty, like sex work. Rubin writes that in metropolitan areas with large groups of sexual migrants, like San Francisco, sexual minorities continue to be economically vulnerable as "[t]hey face intense competition for choice positions. The influx of sexual migrants provides a pool of cheap and exploitable labor" (160). As large populations of people who are removed from their family's support and have faced other obstacles, like poverty, drug addiction, and institutionalization, sexual migrants are often only able to find employment in low-paying positions in which they are easily replaceable. Additionally, Halberstam contends that people who live precarious, fast-paced lives that do not depend on "reprotime" or familial time live "on the edges of logics of labor, and production. By doing so, they also often live outside the logic of capital accumulation" (10). Their exploitable employment and poverty necessitate a queer temporality in which they form new communities and life possibilities in place of their heteronormative families.

12 Cast off from their birth families and living with financial uncertainty, Tea's sexual migrant community displays how lack of steady employment fosters queer temporality through the formation of queer kin groups that replace familial institutions. Rubin explains that queer sexual migration "creates concentrated pools of potential partners, friends, and associates. It enables individuals to create adult, kin-like networks in which to live" (161-162). In the 1990s Mission District, Tea and her friends and lovers easily form alliances and connections, and this broadens their sense of queer temporality as they enjoy a space and community that collectively appreciates sexual diversity, understands its group's poverty, and rejects heteronormative life markers. Sharing their pasts, they form their own queer kin group, which Tea underlines as they all go home together



to eat and sleep after a night of partying (84). Tea's observation that, after this night, when she wakes up with her girlfriend, she feels "normal," illuminates the sense of community and stability Michelle receives from her social group that mainstream, heteronormative U.S. society would deem unstable and precarious (84).

13 While Tea's work does not glorify the group's poverty or trauma, it does accentuate the freedom within their community that comes from their untethered lives. Moreover, Tea stresses that her consumption of alcohol and drugs, ranging from coffee, marijuana, mushrooms, and crystal meth, fuels her sexual adventures and relationships within her community, further forming a queer temporality that resists stability. For example, after Michelle breaks up with Iris, she decides to take speed, which, as Halberstam contends, in the works of queer postmodern writers, "becomes the motor of an alternative history as their queer heroes rewrite completely narratives of female rebellion" (5). Considering her speed intake, Michelle states that, "People are terrified of the thought of me on speed, but the truth is it makes me feel strangely calm, like I've bundled the whole world up to nurse at my breast, grand and serene, all my daily manic energy concentrated into a fine point that sits in my belly and I am god" (Tea 211-212). In her speed-induced rebellion, Michelle emphasizes the sense of power it gives her within her world, enabling her to possess a kind of Lordian erotic self-knowledge that allows her imagination to move past patriarchal constraints (Lorde 54-55). After Michelle ends her relationship with Iris, which is her longest relationship (although not monogamous) in the text, by going on a speed-fueled party and sex spree, she begins an affair with a new lover, Scrumptious/Stella, and underscores the sense of possibility the crystal meth gives her, as she asks, "What would the night give us?" (Tea 214). With use of the drug, Michelle's night is limitless, as she moves from parties to clubs, engaging in sex, including threesomes, with Scrumptious/Stella and challenging bouncers at "classist" gay male clubs who privilege wealthy gay men over poor queer women (214-219). The effects of the drug last well into the next day as they attend the Dykes on Bicycles event and participate in other parties. Michelle refers to the adventure and affair with Stella, which extends several days before Stella returns to Canada, as one "endless day," disrupting notions of middle-class, heteronormative time that are deeply rooted in family and financial futurity (226-229).

14     Unsettling linear heteronormative ideals of monogamous, “charmed” sexuality,<sup>6</sup> familial stability, and child rearing, Tea generates a temporality in which a queer, sexual minority community can thrive. By illustrating one limitless day, Tea challenges what Lee Edelman calls “reproductive futurism,” which he defines as “terms that impose an ideological limit on political discourse as such, preserving in the process the absolute privilege of heteronormativity by rendering unthinkable, by casting outside the political domain, the possibility of a queer resistance to this organizing principle of communal relations” (3). Using speed, both the drug and the pace in which she moves her narrative, Tea rejects a temporality that confines lives to heteronormative ideals and constructs a new space in which queer sexual minorities can form relationships and kinships that accept and nurture their queer (sex)lives and imagine opportunities for alternative futures. This is especially vital in challenging heteronormative ideals because, as Warner explains, heteronormative society indoctrinates individuals with reproductivity which interweaves “heterosexuality, biological reproduction, cultural reproduction, and personal identity” (9). Revealing that her community enjoys sexuality and participates in cultural production, such as poetry readings, pornography-making, and memoir-writing, outside of mainstream culture, Tea offers other possibilities for living and thriving outside of standards that depend on linear reproductivity. Rejecting heteronormative temporality, Tea paints her memoir as a continuing blur of days, events, lovers, and friends; in effect, *Valencia* is full of the present moment that contains almost infinite-seeming romantic and life possibilities. To contrast the infinite opportunities of her queer world with the expectations of patriarchal heteronormativity, Tea shows the reader that, when forced out of this space, time for queer sexual minorities practically stops, as does their sexual agency and individual growth.

### **Exposing Heteronormativity’s Limits: Queer Time for Community Survival**

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<sup>6</sup> In Rubin’s “Thinking Sex” she presents her diagram of sexuality she calls the “Charmed Circle” in which “charmed” sexuality that “is ‘good’, ‘normal,’ and ‘natural’”, should ideally be heterosexual, marital, monogamous, reproductive, and non-commercial. It should be coupled, relational, within the same generation, and occur at home. It should not involve pornography, fetish objects, sex toys of any sort, or roles other than male and female. Any sex that violates these rules is ‘bad’, ‘abnormal,’ or ‘unnatural’” (152).

15 Although most of *Valencia* takes place within the raucous Mission District, the text includes an interlude halfway through the memoir in which Michelle accompanies Iris to her small hometown in the mountains of Georgia for the wedding of Iris's sister. This section breaks from the bombardment of parties, sexual trysts, and string of jobs to feature how heteropatriarchy entraps queer sexual minorities like Tea. The way in which the queer space of the Mission District provides Michelle and her lovers with limitless possibilities and abilities to thrive is sharply contrasted with the heteronormatively confining community of rural Georgia. At the beginning of their trip Michelle describes this episode as a form of social experiment, "For me it was an anthropological study and also kind of zany . . . I hadn't been inside a family for years and I'd forgotten how inherently dysfunctional it was" (Tea 112). Michelle's concept of her trip indicates that for queer sexual minorities, the heteronormative, nuclear family feels unstable and unnatural. Tea develops this through Michelle's reflections on Iris's heterosexual family and the southern community members. Readers see this in particular with the anxiety Iris's sister, the demanding, overwrought bride causes when she demands Iris wear a bridesmaid dress the "color of crusty menstrual blood" and that Michelle must get rid of her lime green hair and wear a Laura Ashley dress (127-128). Additionally, Tea depicts Iris's jealous rage over her sister having an expensive reception and receiving triples of household items as wedding gifts as Iris will never have a wedding that her family would celebrate (114, 127-128). Notably, in her observations of the town, Michelle discovers that the quaint city, in which Michelle and Iris are "starved for gay people," is a corrupt, dysfunctional place where fathers are alcoholics and the sheriff employs teenage boys to deal cocaine (Tea 124, 127-128). Including her anthropological study of a town and family that mainstream society would consider ideal and stable, with its investment in futurity and inheritance, as signified by the preparation of the wedding of Iris's sister, Tea makes visible the artificial nature of heteronormativity and denotes the way heteronormative institutions ensnare not just queer people, but heterosexual people as well.

16 Critical observations of heteronormativity are heightened by Tea's emphasis on the stagnation of her life, particularly her sexual life, in the several weeks the characters spend in Georgia with Iris's family. From the moment they arrive in town, Tea writes that Georgia makes them physically ill and they experience intense lethargy (112). She explains that, "the mysterious chronic fatigue had us both on perma-lounge. Me and Iris had thought it would be fun to have sex there, in the house where she grew up, Mom sleeping lightly at the end of the hall . . . but really

we were exhausted” (113). Tea’s descriptions of Michelle and Iris’s stupor and lack of sexual libido displays the way the heteronormative home impedes their usual lives—no longer able to attend strings of parties and queer activist events, the women are trapped within the physical home, where upholders of the nuclear family lurk, and their activity, including sexual intercourse, stops. Importantly, Tea highlights that, at the house, they could not have the kind of sex they prefer, which keeps them from having sex at all, as the one time they tried, they realized that, “we couldn’t smack each other or play around with the recycled bicycle tire whip because it could wake Mom. We tried it once and it traumatized poor Daisy [the dog] . . . Depressed that our sexual violence disturbed the dog, we resumed our slug-like positions in front of the television” (114). In this way, Tea starkly contrasts the Georgia visit with Michelle’s fast-paced San Francisco escapades, establishing that places in which they cannot express their sexualities impede the flourishing of queer personal identities.

17 During their stagnated time in Georgia, as the endless possibilities available in the Mission remain out of reach, Michelle’s sense of self deteriorates which exemplifies the damage queer people suffer when they are forced to participate in heteronormative families and communities. Not being able to fully partake in valued cultural institutions in a place where queer identities and sexualities are underrepresented and stifled actually impacts Michelle’s individuality. Discussing reprosexuality, Warner explains that it

involves more than reproducing, more even than compulsory heterosexuality: it involves a relation to self that finds its proper temporality and fulfillment in generational transmission. Queers often find themselves in transgression not simply of a commandment to be fruitful and multiply, but more insidiously of the self-relation that goes with it. (9)

Since Michelle finds the heteronormative family and its ideals of marriage, reproduction, and inheritance unappealing, and besides, as a queer sexual minority, unavailable to her, she cannot comfortably occupy a heteronormative temporality. Because she cannot participate in the world of nuclear family-making, Michelle has no viable role within the family unit and is unable to cultivate an identity that would exist and be respected within the heteronormative family and community.

18 Tea conveys her diminishing self by underscoring that the longer they stay in Georgia, the more removed they become from their community, activities, and sexualities. She writes that

Earlier I’d been sad that we couldn’t drive down to Athens to see L7 because it would interfere with the wedding. Now I didn’t care. Of course we couldn’t leave, of course we would remain here, in this town, Chickamauga, Georgia, forever . . . never having sex

because the television had sucked up our libidos like it did little Carol Ann in *Poltergeist*. (122-123)

In this passage, Tea exposes how the more Michelle feels that she is part of the town and family, the more resigned she becomes to being essentially meaningless. Her willingness to give up seeing L7, a radical feminist punk rock band that was associated with the riot grrrl music scene,<sup>7</sup> exemplifies the ways in which Michelle's options for forming community and living her typical life is confined (Grant n.p.). Thus, she and Iris are resigned to the death of their sex lives as they are removed from opportunities to exhibit their desires and form communities with people like them. Stressing the lethargic, slowing of time by the removal of Tea's discussions of queer sexual exploits, Tea connects sexual possibilities and freedom with the fast-paced, queer temporality that she experiences in San Francisco and reveals that the middle-class heteronormative family unit's reproduction of family and inheritance is a limiting ideal.

19      Unveiling the way heteronormative institutions confine sexual minorities, I offer that *Valencia* is a cautionary tale against the idealization of homonormativity for contemporary readers. With the 2015 legalization of same-sex marriage in the United States, queer sexual minorities are encouraged to participate in institutions that celebrate family and financial futurity ("US Supreme Court" n.p.). However, underlining the disintegration of Michelle and Iris's (sex)lives within the constraints of the middle-class home and family, Tea demonstrates that this glorified normative environment hinders queer personal identities and reminds readers that these spaces limit imaginative possibilities. Furthermore, the access to institutions, such as marriage, and its investment in wealth accumulation and inheritance are also restraining ideals that perpetuate the erasure of communities where sexual minorities can survive and thrive (Duggan 50). The political,

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<sup>7</sup> The riot grrrl movement used music and zines to advocate for feminism and address racism and sexism within the punk scene of the early 1990s (Schilt 6). Notably, riot grrrl bands, such as L7, drew from personal experiences and incorporated topics such as sexual assault and eating disorders into their music that were often ignored by mainstream media (7-8).

social, and economic positions queer sexual minorities experience in Tea's *Valencia*, such as poverty, exclusion, and threats of violence, do not disappear when LGBTQ people gain access to heteronormative institutions that promote capital accumulation—they are only displaced onto other minoritized communities. As Dean Spade and Craig Willse explain, “[f]reedom and equality are not achieved when a practice crosses over to being acceptable. Instead, such shifts strengthen the line between what is considered good, healthy, and normal and what remains bad, unhealthy, stigmatized, and criminalized” (3). Tea's narrative represents people whose lives continue to be stigmatized, and even if they could access institutions and wealth, the marginalization they experience would merely be passed on to the most vulnerable, such as transgender people, people of color, and poor people (and especially those at the intersections of these identities). In the way that gentrification displaces the most marginalized, so does sexual normalization, and thus reading *Valencia* as a political, sex-positive work exemplifies the need for queer communities that continue to celebrate sexuality and search for continuous possibility.

## **Conclusion**

20     Through her fast-paced memoir that chronicles a year of sexual and romantic exploration, Tea's *Valencia* confronts middle-class, white heteropatriarchal ideals that work as a violence against people who do not conform to its standards of heteronormative relationships, families, reproduction, and inheritance. The need for narratives like Tea's is especially vital in presenting queer life possibilities that challenge hetero- and homonormativity as LGBTQ politics succumb to the neoliberal impulse for homonormative movements that focus on access to institutions, such as marriage, that perpetuate capitalist ideals that marginalize sexual minorities and working-class

people of color.<sup>8</sup> Thus, sex-positive memoirs like Tea's can be utilized to imagine possibilities that resist heteronormative and homonormative lifestyles that celebrate capitalist wealth accumulation and resulting hypergentrification. Moreover, they are imperative in imagining a transformative queer politics that "does not search for opportunities to integrate into dominant institutions and normative social relationships, but instead pursues a political agenda that seeks to change values, definitions, and laws which make these institutions and relationships oppressive" (Cohen 424).

21     Crafting a queer temporality in her memoir that depicts the queer time she and her fellow sexual minorities inhabit, Tea echoes sex-positive feminists who use personal writings to imagine new selves, communities, and futures that challenge mainstream social and economic values. Reflecting on *Valencia* in her 2008 introduction, Tea explains that "I found that in the process of transforming my world, my life, my self into literature, my world, life, and self became elevated, and seemed to occupy a space it hadn't previously" (8). In the queer temporality that Tea creates through memoir, she puts forth possibilities for queer lives, ultimately exhibiting alternative ways of forming communities that celebrate difference and alternate ways of being that can transform capitalist, heteropatriarchal society and its celebration of wealth accumulation and financial progression that feed gentrification and destroy vulnerable neighborhoods. Emphasizing the importance of sexual, personal, and community possibility, Tea's narrative, an artifact of a community that no longer exists, illustrates to present day readers the necessity of resisting hetero- and homo- normalization and constructing paths for alternative lives and communities.

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<sup>8</sup> For discussion on how neoliberalism has sought to depoliticize queer movements through "equality politics," particularly since 9/11, see Lisa Duggan (45-55); Martin F. Manalansan IV (141-153); Dean Spade (80-85); and Michael Warner (*The Trouble with Normal* 39).

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