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Camp Sensibility and Disidentification in *Martin Sherman's Cracks*

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In Martin Sherman's play *Cracks,* the concepts of camp sensibility and disidentification are prominently explored through the portrayal of a group of marginalised characters from the 70s context. The play features each character's sexuality, with every character preoccupied with their desires, even though they are faced with a series of murders, with nine of them being killed one by one. There is no intention for the characters to investigate the murders, and the murderer cannot be found throughout the play. This turns the whole play into a focus on the characters' thoughts and stage directions, making the play more bizarre and over-the-top. Sherman's unconventional way of highlighting sexuality resonates with a profound gender theory, as a matter of fact. As Judith Butler states, "gender is performative" (1), meaning that gender is an enactment that is often mistaken as a sign of inherent truth. In other words, 'gender' is a 'doing' rather than a 'being,' shaped by historical and cultural ideology and power since birth (Salih 55). Rather than adhering to societal norms, the characters in the play defy expectations and act in ways that would have been opposed by society, indicating a departure from realism. In theatres, queer performance challenges societal norms to present the profitable instability and fluidity of sexuality through performativity (Dolan 486). The disjunction between the physicality of the performer and the sexuality that is being performed interconnects to a mode of queer sensibility, 'camp,' which particularly responds to the exaggerated content (Sontag 4).

Being campy on the stage is to present a particular epicene style that everyone will not mutually agree and/or disagree with, such as drag culture, which reveals the imitative nature of all gender identities (Salih 57). The notion of camp sensibility serves as an underlying theme and plot device to deduce the guilty pleasure of non-cis-heteronormative passion in *Cracks*. Each character clashes with fixed societal dispositions and struggling with identities. Unlike Sherman's other consistently realistic plays, *Cracks* emphasises excess through camp sensibility and recreates the objective reality for the characters. On the other hand, the reception of sexual minorities is political, representing some dominant cultural ideas. As in the tactic of disidentification coined by José Muñoz seeks to explore how individuals who experience intersecting forms of marginalisation create their identities, resist dominant norms, and engage in practices of worldmaking (27). Sherman reframes his minoritarian characters, especially Roberta and Sammy who is a black trans woman, and a religious person respectively. Every character in the play struggles to survive in a lethal environment, but their new identities also

provide new narratives that speak to and represent the community. This adds a political stance to the play, in addition to its humorous effect.

With hindsight, more plays addressing underrepresented themes of sexuality have emerged from the shadows, and more performers have participated in queer performances since the outbreak of the Stonewall Riots in 1969 (Dolan 488). In fact, on the night of June 28, Sherman was at Christopher Street outside the Stonewall Inn during the protest against police brutality towards homosexuals and drag queens (OutHistory). After the riot six years later, Sherman completed the realistic play *Passing By*, followed by the surreal one *Cracks* both on a similar timeline to call out sexual minorities. The former play is an upbeat comedy that portrays two initial strangers who, while suffering from illness, come to care for each other without agonising over sexual orientation, persecution, or coming out. The play emphasises the importance of same-sex love and being loved, of laughing together, and of fighting together when love strengthens the aftermath. Sherman maintains a realistic perspective on the two homosexual characters' need to pursue their love and careers, which is portrayed as natural, and a given (Dace 31). The play romanticises the context of homosexuality in the 1970s when it was still taboo to perform on stage. When Sherman attempted to produce *Passing By* in 1972 in New York, he was rejected by most producers. The lack of appreciation for a realistic play only fuelled Sherman's determination to approach the New York producers with a bolder style (Dace 33). As a result, *Cracks* was completed by Sherman in late 1973 as opposed to the romance in *Passing By*.

Sherman wrote *Cracks* while staying in Taos, New Mexico, surrounded by canyons, gorges, the Rio Grande, ancient Indian pueblos and ceremonies, a sacred mountain forbidden to white people, and a Mexican community struggling with alcoholism and unhappiness. There were also occasional sounds of gunfire and wandering hippies mourning the end of the 1960s, as well as a secret Catholic cult called Penitentes who crucified one of their members each Easter (Sherman vi). The living environment seemed to inspire his writing progress and contribute to the bizarre plot of the play. According to Dace, the title of the play has various connotations depending on the audience's interpretation, including making witty comments, following popular trends, solving a complex murder case, hearing gunfire, experiencing the effects of an earthquake, and recognising flaws in people's characters, such as excessive self-absorption (34). Dace continues that the play satirises the death of the 60s and emphasises the significance of the counterculture's high principles, but this is also a tragicomedy that showcases the inevitable process of death, which has no motive or sense (35).

Cracks premiered in 1975 in Waterford, Connecticut, but Sherman described the production as a catastrophe (Hicks and Sherman 76), despite its massive Off-Broadway production and its cast, including Meryl Streep, Christopher Lloyd, Jill Andre, and other performers. Some reviews criticised the play as 'the worst disaster' (Watt 13) and 'a misfire,' with critics describing it as 'unfunny' (Watts 78). Sherman himself even referred to *Cracks* as 'the most sophomoric, inane, embarrassing thing ever to come out of [his] typewriter' (Dace 33). On the other hand, Cracks has been described as a burlesque reminiscent of Agatha Christie's *And Then There Were None* (Barnes 35), with some calling it 'Christie on an acid trip' (Shorter 11). The characterisations are stereotypical clichés but have been called 'the funniest and cleverest portrayal of that doped and dopey generation could hope for' (Kingston 34). Another laudatory review raves about the 'freshest stage satire I've seen this season' (Syna 12). The play occurred to differ from Sherman's usual realistic approach to the issue of sexual minorities in his other plays like *Bent* and *Passing By*. It brings out the excess of stereotypes to create affectionately egomaniacal characters, turning this comedic whodunit into a neo-classic tragedy along with the tactics of camp sensibility and disidentification.

This paper argues that Martin Sherman's *Cracks* employs the humour and excess of camp sensibility to embrace the stereotypes surrounding sexuality. Through the tactic of disidentification, Sherman also creates a safe and inclusive space for the out-group individuals to redefine their identities and offer a critical commentary on traditional societal norms.

On Others and Otherness

Camp sensibility and disidentification are related to the concept of others and otherness as the tactics address individuals from minority groups. In *Cracks*, others and otherness are explored primarily through the characters' relationships with the majority of society. The dominant in-group, i.e., the societal majority, creates the notion of being 'the others' or being in the group of 'otherness' by stigmatising differences as a negative identity, resulting in political challenges such as discrimination, disease, poverty, displacement, violence, and starvation (Staszak 25).

There is no gender without the repetition of norms that risk undoing or recreating it in new ways and allowing for the possibility of redefining gender. Consequently, the power derived from sexuality belongs to the majority who conform to conventional norms, while those who do not conform classify 'the others' and they are left with fewer rights and a precariously uncertain existence. Butler justifies the gap in this concept in regard to sexuality and states that 'the reproduction of gender norms within ordinary life is always a negotiation with forms of

power that condition whose lives will be more liveable, and whose lives will be less so, if not fully unliveable' (11). The majoritarian discourse excludes and underestimates the others, perpetuating stereotypes, and stabilising otherness.

Dramatising the out-group individuals' experiences has been a hallmark of Sherman's work, as his challenging childhood, coupled with his homosexuality and low confidence, made him feel like an outsider as well (Dace 4). Sherman projects his own experiences as an outsider and his threats to survival to inform the characters in *Cracks*, many of whom possess different sexualities such as homosexuality, bisexuality, and transsexuality as opposed to the in-group. In Act 1 Scene 3, each character delivers a narcissistic monologue that reveals their sexuality, personality, and desires. The characters include Jade, an underage promiscuous groupie; Maggie, a former actress who is now a celebrity; Nadine, who is possessed by a dybbuk; Gideon, a bitter and stoned guitarist in Rick's band; Roberta, a transwoman who serves as Rick's bodyguard; Irene, the seemingly non-minority character; Clay, a pornographic director and Rick's lawyer; and Sammy, who, according to Dace, resembles Sherman's homosexuality, Jewish identity, appearance, and his registration of black voters in the South (35). Each character possesses different sexual preferences that are not traditionally accepted by society. Their endless enigmatic desires are the result of the misunderstanding of sexuality and self-perception. If the characters hold a different opinion or identity than their assigned gender, the idea of 'one's own' becomes a misnomer and so the characters must navigate what is expected of them, striving to survive within the majoritarian discourse. *Cracks* does not perpetuate any stereotypes or fixate on any identities. It cuts through audiences' layers of sexual misperception. This subversive idea would have made the play unwelcome to many readers and audiences at the time. However, the play adopts a queer aesthetic i.e., camp sensibility to challenge societal stereotypes and approaches to identity representation i.e., disidentification. It celebrates the notion of otherness and reimagines new identities for those who are traditionally excluded.

On Susan Sontag's Camp Sensibility

The term 'camp' is believed to have originated from Christopher Isherwood's *The World in The Evening* (1954), in which he used humour to express seriousness and suggested that its origin and meaning were influenced by a homosexual perspective (Christian 353). Christian writes to extend Isherwood and Sontag's ideas that camp establishes the foothold for queerness by blurring the dentition of gender and sexuality, challenging societal assumptions (353). This concept is then associated with otherness and has been a source of cultural expression for many members of the out-group. It forces spectators to question their assumptions about what is

beautiful and valuable in their culture. In this way, camp sensibility calls for the rejection of rigid cultural norms and values that often limit everyone's imagination and creativity.

Sontag defined 'camp' as a mode of aestheticism, where people value art based on its seriousness and dignity, but there are other creative sensibilities beyond high culture and high style in evaluating people. Thus, the taste of camp is also to reject the seriousness and tradition and to risk reaching a new and full identity through extreme states of emotion (Sontag 10). In other words, she argues that camp is a way of seeing the world that is rooted in a love of excess, an appreciation of the absurd, and a celebration of the unconventional. For example, camp sensibility is for the convertibility of man and woman, and person and thing. All camp styles are artifice and androgynous (Sontag 4). Her essay shaped the understanding of camp as a cultural phenomenon and inspired new perspectives on the role of art and beauty in contemporary society.

Camp sensibility has had a significant impact on queer theatre by encouraging performers and playwrights to embrace the exaggerated in their work (Dolan 500). This opens up new ideas for defining beauty, meaning, and form of expression unconventionally. The taste of camp allows them to challenge cultural norms and rebuild new identities for the performers through the over-the-top artistic expression that explores the theme of sexuality. The performances are both entertaining and thought-provoking, challenging the audience's assumptions about what is normal and acceptable in society. Dolan states that '[queer performance is] a transgressive social practice that demonstrates, through notions performativity, the profitable instability and fluidity of sexuality' (486). From the perspective of queer theatres, they use the camp sensibility to critique societal norms surrounding sexuality through humour and exaggeration. The queer theatres draw attention to how the majoritarian discourse is oppressive and limiting, and they offer alternative perspectives and possibilities for redefining identities.

Cracks and Camp Sensibility

Cracks can be seen to embody the camp sensibility as described by Sontag: 'Camp is the triumph of the epicene style' (4). To begin with, the play starts with a bizarre mono act, detaching the plot from reality but also alluding the fixated gender binarism. In Act 1 Scene 1, Rick's stage direction showcases the camp sensibility:

> '*He is almost naked. He takes a stick of white makeup and paints the area around his right eye white. He draws a jagged orange line down his chest. He colours his loins green. He wraps a purple sash around his body. He puts a silver bracelet on one arm,*

> *a golden bracelet on another. He drapes a necklace of turquoise and coral on his chest. He takes a knife and slits his arm, beneath the golden bracelet, and covers his neck with blood. He smiles. He holds his hand. out - in supplication - then brings them together and claps twice. His right leg moves out to one side. His left leg to the other side. A dance has begun. His face is bathed in ecstasy*' (Sherman 3).

Rick donning himself resembles the motion of arming which is often associated with hypermasculinity or machismo. This scene can be seen reminiscent of Homer's *Iliad*, where Patroclus dons Achille's armour and leads the Greek army in the Trojan War:

> First, he fixed on his shins the beautiful leg armour,
> fitted with silver ankle clasps. Around his chest
> he put on the body armour of Achilles,
> swift-footed descendant of Aeacus—finely worked
> and glittering like a star. On his shoulders he then slung
> his bronze silver-studded sword and a large strong shield.
> On his powerful head he set the famous helmet
> with its horsehair crest. The plume on top nodded
> full of menace. Then Patroclus took two strong spears
> well fitted to his grip. He'd didn't choose Achilles' spear,
> for no Achaean man could wield that weapon,
> so heavy, huge, and strong, except for brave Achilles.
> (Homer, line 161-172)

The arming of Patroclus highlights the importance of friendship and bravery, but it also perpetuates the idea of hypermasculinity. In *Cracks*, Rick's makeup, purple sash, silver bracelet, golden bracelet, and necklace of turquoise and coral are all examples of artifice and femineity, in contrast to the beautiful leg armour, the silver ankle clasps, the body armour, the bronze silver-studded sword, the large shield, and more. Rick's appearance and blocking imitate those of a female figure, challenging traditional beliefs about gender and power dynamics. Although it does not show any potentially dangerous and harmful as *Iliad*'s arming scenes do, it is rather odd and hard to understand the motion.

Furthermore, before Rick's tragic, he slits his arm with a knife, relishing in the blood covering his neck. He even shows his smile to prove his gratification. It adds more camp element to the scene, intensifying the exposition and dramatic tension, in which captures the audience's attention with Rick's oddity. In this case, female impersonation fully undermines the separation between one's inner and outer psychological state. It challenges the idea of a

gender expression model, i.e., performativity, and the concept of true gender identity. By presenting the form of demasculinising, the distinct aspects of gendered experience that are falsely seen as a unity through societal norms are highlighted. The imitation of the opposite gender in Rick's impersonation shows that gender itself is an imitation and not a naturally inherent characteristic, but rather a constructed and contingent idea. The portrayal of Rick gives the audience a sense of arming realness but no reasoning. Thus, his epicene style symbolises and refers to the prejudice and distance of the audience, encouraging them to leave their dogma and superstition against the others.

Another criterion of camp sensibility is 'camp involves a new, more complex relation to seriousness' (Sontag 10). Camp and seriousness may seem at odds with each other, but they are complementary in terms of mixing camp humour with serious social commentary. In Act 2 Scene 1, Jade suggests to Gideon to make a phallus cast to commemorate 'his good old days' (Sherman 30) after he gives a monologue about aging to which Jade excitedly agrees, assuring Gideon:

> '… make a plaster cast of your cock. Then maybe you know it's alright, what was then can still live in the 'now'. Oh yes let me do it. Rick has some plaster in his game room. I'll mix it then you come upstairs, and I'll go down on you and get you real hard and we'll put you in the cast, and you won't be unhappy anymore. Oh yes. Let me do it. Please' (Sherman 31).

Later, Gideon gets stuck in the plaster in front of the audience: '*Gideon appears at top of the staircase, naked, except for a plaster cast clinging to his erect penis*' (Sherman 38). The scene soon becomes chaotic when Roberta, who is searching for the murderer, shifts the focus to brandishing an axe and chasing Gideon to help: 'I'll crack it open' (Sherman 39). Roberta, Gideon, and Jade bring the humour and absurd situation on the stage, which can be seen as a Sherman's subversion of conventional artistic style. The audience's attention moves from the murder to the chaos, from 'who is the murderer?' to full confusion at the plot, turning the play into a farce. The over-the-top theatricality takes the seriousness down and turns it on its head to reveal its absurdity. Given that the exaggerated and ridiculous stage direction is sugar-coated to become a farce that the audiences can easily take in, otherness that can be found in reality would then disassociate from *Cracks*' the others because of the new identities. This subversion is a major element of *Cracks* and Sontag's camp sensibility, celebrating the playfulness and the irreverence.

Rick's donning scene, and the phallus scene exceed the societal stereotypes, calling attention to the inaccurate representations of the others. Sherman embodies the camp sensibility

and the critical potential of physical and psychological expressions as forms of resistance and subversion. Therefore, this play manifests sexuality theory, and the ridiculous connotation appears to be derived from the extreme amusement of the comedy found within its tragicomic texts as well as literary nonsense. Although camp is about embracing and celebrating differences, the camp sensibility tends to focus more on aesthetics and style rather than on promoting authenticity and representation related to the oppression and intersectionality faced by sexual minorities. This can lead to Muñoz's concept of disidentification, which in turn justifies Sherman's concerns about the roles of identity and politic.

On José Esteban Muñoz's Disidentification

When the camp sensibility arises as a new mode of aestheticism to challenge the culture per se, Muñoz's disidentification is similar in that out-groups use popular culture to resist dominant values and norms. The purpose of disidentification is to offer a perspective that can elucidates minoritarian politic in a nuanced manner, one that considers a variety of interlocking identity components and their impact on society. It is not a simplistic or singular approach, but rather one that is calibrated to discern the complexity of these issues (Muñoz 35). Both Sontag's and Muñoz's ideas share a focus on the subversive potential of culture, and they both recognise the importance of humour in this process. However, disidentification has a greater impact on out-group members by creating new forms of expression that reflect and assert their experiences and perspectives.

To bring the concept of otherness to mainstream theatres, playwrights may unintentionally use the tactic of disidentification. This allows majoritarian subjects to easily access and interact with each indifferently fictional identity and activate their own sense of self within subcultural fields. It enables them to negotiate the power and phobic sphere that constantly reject the existence of sexual minorities who do not conform to dominant cisnormativity and heteronormativity (Muñoz 27). By all mean, sexuality is a complex array of influences that shape an individual's understanding of their sexual desires and behaviours. Sexuality has always attempted to capture an idea that links between the past and present and cannot be fully encapsulated by a single term, identity, or set of behaviours despite its evolving definition (Bronski 14). For instance, in the play, Roberta is intended to portray a transwoman character, but Sherman's description of her is problematic. He writes:

> 'Roberta *enters*. Roberta *is forty-five, and appears to be a man, a rather bulk man, but he is wearing a prim skirt and blouse, and his hair is in a neat little bun. He smokes a cigar*' (Sherman 5).

In the context of the 1970s, the use of male pronouns and the physical depiction of Roberta are derogatory and fail to convince the readers and audiences that she is a welcoming character. It is possible that Sherman intended to create veils and develop dramatic tension to conceal Roberta's transgender identity until she reveals it by herself. Alternatively, Roberta is a character who embodies exaggerated stereotypes, and so when she confesses to other characters about her predicaments, the tactic of disidentification serves as a representation of transgender people. However, queer in the past was always a taboo topic in theatres. Critics also argue that realistic depictions of the others harm representation because realism's ideological entrenchment promotes heteronormative value and serves as the default perspective from which drama speaks, leading to more commercial and visible theatres obstructing the visibility and parity of less favourable plays (Dolan 491). With the evolving societal structure, there was a need for queer performance to be intent on displaying the world of queer aesthetics and politics. In response to social repression, many playwrights move towards less commercial and visible theatres to produce plays about the others in a more liberal and supportive community of audiences and artists (Dolan 488). Hence, disidentification offers a solution to the precarity in the out-groups. As in Muñoz:

> 'The fiction of identity is one that is accessed with relative ease by most majoritarian subjects. Minoritarian subjects need to interface with different subcultural fields to activate their own senses of self. This is not to say that majoritarian subjects have no recourse to disidentification or that their own formation as subjects is not structured through multiple and sometimes conflicting sites of identification' (30).

It deals with the dominant ideology without assimilating or opposing the structure, instead functioning with and against it. This strategy involves examining one's own identity in relation to an object, subject, or moment that is not typically associated with the disidentifying individual. It is not a matter of selecting what to exclude from one's identity. Rather, it involves reinterpreting and embracing the conflicting aspects of identity without ignoring or removing them. It is recognising and accepting the impact of past experiences in shaping one's identity (Muñoz 42). The out-groups hold onto the differences while the disidentifying subjects invest it with new lives. This approach gives an alternative way to express the identities of the others and actively challenges the oppressive system and the majoritarian discourse.

On Martin Sherman's Disidentification

Narcissism among the characters' conversations suggest a major transition of how the new identities work under the tactic of disidentification. *Cracks* begins with explicit monologues in

Act 1 Scene 3 to narrow down everyone's characteristics. They are narcissistic and showcase overly self-centred, arrogant, and delusional, leading to absurd situations and interactions with other characters, especially Sammy who resembles to Sherman himself (Dace 35):

> 'Boy, even then [Rick] was sexy. Fucked me up. Fucked me up – and down...He was mean, physically *mean*. And I dug it. That was the beginning of my disorientation…I'd come back to Rick, and he'd fuck me up and down again, and I'd leave, always more confused than before. You see, Rick made me turn to religion. If I had found Satan so easily, why not look for God…Like all good Jewish boys, I became a Buddhist. But that's obscure, very obscure. So I became a Catholic…I came upon this cute town with a divine Benedictine mission…So Tuesday I fly Air France to become a monk. I'm even gonna give up outside fucking. Only do it with other monks. And you know, I'm really into it, into God and things.' (Sherman 9-10)

Sherman disidentifies the traditional religious image by comparing the notion of Sammy's homosexuality to Sammy's religious beliefs. His desire of possessing Rick aligns with his changes of religions, as he states, 'Rick made me turn to religion' (Sherman 9). In other word, despite religious prohibitions on certain types of sensuality, Sammy strongly believes in his homosexuality, and he present himself as a hypersexual and impulsive monk who has converted from various religions. Rather, religious perspectives on sexual minorities often condemn certain types of sexual behaviour as immoral, including same-sex relationships. In some cases, religious teachings about sexuality have also been used to justify discrimination and persecution against sexual minorities. Sherman disidentifies Sammy with a new identity as a religious person, yet Sammy is actively promiscuous in gay sex and even desires sex from a dead body. His thoughts are camp in the first place. His monk identity further disrupts conventional religious norms, breaking the stigma and making it more political, despite its humorous effect. Furthermore, his over-the-top-ness reflects the out-group members' obsession with certain image, gratification, and recognition in modern society. Sherman gives the out-group individuals new identities as opposed to the fixed norms, seeking conventions which often prioritise individualism and self-interest over the majoritarian discourse. By highlighting their ridiculousness of narcissistic behaviour, *Cracks* also criticises the majoritarian culture of self-absorption and superficiality that pervades many aspects of contemporary life. Sammy continues to be overly focused on himself as well as his desire. When the characters trying to come up with possible murder's names to solve the case, Sammy and Nadine talk to each other:

Sammy Don't you think we should leave [Rick's body] alone?

Nadine No. I am his friend. The others aren't. Except maybe you.

Sammy Yeah. Maybe. It's awful. I want to touch his body. I want to make love to him right now. Do you think that's the worst thought I'll ever have?

Nadine I think it's beautiful. I think you should.

(Sherman 15)

In portraying Sammy as a religious figure and his necrophilia, Sherman highlights his ignorance and lack of sympathy towards others. Sammy fails to understand and relate to the emotions and experiences of those around him. Sherman suggests that religions often present themselves as benevolent towards those in need, but they fail to recognise the existence and needs of sexual minorities, instead condemning them. Sammy and Nadine do not refrain themselves from using their understanding of Rick's predicament to further their own desire. Their attempt to assert their superiority and desire over another is foiled by the mysterious murderer scene they find themselves in. The audience sees Sammy and his life story in something that is not culturally, religiously, and morally associated with the person. It is not about selecting certain aspects of an identity and ignoring others, or deliberately avoiding the politically questionable or shameful parts of an identity. Instead, it involves transforming the energies that do not fit neatly into a particular identity, while acknowledging and accepting the inevitable inconsistencies and conflicts that come with any identity (Muñoz 42).

The audience may convolute Sherman's ideas and struggle to relate to such otherness, but the play explores disidentification as a way to manage and negotiate balance with racial and sexual hierarchies, as Muñoz states, 'disidentification is about cultural, material, and psychic survival. It is a response to state and global power apparatuses that employ systems of racial, sexual, and national subjugation' (267). Roberta is an example to demonstrate the intersection of black transwoman in society:

> '[Rick] was a creep. Still, he took me in when no one wanted me. Yeah, I had a rough time. All those headlines—'Teamster Changes Sex!' Ahh, people are pigs, they don't understand. You see, it's not related to sex drives—you got that? It's just biological. I wasn't the gender my body said it was, see, and it got embarrassing, being on the docks, you know, and wearing dresses. But they got this operation now and they fix you up good. I'm much happier, I got to say that, much happier…He was surrounded by a lot of weirdos…Perverts. Made me nervous…' (Sherman 11-12)

Roberta is Rick's bodyguard, who at 44 years old underwent sex reassignment surgery and now lives happily. While there is nothing wrong with Roberta's physical appearance and

features, audiences in the past did not share the same view as modern audiences, reflecting the discrimination that transgender people face in society— 'no one wanted me' (Sherman 11). Sherman could have written Roberta with more compelling elements that align with the majority discourse such as being white, but the humour in disidentification, as Muñoz suggests, provides a way to critique cultural norms while avoiding direct confrontation with phobic and reactionary ideologies (203). Through the comedic portrayal of Roberta, transgender individuals can resist and challenge binary gender norms, creating their own sense of gender identity that is authentic to their experiences. Roberta's character represents the transgender out-group, and Sherman's stage serves as a tool to explore the complexities of this group through fictional characters.

Although the 'operation' that makes Roberta 'much happier', Sherman intends to alert his audience the social threats that the members are confronting, Roberta says:

Roberta They're gonna think [the killer is] me.

Maggie What do you mean?

Roberta Nothing. But I didn't do it.

Maggie Nobody here did it.

(Sherman 18)

The misconception of an out-group member leads to social injustice. However, the process of disidentifying makes the characters less sympathetic, which dispels the illusion of optimistic harmony and indirectly highlights the needs of the others. Roberta continues:

Roberta When the police come, they'll arrest me.

Nadine (as Cynthia) Why do you say that?

Roberta Huh? Oh, it's that voice trick of yours. Yeah, well, see I'm easy to pick on.

Nadine (as Cynthia) What makes you think that?

Roberta It's just the way it is.

(Sherman 27)

The rising action comes to a realisation along with the characters' irrationality, leading the play to become a heavier and darker farce. When Nadine verifies about Roberta's heterosexual marriage and sexual relationship with their wife, Roberta rebukes 'Hey, lady, what do you think I am, some kind of lesbo?' (Sherman 28). The intersection of transgenderism even otherness is often misinterpreted by society, but sexuality is fluid, and it is difficult to pin down one's perception about themselves. Therefore, following the development of the plot, it leaves

the audience to question whether they should not have laughed at Roberta's life-threatening situation that other out-groups are confronting as well.

Sammy and Roberta show the camp sensibility and further associate with the intersection and oppression through disunification, in which differ from Sherman's more famous and realistic concurrent play, *Passing By*. Although *Cracks* was a result of the underappreciation of *Passing By*, it can still be viewed by the audience and critics as a funny wake-up call for humanity to save itself from oblivion. In a sense, empowerment conveys a small glimmer of optimism that could potentially forestall even worse stigma and stereotypes. *Cracks* not only addresses the issues of otherness but also the ingrained oppression that can be performed through the interaction of the audience with the characters and/or the plot. The audience is led to seek the truth and solve the crime throughout the drama, as the play does not reveal the murderer's identity or the reasons for the series of murders. This process of rationalising is also the process of disidentifying the characters by interpreting the characters by the audience themselves, giving the characters new, more conceivable identities. Disidentification appears to be an effective strategy to not work with sympathy and morality throughout the play's discussion of sexuality, making the audience accept it as harmless dark comedy or sensationalism. This helps to explore the majoritarian discourse that motivates both the out-groups and the in-group members, fostering relationships and aligning them into constituencies. It also challenges the audience's perception of otherness. The characters' intentions and the play's end may not be understandable to the audience, but the reframing and humour force them to question their own beliefs. The play ridicules new disidentifying characters and makes the audience laugh at their sinister perspective on someone's predicament so Sherman chooses not to write *Cracks* realistically and defend the out-groups with jeremiad.

On *Cracks* Per Se

Although Sherman employs camp sensibility and disidentification, *Cracks* remains a murder mystery that draws upon the majoritarian discourse of the detective genre. As Dace states that *Cracks* adapts Agatha Christie's *And Then There Were None* and Sherman reinterprets the play suspensefully to subvert Christie's characters original identity and place them in service of the out-groups (34). In this genre, the characters who play the detective roles are the major agents who restore morality and the system or situation that is threatened by the crime (Ebert 6) but there are no exact detective roles in *Cracks*, apart from Irene and Roberta's side-tracked investigation into the gunshots. The investigation does not go well, and instead, Jade and Gideon, the 17-year-old groupie and the stoned guitarist turn the plot into something

camp. Sherman reorientates the characters in *Cracks* from Christie's realistic play, refiguring their representations and their engagement with the dominant majoritarian discourse, including women, different races, and sexual minorities. When Irene says:

> 'I *don't* know. That's just it. But it's the logical reason for his being murdered. When he would show the tapes, he'd discover the identity of Rick's killer. So the killer had to get Clay first, don't you see?', Maggie replies, 'I did an Agatha Christie play once, and I didn't understand a word of it.'
>
> (Sherman 29)

There are references to Christie's play throughout, but *Cracks* has fewer subtle clues and evidence for solving the case because the plot focus is on the cast's provocative sexuality rather than the murders. If the detective role is the key to restoring morality and the system or situation that is threatened by the crime, then Irene and Roberta symbolise a counterpoint to the conventional male-led detective genre. Irene, the only in-group character, attempts to solve the crime by referencing another fictional plot, bringing the play back to rationality and reality. Thus, Irene's intention overcomes preconceived notions and prevents the audience from jumping to conclusions too quickly. In later scene, Roberta's line 'crack it open' (Sherman 39) occurs to be a response to the murder case. However, Roberta is actually referring to Gideon's phallus cast, using the phrase as a euphemism to describe their help in removing the plaster. This act can be interpreted as a subversion of masculinity, with a black trans woman helping to overturn traditional gender roles, as Sherman's adaptation disidentifies the white, heterosexual, and cisgender characters from Christie's novel, challenging the traditional portrayal of queerness as deviant or villainous in mainstream media. Additionally, the play increases sexual tension and explores the characters' relationships, highlighting the absurdity of the situation and the complexity of the queer characters. The balance between the desire to solve the mystery and enjoying the story and characters is not present in *Cracks*.

On the other hand, the absence of a queer villain in a play can be significant when members of the out-group have been victimised from the start. The audiences may already have suspicions that one of the out-group members is the villain, as every murder play is expected to provide an answer. American entertainment has a history of portraying homosexual villains, who are often depicted as dangerous, violent, and inherently wicked. This portrayal of the others is influenced by the social and political climate surrounding homosexuality and has contributed to the negative stereotypes and criminalisation of the out-groups in American culture (Schildcrout 2). Also, the intentions of the playwright and societal norms may influence the audience to interpret the performance in a dominant way, based on the assumption of shared

social values and acceptance of the dominant ideology expressed through narrative conventions (Schildcrout 4). However, Sherman has recreated the characters from Agatha's novel to combat homophobia in two ways: 1) the unfound murderer i.e., the villain is not revealed in the play to prove the audience's assumption wrong; 2) every marginalised character is killed as a victim in the play, which perpetuates the American entertainment trope of minorities being preyed upon. Sherman's characters have explored the fears and anxieties that impact the out-groups, such as transphobia, and the difficulties of living as a member of out-group. These characters, even in their most over-the-top forms, shed light on the real emotional, social, and political challenges faced by the out-group people. Hence, by refusing to portray queer characters as villains and emphasising their deaths, concerning the typical American entertainment, Sherman prompts the audience to consider the issue of stereotyping the others.

In the end, Sherman changes Christie's original plot by killing the last survivor, Irene, and leaving the identity of the murderer unknown in order to cut through the oddity of the situation. Throughout the play, the audience is drawn into the plot surrounding the potential murderer, which allows the audience to confront and overcome the darker aspects of their own nature. Irene, who also represents the in-group, convinces herself that she is the murderer, yet she is killed as well, and the scene abruptly ends with her last word 'shit' (Sherman 49). Despite not portraying the positive aspects of otherness to defend their societal status, Sherman ends the play with the death of all characters, emphasising that death will eventually claim everyone regardless of sexuality. Although putting Irene in this situation does not arouse audience's sympathy, when Irene is justifies herself, the audience may have a tendency to believe her. However, Sherman subverts this idea by portraying how society biases marginalised people as criminals, which proves that this assumption is dangerous and limits one's extent in society, putting one in a box most of the time. Therefore, the portrayal of the homicidal out-group members is not meant to represent the villain among us, but rather the potential villain within ourselves. The audiences and characters cannot comprehend the relentless process of death, highlighting the importance of understanding the social context in which the plot is set and how *Cracks'* attempt at parity and visibility differs from the canon.

In conclusion, Sherman's *Cracks* sets itself apart from his other realistic works by celebrating sexuality through the use of character blocking and humorous thoughts that subvert societal stereotypes. Sontag's camp sensibility is employed to encourage people to embrace excess in the unrealistic play. Muñoz's concept of disidentification is also utilised to reframe and refigure minoritarian characters who struggle to survive in a lethal literary world. Sherman

challenges majoritarian moral condemnation and exclusion of sexual minorities by giving new identities to both transgender and religious characters. While most people's behaviour perpetuates the idea of performativity and reinforces their ideology, mutual respect and understanding of rights should prevail despite differing sexuality. As in Sherman stated in an interview:

> 'Gay writers should do what straight writers do, which is to write out of their sexuality but about other things…Heterosexuals write about whatever they want to write about, but clearly, their sexuality and sex affect them. Their characters are usually exclusively heterosexuals…They're anything, and no one ever thinks about it' (Sherman and Hicks 79).

Cracks is a dark comedy that questions the audience's assumptions about what is normal and acceptable in society. Sherman's use of different theatrical tactics results in audience questioning the majoritarian discourse and its impact on relationships and identities.

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