

Queering Comradeship: Anti-Capitalist Relations in *We Are Who We Are*

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Abstract

This article argues that *We Are Who We Are*'s value lies in its exploration of the radical relationality of comradeship, a concept theorized recently by Jodi Dean. The profoundly queer connection forged and cultivated by the show's dual protagonists, Caitlyn/Harper Poythress and Fraser Wilson, inspiringly models a comradeship that overflows with everyday possibilities for contemporary anti-capitalist praxis. The article begins by tracing the outlines of the material landscape in which Fraser and Caitlyn/Harper's relationship unfolds, namely an American military base which captures the contradictory dynamics of our contemporary social totality, including the intersections of capitalist political economy, imperialism, and gender/sexuality. The article then offers a close reading of the show to illustrate Dean's (2019) four theses of the comrade. Special attention is paid to the relational dynamics between Caitlyn/Harper and Fraser, juxtaposing them with those of others in their immediate lives. The article concludes by using recent sociological research on youth activism to argue that the political legacy left by Fraser and Caitlyn/Harper can, in fact, inspire revolutionary change and promote the everyday subversion of global war capital.

KEYWORDS: Queer comradeship, radical relationality, youth activism, Jodi Dean, *We Are Who We Are*, Luca Guadagnino

Introduction

By the time Prince's "The Love We Make" scores the closing credits in the finale of Luca Guadagnino's 2020 television series, *We Are Who We Are*, audience members cannot be faulted for being left speechless. After all, they have accompanied the show's dual protagonists, Fraser Wilson and Caitlyn/Harper Poythress, for more than 8 hours of emotional catharsis and intense intimacy, climaxing in the two passionately kissing and embracing one another tenderly in what Fraser describes as "the most beautiful place on earth" (an otherwise prosaic archway in Bologna, Italy). Along the way, Guadagnino has lovingly documented a relationship that seems to defy conventional classification, living up to the boldness, clarity, and dynamism of the series title.

Critical responses to *We Are Who We Are* have praised the series. Mainstream journalistic accounts of the show describe it as a "rich exploration of the teenage experience in an especially heightened location" (Soraya 2020), and a "languid, lusty, sun-baked teen drama" (Poniewozik 2020) capturing the "abiding emotional and physical chaos that is puberty" (Weldon 2020). While these laudatory assessments capture some of the show's most important themes, the popular press have yet to provide a deeper and more incisive analysis that such a profound work deserves.

I attempt to remedy this oversight by offering a counterhegemonic reading of a series that challenges not only taken-for-granted modes of social identification but also the nature of political practice itself. My central contention here is that *We Are Who We Are's* value lies in its exploration of the radical relationality of comradeship, a concept theorized recently by Jodi Dean. The profoundly queer connection forged and cultivated by Caitlyn/Harper and Fraser expands beyond platonic bond, romantic attachment, adolescent commiseration, and/or survivalist solidarity. The two protagonists inspiringly model what I call a "queer comradeship" that can create the affective space and energetic intimacy necessary for effective anti-capitalist praxis to become possible.

I begin the article by establishing the show's production details, dramatis personae, and narrative arc. This opening section also explores how the series' physical setting (i.e., an American military base in Italy) represents a geopolitical context/material landscape with special salience for contemporary Marxist and queer theorizing regarding global war capital and homonationalism. I then use Jodi Dean's four theses about comradeship (2019) to dissect the interpersonal dynamics between Caitlyn/Harper and Fraser, juxtaposing their relationality with those of other characters, whether friends, family, or institutional authorities. The article concludes with a brief discussion of how the queer comradeship in *We Are Who We Are* can effectively respond to possible critiques of its seeming limitations as a political practice. Borrowing from recent sociological research on youth activism, I close the article by suggesting that the radical relationality between Fraser and Caitlyn/Harper provides a model for viewers to subvert their own otherwise mundane lives, and that such everyday openings/opportunities/ruptures can serve as the basis for creating concrete, real, and lasting change in the "right here, right now" (to borrow the title of all the series' episodes).

Setting the stage

We Are Who We Are is an 8-episode miniseries directed by Luca Guadagnino and written by Guadagnino alongside Francesca Manieri and Paolo Giordano. It was produced for HBO in the U.S. and Sky Atlantic in Europe with episodes released weekly on television cable as well as the networks' respective streaming services over the autumn of 2020. Each episode, ranging in length from 45-80 minutes, advances and/or retraces a linear chronology of events of four seasons (almost a full year) on a U.S. military base in Chioggia, Italy. The show focuses most of its attention on chronicling the coming-of-age and sexual/gender identity explorations of Fraser Wilson and Caitlyn/Harper Poythress, two American-born teenagers who live with their respective families next door to one another on the base.

Both protagonists' households, though differing in their respective gender/sexuality compositions, are headed by servicemembers who have leadership roles on the base: Fraser's White American mother, Sarah, arrives to Italy with her family at the start of the series to assume the base commander post, an unwelcome transition in the eyes of Caitlyn/Harper's Black American father, Richard, an incumbent senior officer who had hoped for a promotion. Sarah's Brazilian American wife, Maggie, works as a military nurse and parents Fraser with Sarah; Caitlyn/Harper's mother, Jenny, is a Nigerian American immigrant whose son (Caitlyn/Harper's brother), Danny, is from a different father from her former country. Outside these neighboring nuclear families are several other important characters on the show: Fraser and Caitlyn/Harper hang out with a group of peers with whom they partake in the antics and angst of adolescent life, including a White American woman named Britney, the Black American brothers Craig and Sam (the former is a soldier undergoing basic training on-base, while the latter is Caitlyn/Harper's boyfriend at the show's start), and a pair of unrelated Italian locals named Valentina and Enrico. And of particular significance for Caitlyn/Harper and Fraser's romantic lives are Jonathan, Sarah's Israeli American 20s-something assistant (who Fraser pines for and openly flirts with), and Giulia, a teenage Italian local who actively pursues Caitlyn/Harper.

Having established the network of relations in *We Are Who We Are*, it is helpful now to turn to what is a crucial feature of the show: its setting. The series is not situated in the conventional locations for critical representations of capital, whether the orthodox Marxist venue of an industrial manufacturing factory/mine shaft or the more contemporary milieu of the corporate executive boardroom/tech company office building. Indeed, a U.S. military base in Italy seems an unusual place for portraying the accumulation and composition of capital in the global political economy. However, this backdrop actually offers a useful lens for analyzing present-day capitalist dynamics and identity politics. In the paragraphs to follow, I employ the works of David Harvey, William

I. Robinson, and Jasbir Puar to help explore the mutually reinforcing social forces of capital, imperialism, and homonationalism at the core of the show; these are the elements of the current social totality that the queer comradeship of Fraser and Caitlyn/Harper challenges. Specifically, I provide a separate, one-by-one examination of each scholars' relevant ideas as well as exploration of those ideas through their application to specific textual examples from *We Are Who We Are*.

David Harvey's conceptual framework of "accumulation by dispossession" borrows from Hannah Arendt's writings on the contradiction between the geographically limited territorial logic of the nation-state and the limitless expansionist logic of capital (Harvey 2005, 91-3). Capital's need for expansion creates overaccumulation crises which result, in turn, in territorial expansion by nation-states, often for the purposes of quelling antagonisms between imperial state governmentality/legitimation and the ruling class interests of the imperialist bourgeoisie (ibid., 93-6). Harvey further explains these power dynamics by proposing a "dual character of capitalist accumulation": "accumulation through expanded reproduction" (economic 'growth' through the increased exploitation of labor power by capital) and "accumulation by dispossession" (political domination through the increased control of territory by empire) (ibid., 96-7). This sort of multidimensional analysis accounts for the continuing geopolitical hegemony of the U.S. despite its growing vulnerabilities in the capitalist realms of finance and production (ibid., 98). Put simply, U.S. military superiority (and ruthlessness in exercising that superiority) offsets any lost dominance in production. Harvey ultimately describes contemporary world system dynamics as shifting away from neoliberal globalization and multilateral consent for expanded reproduction to a more irrational (from the standpoint of capital) coercion practiced by those nation-states (the U.S., most notably) that stand to lose their dominance in the power configurations of the global stage due to economic weaknesses. The ubiquity of U.S. armed forces presence, including bases, in almost every nation-state reflects what Harvey calls a "frontal military assault" for command of

the primary resources (land/territory being the most primary) of global capitalism (*ibid.*, 98-100).

An encapsulation of Harvey's insights can be found in *We Are Who We Are's* military base setting, a (figuratively and literally) concrete example of imperialist expansion in the interests of transnational power/control. The specific base in question here is admittedly a complicated case: while the U.S. military is indeed occupying space in another country, that country is Italy, a fellow G8 member and a nation-state that has itself historically attempted to impose itself as an imperial force on the world stage (albeit unsuccessfully, per Italy's failed invasion of Africa during World War II). Following Harvey's analysis to its logical end, however, one can argue that a U.S. military base in Italy reveals a crisis-induced desperation fueling imperial cannibalization within the capitalist core itself. As a recent piece in *The Guardian* highlights, Italy is being transformed into a "launching pad for U.S. wars," an abdication of territorial sovereignty that is supposedly offset by hefty tax payments made by the U.S. government to its host, among a number of geopolitical considerations (Vine 2013). Hence, the U.S. base in Chioggia may serve as a case study in how globalized dynamics of accumulation by dispossession have facilitated a "deterritorialization of the periphery," such that "peripheral zones" are emerging in core countries (Buechler 2008, 224).

Specific textual elements within the show support such a Harvey-inflected reading of the setting. An air of totalized political economic domination by the U.S. military, common to many such bases (Enloe 2014), pervades over this otherwise ostensibly Italian space, as illustrated by Britney explaining to Fraser during the show's opening episode that the commissary grocery store is organized exactly like all U.S. military bases worldwide, so the American shoppers "can't get lost" while engaging in the consumption habits they are accustomed to back home. Indeed, the entire series features such hints of quasi-settler colonialism with a (Protestant-appearing) Christian chapel as the only house of religious worship, an officer mowing his American suburb-replica lawn, a mall-like food court featuring the most generic of

American brands, and even a cineplex showing exclusively Hollywood films (and whose screenings require rising for the U.S. national anthem before the lights go out). Indeed, the Italian name of the base "Caserma Maurizio Pialati" is explicitly contradicted by Maggie, who explains to Fraser in no uncertain terms that "this is America." And when Caitlyn/Harper's family are reassigned to a different U.S. military base in the show's final episode, their next stop is Okinawa, Japan, another possibly "deterritorialized" peripheral zone within a G8 nation-state (like Italy) whose modern history has been characterized by (similarly unsuccessful) imperial ambitions.

Building upon Harvey's work, William I. Robinson posits that today's world system has transformed into a "global war economy" of "militarized accumulation." In this contemporary context characterized by various interrelated and unprecedented crises, Robinson argues that it is "increasingly difficult to distinguish between military and non-military dimensions" (Robinson 2019, 853) of the political economy; this radical shift in society is mutually reinforced by the rise of "21st-century fascism," with its far-right civil society movements and authoritarian state regimes all over the world (*ibid.*, 856). Paralleling Harvey's use of Arendt to help parse the political and economic, Robinson leans on Gramsci's analysis of social control to explain how hegemonic nation-states like the U.S. react militarily to the rising threat of a breakdown in global order. For Robinson, it is the erosion of American dominance on the world stage that compels "particular forms of exceptional" (*ibid.*, 856) imperialist practices meant to delay and/or defer a reckoning with globalized crises relating to capital overaccumulation, surplus populations, and volatile polities.

Robinson's ideas are best understood when applied to *We Are Who We Are's* off-base environment, as the entire landscape of Chioggia seems circumscribed by a global war economy of U.S. military accumulation. Fighter jets scream overhead throughout the port town, even during the most mundane scenes in the series. Almost all the service labor at the base, including cafeteria and security staffing, is performed by local Italian

residents, including one man who is shown cleaning up an outrageous mess left by the base teenagers after a summer paintball excursion; even a small-scale artisanal seamstress that Fraser stumbles upon in a remote part of the town during episode one is seen sewing uniforms for the American troops. Additionally, the show highlights that the majority of U.S. armed forces servicepersons reside in off-base apartments, potentially occupying/distorting the local real estate market. And the series' temporality, set during the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, raises the specter of the ascendant neo-fascism that Robinson posits. The show includes conspicuous signs of Trump's reactionary rise to power, an ever-present specter of authoritarianism that mirrors a totalitarian tone within the show's narrative. In episode three, Sarah makes a fateful choice to deploy an insufficiently trained platoon to Afghanistan against the advising of her fellow officers; in episode seven, when that fateful choice has resulted in casualties among the soldiers (including Craig), Sarah invokes Trump to dismiss all critical reflection: "Have you been watching the news?! The people want a leader who'll make tough decisions!". The series also offers an astute glimpse into one of the more surprising demographic groups that Trump wins over with his hegemonically masculine, 21st-century fascist rhetoric: African-American men, as evidenced here by Richard, who secretly orders "MAGA" hats for he and Caitlyn/Harper to wear.

Lastly, Jasbir Puar's work can help link the analyses of Harvey and Robinson to contemporary identity politics. Specifically, Puar's concept of homonationalism reveals how a "settler subjectivity" and "human security-state system" (Mikdash and Puar 2016) can create and regulate sexuality and sexual identities worldwide. Specifically, Puar (2013, 337) articulates a framework in which an "assemblage" of geopolitics, neoliberalism, biopolitics, and affect reorient the relationship between the state, capitalism, and sexuality. For her, homonationalism emerges as a project by which Western/imperialist LGBTQ+ identity politics function as both proxies for, and beneficiaries of, the "accumulation by dispossession" and "military accumulation" theorized by Harvey and Robinson.

Puar thus understands identity as intrinsically related to the territorial logics of imperialism as well as the expansionist logics of capital, and her "analytics of power" always locate individual-level gender/sexuality within a global war political economy.

Puar's theorizing is reflected by the interplay of capital, empire, gender, and sexuality on display in *We Are Who We Are*. While Fraser's openly lesbian parents represent a token progressivism regarding LGBTQ+ identity in U.S. society, their gender/sexual identities (along with those of all others on- and off-base) are ultimately representative of the homonationalist conditions within which they operate. At the heart of these conditions is a cis-heteropatriarchy that undergirds the global war political economy, including the U.S. military. Indeed, phallogentric hegemony looms large in the show, whether literally (male penises are omnipresent, from a barracks shower shot in episode one to several scenes of men skinny-dipping) or only just slightly more metaphorically (countless conversations among the teenagers on the show about their sexual relations revolve around touching, liking, and/or feeling "it"). Equally homonationalist are Sarah's objectifying/property-based references to Maggie as "hers," as well as her overt displays of institutional power when humiliating and one-upping Richard throughout the series. Sarah even attempts to pry Caitlyn/Harper away from Richard and his supposedly "basic" family; she secretly takes Caitlyn/Harper to the base's shooting range and schedules an unsolicited appointment on their behalf with the base's endocrinologist to discuss gender transition. Not surprisingly, the affair between Jenny and Maggie also features traces of homonationalism, with the former painfully describing legal/social repression in her native Nigeria, while the latter, whose formally recognized marriage to Sarah exemplifies supposed U.S. open-mindedness, patiently listens/supports. Such relationships ultimately mirror the more impersonally violent heteropatriarchal dynamics of militarized imperialism. In the opening episode, during a ceremony honoring Sarah's arrival, the outgoing male commander whispers that under his watch there were 20 brawls and three rapes,

and in the second episode, male soldiers can be overheard grotesquely recounting, complete with laughter and ethnic/misogynistic slurs, their gang rape of a local Italian woman. And Britney shares with the teens the gruesome tale of a neighbor serviceman who attempts to murder his wife.

The setting of *We Are Who We Are* thus provides an ideal backdrop for critiques of capital in its most imperialist, militarized, and homonationalist forms, as theorized by Harvey, Robinson, and Puar. The show's context of accumulation by dispossession, global war economy, and cis-heteropatriarchy offers an ideal stage for the everyday practices Fraser and Caitlyn/Harper engage in to challenge, subvert, and undermine their lived environment. The two protagonists' relational dynamics assertively resist identification with the problematic discourses circulating around them, and as such, enact a radical politics of refusal. Ultimately, then, as discussed in the section to follow, the queer comradeship between Caitlyn/Harper and Fraser not only transforms their own individual identities, but embodies, even in seemingly subtle and immaterial ways, a comprehensive rebuke of the present-day social totality across its various dimensions and layers.

Radical relationality

The previous section introduced the story structure of *We Are Who We Are* while focusing on how the series' setting illustrates scholarship on capitalist accumulation, military imperialism, and identity politics in the current conjuncture. Jodi Dean's theoretical oeuvre also emerges from, and responds to, historical materialist accounts of the present-day social totality. In her most recent work (2019), Dean argues for comradeship as a necessary organizing principle for constructing a communist future. The relational dynamics between Fraser and Caitlyn/Harper in the show can help make Dean's somewhat abstract theses on the comrade more concrete, as the seemingly undefinable intimacy between the two protagonists subverts the alienation of their environment; as such, their queer comradeship

provides a model for the everyday practice of anti-capitalist politics.

Dean's first thesis posits that comradeship is a relationality of "sameness, equality, and solidarity" that transcends "the determinations of capitalist society" (Dean 2019, 62). She goes on to explain that comrades embody a "mode of belonging" that is opposed to the isolation, hierarchy, and oppression characterizing bourgeois work and family relations (ibid., 63); this belongingness "engenders new feelings" in the comrades such that they no longer recognize themselves as unequal or submissive (ibid.). Dean explicitly links comrade relations to a "celebratory queerness" that seeks to disrupt heteropatriarchy and binary gender (ibid., 64); she invokes Hongwei Bao's scholarship on the Chinese identity of *tongzhi* to claim that comradeship is "intrinsically queer" in the ways it deconstructs traditional kinship structures and makes public an intimacy that would otherwise be relegated solely to the private domestic sphere (ibid., 65). In this way, Dean's conception of the comrade overcomes conventional identity-based distinctions ascribed to subjects within contemporary capitalism, including but not limited to race, class, gender, and sexuality (ibid., 66).

Over the course of the series, Caitlyn/Harper and Fraser develop queer comradeship ties that embody Dean's profound and inspiring description. The show's narrative structure emphasizes the two protagonists' respective aloneness prior to forming their bond, as the first two episodes follow each during the same 24-hour period. In the opening episode, the audience sees Fraser upon his arrival with his family to the base, an alienated experience that includes him forced to share his loathing of life on a "copasetic" base solely through voice memos on his phone. Caitlyn/Harper is the focus of episode two, with their first menstruation simultaneously overemphasized by friends and neglected by their family (e.g., Caitlyn/Harper's "I love you, Daddy" in a moment of extreme vulnerability is met with total silence from the pathologically stoic Richard). However, upon exchanging knowing glances during scenes in particularly authoritarian contexts (e.g., a classroom, their high school hallway, Sarah's base

commandership ceremony, etc.), the prolonged eye contact between the two protagonists establishes an affective foundation for their genesis as comrades.

Indeed, starting with the third episode, Fraser and Caitlyn/Harper develop an interactional dialectic that exemplifies Dean's first thesis, enacting their belonging with one another while simultaneously denying identity labels and transgressing relational limitations. The two go back and forth discussing everything from industrial food production and avant-garde poetry to personal sexuality and existential dreams. At every turn, they engage directly with one another's weaknesses, but always in the service of deepening a collective awareness of their desire for one another's company. In this way, Caitlyn/Harper and Fraser actively practice an intimacy that affirms and supports their collective exile from the stultifying peer pressure they endure in their daily lives. One moment, Caitlyn/Harper holds Fraser's penis while the latter urinates perfunctorily in the bathroom at his house; the next, Fraser is a raucous fan egging on Caitlyn/Harper's performance of a shockingly lurid, memorized monologue in front of their classmates. The two stare at one another through windows facing the yards of each other's family houses, they gaze at one another through their phone screens when falling asleep, and they text one another avidly and lovingly about their respective romantic trysts with other characters.

An especially captivating moment of the queer comradesly connection between Fraser and Caitlyn/Harper transpires in episode six. In an extended dream-like sequence, the two are clothed in all-white turtlenecks, pants, and baseball hats and perform their own version of the music video for Blood Orange's "Time Will Tell," a song that features throughout the series and becomes an anthem for them. As the two earnestly lip-synch and choreographically dance to the tune, the anonymizing nature of their attire and synchronicity of their movements emphasize the sameness and equality they have developed; neither is interested in upstaging the other, nor are they seeking to merge into one, but rather represent two persons relating with one another in complete solidarity

of queering the otherwise suffocating world they live in. The subversive nature of this performance is heightened toward the end of the sequence, as the camera zooms out to reveal that their performance venue is in fact the on-base cafeteria, with uniformed soldiers gathering food and paying no mind; such dedication to joy and playful expression set against the most violently stoic background possible is precisely what Dean means by the celebratory queerness of comradeship.

A second thesis on comradeship offered by Dean is that "anyone, but not everyone" can be a comrade (Dean 2019, 67). Here, Dean emphasizes how open and inclusive the opportunity is to welcome all prospective comrades, while simultaneously articulating the politically crucial division between "us" (comrades) and "them" (non-comrades). That said, non-comrades are not to be understood as necessarily enemies, but rather as persons "who might later come to be a comrade" (ibid., 69). In other words, Dean describes comradeship as a relationality that is universally available, while also one that is distinct and engaged in struggle; there is a decisive boundary encircling comrades, but this barrier is permeable to all those who seek the (political economic) equality that communism engenders. Ultimately, then, while collective struggle serves as "the condition or setting of comradeship [, ...] it does not determine the relation between comrades" (ibid., 68).

Caitlyn/Harper and Fraser exemplify Dean's second thesis, demonstrating openness to the possibility of including anyone as a comrade while at the same time enforcing the exclusion necessary to maintain the integrity of their queer comradeship. In episode three, for instance, Fraser barges into Sarah and Maggie's bedroom in the middle of the night after a nightmare to ask for comfort, a comradesly extension of trust bestowed on Sarah that is especially noteworthy given the fact that she had embarrassed him in front of Caitlyn/Harper during dinner earlier that same evening. However, when Sarah humiliates Fraser further by dancing suggestively with his love interest, Jonathan, at an annual Chioggia festival, Fraser severs contact with Sarah, letting her know unequivocally that he will not speak to her for 11 days; beyond

the directness of this statement of intent is a prudent determination of the need for an explicitly specified time period within which Sarah might recognize her wrongs and amend her conduct to be eligible for re-introduction to a comradesly dynamic; unfortunately, Sarah does neither, only widening the divide with Fraser in later episodes by overbearingly inserting herself into Caitlyn/Harper's life in a vain attempt at controlling them.

Similarly, Fraser offers both his peers, Sam and Danny, an opportunity for comradesly redemption despite their repeated bullying of him. Fraser extends himself in gently waking Danny up on a bus ride to share a bag of chips that has been passed around communally among the friends on the trip. And during the wedding after-party at the Russian oligarch's villa, Fraser makes Sam a cup of hot tea to aid with the physiological maladies the latter is experiencing due to his alcohol over-consumption. As with Sarah, however, these olive branches of potential comradeship offered by Fraser are ultimately rejected by both Danny and Sam, who openly dismiss Fraser in episode seven and purposely leave the base without him to mourn Craig's death. And yet, Fraser still offers comradesly solidarity when needed, as he enlists Sarah and Maggie to pick up Caitlyn/Harper and Danny when the latter has a drug-induced psychological breakdown during the mourning party.

Like Fraser, Caitlyn/Harper also makes clear their availability as a potential comrade to all those closest to them. For starters, they too go out of their way to establish comradesly terms of engagement with a parent (in their case, Richard). As we discover throughout the first half of the series, Caitlyn/Harper accompanies Richard across a vast array of rituals and routines that includes selling gasoline to Chioggia residents, boxing in the dead of night in the garage, and going to see close circuit broadcasts of baseball on-base. Despite the obvious admiration that Caitlyn/Harper demonstrates toward Richard, reciprocal expressions of appreciation are few and far between, especially as Caitlyn/Harper begins their non-binary gender presentation and spending increasing amounts of time forging their comradeship with

Fraser. In a climactic scene of episode five, Richard screams at Caitlyn/Harper for shaving their head full of hair, grabbing them in an attempt to force them to atone for a supposed transgression; Caitlyn/Harper's response to this violence encapsulates perfectly Dean's insight regarding comradeship's openness to anyone, but not everyone: Caitlyn/Harper hugs Richard, weeping while uttering, "Daddy," an extraordinarily disarming act that forces Richard to reckon with his violence. As with Sarah, Richard squanders this comradesly invitation Caitlyn/Harper offers him. Accordingly, while Caitlyn/Harper dutifully delivers pizzas to Richard (and the rest of the family) on the day they will be leaving for the Okinawa military base, Caitlyn/Harper still sneaks away with Fraser to the Blood Orange concert in Bologna, an indication that while they will always make available the opportunity of comradeship to their family, they will rightly prioritize those who are actually comradesly in return.

Similar dynamics are visible in Caitlyn/Harper's fraught relationship with Britney. From the extremely difficult admission Caitlyn/Harper makes to Britney in episode two about their first menstruation, all the way through the final episode when Caitlyn/Harper humors Britney by going along with the latter's awkward romantic advance, Caitlyn/Harper is clearly up for being comrades with Britney. However, throughout the series, Britney rejects these opportunities, weaponizing Caitlyn/Harper's menstruation secret from episode two to tease them in front of others, choosing a tryst with Sam over an open invitation to join with them and Fraser, and at the last moment pigeonholing her relationality with Caitlyn/Harper into the melodrama of bourgeois love ("It was always you"). All the while, Caitlyn/Harper holds space for Britney's flailing, while explicitly letting the latter know that they see her as a potential comrade "friend," and not a romantic lover.

Ultimately, though, it is in the nuances of the relationality directly between Fraser and Caitlyn/Harper that Dean's second thesis on comradeship manifests most productively. The two are keenly aware that their dynamic is one that both looks and feels fundamentally different from their relations

with everyone else in their lives, and they rejoice in this distinction. The mutual belonging they cultivate with one another is evident by how supportive they are of each other's respective romantic pursuits: Caitlyn/Harper celebrates Fraser's pursuit of Jonathan and excuses obvious distractions like the local girl who kisses Fraser at the villa, while Fraser offers wardrobe advice for Caitlyn/Harper's meetups with Giulia and expresses no animus toward a jealous Sam.

At the same time, the two also hold one another accountable to the fact that comradeship is not a permanent label, but instead an ongoing praxis that requires critical reflection. In episode five, for instance, Caitlyn/Harper misrecognizes Sarah's doting as comradeship, telling Fraser that his mom is "legend" and taunting Fraser that Sarah is "so wasted on" him; Fraser retorts with a comradeship line of demarcation: "I'm so wasted on *you*." He explains further that the phallogocentric activities Sarah is enlisting Caitlyn/Harper in (e.g., shooting guns) are not, in fact, revolutionary. The implication here is that the bond Caitlyn/Harper and Fraser share, while open and available to anyone in theory, is not universal in practice, especially when involving someone who may in fact be acting as an interloper; while Sarah's efforts to cast Caitlyn/Harper in her own image is rooted in a capitalist logic of property ownership, Fraser's comradeship with Caitlyn/Harper needs to be something radically distinct from such hierarchy. On the flip side, in the final episode, when Fraser abandons Caitlyn/Harper at the Blood Orange concert for a random teenage boy who seems almost an Italian doppelgänger of the former, Caitlyn/Harper does not simply excuse Fraser's narcissism and neglect inherent in such an act; they instead draw an explicit boundary with Fraser by departing the show and heading back to the train station despite Fraser's frantic texts pleading them to join him back in town. This impasse is the backdrop for the concluding sequence of the series, in which Fraser is forced to demonstrate his comradeship by sprinting a seemingly impossible distance to the train station and then running with Caitlyn/Harper back to the "most beautiful place on earth."

The third of Dean's theses states that comradeship is in direct opposition to individually based identification. The comrade is a generic and impersonal relationality, not a unique or special identity attached to any singularity. The relations between comrades are "outward-facing" (Dean 2019, 71), in that they emphasize the political project at hand and a collectively dreamed-of future, rather than being rooted in personality preferences or idiosyncratic desires. Along these lines, Dean juxtaposes comradeship with other kinds of relations, including kinship, friendship, and citizenship; in contrast with all of these, comrades are "liberated from the determinations of specificity" (ibid., 75) and thus represent a fearsome challenge to the capitalist insistence on individual uniqueness. Indeed, Dean reverses the valence of anticommunist paranoia regarding comradeship "sameness," relishing the multiplicity, fungibility, and replaceability of comradeship (ibid., 78). Shared characteristics, labels, and/or experiences are not what produces intimacy among comrades; instead, the "deep political meaning" of comradeship is produced through common work and purposeful engagement (ibid., 80).

The relational dynamics between Fraser and Caitlyn/Harper reflect Dean's "generic, not unique" third thesis in both their synergy and their conflicts. While the two embody highly distinct intersectional identities (Fraser a well-to-do White American cisman, and Caitlyn/Harper a non-binary, middle-class Black American), the series makes evident the impersonal existences that both protagonists share. Indeed, the show highlights that the isolated and alienating solitude they each experience can only be resolved by the two shedding their respective individualities and seeking comradeship instead. The show's first episode begins with an extended shot of Fraser at the Italian airport with his parents, a stationary camera looking up at him from behind as he nervously fiddles with objects and lays his head on a customer service counter. Though the accompanying electronic music score crescendos into a symphonic whirlwind, such sonic excitement is belied by the anxious apathy written across Fraser's bored face and on his languid body; indeed, Fraser is so alienated that he urgently solicits and consumes

a small bottle of alcohol Sarah has stashed from the flight. Similarly, episode two opens with a shot of Caitlyn/Harper from directly behind their head (their twin massive ponytails of hair hidden underneath a green baseball cap) as they travel on the family motorboat at dawn to deliver petrol to the locals with Richard; Caitlyn/Harper is seated at the very front of the boat's bow, a pose that might otherwise symbolize the power of the individual were it not shot from behind, with Caitlyn/Harper faceless and motionless (indicating how mundane and uninspired their solitary/isolated experience is in actuality).

Across both these introductions, the audience is provided ample evidence that the show's protagonists are desperately in need of what Dean describes in her third thesis as "a sameness with another with respect to where you are both going" (ibid., 78). This sameness begins at the conclusion of episode two, when Caitlyn/Harper and Fraser speak directly with one another for the first time; upon following Caitlyn/Harper to an off-base bar, Fraser fires an opening salvo about the former's genderqueer presentation that doubles as an invitation to comradeship: "The stuff you wear is inappropriate for what you're planning on doing." When Caitlyn/Harper retorts that they are just "messing around," Fraser explicitly states the radical stakes of their comradely relationality: "You can't mess around with that kind of thing." Note here the simultaneous clarity and ambiguity of Fraser's challenge, as he offers an invitation to a political project that somehow combines both playfulness and seriousness. The subtext of such a declaration is that the two have much work to do, and that their alienated individualities must give way to the intimacy of shared responsibilities and commitments of critiquing and queering themselves and the world around them.

By the time episode three begins, the two have embarked on their comradely adventure, sharing an afternoon on Caitlyn/Harper's motorboat in a Chioggia canal. In this, and subsequent episodes, a crucial component of their dynamic is to rid themselves of any last vestiges of self-centeredness. When Caitlyn/Harper inquires about how to identify the relationality they share with

Fraser given rumors among their peers on-base that the two are dating, Fraser is adamant about the irrelevance of such labels; Caitlyn/Harper goads Fraser by tempting him with the prospect of popularity were they to acquiesce to the cis-heteropatriarchal norms of their social circumstances and claim a dating partnership, prompting Fraser to reply in no uncertain terms: "I don't want to be popular!". The implication here is that adolescent popularity is the quintessential celebration of individuality, singularity, and uniqueness, all of which undermine the impersonal and collective project of queer comradeship the two have at hand. Such calling to account between the two is also directed the other way throughout, as in episode five when Fraser begins pressuring Caitlyn/Harper to mold into a static and limiting notion of masculinity; as Fraser lets out an exasperated, "This is not what I had in mind for you," Caitlyn/Harper warns Fraser about the narcissistic nature of such ego projection: "Surprise! I exist outside your mind."

Despite these warnings, the two protagonists allow the peer pressures and social forces of alienation to individuate them in the latter stages of the series. Fraser's romantic pursuits of Jonathan become mired in self-centeredness, while Caitlyn/Harper, seeking a more stable identity, reunites with former friends and tries out a more conventional trans-masculinity; in both cases, the show emphasizes the emptiness of such developments. In episode seven, Fraser runs out on an unfulfilling quasi-threesome encounter with Jonathan and the latter's cis-woman partner, Malta, and ends up drinking alcohol to oblivion back at his home; he follows this up in the final episode by ditching Caitlyn/Harper and pursuing the bi-curious Italian boy whose kiss proves unfulfilling. For their part, Caitlyn/Harper is visibly uncomfortable with the hedonism on display at the villa mourning party for Craig and ultimately has to make an emergency call to Fraser to rescue Danny from self-destruction. Like Fraser, Caitlyn/Harper also finds a stranger to kiss in the final episode (an Italian bartender at the concert), though the casual and overly presumptuous way the bartender throws around the "trans" and "F2M" labels to try and identify Caitlyn/Harper leads the latter to

walk away. The failures of these respective individualized projects, then, demonstrate with clarity for Fraser and Caitlyn/Harper the void that only their queer comradeship can resolve.

The last of Dean's four theses on comradeship is arguably the most important, as it culminates the progression of the previous three (all of which focus on the relationality between comrades) to reveal what the "outward-facing" anti-capitalist political project of comradeship is: fidelity to the truth of communism. Dean argues that truth is a collective process of "working out and working with" the possibilities created by eruptive breaks with the pre-given world as we know it (*ibid.*, 82). In this sense, undecidability is not anathema to truth, but an inseparable dimension of it, as verification becomes an "infinite procedure" of "multiple experiments, enactments, and effects" (*ibid.*, 83). Such efforts are ultimately undertaken on behalf of the oppressed in society, and an organized struggle is required to emancipate those who are exploited and marginalized within capitalism. As Dean concludes, fidelity to the truth of an open-ended communism is about more than simply a belief or spirit among comrades; it must be "manifested in practical work" (*ibid.*, 85) that comradeship itself allows, requires, nurtures, and reinforces.

As with the previous thesis, the trajectory of the relationality between Caitlyn/Harper and Fraser over the course of the series offers audiences a practical representation of Dean's fourth thesis, especially if disidentification and queerness are the focal points of analysis. What initially sparks Fraser's interest in Caitlyn/Harper, after all, is the latter reading aloud in their English class a love sonnet that subverts conventional gender norms; a then-feminine-presenting Caitlyn/Harper begins, "I am he ...," stopping Fraser in his tracks while roaming the school hallways on his first day in Chioggia to snap a photo capturing a moment of genderqueer truth. Later in the episode, Caitlyn/Harper returns a gaze of curiosity back at Fraser, noticing that the latter is the only one seated during the playing of the U.S. national anthem at his mother's base commander ceremony. Both instances can be read as demonstrations of Dean's notion of fidelity to communism when

incorporating Puar's insights on homonationalism. Though reading out the seemingly preferred masculinity of life on-base in their classroom (to say nothing of Caitlyn/Harper as the reader), the sonnet Caitlyn/Harper recites is an exploration of romantic passions, which are anathema to the banal violence of militarized accumulation. For his part, Fraser, though a more conventionally neoliberal LGBTQ+ subject, practices an anti-imperialist queer politics that links his refusal to support the American nationalism at the heart of the global war economy with his constant effort at resisting the cis-heteropatriarchal gender/sexuality identities forced upon him by society.

In the episode that immediately follows, a mutually reinforcing loop of queer comradeship emerges between Caitlyn/Harper and Fraser. Fraser sends over a secret package of masculine-coded clothing that Caitlyn/Harper (after a bit of trepidation) tries on; the protagonists ultimately share a knowing glance of camaraderie through their bedroom windows and across the lawns of their families' suburban housing on-base, a poignant foregrounding of political solidarity amidst a most alienating backdrop. The two become inseparable by episode three, exploring the truths that are central to their own relational dynamic while simultaneously questioning and critiquing the various hegemonic discourses operant in their surrounding society. The episode opens with Fraser calling out the commodification of food, fashion, and love using the term "fast" – he bemoans the erosion of meaning in all the ways the capitalist imperative for acceleration and expansion speeds up everyday life. Eventually, the two are in Fraser's bedroom watching videos of transmasculine gender transition, with Fraser offering vanguard-like theorizing on genderqueer as a "symptom" of the "fucking revolution" that is inside their bodies; he insists that paying attention to the eruption of transgression within themselves is the key to discovering "real life." Note here the striking similarity in Fraser's conceptual language to Dean's epistemological ideas in her fourth thesis of comradeship. And true to Dean's emphasis on practical action rather than simply abstract belief, Fraser and Caitlyn/Harper have an incredibly vulnerable

discussion at the episode's end about their respective sexualities, a conversation that ends with the two eschewing conventional identity labels, acknowledging the pitfalls of traditional relational norms ("We're never going to kiss"), and pledging instead to cultivate their respective queerness. As such, they embody fidelity to the truth that they are queer comrades seeking to enact a "fucking revolution" in their everyday lives.

This collective refusal to conform within the world they live in deepens over later episodes of the show, as Caitlyn/Harper and Fraser sharpen their critiques of contemporary capital and the identity politics it engenders. Episode six begins with the two brainstorming fantasies about their preferred methods of committing suicide; what is otherwise a cliched trope of adolescent life (i.e., the hyperbolic angst of teenagers) is itself here transformed into a dizzyingly exhilarating moment of solidarity between the queer comrades explicitly acknowledging their own mortality while also implicitly rejecting the expected appropriation of their future labor power for social reproduction. In the next episode, Fraser creates a stir by speaking fearlessly about the violence of the global war economy, leading Caitlyn/Harper to slap Fraser across his face. While such a gesture reflects an interpersonal squabble over Fraser seemingly besmirching the honor of Craig (a fallen soldier), Caitlyn/Harper's facial expressions during Fraser's comments reveal that they too realize the ruthless nature of militarized accumulation; with that context in mind, the slap can be reconsidered as embodying an exorcism of the specter of political reaction to any incisive anti-capitalist critique.

Not surprisingly, Fraser and Caitlyn/Harper's fidelity to practicing communist truth reaches its zenith in the series finale. On their way to the Blood Orange concert, Fraser discloses that the "Mark" he has been communicating with via voice memos throughout the show is really an imagined friend based on an actual schoolmate from New York who completely dismissed him. The stunning revelation leaves Caitlyn/Harper speechless at first, though Fraser's baring of this secret catalyzes a newfound loyalty that leads into a cathartic display of the queer comradeship the two share. Caitlyn/

Harper begins exclaiming a list of all which she once held dear that no longer exists to her (Harper, Fraser, Sam, the base, their parents, etc.); having effectively deconstructed all the elements in their life that anchor them to the status quo, Caitlyn/Harper ultimately erupts, "We don't exist!". At this, the two begin to jump around and twirl playfully, giddily shouting at the top of their lungs to the capitalist world they inhabit to "Fuck off! We don't exist!". In a nameless neighborhood of Bologna, two queer comrades thus diagnose with breathtaking precision their non-existence as subjects from the standpoint of militarized capital, while also rejoicing that such complete erasure impels them to assert their political truth to the world without anything to lose. Unsurprisingly, then, when they are asked by the Italian bartender at the concert about their relationship to Fraser, Caitlyn/Harper declares, with a wry smile to themselves, "We're free".

It is this freedom that culminates in the physical intimacy of touching, holding, and kissing that the two share at series end in "the most beautiful place on earth". Harkening again to Dean's epistemological insights, only the event of Caitlyn/Harper and Fraser's collective experience in that moment can verify such an absolute aesthetic judgment, a point that is driven home by the relatively non-descript nature of their actual surroundings. This rapturous moment, then, is nothing less than sublimity for two queer comrades who have journeyed together well outside the spatial and temporal confines of their alienated lives in the global war economy to delight in the truth of their project of emancipation, liberation, and love. Far from a traditional Hollywood happy ending, with all of its politically neutralizing capacity, the conclusion of *We Are Who We Are* is a moment of anti-capitalist triumph, as two comrades who realize they "don't exist" unite in a display of Dean's four primary characteristics of comradeship (ibid.): discipline, joy, enthusiasm, and courage.

Conclusions

The preceding section parsed Jodi Dean's innovative theorizing on comradeship through a close

reading of how Dean's four theses of the comrade manifest in the queer relationality of Fraser and Caitlyn/Harper. That said, there are a couple of obvious and important challenges that can be levied at the preceding account of *We Are Who We Are* as an anti-capitalist critique. For starters, Dean posits the comrade as a political relation that is ultimately indebted to institutional structures like the party. Indeed, her book on comradeship developed out of a previous work (2018) on the absolute necessity of party formation, in which Dean explicitly argues against the sort of micro-level, spontaneous, and seemingly disorganized everyday struggles that Fraser and Caitlyn/Harper engage in. The other, more general question to be asked is about the overall political efficacy of cultural intervention, particularly television – what possibilities for revolutionary change does a show broadcast on HBO/Sky Atlantic actually offer? Is this series really a critique of capital, or (cynically) just another example of how capital appropriates representations of radical relationality among fictional protagonists to generate profit for the media conglomerates of the TCC?

While such questions regarding the analysis at hand are certainly valid in presenting possible criticisms, subtler elements of Dean's work itself as well as recent sociological scholarship by Earl et al. (2017) present ways of expanding and conceptualizing politics that are relevant to Dean and *We Are Who We Are*. It is true that Dean emphasizes the central importance of the party structure for directing strategy, promoting orderliness, and ensuring accountability, but her work also allows for a relatively wide degree of flexibility and fluidity in the practice of comradeship. So long as the actions undertaken by comrades are reliable, consistent, and practical, then "expectations of solidarity" emerge that mediate the comradely relationality with "the truth of communism" (Dean 2019, 95). Additionally, Dean imbues comradeship with a "disruptive negativity" that encourages comrades to draw lines and clarify sides within their actually existing dynamics and real-life relational context; far from "a naïve ideological imaginary," which might in fact be more likely to manifest in party machinations, comrades "know whom they stand

with and who stands with them" (ibid., 96). Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, Dean acknowledges that the praxis of comradeship can produce its own methods and objectives, including those that outstrip the narrow confines of abstract dictates and static mandates from hierarchical authorities like the party. As Dean states explicitly, "comradeship generates new values, intensities, and possibilities" (ibid.) in the process of collective engagement. Ultimately, a redemptive communist disalienation from "the oppressive determinations of capitalism" (ibid.) requires that comrades work together in ways and for common purposes that only they can articulate for themselves through action.

In *We Are Who We Are*, the radical relationality between Caitlyn/Harper and Fraser addresses these openings that Dean builds into her theorizing. The solidarity between the two brings a disruptive negativity to every social context they live in, and their camaraderie engenders projects that they could not have realized were it not for their daily efforts. While each at times falls into the traps of bourgeois comforts, particularly those connected to family commitments and peer people-pleasing, Fraser and Caitlyn/Harper still manage to disalienate themselves from the oppressive determinations that surround them; Fraser is constantly defiant and rebellious toward parental authority (often in ways that are uncomfortable for audiences to witness), while Caitlyn/Harper progressively emboldens their refusal of the domestic ties that bind, culminating in their final episode runaway to attend the concert in Bologna on their family's last day on-base.

That said, a full reckoning with Fraser and Caitlyn/Harper's critiques of capital requires extra attention be paid to how their subversive queer pact intersects with the challenges/obstacles inherent to youth activism, particularly among a demographic like teenage children of military personnel. As Caitlyn/Harper explains in the final episode, base life is an inherently transient one, with only three years before having to move (as their family is forced to do), thus limiting the roots one can establish for the purposes of mobilization. Additionally, throughout the series there is the

constant reinforcement of profoundly patriarchal domestic environments, leading to the silencing and devaluing of the adolescents living in these households. And yet, as a relatively long scene in episode seven demonstrates, these young folks are anything but apolitical: following the news of Craig's death in Afghanistan, students are shown in an English classroom grief processing session discussing the implications of America's 'War on Terror' – not only are the various comments visceral and profound, including those from otherwise unnamed characters, but the teenagers in this scene get at the very heart of political debates within U.S. society regarding its settler colonialist policies and their impact on soldiers as well as civilians.

Hence, while it is true that Caitlyn/Harper and Fraser do not explicitly pledge allegiance to any leftist party or other formal social movement organization dedicated to anti-capitalist struggle, that fact alone should not be grounds to dismiss their queer comradeship as politically ephemeral or ineffectual. Indeed, as Earl et al. (2017, 2) describe with the "engaged citizenship model" of youth political participation, young persons today often embed activism within their everyday lives and as such develop creative, less visible modes of direct action. Such ongoing proclivity for activist practice and innovation is, in fact, a direct result of the ageist structures within many activist organizations that de-legitimize, silence, and otherwise undermine the participation of their youthful members (Earl et al., 8); as with so many spheres of social life, marginalization breeds its own resistance, and in this case, young persons reverse their activist ostracization by sublimating their activism. The queer comradeship forged by Fraser and Caitlyn/Harper is thus so much more than teen drama – it can be reconceptualized as a radical and meaningful struggle within their otherwise stultifying and suffocating environment of ageist, homonationalist, and militarized capitalism.

All of which raises the overarching question of the anti-capitalist utility of popular culture like *We Are Who We Are*, an issue that is directly relevant to the queer comrades at hand. After all,

rather than read Marx together, Caitlyn/Harper and Fraser would rather lay side by side listening to music or streaming video content. Here again Earl et al. provide useful insights, especially with their discussion of present-day youth's tendency to engage in "fan activism" (ibid., 7); young persons today "desire to no longer be vanquished from the production of culture," and instead radically democratize social life through their mass self-mobilization as critical consumers (ibid.). In this way, fandom and other modes of youth activist engagement:

stress the importance of not considering young people, their relationship to activism, and their political interests as being automatically analogous to adults, or as being a special case of (adult) activism (ibid.).

To that end, then, the queer comradeship of Fraser and Caitlyn/Harper can both embody a struggle against the status quo political economy and mirror for audience members themselves a form of relationality that inspires their own everyday acts of resistance. The closing shots of the show are crucial in this respect: while it is certainly not universally available for everyone to be able to kiss a queer comrade in the pre-dawn glow of Bologna, viewers are filled with a communal affect of meaningful hope and open-facing desire to transform a world that alienates them all. And while generically distinct from a communist manifesto, *We Are Who We Are* is still a thoroughly revolutionary text that theorizes radically exciting possibilities for relationality while simultaneously offering practical models for political economic interventions in our lives. Returning to the overly-superficial reviews of the show, if these two supposedly "sun-baked" teens in an "especially heightened location" can inspire such impassioned fandom and ecstatic energy simply by bringing queer comradeship into existence on-screen, one can only imagine the radical implications of millions actualizing their own versions of queer comradeship right here, right now.

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