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TOPOGRAPHIES OF GENDERED VIOLENCE: (TRANS) FORMING HOSPITALITY IN RYKA AOKI'S *LIGHT FROM UNCOMMON STARS*

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Abstract

In this article, I explore Ryka Aoki's science fiction novel, *Light from Uncommon Stars* (2021) and its depiction of social and spatial violence against trans* women in a North American context. I contend that Aoki presents instances of what Derrida describes as hostipitality, a blending of hospitality and hostility, to denounce, through speculation, the extreme vulnerability of trans* racialized women in the United States, and the way in which patterns of exclusion and abjectification can be (re)produced in queer spaces. Aoki's depiction of spatiality and failed hospitality thus highlights the unique (and often ignored) forms of violence experienced by trans* racialized women through the inclusion of science fiction elements.

Keywords: Science Fiction; Spatiality; Hostipitality; Queerness; Queer Space.

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Trans* Bodies and Bodies in Transit: Tracing Physical and Narrative Displacement in Ryka Aoki's *Light from Uncommon Stars*

In the last decade, the United Unites has undergone, for many queer people, an "epidemic" of anti-lgbtia+ violence (Robinson 2023, n.p.). With the rise to power of the extreme far right and figures such as Donald Trump and Mike Pence being appointed into office, the country saw an unprecedented number of anti-lgbtia+ bills introduced into Congress, of which more than two thirds explicitly targeted trans*[1] people and youth (American Civil Liberties Union 2023; Yousef 2025)[2]. Often, this legislation aims at controlling their body autonomy and participation in public life through measures such as, but not limited to, restricting gender-affirming medical care; forcing students' bodies to be examined by school authorities or medical professionals to determine their sex; banning trans* athletes from competing in the appropriate gendered category; or making trans* people use specific public restrooms depending on which sex they were assigned at birth.

These forms of harassment and control over vulnerable bodies seem to be motivated by contemporary transphobic discourses that view the so-called "gender ideology" and trans* people as not only interchangeable but also morally corrupt and dangerously sexual; that is, as an attempt to negate or erase the sexed body and its experience, and as a threat to both children and heterosexual futures[3] (see Serano 2016; Hybris 2023; Butler 2024). Such forms of dehumanization have led to the United States becoming not only a brutal topography of legal violence, but also of physical harm against the lgbtia+ community, with hate crimes both on the rise and yet severely underreported (Alfonseca 2023, Wiggins 2023). As a result, it appears that many trans* people have started to flee more conservative states in pursuit of safety to avoid the "controlling, demeaning, caricaturing, pathologizing, and criminalizing [of] [trans*] lives" (Butler "Who is Afraid of Gender", 11) in contemporary American society –mimicking, or redefining, in a way, what Karen Tongson designates as "dykeaspora" (18). Coined in 2011, Tongson's "dykeaspora" refers to the intranational migration of rural queer people moving towards the (perceived) more progressive and accepting urban nucleus, emphasizing not only the existence of national myths about what kind of spaces might be more open and welcoming towards marginalized communities, but also the ways in what geographical and social landscapes are (re)configured through commonly-shared believes on gender, sexuality and identity.

Some of the aforementioned bills, apart from impacting what kind of places queer people are able to occupy, are also engaged in limiting access to or banning queer books[4]. Thus, by trying to erase queer and trans* experiences from the literary imagination—and, arguably, larger symbolic and public spaces—they police what kinds of stories are readily accessible, thus robbing queer youth of the possibility of finding and recognizing themselves in fiction while they are growing up. In the face of adversity, queer stories seem to be more important than ever, for they "hold the potential to act as affective and collective resources of hope and be/longing for trans readers" who cannot find a community in their real life, and

offer them "opportunities for having [their] identities and experiences affirmed mirrored, validated, and possibly even celebrated" (Pages Whybrew 2022, 90) in hostile spaces and contexts such as North America. These texts contribute to creating narrative spaces of shared vulnerability where people might find their "transgender becoming[s]" (2016, 30), in the words of Cael Keegan, between the pages, for doing so elsewhere can be incredibly dangerous. Trans* narratives are, then, essential to queer survival, for they open up possibilities of imagining and reclaiming a future that is often negated and rendered obscure.

Through speculation and imagination, many people attempt to make sense of the world and their place in it, as these stories help us to "thematiz[e] the unstable relationship between assigned genders, sexualities, and identities and reconceptualize[e] feminist strategies against gender oppression (Melzer 2006, 220) and cisnormative violence. In this context, stories, and science fiction stories in particular, are survival strategies in worlds trans* people were not meant to survive. For, despite their exclusionary origins, science fiction has often been described as a radical space from where to reclaim forgotten identities, as the genre's ability to blur the boundaries of what, and who, is deemed normal, human, or "a subject" (Gay Pearson 2023, 119) creates narrative spaces for trans* and queer people to exist in the face of hostility and systemic–cis-temic–violence[5]. In putting into words what was previously viewed as impossible or unnatural, science fiction provides people whose lives have been shaped by the hostility of allo-cis-hetero-normativity with the opportunity to "imagin[e] a future that opens out, rather than forecloses, possibilities for becoming real, for mattering in the world" (Gay Pearson 1999, 5) through narrative. These narratives can thus be understood as vehicles of textual resistance that allow trans* people to share their experiences through imagination, and to challenge ideas of normalcy that render them as abject or monstrous.

In this article, I focus on Ryka Aoki's *Light from Uncommon Stars* (2021), a queer science fiction novel that includes supernatural elements to discuss the need for queer solidarity in the face of vulnerability and precarity. The text, which seems to echo some of Aoki's experience as a racialized trans* woman in the United States, follows the fictional Katrina Nguyen, a biracial trans* woman who escapes her transphobic family after being subjected to abuse. Unsure of where to go, Katrina turns to the queer community of Los Angeles in search for shelter, but she is denied help and endures sexual abuse in the hands of white queer people. After running away a second time in order to avoid being harmed by the very people who were meant to protect her, Katrina is scouted and taken in by famous violin teacher Shizuka Satomi, who has made a deal with a demon to give him the soul of her students to save her own. As Katrina enters the world of professional music and faces both constant transphobia and racism and new, unexpected waves of care and support, Shizuka starts to look for ways to protect both her soul and her student's. As the novel progresses, Katrina's and Shizuka's storylines merge with those of other women who seek to understand their own place in the world, such as that of an intergalactic refugee and a violin maker that

struggles to claim her role in the family business. By the end of the text, the four women come together to create new structures of care that may not only serve them as individuals, but that may also expose systemic violence and allow for a glimpse of hope through mutual aid and queer horizontality (Hamington 2024).

Here, I argue that Katrina's experience of social and spatial violence is representative of a larger issue of displacement and harm in the United States that disproportionally affects trans* women, and trans* women of color in particular. As a result, I contend that Aoki presents instances of hostipitality (Derrida 2000), a blending of hospitality and hostility, to denounce, through speculation, the extreme vulnerability of trans* racialized women in the United States, and the way in which patterns of exclusion and abjectification can be (re)produced in queer spaces. Borrowing from queer, hospitality and space studies, I analyze Katrina's experiences in so-called queer places and the violence that is enacted in them due to racial dynamics that white queer people weaponize against trans* women of color. I examine the interconnectivity of these subjectivities as I look at the hostipitality Katrina endures and, following her movement and experiences as a runaway, I discuss how the inclusion of the science-fictional serves a metaphor of conditional hospitality that reveals itself as central in the creation and negotiation of identity. After that, I focus on how solidarity is negotiated and realized, and the depiction of the domestic spaces as poisoned and unsafe, which echoes the real experiences of many women throughout the United States (Greenberg 2012). In the end, I conclude that Aoki's science-fictional text acts as a lifeline for other queer people, ridging the gap in our collective imagination through the inclusion of the supernatural.

Queer Places of Hostipitality

In 2017, Lucas LaRochelle created *Queering the Map*, an interactive online communal space that generates queer cartographies through a unique webpage (2017-present)[6]. The project, which is defined as a "community generated counter-mapping platform for digitally archiving LGBTQ2IA+ experience in relation to physical space" (n.p.), has a fairly intuitive interface: users can look for specific places in an online map and share their experiences with the community, connecting them to specific locations where they might not be granted visibility otherwise. The webpage is described as follows:

> The platform provides an interface to collaboratively record the cartography of queer life–from park benches to the middle of the ocean–in order to preserve our histories and unfolding realities, which continue to be invalidated, contested, and erased. From collective action to stories of coming out, encounters with violence to moments of rapturous love, *Queering the Map* functions as a living archive of queer life. If it counts to you, then it counts for *Queering the Map*. (n.p.)

Figure 1. Screenshot from *Queering the Map* depicting an area near San Gabriel, California.

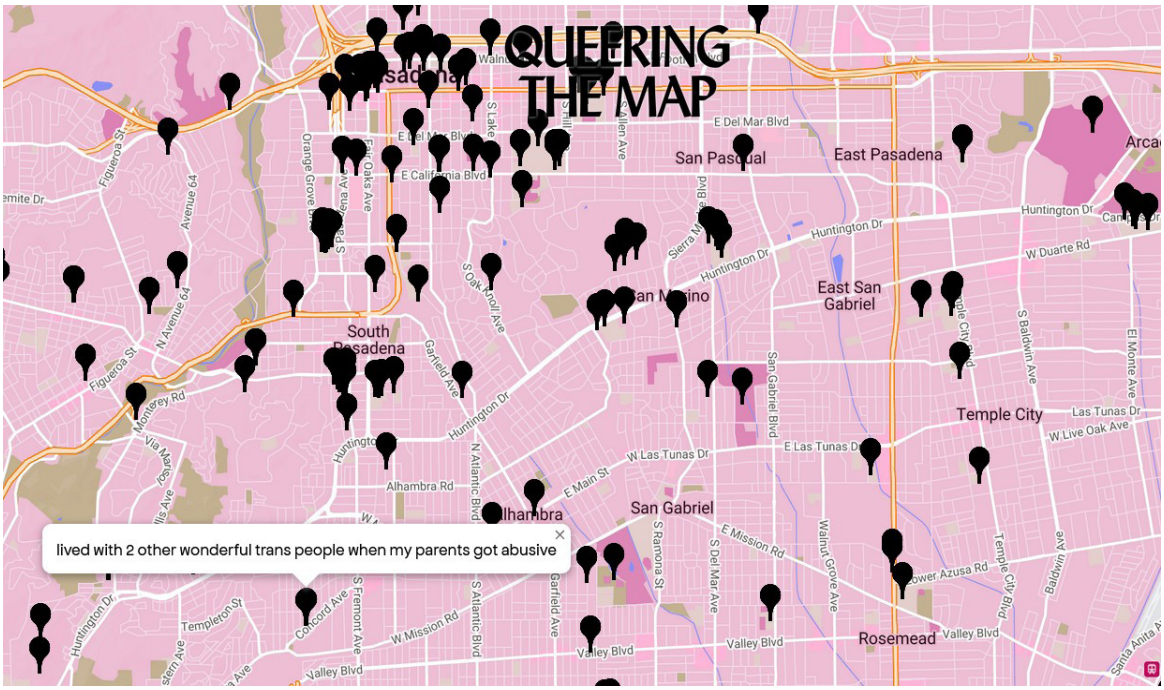

Figure 2. Screenshot from Queering the Map depicting a different area near San Gabriel, California.

Queering the Map, then, promises not only an alternative cartography of queer experiences, but also, to light up obscured connections, creating a sense of togetherness through time and space. Efforts like this are a direct response to the violence the queer community faces every day, tending transnational and transgenerational bridges in an attempt to salvage lost shared stories. They seem

to imply that, together, it is possible to make and remake space anew, to name our personal and collective landmarks. Projects like this one, much like the field of spatial studies (see Jameson 1991, Tally 2017), in their own way, remind us that spaces and places are never static, but are rather made and remade anew through social intervention, "under construction," always "in the process of being made, […] never finished; never closed" (Massey 2005, 9), for they change to reflect our own social relations (see Lefebvre 1991, 26). Indeed, spatiality is always "the product of interrelations" (Masey 9), always the result of social interactions. It reflects how human interactions and subjectivity are expressed situated, in both literal and symbolic ways, in an ever-moving world.

If *Queering the Map* dares participants to rethink what kind of lives and stories "count" and are seen as important and worth preserving, then it also highlights the ubiquitous violence that queer people experience. As James A. Tyner explains in *Space, Place and Violence*, there seems to be "an underlying *spatiality* to violence" as violence itself is "a practice of both social and spatial control" (2012, 64), a practice that extends to more intimate and private places such as the domestic. Indeed, for many queer people in the United States, the home can be a violent space, and they often turn to other people in search of support and refuge. Yet not everyone has a place to go nor a place to be welcomed in.

In this section, I examine how the character of Katrina experiences hostipitality, a blending of hospitality and hostility that, in the novel, is deeply intertwined with transphobia, racism and rape culture. The term, coined by Derrida, highlights the many grey, often unseen spaces, between hospitality and harm, and seems to "reconceptualiz[e] the rituals of incorporation and expulsion, as it creates new outsides on the inside, new gray areas that need to be further explored" (Mezzadra and Neilson 2012, 62; Manzanas and Benito 2017, 4), and sheds light over the inherent violence of processes of inclusion and welcome. It is precisely in this problematization of belonging and exclusion that, I argue, the novel showcases the often liminal and vulnerable position that many racialized trans* women occupy in supposedly queer spaces.

Katrina's journey in *Light from Uncommon Stars* is pierced and determined by the perception of the trans* body as a form of abjection that is rendered unwelcome in most spaces. As a mixed-race trans* woman of Chinese, Vietnamese and Mexican descent who does not "pass" as a woman, Katrina's appearance is constantly scrutinized, her body perceived as a monstrous[7], public spectacle. After the opening scene, passersby comment on Katrina's body, attempting to interpret her gender expression in line with cisnormative expectations – "too ugly to be girl," "definitely boy. To be would be sad" (7). These unnamed women on the sidewalk examine Katrina, the trans* body rewritten and misrepresented in accordance with the gender binary. This questioning is present all throughout the novel and sets the tone of the text but intensifies after Katrina moves from her abusive household to a gentrified Southern California where she is often surveilled in both public and private places. She seeks refuge in a queer friend's home, trying to avoid the hostile spaces of the United States, yet her supposed

refuge is later revealed to be a space of sexual violence where she is eventually assaulted, scrutinized and treated once more as abject.

After fleeing the Bay area, where her father abuses her physically until she develops suicidal thoughts; where her home is no home but her family's domain and she is no more than an unwelcome ghost, she runs to Los Angeles, looking for the help of an old queer friend that she met at a queer camp. She remembers Evan fondly as someone who "told her he would be there whenever she needed" (31), even if they have not seen one another in two years, and he seems to constitute the only queer community Katrina has access to as a young trans* woman. After being scrutinized on the bus to Los Angeles and the San Gabriel suburbs by neighbors who deem her both foreign and unsuitable as a trans* racialized woman that is somehow in-between identities, in a permanent liminal space, Katrina finds Evan's home – "Finally. A rainbow flag on the door, a compost pile in the yard. Katrina had arrived" (31). Yet, she is not welcomed with solidarity, or even welcomed at all, for when Evan sees Katrina, he closes the door and opens it up again to say that "[y]ou [Katrina] should have said you were coming for real" and that she should "come back later tonight" (32), as Evan has a date in the house despite being aware of Katrina's arrival. Here, in this brief interaction, Evan positions himself as the ruler of the house, the host who controls who is welcomed inside and on what parameters, the threshold a rigid line that Katrina cannot cross without permission. His hostile encounter anticipates not only the cruelty she will find within the home, but also within the queer community itself.

On the move, Katrina passes through different areas of a gentrified California. Even if the space appears kind in its multiculturality–for instance, she moves past "a 7-Eleven, past a Chinese herb store, a Mexican hardware store, a Vietnamese nail salon, a Taiwanese dance studio, more boba places, a dozen noodle shops…" (33) – Katrina soon realizes that, despite her heritage, she is not welcomed in any of the places she walks by, as she is constantly scrutinized by people trying to decide whether she is trans*. She is reminded of how people stare at her hands, seemingly wondering whether they are too big or not feminine enough. They look at her cheeks and chin, wondering if the discoloration in Katrina's face is a closely shaved beard or just a passing shadow. Time and time again, onlookers seek confirmation of Katrina's monstrosity, her suspected transness a diversion from the strictly rigid gender binary that one is expected to inhabit as a cisgender person. Throughout her walk, Katrina is forced to navigate different invisible borders inside California. Rather than finding obvious lines that demark places she can or cannot cross, Katrina deals with borders that are both stitched along the lines of and reproduce social relations, and are "further imbued by gender, sexuality, class, ability, and nationality" (Walia 2021, 105-106)[8], demarcations that mark her as other precisely because of her particular embodiment as a liminal figure that moves, according to this logic, in between racial and gender lines[9]. Here, Katrina encounters places demarcated not by clear lines or outwardly transphobic messaging, but by vigilant glances and under-the-breath comments that render the San Gabriel Valley inhospitable.

Here, one might think of Karen Tongson's work, which deals with the queer potentiality of the suburb as a physical place from where to challenge the nuclear family, amatonormativity[10] and the centering of cisgender and heterosexual identities and logics. Tongson proposed that, since the suburbs were built on exclusionary practices that deliberately targeted queer, racialized and unhoused communities (2), these places might become sites of possibility due to the presence of queer people within the racialized communities who made them their own. In reclaiming the suburbs, spaces such as the ones Katrina passes by in San Gabriel, Tongson proposes that people might create queer spaces of horizontality and safety that prioritize interconnectivity, mutual care and vulnerability in the face of systemic violence and perpetual precarity, moving beyond cis-heteronormative rhetorics of social organization and belonging – rather than being understood as queer in that they are merely occupied by people whose identities fall outside the confines of cisheterosexuality.

And yet, these queer possibilities are not realized in Katrina's supposed shelter. Once Katrina goes back to Evan's house, the building is revealed as a site of sexual and psychological abuse as well as a white site of urban gentrification. Throughout her stay, Evan and his friends enact a performance of mainstream queer culture, one that, on the surface, is preoccupied with inclusivity and liberation and is meant to be a place of unconditional hospitality and welcome. In the same breath, they preach lgbtia+ rights, they joke that their Asian neighbor probably eats cats, and to hide their pet just in case (32). They seem to celebrate Black women's feminist writers, yet in a discussion on how to end the status quo, they attribute Audre Lorde's famous quote of how the masters' tools will never dismantle the master's house to bell hooks (48)[11]; both of their work on community and revolutionary work reduced to the false theatricals of inclusivity. This performance of queerness, which seems to be based on identity politics and putting on a 'progressive' façade, does not include worrying about or welcoming and caring for Katrina, who feels unsafe in this space as a trans* woman and as a person of color.[12]

Katrina is indeed in a liminal position, where she is not a welcomed guest, but instead, an (unwanted) occupant who must pay a price for her stay, as she has not fully been extended any form of hospitality. Indeed, hospitality, is, in the words of Judith Still, "always already at stake where a boundary is set up—dividing what I call my territory from what I call yours" (2010, 145) and seeks to "regulat[e] relations between inside and outside," (2010, 11; see Manzanas Calvo and Benito 4). In this way, Katrina is in a state of in-betweenness as an occupant that cannot claim as her own the initially safe domestic space she now resides in, and instead, she has only the fantasy of the queer refuge as a form of shelter and community.

This tension between hospitality and violence becomes even more blurry if one is to think about how queerness, as well as the idea of the "queer community" itself, has often been described as a symbolic counterspace that welcomes and is made possible precisely by those that need one another to sustain themselves in

the face of institutional and social neglect. Here, one might think of contemporary discourses surrounding the figures of found or chosen families that are assembled through queer peers, often substituting biological families that might be violent and bigoted (Levin et al. 2020);about how, during the AIDS epidemic in the United States, gay and bisexual men who were, in practical terms, left to die by the Ronal Reagan's government, were cared for by primarily queer women[13]; or even the examples shown from *Queering the Map* in figures 1 and 2. And yet, these places can also be sites of violence among lgbtia+ people.

Again, in the context of Aoki's novel, Katrina is neither fully inside nor fully outside this particular queer place. In a very obvious sense, she has no freedom of movement within the house; no keys, no access to certain areas; and no room of her own, as she sleeps on the living room couch. However, she is also not within the bounds of what Evan constitutes as "the queer community," as his particular definition directly excludes trans* women and racialized people, weaponizing identity politics over horizontal solidarity, and directly harming one of the most vulnerable demographics in the United States.

In addition, Manzanas and Benito explain that hospitality is "deconstructed by the very places it is exercised and by the line that delimits the outside and the inside. Hospitality, according to Derrida, governs the threshold and its unpredictable opening and closing" (9). This negotiation is, once again, present throughout the novel. As the text progresses, readers become more aware of the ways in which Evan violently exercises his power as a host, weaponizing Katrina's houselessness to abuse her. Evan's disdain of Katrina soon turns into sexual harassment and financial pressure, echoing the dehumanization and abjection suffered by trans* women in the US, where they are seen as incomplete bodies, hybrid bodies for the consumption of others, and as inherently associated with sex work. This narrative, fueled by Evan's power and control as a host inside the domestic space, is used to both revictimize Katrina and alleviate Evan's consciousness. In this context, Katrina's experience as an unhoused runaway becomes even more dangerous when Evan's friends, who often stay in the house, begin stealing from her emergency fund, and so she is forced to continue camming and doing other forms of sex work in order to plot her escape from the house[14]. Evan's house fully becomes a cartography of violence once again, where she is subjected to economic violence that intensifies her precarity, and eventually, to sexual and psychological abuse. After Katrina decides to shower in Evan's house, confronting both how unsafe she feels and her dysphoria looking at her body in a new place, Evan rapes her in the bathroom and holds her responsible for her own abuse:

> "I was thinking, it would be a way to help with the rent, you know?"
> He pushed her down and continued. After he finished, Evan tried to kiss her again.
> "I don't know why you're crying," he said. "It's fair trade. Besides, I can only imagine how you paid for that violin". (50)

Evan's violence as the master of the house indeed proves that places with queer people might not necessarily be queer spaces, spaces where queerness becomes linked to a desire for a better world, a commitment to challenging normalcy through solidarity and mutual support. Through these experiences, the novel problematizes the essentialist notion that lgbtia+ spaces are inherently welcoming, and reveals these physical places as pierced by racial, gendered and class dynamics. Aoki insists on the need to question identity politics that refuse to acknowledge queer people as capable of doing harm, and insists on the need to address how supposedly safe environments – like the one in the text, which is first imagined as a direct alternative to the transphobic family home – can become complex topographies of physical, psychological, economic and sexual distress. Seen in this light, Aoki's novel seems reminiscent of Derrida's ideas of hospitality and hostility not as opposite but as intermingled. This violence is indeed central to Katrina's grappling and coming to terms with the crumbling image of the queer refuge that she had in mind, one where a chosen family might have replaced the one she had to run away from.

It is precisely in this context that I contend that it is possible to read the character of Katrina as a nomadic subject in Braidotti's terms; her journey being not only geographical but affective, related to her eventual rejection of ideas of assimilation and passing; and her exclusion not only spatial but also social; based on her transness and her racial identity. Braidotti's work – and her 2006 and 2011 books, *Transpositions* and *Nomadic Subjects*, in particular – proposes the notion of nomadic subjectivity as a strategy to reclaim new forms of agency that oppose and reject not only fixed forms of identity but also centralized Eurocentric forms of knowledge (see 2011, 64-65). To her, these forms of consciousness are not necessarily "fluidity without borders, but rather an acute awareness of the nonfixity of boundaries, forms of transgression based on interconnectivity" (66) that indeed help to "destabilize dogmatic, hegemonic, exclusionary power" (9). In her work, Braidotti attempts to expose geographies of power and control, and, through the figure of the nomad, criticizes binary and rigid understandings of identity that are put *in place* by those same structures of violence. In this context, nomadism becomes a way of inhabiting multiple identities, of reclaiming liminality–and, in Aoki's novel, it is directly tied to the rejection of assimilation and homonormativity to inhabit trans* identities through a queer lens.

After being raped and robbed, Katrina is forced to accept more dangerous clients in her sex work, which include men who exoticize her and fantasize about her perceived 'deviant' body and 'ambivalent' and 'exotic' ethnicity. The novel heavily focuses on how trans* women's bodies are often commodified in a capitalist society and connects Katrina's identity and lack of support with the vulnerability she faces. The following excerpt represents quite explicitly the situations Katrina faces, where she is constantly exposed to different forms of violence, and is once again revictimized:

> "A man on drugs with a limp dick can be very scary. He tried and cursed, then began to blame her, insisting he was soft because he wasn't a homo.
> And then he wanted her to top him. And then he wanted her to speak Chinese.
> And then he pulled her hair and spat on her.
> But at least he didn't reinjure her ribs. (51)

Katrina's experiences as a victim of sexual assault are also connected to the contemporary transphobic narratives that describe trans* women as corrupted cisgender men who enjoy and deserve the violence they face, for they attempt to harm ciswomen by robbing them of their spaces, agency and lived experiences simply by existing openly as trans* women (see Boe et al., 2024). In this way, she is not only without shelter, but she is, in many collective discourses, rendered responsible for her own exploitation, abuse and dehumanization. Once again, Katrina is rendered abject, her body described as monstrous and exotic, forced to flee in search of shelter and community, looking for a place she can claim as hers, and where she can experience queer horizontality rather than hostipitality.

Poisoned Shelter: Conditional Hospitality

A third of the way into the novel, Katrina moves into Shizuka's home after escaping Evan's house, rescuing her violin from an illegal pawn shop and passing out from exhaustion – her body collapsing after being subject to sexual, physical and psychological abuse for long periods. When Katrina wakes up in an unfamiliar environment, that being Shizuka's guestroom, she is deeply alarmed and surprised; her first reaction is that of checking for injuries or signs of sexual trauma:

> Katrina sat up. Quickly, she checked herself. No new scrapes or bruises. She was wearing a nightshirt, but it wasn't ripped. She'd not been choked. In fact, her body seemed fine. (69)

As she moves through the house and learns more about both Shizuka and her staff, she becomes even more confused. She has been given shelter; she has access to privacy and running water, home-cooked meals, and hormones to continue her transition. Shizuka is aware of her being transgender, and yet she is not being harassed for it. Her identity does not result in violence; she does not need to protect or hide herself. Yet, Katrina continues to feel uneasy, for she cannot claim the house as her own. Her experience has led her to be constantly alert and hyper-aware of her surroundings, to view the domestic not as refuge or shelter but as a site of violence and surveillance. She insists that "[p]eople like this weren't supposed to be wonderful. Not to people like her" (74), she is unused to viewing the people she shares domestic spaces with as nurturing or safe.

Katrina does attempt to occupy other physical and symbolic spaces as she moves through the San Gabriel Valley, yet she is often met with distrust and disgust, her body a site of abjection for many people in the neighborhood. Katrina

anticipates these interactions when she thinks that "[a]s their surroundings became ever quainter and more picturesque, Katrina grew nervous. *She did not belong here, she did not belong here, she did not belong here*" (76, original emphasis), separating herself from the richer areas Shizuka moves through. Accompanied by Shizuka, they visit a renowned violin repair shop. After seeing Katrina enter the store, the owner "smiled, but just beneath, Katrina could sense disgust" (79), the disdain palpable despite Shizuka's presence. After the halfhearted attempt at politeness, the man explains that, as honored as he is to be visited by such a renowned music teacher, but refuses to work on such "Oriental junk" (80), referring to the violin but also belatedly to Katrina. After the incident, the two leave the store and Katrina apologizes, as she sees the incident as her responsibility, a consequence of her entering spaces where she does not belong, because of her class, ethnicity and gender identity. She has internalized this inhospitality and sees the violence she faces as her responsibility, rather than a fault of the system: "I'm sorry for embarrassing you" […] "Miss Satomi, I don't want to doubt you, but did you *see* that place?" (80, original emphasis), the last comment referring to the differences between herself and the usual clientele, who Katrina assumes to be mostly white, rich, and cisgender, except for Shizuka.

After the incident, Shizuka uses her social and economic capital as a shield for Katrina's protection, as her social status seems to soften Katrina's perceived difference as "in-between" ethnicities and gender identities. In a different violin repair store, Shizuka confronts the store clerk when she misgenders Katrina and refers to her as a boy, and makes the clerk apologize directly to Katrina, rather than to her. Shizuka also uses her influence to protect Katrina when they go into different parts of the city and visit luxury music clothing retailers, where Katrina may be subjected to harsh looks due to the expectations of the gender binary and the gendered body (175). Katrina is aware of this, and she comments on how she is unaccustomed to staying in what she perceives to be 'rich' environments, and readers are reminded of the beginning of the novel, where Katrina, in full North American fashion, was harassed out of a women's bathroom by a transphobic server, and was forced to excuse her presence there lying and explaining that the man's room was occupied[15]. Indeed, the incidents echo the American surveillance of trans* racialized women, and trans* people in general, in public spaces and the scrutiny their bodies undergo (see Gisi 2022).

Against Shizuka's wealth and influence, Katrina's vulnerability becomes more and more obvious. Indeed, it is a reflection on "the complexities, tensions, and ambiguities of experiences of gender, sexuality, and power in contemporary life" (Gilson 73), and the vertical systems of power that render the lives of many unlivable and painful. This, in turn, echoes Butler's idea of precarity and the ways in which lives "can be expunged at will or by accident; their persistence is in no sense guaranteed" (2004, 12), and are rendered fragile and unimportant. Katrina's vulnerability has to do precisely with the intersections of her identity as well as the geographies of violence in the United States, and the ways in which racialized and trans* bodies are regarded as subhuman and disposable.

Shizuka, beginning to care for Katrina, delays the moment when she must explain the conditions of her deal and her hospitality, yet Katrina eventually asks her directly, confronting the façade that has been put in place. While Shizuka is surprised by the question, her pupil explains that she already knew there were conditions to her stay, as she is aware of the juxtaposition between Shizuka's power and her own vulnerability. She clarifies that "if being queer had taught her anything, it was that there was *always* a price" (162, original emphasis) and that she did not need to "find out" about the conditions because she "never expected to survive" (163), her stay at Shizuka's an extension of her life that she is constantly thinking about ending. Katrina explains that her queerness has always been synonymous with death and opens up about the lived experiences that have led her to have suicidal tendencies so Shizuka and her staff may actually understand the violence she endures.

> She talked of listening to the sneers of people on the sidewalk, the horrible words spoken both loudly and under breath. She talked of listening, always listening, for the next possible attack, of trying to slouch as she walked in public, or that time after church when her uncle held her down and kissed her while saying please don't give him AIDS and that God thought she was a filthy whore.
> And there was more. She talked of dating, of bathrooms, of being in a roomful of queers and still feeling alone. She talked about the sting of applying makeup over fresh scrapes and bruises, the terrible whispers on the bus ride here. (181)

Katrina opens up about the sexual violence she has endured and how she has been made to feel responsible for it, of how her body is seen as abject, an atrocity, a bearer of disease, something to whisper about in public – the discourses of transphobia and rape culture colliding and overlapping. She discusses the lack of support she has experienced when surrounded by other queer people because of her gender and her ethnicity, and how she has yet to encounter true queer spaces that do not only happen to be occupied by queer people, but spatially and socially challenge hegemonic systems and ways of relating, connecting and existing in a particular situated context such as that of the United States. Katrina also confesses how she feels particularly forced to perform a specific form of femininity so as to pass and hide the marks of the physical abuse she suffers, and how passing and conforming to the gender binary seems to be less about her own gender identity and expressions and more about the ways she is forced to exist in public in a hostile context.

Here, the price of her safety, her hormones, her shelter, her being welcomed, is not sex or money, like in Evan's house, but rather, something much more ethereal: her own soul. To be treated with respect, to be safe and to have her humanity recognized, she must pay the price of renouncing what, to many, makes us human. This is also the case for the other past students who have given up their souls in order to learn from Shizuka. While none of them was in such a vulnerable position as Katrina, all of them relied on the supernatural as a way

to avoid systemic violence: whether it be racism, anti-Asian hate, fatphobia… They use the supernatural to denounce violence and oppression: for them, the science-fictional becomes a tool to critique social, spatial and symbolic exclusion, to gain access to the exclusionary classical music industry or to achieve safety and recognition. The supernatural is not a form of escapism, but a political tool of social transformation. Shizuka's students need external influence to guarantee their inclusion in the public space of the music industry and to guarantee that they will not be deemed unsuitable because of their embodiment and background. Her supernatural influence does not erase her pupils' identity, but instead, changes the reaction of the public to their particular form of perceived difference. It is not a structural solution, but an individual salvation that, in the context of the novel, sheds light on a systemic issue. In the case of Katrina, however, Shizuka's protection is essential to guaranteeing the survival of her student over transphobic and racist harassment.

For, in Aoki's text, the trans* body becomes a site of resignification through speculative interventions, where the corporeal reflects alternative forms of agency and relationality that prioritize queer kinship and community. Certainly, the destabilization of the sexed and gendered body that is present in trans* experiences (Butler 1990, 2004, 2011) seems to be in conversation with Braidotti's own ideas of embodiment, which "is to be understood as neither a biological nor a sociological category, but rather as a point of overlapping between the physical, the symbolic, and the sociological" (25). That is, the body is not a fixed space that reproduces cisheteronormative ideals–even if those ideals influence people's own embodiment–but, instead, a site of connection and reconfiguration of the self where queer possibilities might be enacted and reclaimed. Drawing from these ideas, I propose that this reclamation is directly tied to the science-fictional elements of the novel, which, in turn, offer a reconfiguration of dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in a queer context.

Katrina's confession directly speaks of the commodification of life in contemporary society. Many have spoken of how discourses of hospitality have moved from an ethical duty to an economy (Schérer 2004; Manzanas and Benito 19), and Derrida has extensively spoken on the idea of hospitality without conditions and the difficulties of welcoming the other without imposing conditions or expectations (2001). Yet, Shizuka's hospitality is almost a caricature in its exaggeration: the conditions and control imposed over the other, the guest, are exaggerated and clearly stated, the act of hospitality not an ethical imperative but a transaction based on systemic vulnerability, a way of helping Katrina cross the invisible borders that separate the normal and the abject, the civilized from the queer, in exchange for her humanity. The act of welcoming a parody of hospitality, with the only goal of maintaining or advancing existing power hierarchies (Hamington 2010, 23) rather than destroying them, control over queer solidarity. Nevertheless, as the novel progresses, Shizuka begins to care for her pupil and, in creating this affective bond, tries to move towards horizontal relationality and attempts to protect both her soul and Katrina's.

Under Shizuka's poisoned protection, Katrina is able to explore her queerness, since, for the first time, most of her energy is not spent hiding her transness or assessing how to best avoid violent encounters with people who see her as deviant. With her basic needs met, she interrogates the self-hate and dread she has inherited from both society and her biological family, asking herself "[w]hy was she queer, and trans? Why couldn't she have had a father who didn't hate her? Why couldn't she have a mother who was glad that she had been born?" (173). As she progresses with her music and explores what it means to perform in her own terms–both as a violinist and as a trans* woman–Katrina slowly moves from longing for normalcy and assimilation to a new form of self-acceptance that prioritizes queer understanding of the self and of one's subjectivities, embracing and claiming as her own her perceived 'in-betweenness' and monstrosity, "making [her] monstrosity human" (Nordmarken 38).

When she is offered the possibility of transitioning medically through fantastical technology in order to be "a real girl" (275), Katrina rejects the offer, pointing out instead that her physical appearance, despite her extreme dysmorphia, does not determine her identity, moving towards celebration of trans* corporealities rather than prioritizing assimilation into cisheteronormative culture. This does not mean that Katrina stops medically transitioning, but instead, that she rejects the idea that being read as cisgender, and having some specific features and body parts is somehow the only correct way of being a woman, and that a specific sexed body equals womanhood. In this way, by negating the idea that there is one 'adequate' and 'correct' way of being trans* and queer, Katrina embraces a nomadic subjectivity that rejects essentialism and binary understandings of the self that monitor both the gendered and the sexed body. Here, speculation becomes a tool of nomadic queer self-actualization that sheds light on the difficulties of being welcomed and belonging in a North American context as a trans* racialized woman.

At the end of the novel, all storylines converge when the characters join forces to protect Katrina. Discussing the sacrifices that must be made, Shizuka shares her own experiences as an Asian woman, mirroring her student's earlier vulnerability when Katrina opened up about what it means to be a trans* woman in her circumstances. Shizuka speaks about the violent exoticization and dehumanization that she experienced earlier in her career, and how it, alongside an injury, led her to promise either her soul or the souls of seven students to a demon to be safe and recognized for who she was in the industry. She confesses that "[t]hey [music judges and reporters] would call me bright and exotic, a China doll (174). This act helps to expose Shizuka's own vulnerability and offers new affective landscapes based on queer relationality and mutual solidarity. It is in this moment that all the displaced women in the novel recognize all the different ways in which they have been cast as other, creating new forms of relationality based on collective care and an acknowledgment of their shared struggles. The ending, where all the characters come together and both Katrina and Shizuka survive, does not pretend to break down systems of power and end transphobia

and queerphobia, but, instead, presents small pockets of hope where, through mutual aid, queer people can take care of each other and envision a future that centers their experiences and subjectivities. One, precisely, where it is possible to embrace collective and create share nets of safety that might lead to queer spaces of hope. This does not repair nor erase previous harm, but instead, highlights the complexities of existing in the world as a queer person, and proposes queer horizontality as a survival strategy in the face of systemic adversity.

Conclusion, or Queer Speculative Entanglements

Aoki's novel follows the physical journey of fictional Katrina Nguyen in order to explore the different protocols of spatial displacement and social exclusion suffered by trans* women in the United States. I have argued that the inclusion of science-fictional elements in a seemingly realistic story helps to paint a landscape of deliberate harm that showcases how both the domestic and other queer people may be revealed as unsafe and unwelcoming. Consequently, thanks to these supernatural depictions of hostipitality and conditional hospitality, I have claimed that the novel explores themes of spatial boundaries in order to denounce how racialized trans* women are deliberately excluded from queer and public places. Thus, by presenting an ending of hopeful solidarity that does not negate antitrans* suffering, but instead, is based on its acknowledgment to build support networks of community care, Aoki creates narrative spaces where it might be possible to not only reclaim and center trans* stories, but also to protect trans* life in the face of adversity. All in all, *Light from Uncommon Stars* is able to, through speculation, offer narrative spaces that may be the queer spaces we long for.

Notes

1. I use 'trans*' as an umbrella term to refer to non-cisgender identities, that is, to describe people whose gender identity differs from their assigned sex at birth, including non-binary people. For an explanation on the popularization of trans* as an inclusive term, see page 18 of Susan Stryker's 2017 Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution. For discussions on transfeminism and gender as a social construct that intersects with issues of ethnicity, class, ability, etc., see Miriam Solá's and Elena Urko's 2018 Transfeminismos: Epistemes, Fricciones y Flujos and Riley Snorton and Jin Haritaworn's 2022 "Trans Necropolitics: A Transnational Reflection on Violence, Death, and the Trans of Color Afterlife".
2. I do not mean to say that anti-lgbtia+ violence is new to the United States, but that its legal ramifications have been more brutal in the last decade. In particular, I want to emphasize that the social, political and legal attacks on trans* rights are not uniquely tied to or merely dependent on the Trump administration itself, but that they are, instead, symptomatic of an extreme-right and gender-essentialist ideology rising in popularity–here one think, for instance, on the recent United Kingdom Court rulings on what constitutes a woman and who can claim to inhabit the confines of womanhood (Hatton 2025).
3. "Gender ideology" is an ambiguous term often used in political contexts to refer to unspecified branches of queer theory and transfeminist thought that seemingly

seek to endanger and even erase cisheterosexual identities, embodiments and experiences. This narrative often equates trans* people with gender theory itself and contributes to their dehumanization by treating vulnerable people as part of an intellectual movement or debate.

4. Similarly, the United States has also seen a large book ban on books perceived to be associated with 'critical race theory' and that center racialized experiences and discussions of race and ethnicity.

5. Much has been said on queer representation in science fiction and the queer and liberatory potentiality of the non-mimetic – which is not necessarily at odds, or rather, coexists with the fact that there are reactionary works within the genre. See Brian Attebery's 2002 *Decoding Gender in Science Fiction*; Wendy Gay Pearson's, Veronica Hollinger's and Joan Gordon's 2008 *Queer Universes: Sexualities in Science Fiction*; and Alexis Lothian's 2018 *Old Futures: Speculative Fiction and Queer Possibility*.

6. LaRochelle's project is widely available to the public through a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-Share Alike 4.0 International License. All of the images present in this article are screenshots from the *Queering the Map* webpage and have not been altered in any capacity.

7. See Nordmarken (2014) for a discussion on the trans* body as "monstruous" and "in-between identities", and the emancipatory possibilities of reclaiming said monstrosity and liminality. Nordmarken, Sonny. "Becoming Ever More Monstrous: Feeling Transgender In-Betweenness." Qualitative Inquiry, vol. 20, no. 1, 2014, pp. 37-50.

8. Wendy Cheng's 2013 *The Changs Next Door to the Díazes: Remapping Race in Suburban California* explores how said lines are shaped in the context of San Gabriel Valley, paying particular attention to how Asian and Latinx subjectivities are constructed and negotiated in this area.

9. In the prologue of the 2023 book *American Borders: Inclusion and Exclusion in US Culture* (1-17), Paula Barba and Mónica Fernández explore the notion of borders as not only physical boundaries, but as invisible demarcations that separate those who have been deemed "other". See also Étienne Balibar's 1998 "The Borders of Europe" and Patricia Prince's 2004 *Dry Place: Landscapes of Belonging and Inclusion*, both of which are essential in Barba and Fernández's discussion of borders, inclusion and exclusion.

10. Coined by Elizabeth Brake in 2012, the term refers to a belief of systems where romantic attraction is seen as universal and universally desired, and as central to one's humanity. In this context, romantic attraction is also often believed to be realized through monogamous partnerships.

11. See Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (1984).

12. See Snorton's and Haritaworn's "Trans Necropolitics: A Transnational Reflection on Violence, Death, and the Trans of Color Afterlife" (69-70) for a discussion on trans* death and suffering in queer contexts, and the ways in which trans* death are discussed in contemporary western contexts.

13. One of the most well-known examples of lesbian solidarity within the AIDS epidemic might be that of the San Diego Blood Sisters, a group of lesbian women who campaigned for blood donations for HIV patients after bisexual, homosexual and men who have sex with other men were banned from donating in the United States. See the 2022 Yale online exhibition titled "We Are Everywhere: Lesbians in the Archive", with an emphasis on the "Lesbian AIDS Activism" section.

14. While it could be argued that Aoki portrays some instances of camming as sites of relative autonomy where the character of Katrina is able to reconcile herself with

her trans* body, Katrina is forced into sex work precisely due to the economic vulnerability and instability associated with transphobia.

15. I do not mean to imply that this kind of violence is only present in North American contexts, but rather, that it has become part of the US social landscape in recent years.

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