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Through the Looking Glass: Donald Trump, Heteronormativity and Homosociality

Jessica Mei
Scripps College

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Reflective Essay

The assignment for the final paper of my first-year Writing 50 class was an open-ended prompt: discuss a topic related to Donald Trump's rhetoric. Our professor had tasked us with the impossible charge of pursuing a "spicy, productive, relevant, narrow subject that no one else is working on." As the deadline to present my professor with a research topic loomed closer and closer, I was struck with the idea to look at Trump's rhetoric through the lens of queer theory. What would it mean to "queer" Trump? I chose this topic because my queerness has always been something incredibly important part of my identity, and at the time, I had been thinking a lot about what it meant to be queer. I hoped that not only would my personal interest in the topic would make for an interesting topic, but also it would allow room for further reflection within myself.

However, my initial stroke of genius soon turned sour as I saw how overwhelmingly large and daunting the field of queer studies was. I had never taken a course in queer studies, so trying to parse through dense journals and papers on my own to find a simple definition of what the process of "queering" would mean for someone like Trump was extremely difficult. And as I tried to delve deeper into the subject with just my basic Googling skills, the terms and theory I unearthed became increasingly esoteric.

It was only after multiple in-class workshops and an individual meeting with Librarian Mary Martin that I was able to pinpoint a lens through which to focus my research on. Librarian Martin had created a research guide specifically for our class which gave me the specific roadmap and tools on how to narrow down and refine my tentative topic and turn it into an actual argument. First, she taught our class how to better utilize Google and Google Scholar through the use of keywords, modifiers, synonyms, and related terms. The skills she taught me allowed me to

quickly and efficiently sort through the deluge of the constant reporting on Trump by both pundits and academics and pull out background information important for my paper. The general consensus seemed to be that Trump was a “man’s man,” with all of the machismo, misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia implied with that gender archetype. This assumption is supported by a long history of misogynic, homophobic, and transphobic rhetoric and actions, but he also has a history of subverting that the hyper-masculine gender norm, such as not being more aggressive towards President Putin after he had castigated President Obama for that same behavior. The complicated dichotomy between his hypermasculine perception and his subversion of that perception piqued my interest, but it was still too broad a subject to write a paper about.

Librarian Martin also introduced our class to wide array of resources the library had to offer, such as Academic Search Premier, a huge database search engine for journals that I would not have been able to find on Google Scholar even with my updated techniques, and the Gale Virtual Reference Library, a collection of encyclopedia articles and dictionary entries which were more suited to clarifying queer topics than my furtive Google searches. It was only through GVRL that I stumbled upon *The International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* and its entry on heteronormativity, the concept where heterosexuality is centered as the only normal form of gender and sexual expression, and those who fall outside that norm are devalued. It dawned on me that this concept perfectly encapsulated how people were currently perceiving Trump, and it could act as a starting point to jump off into my own scholarly work.

Applying the databases and search techniques, I began to look into what had already been written about Trump regarding heteronormativity. I utilized the “scholarly party” approach introduced to us by Librarian Martin to both summarize and find the limits of the existing scholarly conversation and see where I could respond with my own argument. Through my

research, I saw that when authors like Michael Lechuga had analyzed Trump's acceptance speech at the 2016 Republican National Convention, they had taken Trump's hyper-masculine heteronormative rhetoric at face value, without exploring the media's heteronormative criticisms when Trump deviated from the set gender and sexual norms; nor did any authors examine the implications of their heteronormative perspectives reifying negative assumptions of homosexuality and femininity. I began to see that I could add to the academic conversation by providing a contrasting lens to read Trump's rhetoric and actions which could be more accurate and less disparaging of the queer community.

With Librarian Mary Martin's help in a one-on-one meeting, she pointed me towards the college's unique collection of journals. It was in *GenderWatch*, a database focused on gender, feminist, sexuality, and women's study, where I first stumbled upon the idea of homosociality, which I had never seen before. Homosociality is a term used to describe same-gender relationships not necessarily defined by sex. The research around it seemed to be centered around premodern history due to the extreme change in the role of sex in relationships since then, but I immediately saw how it could be brought into the modern lexicon in order to describe Trump's contemporary relations in a way that had never been done before.

From here, the paper writing process began to speed up drastically. Through my new lens of homosociality, I was able to use the concept mapping that Librarian Martin had introduced to our class to connect different ideas and topics and formulate my thesis. By concept mapping, I could easily see the relationships connecting the antiquated theory and Trump's modern-day real rhetoric and actions. For example, instead of viewing Trump's handshakes with other world leaders as a form of heteronormative power struggle as commonly portrayed by the media, these

handshakes could be read as a modern variant of Victorian-era male-male intimacy. I had finally found my “spicy” subject for my “spicy” paper.

Through the Looking Glass: Donald Trump, Heteronormativity and Homosociality

What happens when Donald Trump is examined without heteronormative assumptions?

One would assume that Trump, due to his hyper-hetero-masculine rhetoric and actions, would be the pinnacle of heteronormativity; however, many things he says and does deviate from the set archetype. While the media characterize those deviations as examples of Trump being a homosexual, I find that characterization troubling not only because of how it devalues queerness, but it also is just not accurate; instead, I believe that those deviations mark Trump as being homosocial, which is a more accurate and less problematic descriptor.

The *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* defines heteronormativity as the “pervasive and invisible norms of heterosexuality (sexual desire exclusively for the opposite sex) embedded as a normative principle in social institutions and theory; those who fall outside this standard are devalued” (“Heteronormativity” 470). Trump appears to perpetuate heteronormativity through his actions and rhetoric. He previously owned Miss USA, Miss Teen USA, and Miss Universe, events which graded young women on how well they perform cis-heteronormative gender roles (Bachrach). He has five children from three wives, with two of those wives being former mistresses (Sinclair). He openly boasted on live television about the size of his hands and penis in a 2016 Republican primary debate (Kreig). He released records of his high levels of testosterone on *The Dr. Oz Show* while not releasing his tax returns (de Moraes). He bragged that he was able to “just start kissing [beautiful women]. It's like a magnet. Just kiss. I don't even wait. And when you're a star they let you do it. You can do anything ... Grab them by the pussy. You can do anything” (“Transcript”). These are all examples of how

Trump's performance of gender meets all of society's assumptions of hyper-heteronormative-masculinity. One would assume that he therefore could not be queer in any way.

Trump also used heteronormative language while campaigning in order to justify his anti-migrant policies and mobilize his base against migrant communities. After he first rode down the escalator of Trump Tower on June 16, 2015, Trump began his campaign by saying Mexican migrants were "bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people" (Reilly). This quote, along with him later calling the migrants "bad hombres," portrayed immigrants as "a sensational and sexualized threat against a vulnerable nation" by characterizing Mexican migrants as men coming to rape and murder the feminine United States ("Bad Hombres?"; Lechuga 327). In his acceptance speech at the 2016 Republican National Convention, he continued to feminize the nation by invoking the death of "Kate Steinle, a young White woman who was shot by Juan Francisco Lopez-Sanchez, an unauthorized migrant from Mexico," and the effect it had on her children (Lechuga 327). He made Steinle and her family the symbol of immigrant violence, thereby centering the discussion around the heteronormative family unit and centering himself as the masculine savior figure.

Due to his heteronormative language, Trump became the exemplary hetero-masculine figure and a signifier for masculinity for his base. They supported him due to the promise to "make men 'great again' too, both fist-pounding, gun-toting guy-guys and high-flying entrepreneurs. To white, native-born, heterosexual men he offered a solution to the dilemma they had long faced as the 'left-behinds' of the 1960s and 1970s celebration of other identities" (Pascoe 125). As the global economy and politics changed over the past decades, those changes have led to the decline of the presence of masculinity. Trump's "Great America" harkens back to

an overwhelmingly white, heteronormative, and masculine America; therefore, to not support Trump is akin to not supporting masculinity. His supporters made memes “implying that those who don’t vote for Trump are ‘sissies,’ ‘fags,’ or ‘without balls’” (Smirnova). The corollary of this was that by supporting Trump, they also served to reaffirm their own masculinity and reassure themselves of their own manliness.

After his supporters voted him to power, Trump transformed his use of heteronormative language into policies that sought to erase and devalue queer people. As soon as Trump was sworn, his administration deleted former Secretary of State’s formal apology for the “Lavender Scare” in the 1950s and 60s from the Department of State website (O’hara). His administration then went on to remove questions about sexual orientation and gender identity from the 2020 census, not recognize Pride Month, and push to replace the idea of gender identity with the more biologically essentialist definition of “sex” at the United Nations (Borger; Gardner; Lopez). These actions erased the existence of the queer community in the eyes of the government. He also appointed many anti-LGBTQIA+ candidates to high-ranking positions, such as Vice President Mike Pence, former Attorney General Jeff Sessions, Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Ben Carson, Justice Neil Gorsuch, Justice Brett Kavanaugh, Director Roger Severino, James Renne, and Carl Higbie (“Donald”; “Timeline”). Transgender people specifically have faced hostility and overt discrimination under his administration, as exemplified by his proposed reinstatement on the ban preventing transgender people from serving in the US military, his administration’s reversal of Obama-era Title IX protections for transgender students, and his administration’s support of “bathroom bills” that seek to limit gender-neutral bathrooms (“Timeline”).

However, despite how his supporters put him on a pedestal for his aggressively heteronormative language and actions, behind closed doors, Trump deviates from invulnerable hyper-heteronormative-masculinity. From the alleged incident in the Moscow Ritz-Carlton Hotel where he hired two prostitutes to urinate on the bed where former President Obama had stayed to his alleged adulterous relationship with Stormy Daniels where she spanked him with a *Forbes* magazine featuring his family on the cover, Trump has diverged from normative sexuality (Aggeler; Friedman). If even Trump cannot fit the strict heteronormative criteria, it seems like a fallacy to believe that anyone would be able to do so, yet society continues to perpetuate the idea; thus, by removing heteronormative assumptions and viewing Trump's rhetoric and actions through a homosocial lens, it reveals how both Trump and society construct and perform gendered relationships, dominance, sexual behavior, and masculinity.

His deviant attitude extends past sexual acts to how he talks about President Vladimir Putin of Russia. Starting June 18, 2013, long before his campaign began, he asked Twitter if "Putin will be going to The Miss Universe Pageant in November in Moscow - if so, will he become my new best friend?" (@realDonaldTrump, "Miss Universe"). Before he took office, Trump repeatedly praised Putin, saying things in 2014 such as, "When I went to Russia with the Miss Universe pageant, he contacted me and was so nice," and "he's done an amazing job of taking the mantle. ... And so smart. ... And he really goes step by step by step, and you have to give him a lot of credit" (Kaczynski et al.). It would be expected that two such hetero- masculine figures from two opposing countries would butt heads; instead, Trump's admiration of Putin goes beyond just having similar ideologies.

While Trump praised Putin in 2014, at the same time he was critical of Obama's handling of Putin, so one would assume that a hyper-hetero-masculine figure like him would aggressively oppose Putin instead of capitulating to him in any way. When Obama was in office, Trump said and tweeted things such as "Putin has eaten Obama's lunch, therefore our lunch, for a long period of time," "I believe Putin will continue to rebuild the Russian Empire. He has zero respect for Obama or the U.S.!", "Putin is having a great time toying with the President," and "Putin has shown the world what happens when America has weak leaders. Peace Through Strength!" (@realDonaldTrump, "Russian Empire"; @realDonaldTrump, "weak leaders"; Trump, "lunch"; Trump, "Bundy"). These statements emphasize that Putin was disrespecting and taking advantage of not only Obama but also America as a whole, continuing his metaphor of the feminized, vulnerable nation.

While Trump praised Putin in 2014, at the same time he was critical of Obama's handling of Putin, so one would assume that a hyper-hetero-masculine figure like him would aggressively oppose Putin instead of capitulating to him in any way. When he met with Putin in Helsinki last year, Trump, who is known for his bluster and aggressive handshakes when it comes to meeting other foreign leaders, instead opted to side with Putin over American intelligence agencies on whether Russia hacked the 2016 Presidential election, saying "President Putin says it's not Russia. I will say this, I don't see any reason why it would be, but I really want to see the server but, I have confidence in both parties." (qtd. in Holpuch and Weaver). This statement deviates from heteronormative assumptions of masculinity, because Trump opted not to take a more aggressive approach, and since he failed to meet the set norms of heterosexual masculinity, the media marginalized him for it.

The media often criticize Trump's submissiveness and lack of masculinity in relation to Putin by depicting Trump and Putin as gay lovers. The Helsinki meeting between Trump and Putin led to the *New York Times*' publishing a cartoon titled "Trump and Putin: A Love Story." The description of the video states that: "In this episode of Trump Bites, Donald Trump's not-so-secret admiration for Vladimir Putin plays out in a teenager's bedroom, where the fantasies of this forbidden romance come to life" (Plympton). It depicted "the shirtless men [kissing] passionately, [riding] unicorns through fields of rainbows and [daydreaming] about one another over pink and purple landscapes," but the media's attack on Trump's masculinity by representing him as a gay man did not just stop at the Helsinki summit (Loken).

After Trump initially canceled his summit with North Korea's Kim Jong Un, The Washington Post's David Ignatius called Trump's cancellation notice a "breakup letter" and concluded that he "writes in the tone of a wounded suitor." After the summit, the Boston Globe printed a cartoon that featured Trump and Kim sharing a milkshake and writing love letters against a backdrop of hearts, a unicorn and a rainbow. The cartoon asks, "Will it be true love or just a ... 'Singapore fling?'" (Loken)

In an opening monologue for *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, Colbert disparaged Trump using emasculating language by calling him "Vladimir Putin's cock holster," for which he has since half-heartily apologized (Colbert; Sims). On *Saturday Night Live*, however, Alec Baldwin and Beck Bennett continue to portray Trump and Putin's romantic relationship (Fallon). While the media attempt to ridicule Trump through this rhetoric by preying on his homophobia and using it against him, the rhetoric they use is harmful because it entrenches heteronormative ideas in American society. These supposedly liberal media sources' use of homosexual relationships as

a metaphor for political submission and weakness serves to reify heteronormative assumptions. Trump, by deviating from normative gender roles, therefore must also be submitting himself to Putin in a homosexual relationship, a crime that makes him inferior or less than. Equating homosexuality with something undesirable or something to be ashamed of is an incredibly homophobic concept in and of itself, but since the media also equate homosexuality with effeminacy—meaning it is contemptible for a man to lower himself to the same level as a woman—it is also incredibly sexist as well.

Even when the media report on a more balanced relationship between Trump and a male leader, it has connotations of romantic or sexual attraction. The *New York Times* characterized Macron's state visit to the White House as a "bromance," stating "the couple seemed to be happy together again" and that "their body language went beyond the usual respectful handshakes of two world leaders meeting for high-level talks and bordered on the intimate" (Davis and Rogers). It should be noted that the term 'bromance' seeks to challenge and disrupt heteronormative masculine assumptions by allowing heterosexual male-male intimacy (Sargent). The bromance is not a relationship of domination and subjugation that is coded in the media's representation of homosexuality, but one of admiration and mutual respect even if they do not agree on the issues. Nevertheless, I am skeptical of the words due to the connotations of men still needing to overperform masculinity by adding the prefix "bro-" in order to not be perceived as gay.

Thus, here I begin to explore Trump's queerness through the lens of homosociality. Trump is queer not because he is sexually or romantically attracted to men—we have no evidence which suggests that to be true—but that his gender performance sometimes deviates from society's assumptions of masculinity. While the media often immediately take those

deviations and frame them as evidence of homosexuality, a more nuanced view into male-male relationships would suggest that Trump has homosocial tendencies. The *Encyclopedia of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender History in America* describes homosociality as:

a way of life common in Victorian America that isolated men and women into "separate spheres." The word has been most influentially redirected by the critic Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick to emphasize the continuum between homosocial institutions and homosexual desire ... While these spaces reinforced patriarchy and often bred misogyny, they sometimes also generated bonds of deep affection and physical intimacy between men.

(Creekmur 51)

It should be noted that this term is primarily used by historians when discussing pre-French Revolution same-sex relations as not to be anachronistic by ascribing contemporary gender roles onto same-gender relationships, but I feel it apt to co-opt this term in order to explore contemporary male-male relations, because homosociality shows the possibility of moving “beyond the rigid categories of sexual identification that were imposed in the nineteenth century on hitherto more fluid behaviors and identities” (Klosowska 710; Sponsler 712). While being homosocial does not necessarily disprove the “the existence of same-sex desires, performance of same-sex acts, or existence of same-sex couples ... even in the twenty-first century, sex acts are only the tip of the iceberg; desires and emotions fill far more cultural space ... than acts” (Klosowska 711). Currently, being a homosexual is seen as the only valid form of queerness. This immediate assumption of homosexuality at any sign of gender non-conformity is a clear sign of homonormativity— an extension of heteronormativity that seeks to include primarily cisgender, cisnormative, white, gay men in the norm as the only “normal” type of queerness at

the expense of devaluing and delegitimizing the diversity of gender and sexual performances (Brown 1496-1497; Hawthorne and Auga 367). This is violent erasure of the rest of the queer spectrum (such as bi-, pan-, ace-, and other sexualities, romanticisms, affectivities, and expressions) which showcase the different forms and intersectionalities of intimacy possible. “The three terms [of homoeroticism, homosociality, and homoaffectivity] divide the multidirectional conglomerate of same-sex relations into the fields of erotic, social, and effective affinity. The three are not mutually exclusive; they overlap and are sometimes used interchangeably” (Klosowska 710). This explains why the media, when faced with Trump’s deviation from normative sexuality, immediately constructs his actions and rhetoric as examples of homosexuality.

Looking at Trump through the lens of homosociality reveals not only a lot about his rhetoric around Putin but also his relationships with other male leaders. Trump’s affinity for Putin may not be caused by a romantic or sexual desire, but instead a simple desire for companionship. Trump attended the all-male New York Military Academy growing up, a prime example of a homosocial environment, and he gets along the best with other leaders who come from similarly homosocial, male-dominated spheres, such as Putin, Prime Minister Shinzō Abe of Japan, President Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkey, Chairman Kim Jong Un of North Korea, King Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud of Saudi Arabia, and President Xi Jinping of China (Creekmur 51; Delk; Ertan; Garcia 56; Hawkins 36, Healey 510-511, Ismail 261, Malsin; McCurry; Miller; Seib; Watts; Wei 1670; Wiseman; Yi 64). However, he also gets along well with President Emmanuel Macron of France even though the two men disagree on the things such as Iran Nuclear Deal (Davis and Rogers). When they met, Trump even went so far as to say, “I like him a lot” and that “he is perfect” (Davis and Rogers).

Homosociality also explains why Trump, in contrast with his relationships with male leaders, does not get along well with female leaders. One would assume that since Prime Minister Theresa May of the United Kingdom and Trump both lead two increasingly nativist countries, they would get along, but when it comes to even conservative-leaning female leaders, Trump is often critical. This is shown through his attack on May's Brexit proposal as well as his suggestion that no one would vote for fellow Republican candidate Carly Fiorina because of "that face. Would anyone vote for that?" (Lawler; O'Connor).

Trump's homosocial tendencies explain how Trump's handshakes differ in regard to men and women. While the media frame Trump's strange, long, jerky handshakes as Trump struggling to establish dominance, they may instead be a modern-day manifestation of Victorian intimacy (Vesoulis). "[W]hen women began to enter these spaces in the first decades of the twentieth century ... [t]he sentimental relations that characterized Victorian male friendship were then renegotiated and repressed, so that firm, brief handshakes came to replace the hand-holding common among earlier male friends" (Creekmur 51). Trump uses his handshakes to strengthen his bonds with other male leaders. Trump shook Abe's hand for nineteen seconds (Fanner). He shook Macron's for twenty-nine seconds, and they kissed each other on the cheek (Cillizza, "Trump-Macron"; Davis and Rogers). When reporters asked Trump and Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany to shake hands, however, he acted much colder and even initially refused after she offered (Cillizza, "Merkel-Trump"). While Trump's handshakes are aggressive acts of intimacy, they still are acts of intimacy all the same, as homosocial gestures can take many forms "from handshakes, hugging, kissing, and caressing to backslapping, punches, and blows. Some of these gestures appear tender, even cuddly, while some seem harsh and brutal" (Kaplan 583). The aggressiveness of his handshakes exemplifies a specifically masculine form of intimacy.

Beyond his professional relationships, the pattern of male intimacy and female distance extends into his personal life. While Trump often touts the attractiveness of his wife Melania, there appears to be little emotional attachment. The *Washington Post* reports that they neither share a bed or meals together (Jordan et al.). Rather than stay with his wife at the White House, Trump appears to prefer to spend time with male companions such as Bruce Moskowitz, Ike Perlmutter, and Marc Sherman at Mar-a-Lago in Florida (Arnsdorf). This is because a tenant of homosocial behavior is that “male-male friendships take priority over male-female relations” (Flood). While he was apparently too “busy to be running out looking for presents [on Melania’s birthday], OK? But I got her a beautiful card and some beautiful flowers,” he was apparently not too busy to call in to *Fox & Friends* for a half-hour-long interview in order to discuss various other topics: he dismissed Dr. Ronny Jackson’s withdrawal of his nomination to lead the Department of Veterans Affairs, threatened various political opponents such as Senator Jon Tester of Montana and former FBI Director James Comey, praised Kanye West, and threw Michael Cohen under the bus (Trump, “Exclusive”). Even on Melania’s special day, Trump felt more comfortable discussing male associates and enemies.

Trump turns his wife into a commodity where he uses her for her beauty while not emotionally connecting with her. Trump’s commodification of women such as Melania stem from all-male spaces such as aboard an Access Hollywood bus. These all-male spaces are breeding grounds for misogyny, but also homosociality. Masculinity is “homosocial enactment,” where masculinity is performed in front of and granted by other men (Kimmel 87). While men desire approval, companionship, and a sense of belonging, they refuse to talk about their feelings due to homophobic idea that “other men will unmask us, emasculate us, reveal to us and the world that we do not measure up, that we are not real men”; instead, men bond by competing

against one another (Kimmel 88; Norman 932). They compete by improving their position in masculine social hierarchies through “markers of manhood” (Kimmel 87). These markers include “wealth, power, status, [and] sexy women” (Kimmel 87). “Heterosexual sex itself can be the medium through which male bonding is enacted. ... Men’s sexual storytelling is shaped by homosocial masculine cultures” (Flood). So, when Trump tells Billy Bush a story of how he can easily sexually assault women, it is an act of homosocial bonding where Trump uses women as a currency in order to position himself higher on the masculine hierarchy.

By queering Trump, the man who at face value appears to his followers to fit all the criteria of a hyper-hetero-normative figure, society can begin to deconstruct heteronormativity by erasing the distinctions between the queer and the normative, and it can examine how masculinity is contingent and performed. The best way to achieve this goal is by using the lens of homosociality to analyze Trump instead of homosexuality, because not only is it more accurate and, thus, explains his actions and rhetoric more fully, but it also does not serve to disparage the rest of the queer community by demeaning homosexuality.

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Reflective Topic Concept Map

