
Threading the Narrative: A Critical Discourse Analysis of LGBTQ+ Resistance to Heteronormativity Through Textile Arts

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Abstract

This critical discourse analysis explores how the act of creating textile art combats the erasure of LGBTQ+ narratives and experiences. In response to the confining power structure of heteronormativity, queer artists subvert and reshape traditional textile arts and crafts to resist heteronormative narrative dominance. By deeply reading three textile art pieces created by queer artists and examining heteronormativity as a power structure, this research aims to understand how textile arts can be a form of resistance. Through imagery, colour, materials, and practices, these textile art pieces authentically communicate queer narratives around love, sex, and marriage to challenge traditional heteronormative values.

Introduction

Heteronormativity facilitates the erasure of queer voices and experiences by treating heterosexuality and heterosexual value systems as the correct or default mode of living. Even as queer voices emerge through trendy diversity initiatives, as a lesbian, I've been asked about my boyfriend or husband countless times, and when my wife and I bought our wedding rings together, the jeweller assumed we were best friends having a double wedding with our respective grooms. As the acceptable dominant narrative in society, in the past and often present, "normal" people and their families' lives are structured around cis heterosexuality. In a heteronormative society, a man and woman raise "normal" kids who they assume are heterosexual unless they are revealed to not be in an elaborate coming-out confession. Traditional textile arts or crafts, such as sewing, knitting, quilting, embroidery, cross stitching, and a myriad of others, are commonly associated with old-fashioned, heteronormative ideals. Textile arts call to mind grandmotherly homemakers bound to heteronormative ways of life and conformist creative methods.

Making and queerness are connected – in a world that doesn't see and represent you, you learn to make things for yourself. Existing, creating, building a home, and taking care of people you love are all private forms of activism under the constraints of heteronormativity. Although quiet, it is innately rebellious to subvert a traditional practice by exerting the time and effort to create something tactile, often by hand, that tells a story that was and is regularly overwritten by dominant narratives.

This paper aims to answer the research question: how have queer people used textile arts as a form of resistance to heteronormativity as the dominant narrative? The following critical discourse analysis investigates how queer textile artists privately resist heteronormativity by creating art that reflects their realities through a deep reading of three works. By examining heteronormativity as a power construct and highlighting creation as an act of resistance, this

research shifts the critical paradigm of recognizing power inequities to both acknowledging inequity and resisting the dominant narrative.

Limitations

This research is limited to a small sample size to provide a greater depth of analysis. A larger sample size with broader categories of textile arts could increase the research's reliability. Increasing the scope to include discourses about gender's intersection with sexuality would benefit the research's comprehensiveness due to their inextricable nature. It is important to note that the samples feature little word-based text, so explorations of themes are limited to my understanding of visual symbols. The lack of word-based text also diminishes research tools typically used in a critical discourse analysis pertaining to language (e.g., quotes, vocabulary, grammar, and other linguistic devices directly embedded in the text), and such analytic methods need adaptation.

Definitions

For the purposes of this research, the following terms are defined as:

Queer. A member of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) community, inclusive of other community subsets not listed in the acronym. This term is used interchangeably with LGBTQ+ in this paper.

Textile Arts. Artistic practice that uses fibre-based materials, typically created through handmade methods, including but not limited to knitting, quilting, sewing, and embroidery.

Textile Artist. Anyone who uses textiles in their art practice. This term is used interchangeably with crafter at times to reflect the accessible nature of textile arts originating in domestic and amateur spaces.

Literature Review

Most existing literature on marginalized groups resisting dominant narratives through textile arts focuses on women, with limited scholarly studies on LGBTQ+ people specifically. The following sources are closely adjacent, researching craft and domesticity, self-actualization, and activism.

This research paper is heavily inspired by the concepts Hackney (2013) introduced in "Quiet Activism and the New Amateur: The Power of Home and Hobby Crafts." Hackney (2013) explores the devaluation of historically feminized work (e.g., sewing, embroidery, knitting) as amateur and textile crafts' significant attributes, such as being radically unruly and lacking institutional support. These attributes make textile crafting accessible for marginalized groups to engage with as a creative practice. Hackney (2013) argues that crafting has evolved from its traditional connotations into a subversive counterculture that challenges consumerism and gives crafters storytelling agency and experimental freedom. Crafting provides a method for "alternative values and ways of living [to] be imagined and shared, and practical examples for change [to be] defined and materialized" (Hackney, 2013, p. 187). Instead of rejecting traditional narratives about who creates textile arts and in what context, modern crafters are reshaping history by respecting and reinventing textile arts (Hackney, 2013).

“Whip Your Hobby into Shape: Knitting, Feminism, and Construction of Gender” (Myzelev, 2009) and “Lesbian Knitting: From Self-Sufficiency to Self-Representation” (Medhurst, 2022) echo similar sentiments regarding textile arts as a method for self-representation, reclaiming time in a busy society, and subverting gender and sexuality stereotypes about textile arts.

In “Interstitial Spaces: Visual Culture, Domesticity, and Metaphor,” an analysis of lesbian artist Allison Buenger’s work, the concept of personal possessions being metaphorical representations that can connect “private spaces” to “larger systems of habitation” and the relationship between critical discourses about sexuality and “domestic spaces, activities, and their implications” are explored (Sanders & Buenger, 2010, p. 181, 183). These ideas are interesting in relation to this research paper, as the samples also explore themes of domesticity and objects as metaphors for societal and self-determined narratives.

Other literature suggests that creating textile arts can be a form of queer community building and grassroots activism. In the past, “The AIDS Memorial Quilt as Cultural Resistance for Gay Communities” (Krouse, 1994) explores *The AIDS Memorial Quilt* as a response to stigmatizing discourses about homosexuality by using imagery that counters these narratives and facilitates a collective experience to aid the reconstruction of gay identity during and after the AIDS epidemic. More recently, “#Quiltsforpulse: connected and shared socio-political activism through craftivism” analyzes the public quilting initiative/social media phenomenon that created approximately 1700 quilts shared with survivors, first responders, and family members affected by the shooting at the Floridian gay night club Pulse in 2016 (Keune et al., 2022). Although different from this research paper because these two articles focus on community initiatives, these works are important to understanding where textile arts fit in the landscape of this discourse.

All articles explore ways that textile arts have been used in response to immediate physical and long-term ideological tragedies rooted in systemic heteronormativity. The first three describe personal forms of quiet, everyday resistance, while the others describe impassioned community initiatives as resistance to injustice. This research paper connects these articles’ conceptualizations of quiet activism and textile arts to queer resistance specifically.

Methodology

This research is conducted as a critical discourse analysis (CDA) based on Mullet’s General Analytic Framework for CDA (2018). As there is no singular method for critical discourse analysis, the General Analytic Framework for CDA combines key processes and principles from different approaches into a flexible framework (Mullet, 2018). This framework includes selecting samples related to the chosen discourse and analyzing their internal and external relations to social/historical contexts to interpret overarching themes. Because critical discourse analysis examines societal power structures and their resulting inequities, it is the ideal method to investigate how queer textile artists (i.e. crafters) craft as resistance to dominant narratives. The aim of critical discourse analysis is to “enable people to emancipate themselves from domination through reflection and self-awareness” (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p. 7), which aligns with the purpose of this research.

Data Collection

Three textile arts are purposively selected as the sample for this critical discourse analysis. These pieces are chosen because they are created by queer artists, challenge heteronormativity, and convey a sense of intimacy because of their functional role in everyday domestic life. Traditional textile arts are linked to the home and domesticity, so it is fitting to explore how these tropes are subverted by queer textile artists. Purposive sampling is an important aspect of the critical discourse analysis method because it ensures relevance to the context and research objectives, guaranteeing that the selected power-related discourse is explored. The first sample, McIntosh's *The Couch* (2014), is a colonial-revival couch upholstered with quilted digital textile prints of romance novels and gay erotica. The remaining samples are marriage-related quilts; Wilson's *Traditional Queer Double Wedding Ring Quilt* (2009) and Rother's *Untitled Proposal Quilt* (2014) are composed of repurposed garments and cotton. *The Couch* (McIntosh, 2014) and *Traditional Queer Double Wedding Ring Quilt* (Wilson, 2009) were discovered in the exhibition book *Queer Threads: Crafting Identity and Community* (Chaich & Oldham, 2017). *Untitled Proposal Quilt* (Rother, 2014) was sourced through the artist's personal Instagram post¹ reminiscing on her proposal quilt during her five-year wedding anniversary. Although critical discourse analyses commonly examine word-based (speech or written text) samples, this research applies the same relational power discourse analysis to visual representations.

Data Analysis

First, the concept of heteronormativity is explored as a dominating narrative that works to silence queer voices and experiences. Then, the samples undergo a deep reading to explore their role as a response to heteronormativity and examine common themes between the texts.

Discussion

Heteronormativity as the Dominant Narrative

The term "heteronormativity" was first coined by Michael Warner in the introduction to his book *Fear of a Queer Planet* in 1991. Heteronormativity is an oppressive societal structure that normalizes and privileges heterosexuality as default, maintaining traditional family structures and belief systems that reinforce the status quo and uphold other systems (e.g., economic and political) that benefit from established norms (Warner, 1991). Heteronormativity is at the root of many issues many queer people face, such as stigmatization, lack of representation (or inaccurate misrepresentation), invisibility, violent discrimination, and structural biases (e.g., laws, policies, educational curricula). Under heteronormativity, homosexuality is viewed as deviance in need of correction. Up until 1973, homosexuality was considered a mental disorder according to the American Psychiatric Association Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (Drescher, 2015). If not an ailment, homosexuality is an alternative lifestyle, designating queer people as "other." From media to gender roles and legal rights, heteronormativity is a confinement.

¹ Note: This Instagram account was publicly accessible during the research period but has since been set to private.

Traditional Queer Double Wedding Ring Quilt



Figure 1.0



Figure 1.1

Traditional Queer Double Wedding Ring Quilt, Birds-Eye View. Traditional Queer Double Wedding Ring Quilt, Magnified.

Created through community and family quilting bees, wedding quilts were gifted to brides to celebrate their marriage and as a reminder of their impending responsibilities for domestic labour in the home (Joachim, 2022). These quilts were often passed down generationally (Joachim, 2022). The traditional pattern, the Double Wedding Ring, was popularized in America throughout the 1920s, but the first uses date back to the 19th century (AccuQuilt, 2017). The interlocking rings mimic the couple's wedding rings and symbolize eternal love and commitment (AccuQuilt, 2017).

Wilson's *Traditional Queer Double Wedding Ring Quilt* (Figures 1.0 & 1.1) is her interpretation of a traditional Double Wedding Ring quilt. While using the traditional pattern, Wilson subtly uses sapphic imagery (vaginas) in the rings' negative space. The contrast between and combination of traditional concepts of love and commitment with desire suggests a reality wherein all three are available for queer people. In an interview with Julia Bryan-Wilson in *Queer Threads: Crafting Identity and Community* (Chaich & Oldman, 2017), Wilson said:

The [*Traditional Queer Double Wedding Ring Quilt*] is composed of lingerie, bed sheets, and fuzzy sweaters, all in reds, pinks, and flesh tones, to highlight the sensual/sexual function of this nuptial as a bed covering. So many of the "traditional" wedding quilts I've seen are so prude and sterile in their colour palates. ...Typically, the interlocking marriage rings are what is in the foreground, but I had to flip it, to break from the shackles of heteronormative conformity. I made the negative spaces – the vaginal open spaces – the focal points.

Wilson subverts the heterosexual, patriarchal undertones of a traditional wedding quilt through colour, material, and sapphic imagery. Considering that marriage is a historically heterosexual institution, with same-sex marriage being legal in only 34 countries as of December 2023 (Pew

Research Centre, 2023), the *Traditional Queer Double Wedding Ring Quilt* reshapes the narrative around the importance of marriage and what it should and can look like.

Untitled Proposal Quilt



Figure 2.0
Untitled Proposal Quilt.

Grace Rother's (2014) *Untitled Proposal Quilt* (Figure 2.0) is another modern interpretation of a wedding quilt, serving instead as a marriage proposal for her wife. This interpretation subverts traditional marriage narratives by wholeheartedly exercising the right to participate in a modern, inclusive version of marriage. Rather than receiving the quilt externally (with implied approval and well-wishes) from a family member, Rother exercises agency by creating it herself. As a gift to her wife, the quilt symbolizes the promise to build a comfortable home together. Instead of using a traditional pattern, Rother boldly proclaims her proposal with the text "WILL YOU MARRY ME?" in combination with rainbow (LGBTQ+ symbolism) fabric on the reverse side of the quilt. In Rother's now private Instagram post sharing the quilt, she says that the "gut feeling that pushed [her] to start [the quilt] continues to be affirmed daily," cementing the quilt as a symbol of a life milestone that elicits queer joy (2019). Creating affirmative art as an act of love is a powerful resistance to heteronormativity, even on an individual scale.

The Couch



Figure 3
The Couch.

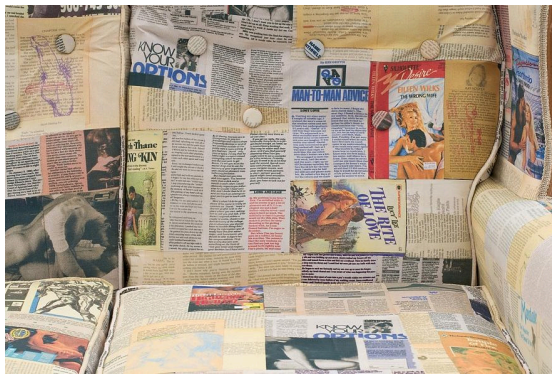


Figure 3.1
The Couch, Cushion.



Figure 3.2
The Couch, Bottom Right.

McIntosh's *The Couch* (2014) reimagines a vintage Colonial-Revival couch as an expression of queer desire and fantasy in the form of a functional object. The juxtaposition between the traditional couch style and homoerotic texts alongside heterosexual texts normalizes sexual experiences and fantasies across the spectrum; all of them can exist and have existed at the same time. McIntosh describes the couch as having “no hierarchy or dominant sexuality—it charts the known and unknown territories of [his] personal desire, which has been informed by a variety of gendered and sexual experiences” (n.d). *The Couch* (2014) challenges heteronormativity by celebrating and normalizing a patchwork of experiences that are equally valid and visible, countering narratives that queer sex is unnatural or deviant.

Themes

Repurposed Materials

All samples of this study are entirely composed of repurposed/vintage materials. The use of repurposed materials reflects the artists' intentions to reimagine traditional materials and practices associated with heteronormative systems to create new realities for themselves.

Comfort

All samples are objects intended to provide comfort functionally and emotionally. Quilts and couches are cozy and relaxing physically, but the act of creating something is also comforting. The *Untitled Proposal Quilt* is a continual source of comfort and happy memories, showing that queer people can resist heteronormativity by living and loving to the fullest.

Reimagining the Home

Although each sample is a functional domestic object (i.e., quilts and furniture) by design, it is interesting to consider how the creation of objects rooted in traditional domestic practices can be used to subvert heteronormative narratives. People's homes and objects reflect their values; homes witness small moments that combine to build life. Experiencing the home as a place of safety, warmth, and comfort and then using agency to create items that reflect identity is a wonderful resistance method.

Sexual Imagery

The Couch and *Traditional Queer Double Wedding Ring Quilt* address queer love and desire with sexual imagery to varying degrees. *Traditional Queer Double Wedding Ring Quilt's* sexual imagery is subtle, suggesting queer sexuality may be overlooked but is ever-present regardless. *The Couch* is more overt; it normalizes and revels in queerness, positioning queer sexual imagery as equal to heterosexual sexual imagery.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Although community initiatives and activism are important, resistance can look different than waving signs at a protest or signing petitions. It is also about subverting dominant narratives and establishing a sense of self through creativity. It is finding comfort in a home you have made for yourself and taking care of people you love. How do queer people resist dominant narratives through textile arts? Through a deep reading of *Traditional Queer Double Wedding Ring*, *Untitled Proposal Quilt*, and *The Couch*, queer textile artists have quietly and courageously opposed heteronormativity as the dominant narrative. Through colour, method, material and imagery, queer artists can create objects that excite their hearts and authentically reflect their realities. In the context of existing literature, this research seeks to connect the modern reemergence of crafting culture as a subversion of tradition with queer resistance. Prior research has not focused on LGBTQ+ communities specifically in relation to this concept. As for future scope, an expanded reading of different forms of textile arts (outside of quilts and upholstery) would further illuminate imagery and practices used for resistance. To leverage different modes of resistance, further exploring how quiet activism and community initiatives can work in tandem would also be of interest.

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