Queer Resistance Through Multi-Platformed Storytelling

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Check, Please! is a multimedia comic by author Ngozi Ukazu following Eric "Bitty" Bittle's time in college as a queer hockey athlete. It navigates parallel experiences of coming out both in college and in a professional athletic league. The comic began in 2013 as a multi-platform series where expansions of the story and lore are told through Bitty's Twitter account and the comic's Tumblr blog via segments such as "Ask a Wellie!" and "Hockey Shit with Ransom and Holster". Ukazu self-published the comic online using the blogging platform, Tumblr, and later transitioned to webcomic host, Hiveworks. She successfully launched three Kickstarters to independently print volumes of *Check, Please!* before officially publishing under First Second Books in 2018. This essay focuses only on the series' content posted online, and notates the illustrated comic by year and episode (e.g., Year One, Episode One is written as "Ukazu 1.01").[1] It will also reference Bitty's Twitter to further contextualize the work.

With a gay protagonist and a focus on contemporary queer issues, *Check, Please!* is regarded specifically as a *queer* story as opposed to a *sports* story. It situates itself firmly within the 'gay ghetto' genre, in contrast to queer alternative comics, though it also uses techniques of queer alternative comics. These techniques, supplemented by the webcomic format, demonstrate the comic's queer resistance. By combining different platforms and comic practices, Ukazu offers a mode of storytelling through which to create a nuanced queer narrative.

Check, Please! can be categorized as a gay ghetto comic. Sina Shamsavari defines 'gay ghetto' in contrast to alternative queer comics: "The more traditional gay ghetto comics... tend to reinforce the dominant gay habitus, while the alternative gay comics... tend to define themselves against this dominant gay habitus as much as they do against 'heterosexual' mainstream culture, and to participate in the construction of an alternative gay—or queer—habitus."[2] Set in Samwell University and located in the fictional town of Samwell, Massachusetts, *Check, Please!* immediately demonstrates aspects of the gay ghetto. "Gay ghetto comic strips and cartoons are often set in a recognizably 'gay' location—one of the well-known gay urban enclaves in major (usually American) cities."[3] Samwell is known to have a large queer population: "Ahhh, 1 and 4 or more? Like 1 out of every 4 students here identifies as gay. Oh, Samwell."[4] In addition to being a liberal college known for being queer-friendly, Samwell is also located close to both Providence, Rhode Island and Boston, Massachusetts. Both cities are known to be more accepting towards queer people, especially in comparison to the American South where Bitty is from. This exemplifies the gay ghetto location: "The characters in these gay micro-communities ultimately are represented as being very much 'at home' with one another... Sometimes 'home' is meant quite literally, since the characters in these strips often share a home with one another as flatmates..."[5] Moreover, a majority of the narrative takes place in the Haus: the hockey team's fraternity. By having the characters living together in a fraternity environment, the comic's setting further supports the gay ghetto genre.

The characters and comic aesthetic also situate *Check, Please!* in the gay ghetto category. "They feature gay men who are for the most part young, white, and middle-class and conventionally attractive and fashionable in accordance with the dominant gay trends."[6] Additionally, gay ghetto "references to stereotypically 'gay' locations, slang, 'types' and cultural products serve as signifiers for the gayness of the characters as well as indicating a specific kind of dominant gay habitus at a certain point in time."[7] In summary, gay ghetto comics feature the following aspects: middle-class, young, white men and 'stereotypical' gay aesthetics. Bitty, the main protagonist, follows these characteristics almost uniformly as exemplified in the episode *Moved-In*. This single episode reaffirms several of Bitty's interests such as baking, house decorating, and female musical artists like Beyoncé. These interests may be considered 'traditionally'

feminine—especially in comparison to the rest of Bitty's hypermasculine teammates—
and signify stereotypes associated with young gay men.

Finally, many of the comic's themes further position itself as gay ghetto: "discomfort often revolves around the characters' issues around body image, beauty and sexual confidence."[8] These discomforts and insecurities are prevalent in Bitty's tweets: "The entire time I'm trying to work in: 'oh, I play *hockey* now. With guys twice my size. Very dangerous. Goodness, I'm such a bro.'"[9] Bitty later responds to the tweet's reply: "I try so hard to bro and I fail so hard."[10] In addition to trying to qualify himself as a male hockey player, Bitty also expresses his failings to conform to masculine expectations. He laments his physique as well: "All hockey boys have magnificent butts, m'dear. ;) (Except for me. I'm still waiting for a visit from the Baby-Got-Back fairy.)"[11] Bitty's body image issues further emphasize gay ghetto discomfort. As a result, the comic may be classified as gay ghetto, rather than an alternative queer comic.

However, *Check, Please!* still displays forms of queer resistance against dominant gay narratives prevalent both within queer comics and mainstream gay culture. Bitty is the main protagonist and one of the confirmed queer characters within the whole comic. He identifies as a gay man: "So, come on, Bits—what's your type?" "Men." When Bitty comes out, he reveals that he was deeply in the closet due to the homophobic, hypermasculine culture he was surrounded by: "Maybe I was scared, you know? I haven't had the best experiences with sports teams and being anything other than... well, a bro." He implies that his anxieties stem from being queer.

To contrast, Jack Zimmermann is another confirmed queer character and is the second major protagonist within the comic. Aside from being physically different from Bitty, he is often referred to as bisexual by fans. Though he does not define his identity, he expressed interest in both men and women during episode 3.07, an episode which also highlights Jack's status as an NHL athlete. These aspects of Jack's identity also relate to his history with substance abuse: "And so the prince took a medicine to calm his anxiety... And he slew trolls! And he took more... And he slew dragons! But one day he took too much. And nearly lost everything." Unlike Bitty, Jack's anxieties are not based on being queer; instead, they come from athletic pressures and maintaining his father's

legacy. Thus, Jack and his narrative offer a different type of queer narrative in comparison to Bitty.

This type of diversity is a technique used in alternative queer comics: "These comics are clearly motivated by the desire to present a more substantive critique of gay culture than the gay ghetto cartoonists do."[12] Though it is not explicit, *Check, Please!* actually critiques the gay ghetto narrative it subscribes to. Jack—an upper-class, introverted, masculine bisexual and recovering substance abuser—may be regarded as an antithesis to Bitty, who is a middle-class, extroverted, flamboyant homosexual. By having Jack as the second main character, Bitty's queer narrative is complemented and juxtaposed. This diversity is made possible as a result of the comic's medium.

Check, Please!'s story and subsequent success relies on the fact that it is an online webcomic. By using multiple platforms to expand the universe and its plot, Ukazu taps into the potential of digital storytelling:

> Artists looked at webcomics as a digital extension of alternative comics... artists who approached comic art as an infinite canvas either created nonpaneled, long, vertical-running comic art scrolls... paneled comic art with interactive features like menus or hypertext links, or the introduction of other media such as animation, sound, or photography.[13]

Though the comic is hosted on several platforms that include these aforementioned menus and hypertext links, Ukazu takes the digital medium further by adding an interactive, social media aspect. The comic's blog allowed fans to submit questions to specific characters via Tumblr's 'ask' feature, and Ukazu would illustrate comics where the characters themselves would answer. Bitty's active Twitter account further encourages fan interaction. The Twitter account also documents the comic's events in real time and adds elements to the *Check, Please!* universe that would otherwise be excluded from the comic itself.

The multi-platform aspect of the comic adds to its social impact as well: "[webcomics] allow for a diversity in creators and content that is only slowly emerging in mainstream comics... it is notably easy to find creators of all genders, races, and creeds to suit a reader's taste."[14] Furthermore, the success of webcomics "is most evident in how

marginal fans are finding a new social space to intervene in comic book culture."[15] As a result, webcomics are a space for socio-political participation and commentary, especially for marginalized fans. *Check, Please!* is no different: in addition to addressing the homophobic, hypermasculine culture of hockey athletics, the cast has grown to include several characters of colour, many of whom are integral to the plot. Since it is available through multiple platforms, it also reaches a broad, diverse audience.

As such, the online, digital nature of *Check, Please!* expresses elements of alternative queer comics. Firstly, the digital medium allowed a black, female author to self-publish an otherwise niche comic about gay men in athletics. By being distributed online for free, webcomics like *Check, Please!* are also more easily accessible to readers who cannot afford traditional comics and/or prefer to access stories online rather than in print. Finally, since webcomics are published independently, authors like Ukazu are able to take the gay ghetto narrative and expand upon it. Online publishing does not have to follow traditional publishing methods or dominant narratives, and platforms like Tumblr allow creatives to share their work easily. Therefore, comics like *Check, Please!* are able to add nuances to coming-of-age queer stories by including several socio-political issues, such as mental health and racial politics in professional athletics. As a result, the web medium encourages queer resistance and diversifies queer narratives in addition to being more accessible for readers.

Check, Please! creates a successful narrative of queer resistance through its combination of queer comic techniques and webcomic format. As a gay ghetto webcomic, it effectively navigates Bitty's story as a result of Ukazu's multiplatform storytelling. The webcomic medium informs its resistance to dominant queer narratives because it allowed a woman of colour to self-publish, and the easy access of an online platform reaches a wide audience. Enjoyed in any combination of its platforms, *Check, Please!* is a wonderful example of alternative storytelling with nuanced socio-political commentary. Since readers can access both the comic and its author in real time, they are able to make connections between the story's themes to ongoing political issues or pop culture. Sometimes, readers are encouraged to discuss these topics directly via Bitty's Twitter account, the comic's Tumblr features, or Ukazu's online profiles. Thus, despite its humour and more light-hearted moments, Ukazu's success with the comic represents the need for queer multiplicities and more nuanced narratives.

Works Cited

1   All comic citations are from Ngozi Ukazu, *Check, Please!* (blog), as of January 4, 2019.

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6   Ibid., 98.

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10   Ibid., December 27, 2014, 3:16 PM, twitter.com/omgcheckplease/ status/548935351905968128.

11   Ibid., October 3, 2014, 7:18 PM, twitter.com/omgcheckplease/ status/518178390164398080.

12   Shamsavari, 104

13   Paul Douglas Lopes, Demanding Respect: The Evolution of the American Comic Book (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), 175.

14   Maria Campbell, "Inking Over the Glass Ceiling: The Marginalization of Female Creators and Consumers in Comics [MA thesis] (Kent: Kent State University, 2015), 58.

15   Lopes, 172-173.

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