A queer future must guide us from a black and gold past

An autoethnographic examination of my identity, and narrative essay under the contexts of Cornish and Brightonian queer identity

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Foreword

This essay was initially meant to be a despondent and cynical look at how queerness, in some way, is rejected – regardless of where you are – and both poems were written to reflect this attitude. However, whilst writing and crafting the essay, it changed midway through to be something far more hopeful. To reflect this, I have titled this as an autoethnographic narrative essay, and have left the initial pessimistic tone within the essay and poems to display how my outlook and writing shifted throughout my process. I have chosen to do this for the sake of treating this essay as an unconventional piece of creative writing, and thus to maintain artistic integrity. Whilst I am aware this diverges from the academic norm, I believe this artistic choice helps to queer and query the standard essay format. Much like my views on both Cornish and Brightonian queerness, this essay changed for the better.

- *S-R "G" L-G*

To be seen is to be judged.

Walk, strut, stride,

My Docs stomp proudly and a few heads turn.

Ignore, chat, vibe,

My eyes catch another's, and another's.

Flutter, blink, rub,

My makeup elicits glances, and smirks.

Swish, twirl, spin,

My skirt flies happily in my trails, and cackle scratches me.

Pull, stretch, snap,

My top is low-cut and a million iris' attack me.

Flick, toss, tuck,

My hair bounces and becomes fire.

Tick, slide, click,

My earphones snuggle in and my melodies play like film.

Tug, pull, stretch,

My tights lose their grip and people are walking too close.

Ow, that, hurts,

My bra strap has been noticed.

In my walk along the sea,

I am a lighthouse.

To be seen is an achievement.

Walk, strut, stride,

My Docs tread like slippers and I'm a ghost.

Ignore, chat, vibe,

My eyes try to catch, but no one takes.

Flutter, blink, rub,

My makeup is overshadowed in a sea of talent.

Swish, twirl, spin,

My skirt sits as the wind blows it around.

Tap, press, snap,

My crop top reveals me, and no one sees.

Flick, toss, tuck,

My hair bounces and remains hair.

Tick, slide, click,

My earphones simply sit, not a note to be made.

Tug, pull, stretch,

My fishnets wear me as if they were plain t-shirts.

Gone, faded, invisible,

My bra is on show.

In my walk along the sea,

I am nought but a pebble.

Queerness, in relation to location and geography, is complex. Andrew Gorman-Murray in the first paragraph of his chapter "Rural, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans Equalities", speaks on the "myth" that rural areas are conceptualised as "backwards"[1]. The chapter aims to "disrupt" said myth and the "heterosexual [ideal]" rurality. Whilst this chapter, and the book itself, is well meaning, I believe it fails to account for the varied lived experiences of rural queerness. My aim is to not attack Gorman-Murray, but instead illustrate through my own experience, how Cornish (i.e. rural) queerness is shunned, and how said queerness manifests when contrasted to a wider Brightonian form of queerness. Since moving to Brighton last September from my home of Cornwall, I have noticed a drastic shift in how I perceive my own queerness in relation to where I live, as well as observing the striking differences in how I'm perceived. What I wish to accomplish in this essay, is to convey how queerness is observed, treated, and acknowledged across both Cornwall and Brighton. To that end, I have written two poems, companion pieces, meant to be read together – I shall give context and critique to these poems to hopefully illustrate what I will refer to as "queer diaspora". Defined by Oxford Languages as "the dispersion or spread of any people from their original homeland"[2] you may wonder how queerness, a quality of someone and not that which is inherited from your ancestors, could possibly have a diaspora. This is what this essay will discuss.

However, we must acknowledge as to why Cornwall and Brighton have been chosen for this essay, beyond my personal ties to each location. There are 2 primary reasons: firstly, both are imagined to be idyllic seaside getaways, with Brighton being easily accessible for Londoners and retaining all the benefits of being a city, and Cornwall being a remoter, quieter, prettier alternative. Second, the difference in political beliefs: as of the 2019 General Election, Brighton Pavilion is held by the Green Party, whilst Labour holds Hove and Kemptown (voted for whilst under Jeremy Corbyn) – conversely, the entirety of Cornwall is held by the Conservative party[3]. Brighton and Hove prides itself on socialist, libertarian values (mirroring both Caroline Lucas' / Sian Berry's Greens and Corbyn's Labour), in contrast to Cornwall's more regressive, conservative ones, made more blatant by the pseudo 'pro-democracy' stance that Boris Johnson's electoral campaign pushed ("get Brexit done" and the promised "Oven-ready deal") and the turning of a general election into a proxy Brexit Referendum.[4]

A lighthouse stands alone.

I will be referring to the poem *"To be seen is to be judged"* on page 2 throughout my analysis here. In reference to the last word in the poem, this section is titled for the lighthouse; used both as a warning to ships in the night and a signal of sanctuary to those at sea, lighthouses are impossible to miss, much like a queer person in Cornwall. According to the 2021 National Census, the highest concentration of queer people in Cornwall was in Penryn and Falmouth (7.8-9%) with the overall

[1] Browne; Kath; Gorman-Murray, Andrew; McGlynn Nick. "Sexuality, rurality and geography" (26/02/15). Page 35.
[2] Oxford Languages. Accessed 18/05/24 via https://www.bing.com/search?q=the+diaspora+meaning&qs=n&form=QBRE&sp=-1&lq=0&pq=the+diaspora+meaning&sc=11-20&sk=&cvid=686F4A51F0F1415B8AFA7726A78C2A49&ghsh=0&ghacc=0&ghpl=
[3] BBC. "Election 2019" (archived 12/12/19). Accessed 18/05/24 via https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/election/2019/results
[4] Parr, Helen. "Let's be clear about what 'get Brexit done' really means" (10/12/19). Accessed 18/05/24 via https://theconversation.com/lets-be-clear-about-what-get-brexit-done-really-means-128347

queer population of Cornwall being 2.96%[5]. The reason as to why Penryn and Falmouth (my hometowns) have the highest concentration of queer people, is because they are student towns, with a much higher density of younger people from more metropolitan areas, who have likely been raised in far more diverse urban environments than that of Cornwall's predominant cisgender heterosexual whiteness. Within "Sexuality, rurality and geography", Browne and McGlynn discuss the unevenness in LGBT+ lives between rural and urban areas, as state legislature often doesn't focus on areas perceptualized as "queer unfriendly", which frequently manifests as rural areas, as opposed to urban metropoles[6]. Speaking from 23 years of lived experience, I can say with certainty that queerness was shunned, repressed, and mocked for most of my adolescence, and even into my adulthood – owing to, as I mentioned, the very monolithic makeup of Cornwall, those who deviate from said norm are much more easily noticed. I wished to convey this sense of surveillance and 'lighthouse-ery' through both the content, and structure of, the poem.

The poem follows an ABAB line structure, with line A containing 3 words of roughly 6 total syllables, and line B detailing a cause and its affect (e.g. "My top is low-cut and a million iris' attack me"). The rhythm of line A follows a constant, but fast 'one-two, one-two, one-two' to induce anxiety within the reader, or to be far less academic, it follows a "ba-dum" syllabic structure to recreate a heartbeat. This then coincides with line B, which are written intentionally longer to jut out, creating the image of a "lighthouse" – that which signals, and but also stands alone. "Lighthouse" in the context of the poem (and subsequently what it symbolises for queerness in Cornish society) is a double-edged sword – you are both yourself, and by yourself. This form of signalling, a marked attempt to present as queer and not attempting to 'pass'[7], is a distinct change from previous decades of queer history from which the opposite, passing, was deemed necessary to one's survival. Richard Dyer wrote on passing in his book *The Culture of Queers* in the 5th chapter *Dressing the Part*[8], discussing the balancing act between passing and flaunting, seeming natural and trying to seem natural. Since the establishment of the Equalities Act 2010[9], and growth and maturation Generation Z, the idea of 'passing to survive' has steadily fallen away from queer people of my generation, and passing now isn't seen as necessary, but is critiqued more openly as a potential symptom of assimilation into a cis-heteronormative society, an elimination of one's queerness. Nella Larsen's 1929 novel *Passing* dissected the idea of passing in relation to one's race. Vivian Maguire makes this clear in the start of their essay for the University of Texas in El Paso[10]; Maguire states that Larsen critiques placing value on racial and societal roles, as doing so ultimately leads to racial violence. I would argue the same holds true for queer passing: if I am going to be attacked for my transness regardless of whether I pass, why not signal to everyone that trans people exist in rural areas, and we will continue to do so?

This, however, is merely an idealistic stance. Perhaps hypocritically of myself, I have actively tried to 'escape' Cornwall, to find a new 'home' – contrary to how Cornwall advertises itself as a peaceful antiquated seaside getaway, the reality is that substantial progress cannot be made for Cornish queers, as many of us simply are unable to live in our homeland, owing to the abundance of second-

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[5] Census Map; Cornwall's queer populace. Accessed 18/05/24 via MyStudies

[6] Browne, Kath; Gorman-Murray, Andrew; McGlynn, Nick. "Sexuality, rurality and geography" (26/02/15). Page 38.

[7] Teen Health Source. "What is passing?" (last updated 06/20). Accessed 20/05/2024 via https://teenhealthsource.com/blog/faq-what-is-passing/

[8] Dyer, Richard. "The Culture of Queers" (20/12/01). Page 63.

[9] Equality Act 2010. Accessed 20/05/2024 via https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents

[10] Maguire, Vivian. "Passing, segregation, and assimilation: How Nella Larsen changed the "Passing" novel" (2010). Accessed 20/05/24 via https://scholarworks.utep.edu/dissertations/AAI1483825/

home owners, Airbnbs and so on. According to Rightmove as of 22/05/2024, there are only 257 properties in the entire county available to rent[11], not factoring in one's budget, salary, bills, or living expenses. For a county with a total population of 570,300 according to the 2021 census, this is disgraceful; it's no small wonder that the population overall is ageing[12], as fewer younger Cornish people simply cannot afford to live there. Cornwall lacks a lot of the modern amenities that even places like Devon, its neighbour, are afforded: reliable and affordable public transport / overreliance on personal motor transport, a motorway, major retail chains only available north of the River Tamar, unfulfilling job prospects, and that's a very non-exhaustive list. These factors pile together to make Cornwall an entirely undesirable place to live for younger people. But in what way does this relate to Cornish queerness? Because of Cornwall's lack of funding, its lack of development, its over-catering to older generations in how its infrastructure, housing market and public services are set-up and what it offers to its citizens, there is almost no incentive for younger people to stay and possibly try to change Cornwall's trajectory, to try and make it better for queer people. As it stands, Cornwall is a relic of the eighties, that has barely made it to the noughties; this is reflected in its attitudes to queer related hate crime[13], its reluctance to fully embrace queer people, and the slow but sure emigration of its young people to more developed and inclusive areas of the UK, and I believe I fully conveyed this overarching sentiment through *To be seen is to be judged.*

It is, therefore, no small wonder that many Cornish queers find sanctuary in Brighton.

A pebble sits among many.

For this section, I shall be referencing *To be seen is an achievement* on page 3. Titled for a pebble, this section is likewise named for the final line of its respective poem, however, unlike what you may expect, this poem does not seek to praise Brighton; as Gorman-Murray sought to disrupt the 'myth' of queerphobic rurality, I aim to dismantle the myth of 'Brighton'.

Pebbles are just that: indistinguishable, many, but together, create a beach; it is nigh impossible to find a sense of true individualism among such circumstances. I will not go so far as to say that every queer person in Brighton feels this way, but it is certainly how I felt until early May, 2024.

Brighton is unanimously seen as the 'Queer-capital' of the UK. Only an hour train journey from London but not being a total metropolis itself, sat snugly on the Southeast coast with a beach that extends for miles, Brighton is positioned geographically as a paradise and indeed, that's what it appears to be for many queer people who grew up in a rural environment. Perhaps in this way we can call Brighton the 'Eden' for UK queers, the utopia to be who we wish we could always be, without fear, judgement or hate. In the introduction to *Queer Diaspora,* the idea of translocation is framed as a crucial factor in the discussion of sexuality, and specific mention is given to how sexuality itself is on the move, and how by a queer body undergoing the act of translocation, there is often poignant yet laborious time spent on the reinvention of the self, the renegotiation of the new and

[11] Rightmove: Properties available to rent in Cornwall on at time of writing (most recently updated on 22/05/24). Accessed 22/05/24 via https://www.rightmove.co.uk/property-to-rent/Cornwall.html

[12] Grimond, Will for The Cornish Times. "Census 2021: First Results Show Cornwall's Population Has Grown over Past Decade" (28/06/22). Accessed 20/05/24 via https://www.cornish-times.co.uk/news/census-2021-first-results-show-cornwalls-population-has-grown-over-past-decade-552657

[13] Watson, Eve; for the BBC. "Cornwall man 'had to move away after homophobic attack' " (24/10/22). Accessed 20/05/24 via https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-cornwall-63283798

the reimagining of the old[14]. This, is how Brighton as Eden has been for me – a laborious amount of effort to change myself, to play by the new rules of this supposed 'utopia', but not to reimagine the old, instead to feel neither at home then, nor now. An understandable question to ask at this point is, "but why not?", why don't I, a queer trans woman, feel at home in what is demonstrably the UK's most gay city[15], somewhere I should be allowed to feel like myself?

To answer those questions, we must look at the poem. Although I cannot quantify with data, my experience of being queer in Brighton has not been what I expected thus far. Frequently, and often, I find myself experiencing a sense of distance, of otherness, from the thousands of other queer people in this city who have long made it their home. Perhaps it's my style of clothing? Or that being a woman is a lot of effort? Or that my make-up skills are sorely lacking when compared to everyone else? Am I not creating enough? Am I wasting my talents? Am I not womanly or even trans enough to people? Is it that AMAB queer people carry a certain anxiety about never being accepted into queer spaces because of our genitals? Whatever the case, I haven't felt 'queer enough' for Brighton; just a simple pebble amongst thousands, unable to truly feel as though I belonged – at least in Cornwall, I belonged but wasn't welcome. The content of the poem was meant to convey these smouldering feelings of paradoxical anxiety: each line B has been toned down from an increasing effervescent panic, to a rather depressing observation of each, and although each line B still juts out as though it were a lighthouse, this is meant to be read as an attempt to be a lighthouse – the content and typography of the poem are at odds with each other, much like me and Brighton… but, is that how I feel now? I mentioned that this is how I <u>used</u> to feel, after all.

<u>Both pebble and lighthouse.</u>

I previously described pebbles as indistinguishable, but there exists a strangely rather ubiquitous experience of picking up a pebble, examining it, holding it in your hands, feeling its nooks, dents, gouges, and saying to yourself "That's a cool rock". This then raises the question, in <u>what way</u> are Brightonian queers indistinguishable? The answer is that they're only indistinguishable if you don't care to look, if you wish to simply see the forest for the trees and not try to understand what 'queer' actually means – like how I did when I began writing this essay. I originally wrote *To be seen is an achievement* as a scathing remark against one's inability to stand out in Brighton, but, ironically, this essay has helped me realise another, accidental, meaning to the poem; each Line B doesn't try to be a lighthouse, they <u>are</u> lighthouses, but being a lighthouse in a sea of lighthouses (one queer in a city of queers) makes it hard to stand out. But I think I'm okay with that. In many ways, queerness in Brighton doesn't exist like it does in Cornwall. It doesn't make you a lighthouse, a hyper-visible-ultra-seen entity, it merely allows others to see someone like them; it doesn't other you, mark you as a foreign entity in your own homeland, it helps you revel in its culture, its personal freedom. No, what individualises people in Brighton, is anything <u>but</u> queerness: their hobbies, background, upbringing, heritage, these are the qualities that make individuals out of Brightonian queers; queerness is merely a canvas on which an entire person is created, whereas in Cornwall, it often feels as though queerness <u>is</u> your person, because that is all anyone will ever see you as.

[14] Patton, Cindy; Sánchez-Eppler, Benigno. "Queer Diasporas: Introduction – With a passport out of Eden" (pg 2-3) (07/2000)
[15] Census Map; Brighton's queer populace. Accessed 22/05/24 via MyStudies

It is not unfair to say that Generation Z currently represent the largest proportion of identifying queer people in the UK[16]; by interacting with queer people of my generation in Brighton I have began to understand my own short-sightedness in regards to this 'Queer-capital'. Without realising it, I have been able, since September, to interact with many different queer people, in the multiple circles I frequent, and it was only very recently, that I began to feel at home in these circles. Joseph Campbell, the famous narratologist and comparative mythologist, wrote on the concept of the monomyth[17] and how each story follows the same narrative beats. What's notable about Campbell is that he based his work on myth and narrative from the psychologist Carl Jung, who theorised about the idea of individuation, and attaining an understanding of the "True Self" through the reconciliation of the persona and shadow, and how archetypes emerge from the collective unconsciousness, a shared primordial pool of knowledge that transcends time and space.[18] I bring Jung and Campbell up because I believe that writing this essay has allowed me to undergo my own hero's journey, and achieved a form of individuation; I have accepted that my queerness is not exclusively what defines me, it is but one factor among many. In so doing, I have reframed my queerness through the viewpoint of José Esteban Muñoz' – queerness as an ideal, something that illuminates the horizon with the potential for change[19], and something that I believe the queer people who live here, whether consciously or not, strive for.

Brighton is not the 'queer-capital' of the UK because it simply has a lot of gay people living there who operate in one massive polycule who all drink and smoke a lot (although that is a large part of it), but because it enables and encourages queerness in a way that Cornwall doesn't, and that scared me initially; if I'm not queer, then what am I? The truth is that I am me, and I am no less queer for being somewhere where queerness is embraced. Despite how both locations have abhorrent housing issues and cost of living problems, there is a far greater sense of unity and solidarity within Brighton, that I believe is enhanced due to the collective commitment towards a queer future, one that we may never reach but can certainly try.

A lighthouse guides the way.

Whilst this essay may not have gone the way I expected, I can't say I'm upset by that. This was not meant to be an autoethnographic self-examination that ultimately led to me appreciating this city I had long since shrugged off with distaste. Whilst I have not disproved the myth of Brighton, and indeed ended up praising it a lot, I believe what I have praised is the idea of Brighton and what it represents. It is a microcosm of a queer future, where queerness is loved, accepted and celebrated in all forms, but simultaneously suffers from being one of the most expensive places to live in the UK[20] and suffers greatly from lacking job opportunities owing to how popular it is; its status as a queer sanctuary has made it hard for queers to live in their supposed 'capital'.

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[16] Wareham, Jamie. "How many people are LGBTQIA+ in the UK?" (08/10/22). Accessed 23/05/24 via https://www.wearequeeraf.com/how-many-people-are-lgbtqia-in-the-uk/#:~:text=Indeed%2C%20the%20stats%20for%20Gen%20Z%20respondents%20%28aged,do%20identify%20as%20queer%2C%20are%20bisexual%20or%20pansexual

[17] Campbell, Joseph. "The Hero with a Thousand Faces" (1949)

[18] Jung, Carl Gustav, et al. "The Essential Jung" (1998)

[19] Muñoz, José Esteban. "Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity" (2009)

[20] Simone, Carlo. "Brighton ranked among most expensive UK cities for first-time buyers in 2024" (24/04/24). Accessed 23/05/24 via https://uk.news.yahoo.com/brighton-ranked-among-most-expensive-230100919.html#:~:text=Brighton%20has%20been%20ranked%20among%20the%20most%20expensive,someone%20looking%20to%20get%20on%20the%20property%20ladder.

That said, in praising the idea of ‘Brighton’ and critiquing what it physically is, I’ve been able to reach something I didn’t think I’d need to do; I have reframed what ‘queer’ means to me – I’ve discovered it is not only an identity, but an ideology, an ideal, a future that we can attempt to reach. In reframing the myth of Brighton, and providing credence to the negative queer reception of Cornwall, I feel motivated to inspire change in my homeland, and not so ready to abandon it like I was not too long ago. My queerness may not have a defined home, but perhaps it doesn’t need one. If a queer future is to be achieved for my homeland, then a lighthouse must guide it to shore, and I believe that the most Southwestern point of the UK, must look to the most Southeastern to develop, evolve, and embrace the rainbow under its shield of black and gold. The Cornish queer diaspora cannot continue if Cornwall is to grow and develop; whilst I remain steadfast on what I put forth on the first section of this essay and how Cornwall is almost intentionally structured to be this unappealing to younger people, I now also put forth that the onus is on the queer people of Cornwall to change our home, to not run, not abandon, not leave it in the hands of those who want us gone. Truly meaningful change cannot come from Parliament, who would sooner rejoin the EU than allow Cornwall its independence; it must come from the children of Kernow, regardless of their identity. It is my home, and I realise now that the only way to beat back the Cornish diaspora, is to fight for it.

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