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Gay Nettersexuality: Grindr, Porn, and Non-being in Nick Comilla's *Candyass*

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Abstract: Since its appearance in 2009, Grindr has become (in)famous as the go-to app for anything from casual chat and casual sexual encounters to relationships and even finding a spouse. 'Nettersexuality' denotes how gay men's sexuality is mediated by digital media such as dating apps, which allow users to create and circulate their own self-made gay porn. In this article, I analyse gay nettersexuality in Nick Comilla's debut novel, *Candyass* (2016), arguing that the novel and its representations of gay pornography offer crucial insights for masculinities scholars into how gay men represent and articulate their experience of nettersexuality. Drawing on the existentialist tradition, I pinpoint the ways in which *Candyass* illustrates the concept of 'non-being' as a state of tedium, vacancy, and psychological disintegration shaped by gay men's pornified use of gay dating apps. I argue that the nettersexual nature of their engagement with dating apps and gay porn causes the characters in *Candyass* to confront new experiential challenges related to their sexual behaviour.

Keywords: nettersexuality; non-being; Candyass; gay porn; gay dating apps

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Introduction: Grindr and Gay Masculinities

Since its appearance in 2009, Grindr has become the world's best-known (and most used) geosocial LGBTQ dating app (GDA). Over the last ten years, work in sociology, psychology, communication studies, and cultural studies has begun to investigate how Grindr works and the impact it has on gay and bisexual men and men who have sex with men (MSM). Discussions of Grindr have elucidated its role in reconfiguring how MSM and gay men experience place within the context of a so-called 'post-gay' world that no longer relies upon physical spaces to enact sexualities and marginalised non-heterosexual masculinities (Miles, 2017; Ghaziani, 2014; Nash, 2013; Campbell, 2004). Other scholars have focused on the ways in which Grindr engineers hypersexualised identities and reinforces sexual and racial inequalities, as well as exacerbating body image concerns among men, such as the litany of 'Nos' which preface dating descriptors such as 'fats' and 'fems' (Aunspach, 2020; Conner, 2019; Jaspal, 2017; Rodriguez et al., 2016; Callander et al., 2015; Han, 2008). The use of Grindr for sex work has also been considered (Brennan, 2017). Others, however, have opened lines of inquiry that position Grindr (among other gay dating apps) as a key feature in men's consumption of gay porn. Echoing the work of Brandon Arroyo (2016), Evangelos Tziallas has argued that aside from allowing men to meet each other for sex, Grindr in fact encourages users to perform a highly elaborate game within a 'digital enclosure', in which a key reward is that users can create their own porn and circulate it in a specifically circumscribed cyberspace that promises proximity and thus a semblance of exciting immanence (Tziallas, 2015, p. 767). In other words, the goal of meeting for a sexual encounter with another is displaced somewhat by a game that may never involve a physical, face-to-face encounter.

Tziallas is building in a broader discussion of how the internet, and particularly internet porn, is mediating and shaping gay men's sexualities and masculinities, specifically in urban areas in which the 'digital hybridisation' of gay sexualities is layered on a palimpsest of

older, place-based gay identity symbolised by the Gay Village (Miles, 2017; Ghaziani, 2014). Sam Miles has argued for a shift from 'queer publics to private space' that has coincided with the proliferation of geosocial networking apps and 'larger neoliberal economic shifts' which impact how gay men represent themselves—witness Jamie Hakim's 'spornosexual', for example, whose only capital is the hours he puts in at the gym building his body (Miles, 2017, p. 1596; Hakim, 2018; Chan, 2018; Enguix and Gómez-Narváaez, 2018; Duggan, 2002). Jay Poole and Ryan Milligan have also coined the term 'nettersexual' 'as a way of conceptualizing the complexity of interpersonal sexual experiences that exist as a result of the Internet', especially for men who identify as gay (Poole and Milligan, 2018, p. 1191). The Internet, including GDAs, gives 'a private, perhaps disembodied opportunity for anyone with access to it to experience an endless array of sexual acts as one engages in self-satisfying sexual activity either alone or with a partner or partners' (Poole and Milligan, 2018, p. 1194).

Discussions about gay dating apps to date have sought to analyse how such men use GDAs and, in some cases, how they might contribute, if at all, to their sense of 'well-being', affect, or anxieties about identity and privacy (Zervoulis et al., 2020; Cassidy, 2018; Penney, 2014). As Poole and Milligan explain in their discussion of nettersexuality, 'we are not attempting to debate the ethics of being nettersexual', but they do admit that 'there are obvious ethical and moral considerations, such as how this experience impacts others and how such experiences shape the view of the self—potentially impacting self-esteem' (Poole and Milligan, 2018, p. 1200). Such reluctance to consider the ethics of gay nettersexuality can be contrasted, however, from conversation outside the academy among gay voices which have highlighted the potential negative emotional and psychological impact of Grindr and similar dating apps on gay men (Tziallas, 2020; Sahgal, 2019; Vytniorgu, 2019; Bloodworth, 2018; Pavlou, 2017; Michele, n.d.).

This article seeks to address the 'ethical and moral considerations' of gay nettersexuality and thereby invite further scholarly discussion on how gay men positively or negatively experience the dynamics of

nettersexuality especially as it pertains to porn and their use of GDAs. One of the striking omissions in the literature on gay porn is any investigation into literary or other artistic representation of how men experience gay porn and dating apps. This omission is partly explained by the very recent nature of this phenomenon and the dearth of fictional works that feature nettersexuality in the age of smartphones and GDAs (David Leavitt's Equal Affections (1989) features an early instance of internet-mediated gay dating). Indeed, one cannot even speak of scholarly literature examining the use of dating apps in literary works: the phenomenon is simply too new, confined to studies focusing on the actual use of dating apps by gay men and men who have sex with men. But part of the problem also lies in a broader absence within porn scholarship of the arts, and especially literature, as material for a scholarly exploration of how these phenomena are experienced and artistically represented by those who engage with gay porn and apps such as Grindr.

What follows is an analysis of Nick Comilla's debut novel, Candyass (2016), praised by renowned gay writer Edmund White as 'thoughtful and skillful in dissecting the exquisite corpse of gay life today' (back cover endorsement). Set in the USA and Canada, Comilla's novel represents a sustained reflection on the ethical and moral consequences of gay nettersexuality within the digital enclosure of DIY porn and GDAs. Candyass is therefore an ideal text to begin a scholarly discussion about fictional representations of gay dating apps, as well as lifting commentary about Candyass into the scholarly domain (to the best of my knowledge this is the first article exploring Nick Comilla's work). I draw on the existentialist concept of 'non-being' to pinpoint the direction of ethical movement in the novel, from being to non-being and back again, which also mirrors some of the novel's physical movements between suburban and urban environments. While I define non-being more fully later on, for now it should be understood as a state of psychological disintegration, vacancy, tedium, and intense boredom. Being is therefore (ironically) the absence of these qualities to a greater or lesser extent. And rather than positing a strict binary, being and non-being are posited

on a continuum, with frequent oscillations between them. Comilla's novel is a useful starting point for discussing the possible ethical dimensions of nettersexuality for gay men in a neoliberal age, due to its representation of extreme consequences when gay life and identity are heavily mediated by apps such as Grindr.

Gay spaces and precarious finances

Candyass is a novel, consisting of three parts, about gay men's search for fulfilment of being a unified and stable whole – becoming 'oneself' and resisting conformity to the status quo. Arthur is a young man from the Pennsylvanian provinces who moves to Montreal to study. There he meets a variety of young men with whom he embarks on unstructured relationships mediated by digital technology and a shifting attitude towards more conventional gay spaces such as the Village. As the novel progresses and the drama shifts to New York City (NYC), Arthur continues his quest for realness in the face of so much in gay culture that seems superficial, unreal, and damaging. The third part of the novel depicts his abusive, sadomasochistic relationship with Jason—a hustler from NYC who symbolises non-being to the point of committing suicide at the end of the novel. In the earlier sections, however, Candyass primarily focuses on exploring the way gay men in their twenties are negotiating urban life and digital culture in a time of unprecedented economic uncertainty.

Candyass presents numerous binaries that induce readers to focus on the experience of living in transformative urban spaces in precarious financial times. Montreal and NYC are urban spaces that link to the two main ethical centres in the novel: Arthur's Montreal symbolises community, the Gay Village, and intimacy in a way that NYC does not. Jason is attached to NYC which is opposed to Arthur's 'Montreal shit' (Comilla, 2016, p. 64). Yet Arthur fears 'getting sucked into the kind of shallow, New York bullshit that Jason seemed to worship' (Comilla, 2016, p. 98). Compared to Montreal, 'New York is more cut-throat, more individualistic, is fueled by money and good looks plus coke and alcohol'

(Comilla, 2016, p. 96). Both Montreal and NYC present challenges in Candyass; both are urban centres which are contrasted to the suburbs, which represent heteronormative smugness as well as an innocent cocoon whose spell is lost once young gay boys from the suburbs get warped by the city. As Arthur moves from 'the bumfuck, white-trash, redneck town I grew up in' in Pennsylvania to go to university in Montreal, he explores the significance of urban centres as spaces in which gay men can come together in a time of economic hardship (Comilla, 2016, p. 16).

Candyass frames Arthur's physical movements in the manner of an existential Bildungsroman in that physical moves, especially framed in terms of size (small to large, parochial to cosmopolitan), are indicative of mental transformations which in turn are framed as phases of growth. As Arthur admits at the beginning, 'I was so clueless when I first moved to Montreal; I knew nothing, no one' (Comilla, 2016, p. 13). What Arthur notices is 'a higher degree of outness in Montreal, outness being a thing that expands the scope of homosexuals' (Comilla, 2016, p. 14, original emphasis). Immersing himself in what he states is the biggest Gay Village in North America, Arthur and his Montreal boyfriend, Jeremy, reflect on the benefits of being in a Village: 'I like the gay village', says Jeremy, 'I like how the spirit there is so liberated and free, and people can just be whoever they are, do whatever they want to do, and no one will judge them' (Comilla, 2016, p. 25). Yet while Jeremy's speech seems affirmative of the Village, his attitude is more complex, informed by changing historical times in which contemporary gay men can fashion their own sense of gayness, detached from the former drive to activism which cemented gay men's positioning within circumscribed gay spaces.

Jeremy's attitude seems to be conventional in terms of the cultural history of the Gay Village as viewed by gays since the 1970s, when the Village became a mobilising, visible icon advancing equal rights for alternative sexualities. According to Catherine J. Nash, 'gay Villages enabled and supported alternative gendered and sexual practices', yet she recognises that 'these were arguably limited to those expressions of identities, sexual desires and practices that operated within hegemonic

norms established through gay and lesbian political and social activism' (Nash, 2013, p. 244). Focusing on Toronto, Nash explores contemporary attitudes to the Village as emblematic of being in a 'post-gay' world where visible signs of a gay community (which may be heteronormative in any case) are not necessary for millennials, who 'no longer perceive the gay Village as the sole or even the "safest" place to socialize' (Nash, 2013, p. 244; Bettani, 2015; Ghaziani, 2014). Since the 1970s, the landscape has changed dramatically in that 'the current generation of twentysomethings is growing up in a different political and cultural context where homosexuality has a more positive visibility in mainstream culture' (Nash, 2013, p. 245). This means that Jeremy's statement is perhaps culturally nostalgic—something he chooses to say because if for any reason he reacts against the Village, he can always retreat to other spaces which can be gayed without much effort, such as the basement in his suburban family home.

In Candyass, the Village is not so much materially real as it is hyperreal: that which the main characters are attached to is a mental representation of the Village as amenable to their own tastes and preferences for now, for one particular season in their life, or even one particular evening. Alternatively, Arthur and Jeremy relate to space in ways that echo Henri Lefebvre's suggestion that 'there is no strict division between physical spaces and mental spaces but that all spaces are produced, lived and understood through relationships of power' (Austin, 2018, p. 159; Lefebvre, 1991). The ease with which Arthur and his boyfriends move about Montreal, intersecting at will with its Village but never permanently rooting themselves within it, is indicative of a different way of negotiating gay urban spaces, a positioning which may be imbricated in a 'sexual politics of neoliberalism' and the broader economic and employment landscape, which in Candyass is precarious but also sustained by consumerism (Nash, 2013, p. 244).

All of the characters in Candyass face financial pressures, but some more so than others. In the earlier parts of the novel, Jeremy's economic status is foregrounded and contrasted to that of Phil—a boy Arthur also dates in Montreal, who constitutes a more conservative gay character

who is not transformed by the move from the provinces to the metropolis. Arthur and Jeremy first date in Jeremy's family basement in the suburbs: 'That summer it became our little cave, a world we carved out against and away from the real world […] Down there, time collapsed', writes Arthur (Comilla, 2016, p. 29). Arthur meets his 'teenage sensation' on the internet and recognises someone untouched by the city: 'Who was this guy?' he asks himself; 'The suburbs spit out these young, gorgeous guys into the city before they got immersed in ego and image, and they could be stupid-sexy with no effort' (Comilla, 2016, p. 24). With his exotic Quebecois accent, Jeremy is framed as a sexual innocent whose move to the city centre of Montreal, from high school to college, parallels his transformation into a sexualised economic actor who dabbles in pornography. As such, Jeremy's situation invites an intersectional reading that recognises the ways in which class and sexual orientation are simultaneously negotiated in spaces that can absorb personal narratives of marginalisation. Jaime Hakim has coined the term 'spornosexual' to denote the ways in which, in response to austerity, men are focusing on their bodies as a way to create capital and therefore influence among others. Applied to Candyass, Arthur seems to fail to appreciate the reasons why Jeremy turns to using his body as a way to make money in the city (Hakim, 2015).

'Jeremy is so broke that winter', explains Arthur, 'he can't afford both food and rent, though he works twenty hours a week at a dépanneur in addition to going to college' (Comilla, 2016, p. 42). Presented in porn as 'blond twink boy Chris Laurent', Jeremy spreads 'his cheeks apart for the whole Internet to see his gorgeous pink little cherry' (Comilla, 2016, p. 42). When Arthur questions Jeremy about this employment opportunity, Jeremy says he was paid $300, so 'Now I can pay my rent!' (Comilla, 2016, p. 42). Initially, Jeremy decides that this kind of sex work is strictly utilitarian and a bit of fun, a way of expressing his sexuality and paying his rent, consistent with his new attachment to urban Montreal and its promises of freedom.

However, while Arthur comes round to the idea of his boyfriend acting in porn videos (he even finds it quite hot), he is more troubled

when Jeremy starts 'turning tricks' and moving into a crystallised identity as a sex worker: 'For hours at a time each week, Jeremy runs off with Michel. I block it out', explains Arthur; 'Michel looks like a troll that you'd find underneath a bridge […] Jeremy makes fifty dollars every time he sees Michel, every time Michel sucks his dick' (Comilla, 2016, p. 44). As Jeremy 'expands his client list', does drag and dances at gay clubs in the Village, Arthur turns his attentions to Phil, who reminds him of pre-urban Jeremy yet seems more sure of his 'innocence' and less willing to buy into Arthur's precarious, unstructured way of living in Montreal. 'Another cute boy living in the basement of a house in the suburbs of Montreal', Phil has no financial difficulties like Jeremy, and although he lets Arthur fuck him, Phil is more resistant to Arthur's fantasies: 'This is what you came here for, isn't it?', Arthur muses to himself: 'It's my dick with this goddamn, stupid pointless condom on it, my dick pumping up inside you, your asshole all exposed, your legs in the air, all vulnerable […] This is something you will remember for ever, Philip' (Comilla, 2016, p. 59). Arthur asserts his sexual dominance over Phil because Phil's attitudes towards gay relationships unsettle him; he is not as docile as Jeremy. Phil questions the validity of the open relationship Arthur and Jeremy claim to have and advocates the sense in settling down with someone, framing his attitude in opposition to 'typical urban gay stuff' (Comilla, 2016, p. 51). 'I know people from high school', says Phil, 'who were together in high school, and they are still together. It happens […] It's a choice' (Comilla, 2016: 51). When Arthur says how 'ridiculous' this arrangement is, Phil explains 'It's not sad, you pretentious Plateau asshole, it's normal. They love each other, they only want each other. There is nothing sad or tragic about it' (Comilla, 2016, p. 51, original emphasis). Whereas Phil's ideas would appear to be conventional and heteronormative, claiming that 'if you and Jeremy were as in love as you claim to be, you'd be more like them', Phil and his role in the novel work as a defamiliarising tactic, not so that the reader comes to adopt his heteronormative attitudes, but so that it opens up space for readers to question the rhetoric through which characters maintain their relationships. The point is not that Jeremy is lost and Phil saved, that the

urban life is tainted and the suburban life virtuous, but that the way people like Jeremy act is partly down to circumstances that are often beyond their control, and which confront us with broader, economic, cultural, and technological factors.

Gay nettersexuality: pornography and dating apps

Candyass is primarily concerned with the impact of digital technology on gay sexuality and masculinity, where characters mediate their identities and relationships to people, space, and employment via forms of digital connection. In Candyass gay nettersexuality manifests itself in two ways. Internet pornography is a constant if sometimes hidden presence in the novel. Although Jeremy is the only character who works as an actor for a porn company, the influence of gay porn on characters' attitudes, imagination, and language is persistent. Closely connected to porn is the impact of seeking connections with other gay and bisexual men on GDAs such as Grindr. Although nettersexuality can be formed and sustained through a range of digital activities, in Candyass the primary spheres of influence are gay porn and dating apps, which, as scholars and critics show, are closely connected.

In his book, The Paradox of Porn: Notes on Gay Male Sexual Culture (2018), Don Shewey analyses the impact of gay porn on men's sexuality and his conclusions resonate with Poole's and Milligan's depiction of nettersexuality, in that the way gay men who consume porn express their sexuality is often heavily influenced by what they see and hear through porn. Writing from decades of professional experience as a sex therapist for gay men, Shewey claims that 'looking at pornography is for many men an important doorway into erotic existence' (Shewey, 2018, p. 8). Porn is able 'to keep erotic awareness and expansion alive in the face of fears about disease, rejection, and body image' (Shewey, 2018, p. 31). Opening up about his own nettersexuality, Shewey writes of 'engaging with porn as a tool for intimacy with myself, making love with my own fantasies, the porn providing access to some unusual depths of embodied desire' (Shewey, 2018, p. 38). And yet he is also clear about the potential

impact of digital porn on the way men relate to themselves and others: 'The question is what percentage of our porn consumption leads to enjoyment rather than other outcomes' (Shewey, 2018, p. 36). For younger men, 'watching porn and cruising online have taught men to treat each other as if they were video-game avatars', meaning that the language and visual morphology of porn have impacted the way young gay men relate to one another (Shewey, 2018, p. 36).

In a 2020 interview for Aptly, Comilla commented on the way in which 'Even things [like Grindr] that were initially intended to facilitate real-life interactions have, I think, unintentionally become ways for people to just "browse" other people and the notion of "trading pics" and sexting, in general, has become a very boring way for people to get off behind their screens, treating everyone as some kind of personal porn star' (Comilla, 2020). Both Shewey and Comilla are alluding to the prevalence of DIY porn or what Sharif Mowlabocus calls 'Porn 2.0' (Mowlabocus, 2010). As Arroyo explains, 'Today, computers, smartphones and wifi/4G accessibility – coupled with the practices of amateur pornography – create new types of spaces fostering the instantaneous creation and exchange of a pornographic image of oneself' (Arroyo, 2016, p. 83). Porn 2.0 signifies a pornified mediation of gay sexuality, or nettersexuality, in which men relate to place in ways that are not simply gayed but also seen through the prism of an infinite pornified scroll on the internet (Tziallas, 2015). Grindr has been dubbed an 'underground digital bathhouse' that, unlike physical bathhouses, are portable and infiltrate one's way of relating to the rest of the world, even changing the way the brain works, for when 'a neutral action (clicking on Grindr) is paired with a pleasurable response in the brain (orgasm), humans learn to do that action over and over again' (Turban, 2018). The way that Candyass explores nettersexuality supports the notion that for gay men, especially in neoliberal urban centres with multiple possible connections, pornography and GDAs like Grindr are the principal ways in which nettersexuality is formed and sustained.

Aside from Jeremy's work with a professional porn studio, readers encounter the influence of internet porn in Candyass via Arthur's

reflective comments and the language he uses during his sexual encounters. Because Jeremy's 'tricks' are often men who are older than him, Arthur imagines a typical Daddy-boy scenario that cements his own sense of himself as a dominant and his boyfriends as submissive twinks (slim and boyish). 'He's too old for you', Arthur tells Jeremy about Felix, one of Jeremy's tricks: 'it won't last. I don't know what you see in that guy, Jay. Daddy issues, obviously. So, does he fuck you? Does he fuck you raw, Jeremy-boy?' (Comilla, 2016, p. 64). Although Arthur says he can't understand what Jeremy sees in Felix, Arthur is still able to adjust this scenario to his worldview which is thoroughly nettersexual. When Arthur has sexual encounters, he speaks in the language of pornographic descriptions appended to videos, or perhaps like captions on a Tumblr image or gif.

The fact that Arthur is also interested in twinks is also significant. As a subtype of gay men, twinks also represent a specific form of masculinity: one which is contested by its atypical status. Twinks do not possess the same kind of 'masculine capital' that other gay men (such as bears) have; they are often associated with being effeminate and as bottoms in gay anal sex (Mercer, 2017; Hoppe, 2011). Twinks struggle in a context of hegemonic masculinity, in which being seen to be typically masculine is important, even among gay men who may combine stigma against twinks with 'bottom-shaming', targeting the gay male who is penetrated (McGill and Collins, 2015; Moskowitz and Hart, 2011; Eguchi, 2010; Taywaditep, 2002). The sexualisation of twinks as bottoms and objects of masculine men's desire is especially heightened in gay porn and translates into the world of gay dating apps, which Arthur utilises.

But as the novel progresses and Arthur begins a relationship with the sexually dominant Jason, he enters into a highly circumscribed BDSM dynamic in which he is portrayed as the submissive twink: 'I tell [Jeremy] about all the sir and boy play and how, sure, it was all my idea sexually' (Comilla, 2016, p. 111). Although Arthur's consumption of BDSM-related porn remains hidden in the novel, his ideas about powerplay illustrate the ways in which GDAs and amateur porn platforms such as Tumblr and XTube foster sprawling nettersexual

communities that circulate and build discourses of connections which thrive within the digital enclosure of porn (Mercer, 2017).

Shewey also has (or perhaps had, before December 17, 2018, when Tumblr banned adult content) his own Tumblr blog where he explores his self-proclaimed identity as 'Daddy Top' (Shewey, 2018: 197). 'When it comes to sharing porn', writes Shewey, 'we do it indirectly, in the very 21st century form of following each other's Tumblr blogs' (Shewey, 2018, p. 38). And this can be immersive: 'When I'm deeply engrossed in watching some daddy-boy sex scene or a marathon bareback gang-bang video, riveted to the screen, stroking myself, huffing poppers, and talking back to the participants, I'm in an exquisitely vulnerable state' (Shewey, 2018, p. 38).

We do not see Arthur in such a state, but what troubles Arthur belies his consumption habits which may approximate Shewey's. When Jason starts introducing powerplay into the rest of life outside the bedroom Arthur is troubled: 'outside the bedroom', muses Arthur, 'it's as if he doesn't realize that I am a real person […] When Jason playfully beats up on me, he just laughs' (Comilla, 2016, p. 125). 'It's not that hot', Arthur continues, 'when he acts like I'm actually his little boy-toy-fuck-thing. When the roles aren't play' (Comilla, 2016, p. 126). For Arthur to come to this conclusion he needs to have some understanding of how role-playing works and the exchange of power works, and he experiments with Jeremy. In Foucault's words, Arthur and Jeremy explore 'the creation of new possibilities of pleasure', tinged by BDSM dynamics, which, towards the end of his life, Foucault experienced and wrote about (Foucault, 1994, p. 165; Simula, 2019).

While he sees Jason, Arthur also hooks-up with Jeremy again, this time calling him by the diminutive name of 'Tommy': "I'm gonna pound your boyhole, you sweet little twink bitch," I say to him with a menacing smile' (Comilla, 2016, p. 116). For Arthur, this is entirely fine because he is entering a tacit agreement with Jeremy that this scenario, although heavily nettersexual ('sweet little twink bitch'), is nevertheless protected by a mutual understanding that this is simply a contained expression of

their sexuality—when the roles are play. As Anita Phillips has argued in her book, A Defence of Masochism (1999), roles such as Daddy and boy are ideally performed as 'a private game, a psychosexual adventure, primitive and sophisticated at once, relying on trust, humour, acting ability and emotional elasticity' (Phillips, 1999, p. 25). Arthur and Jeremy effectively create 'a safe enclosure', such as Arthur's Montreal apartment or Jeremy's family basement, 'and the manipulation of exciting motifs' such as nettersexual language ('boyhole', 'twink bitch') 'to stimulate and articulate sexual pleasure' (Phillips, 1999, p. 29). Jason, however, effectively dissolves this safe enclosure by blurring the boundaries between nettersexual exploration and ordinary interpersonal communication. Before I analyse Jason's personality and role in the novel as pertaining to the threat of non-being, it is worth showing how Candyass connects porn and hook-up culture via the internet, which encourages nettersexual forms of contact among gay men. The problem, of course, is that Jason effectively overdoses on nettersexuality, bringing its existence into ethical scrutiny.

Arthur meets most of his sexual partners via internet dating apps, especially a fictional one called gay411.com, which can be considered a proxy for Grindr (the most popular gay hook-up app). Regardless of the name of the app, the experience of connection is similar. Arthur refers to gay411.com as 'that life-changing website where, every once in a while, someone really good looking comes into your life and changes everything' (Comilla, 2016, p. 66). In one scene, Arthur meets someone called Fred on this website and the two have a webcam conversation which is structured in a typical hook-up script: 'Are you masc or femme?' Arthur asks, followed by 'What are you looking for?'—a question so ubiquitous on GDAs that Looking became the title of HBO's acclaimed drama about twenty-first-century gay men in San Francisco, which aired between 2014 and 2016. Arthur and Fred meet and have sex in a way that allows Arthur to express his nettersexuality: 'You like it when skinny, young twink boys fuck you up the ass, don't you?' he asks Fred, echoing while also reversing the dynamic Arthur shares with Jeremy (Comilla, 2016, p. 69).

By the time Arthur gets to NYC and is seeing Jason, the line between porn and hooking-up becomes more blurred. Although Arthur feels attached to Jason, Jason openly sees other men. In one scene, Arthur receives a text message from Jason while he and Jeremy are at a party: 'you wouldn't believe this cute boy I have in my bed', writes Jason (Comilla, 2016, p. 126). Jason sends Arthur a photo of the boy via phone:

> a dancer, eighteen but looks about fifteen, with curly brown hair and a tight slender body. Total twink. Jason tells me he's been fucking the boy and breaking him in. He invites me over under the pretense that I'm not allowed to fuck the boy (Comilla, 2016, p. 126).

Instead of hooking-up via an actual dating app, Jason effectively opens the coupling to consider further possibilities of encounter that rely on a mixture of sexting and tapping in to Arthur's nettersexual fantasies (of 'total twinks', for example). The dancer is deliberately obscured and has no voice: 'Jason says he was going to date the boy, but decided—after the boy let me fuck him—that he wasn't worth it' (Comilla, 2016, p. 127). With no name and voice, the dancer is the ultimate nettersexual cipher, almost archetypal in being sexually available for others for 'pounding the boy's ass and cumming inside him' (Comilla, 2016, p. 127). Jason effectively invites Arthur to participate in a communal nettersexual fantasy made possible by a nettersexual mixture of online porn, instant messaging, and geosocial networking apps. The twink dancer is stripped of a distinctive identity and personality. When Arthur thinks 'of other people as ghosts drifting in and out of my love', it is perhaps someone like the dancer he has in mind—a substanceless being that draws the reader's attention to the pervasiveness of non-being that seems propagated by the peculiar nettersexual mix of porn and unstructured, casualised internet dating (Comilla, 2016, p. 117). Indeed, Candyass is a novel preoccupied with exploring the complex ethics of nettersexuality in that it does not simply depict the impact of new technology on identity and relationships; it meditates on its potential to damage people and the way they relate to one another.

Earlier I referred to Candyass as existentialist and Arthur as a protagonist who experiences an existential exploration of sexuality. What I mean by this is that Arthur situates himself in a quest to understand more about himself and the world around him. He is resistant to the status quo and gets uneasy when he feels himself succumbing to routine behaviour and attitudes. He reflects openly about the choices he must make and the impact of his choices on other people. Arthur experiences difficulties in the exploration of his own character and sexuality. Comilla uses literary devices such as character pairing in order to draw attention to the ethical choices Arthur faces as he navigates gay life in Montreal and NYC. Arthur is committed to freedom and the novel shows the paradox of a commitment to freedom: the choices people make can either build them and other people up as personalities or they can reduce people to substanceless ciphers, spiralling into non-being.

As a philosophical concept, 'non-being' gained currency in the writings of Nikolai Berdyaev (1874-1948), particularly during the 1930s and 1940s when he experienced the Nazi occupation of Paris. Berdyaev is not perhaps the first name we think of when existentialism is mentioned. Berdyaev detached himself from the writings of more popular existentialists such as Heidegger and Sartre. If he resembles any of the more canonical twentieth-century existentialists, Berdyaev is closest to Karl Jaspers. But as Berdyaev himself maintained, his existentialism is broad and represents a colouring to his thought rather than subscribing to a particular 'school' or doctrine (Berdyaev, 1950, p. 102). Building on the work of St Augustine, Kant, Nietzsche, Jakub Böhme, and nineteenth-century Russian thinkers such as Vladimir Solovyov and Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Berdyaev rooted his thought on being and non-being in an eclectic tradition of mysticism permeated by European existentialism that focused on the concrete experiences of personalities and the choices they face in changing societies.

In his most famous work, The Destiny of Man (1945 [1937]), Berdyaev stated that his work aligned with the discipline of Christian anthropology, which gave an existential cast to the study of human beings, particularly humans like the characters in Dostoyevsky's fiction—people at war with themselves but seeking some kind of redemption. In his 2020 interview, Comilla commented on how the literature and art of Dennis Cooper, Slava Mogutin, and Edmund White made him reflect on the spiritual dimension of nihilism:

> I remember having a really visceral reaction to the nihilism of those novels, how the transgression of the body had to mean the eventual destruction of it, and I wanted to write scenes that bordered on that but could also break through into lightness, playfulness, brightness, and back and forth, continuously' (Comilla, 2020).

And yet Comilla also expressed sympathy and interest in people who are 'free to fuck up, over and over again' (Comilla, 2020). In the existentialist tradition, freedom is all important, as is the need to take responsibility for the choices one makes. Freedom either pulls us towards being, the fullness of life, and the growth of personality, or it works towards the disintegration of these things.

As two polarities in human experience, being and non-being also represent goodness and evil, or the darkness and light that Comilla alludes to and which he wrote into his novel. Evil arises from the freedom humans face in the world, and this is evil's 'chief attraction, but it always means the end of the freedom of the spirit and the establishing of the tyranny of necessity. The consequences of evil are always the same', writes Berdyaev: 'namely loss of unity and disintegration of being' (Berdyaev, 1948, p. 168). Finally, in the existentialist tradition, Berdyaev affirms the value of suffering as a form of learning: 'Man learns the nothingness of evil and the grandeur of goodness not through the operation of a formal law nor by means of prohibitions, but by his living experience of the road of life' (Berdyaev, 1948, p. 185).

I argue that in its depiction of Arthur's 'living experience of the road of life', Candyass draws attention to the way gay nettersexuality can get drawn into a spiral of non-being which is destructive in its consequences. Once Arthur's relationship with Jeremy begins to break down and Arthur becomes more disillusioned with the Village in Montreal and the nettersexuality of Jeremy's twink friends, he begins to write of his experiences in the language of non-being: 'everything is so fake that it has become real', he writes (Comilla, 2016, p. 39). Of course, what becomes increasingly real to Arthur is his paradoxical sense of the strength of fakery—paradoxical because as Berdyaev shows, that which is fake is effectively without substance. Jason and NYC propel Arthur into a spiral of non-being which impacts the way he relates to Montreal and to Jeremy. Gay NYC is a city which 'sucks' you in, evoking an abyss of non-existence, 'shallow' and full of 'bullshit' (Comilla, 2016, p. 98). Commenting on the psychological effects of Grindr, LGBT commentator Jack Turban has noted that men who use this app told him

> that when they closed their phones and reflected on the shallow conversations and sexually explicit pictures they sent, they felt more depressed, more anxious, and even more isolated. Some experience overwhelming guilt following a sexual encounter in which no words are spoken. After the orgasm, the partner may walk out the door with little more than a 'thanks' (Turban, 2018).

In Candyass GDAs are simply a symbol of the pervasiveness of apparently artificial imagery that lacks real substance. One of Jason's hook-ups, Liam, is a European model who, like the dancer Jason has sex with earlier in the novel, is depicted as being ghost-like, serving the nettersexual sphere of NYC: 'walking around the city with him and then seeing his face on a huge H&M billboard', muses Arthur, 'I realize it's just an image. He's not a person, not a personification' (Comilla, 2016, p. 99). What Arthur comes to value is hints of personality and individual substance. In NYC he realises himself spiralling into non-being, hooking up casually without affection for his partners or recognition of their personalities, seeing them as reflectors of his nettersexual way of

expressing his desire. 'I don't like this new me', he admits: 'almost impenetrable, emotionally hardened' (Comilla, 2016, p. 99).

Realising instead that he's 'fond of realness', Arthur begins to confront Jason about his lifestyle. While the novel recognises that Jason is a hustler partly for economic reasons which seem to be beyond his control, Arthur takes issue with Jason's attitude: he is abusive to Arthur and seems locked in a fantasy world. In one scene when Arthur is drugged up, he focuses his thoughts on that which is emblematic of non-being, 'on themes of ROT, DECAY, AND DEATH' brought on by meditating on Jason and NYC (Comilla, 2016, p. 117). For Arthur, the 'empty unfinished buildings [which] look so desolate and bankrupt' represent an image of his mental state, which Arthur realises is desperately 'unfinished' and 'desolate' (Comilla, 2016, p. 117). Arthur begins to feel a drive to 'put down roots', to become a person of substance, to refuse to view the world as 'make-believe' (Comilla, 2016, p. 119). Yet Jason resists: 'You're such a sensitive boy. I'll have to teach you to stop caring' (Comilla, 2016, p. 134).

Towards the end of the novel, Jason and Arthur are spending time together and Jason shows Arthur a YouTube video which 'shows how, at a sub-atomic level, two objects can never really touch each other' (Comilla, 2016, p. 150). For Arthur, this is 'the most depressing thing [he's] ever seen' (Comilla, 2016, p. 150). The next thing we discover is that Jason has killed himself, which effectively takes the route to non-being to its farthest extreme. Arthur, on the other hand, closes the novel by emerging into a new realisation that it is important 'to be able to feel when something significant is happening' (Comilla, 2016, p. 158). In this context, significance gestures at meaning which has some kind of realness to it.

Conclusion

At the end of Candyass readers are left with several difficult questions. Is Jason entirely to blame for what happens to him? After all, Jason realises

that he is in an economically precarious position: 'You will probably get everything you want and very soon', he tells Arthur, 'and you don't even realize it. You'll get a teaching job, you'll get published. I'm jealous of you' (Comilla, 2016, p. 141). Secondly, readers might ask whether Arthur's gay nettersexuality contributes significantly to his experience of non-being in the novel. I suggest that Arthur's gay nettersexuality is not bad in itself: porn and dating apps are structural devices that impact depending on the direction of their use. For Arthur, it seems as if his experience of nettersexuality in urban spaces is transformative even if painful, whereas for Jason it is destructive because he has lost touch of what is real and what is false: 'It becomes hard to fuck differently', explains Jason; 'Everything becomes like a performance, a negotiation' (Comilla, 2016, p. 135). Readers might also ask whether older forms of urban gay culture such as the Village are entirely supplanted by GDAs. Candyass offers no clear-cut answers to this question. The novel does, however, explore the ethical consequences of unreflective nettersexual concoctions that mean that using apps like Grindr can easily become a grind, 'a performance, a negotiation', in which no real connection is ever possible, symbolised by the YouTube video in the novel which shows how, 'at a sub-atomic level, two objects can never really touch each other' (Comilla, 2016, p. 150). As Shewey explains:

> porn has done us a great disservice by distorting our ideas of what constitutes normal bodies and normal sexual functioning, liberating some inhibitions while installing others in their place, enslaving us to libidinal impulses at the expense of our health and mental well-being, luring us into dark pockets of obsessive-compulsiveness that leave us isolated and shut down, and modelling a culture of sexual behaviour that is so narrow, mechanical, and emotionally bankrupt that we hardly know how to treat each other as human beings. (Shewey, 2018, p. 196)

When the novelist Edmund White wrote (in his pre-publication endorsement) of Candyass that it is 'so thoughtful and skilful in dissecting the exquisite corpse of gay life today', he must have read Candyass in a way that echoes Shewey's thoughts on the ways in which

porn, and more broadly, nettersexuality impacts gay men in the twenty-first century. Yet Candyass is not by any means without hope for gay life today. By dramatising issues that scholars are beginning to explore in a more sustained way, the novel invites critical discussions of the positives and negatives of technologies which are still extremely new.

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Öz: 2009'da ortaya çıkmasından bu yana Grindr, gündelik sohbet ve cinsel karşılaşmalardan ilişkilere kadar ve hatta bir eş bulmaya kadar pek çok şey için başvurulan bir uygulama olarak (kötü) şöhret elde etti. 'Netseksüellik', kullanıcıların kendi gey pornolarını yaratmalarına ve yaymalarına olanak tanıyan flört uygulamaları gibi uygulamalar içeren dijital medyanın, gey erkeklerin cinselliğini nasıl aracı ettiğini ifade etmektedir. Bu makalede, Nick Comilla'nın ilk romanı Candyass'te (2016) gey netseksüelliği analiz ediyorum. Romanın ve gey pornografisine ilişkin temsillerinin, erkeklik çalışan araştırmacılar için gey erkeklerin netseksüellik deneyimlerini nasıl temsil ettiği ve ifade ettiği konusunda önemli bilgiler sunduğunu savunuyorum. Varoluşçu gelenekten yararlanarak, Candyass'in 'hiçlik' kavramını, gey erkeklerin gey flört uygulamalarını pornoize edilmiş kullanımıyla şekillenen bir bezginlik,

boşluk ve psikolojik parçalanma durumu olarak gösterme biçimlerini saptıyorum. Flört uygulamaları ve gey pornosu ile ilgilenmelerinin netseksüel doğasının, Candyass'teki karakterlerin cinsel davranışlarıyla ilgili yeni deneyimsel zorluklarla yüzleşmelerine neden olduğunu savunuyorum.

Anahtar kelimeler: Grindr; netseksüellik; hiçlik; Candyass; gey porn; gey flört uygulamaları