

Transcript of “Queering Blood Purity: Abjection, Muggleborns, and MSM”

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Good afternoon! Welcome to my presentation "Queering Blood Purity: Abjection, Muggleborns, and Men who Have Sex with Men", or MSM! I hope you all are enjoying the first fully online Harry Potter Academic Conference meeting! I know I am.

I have been out as pansexual for over a decade and have several queer men in my life. Part of my coming out process was studying the history of LGBT people. When I learned about the discrimination of MSM in blood donation, I stopped donating. Not because I was ineligible. Instead, I felt I had to stop giving in solidarity with those who were not allowed to give because, as a potential MSM, I might have to stop one day.

This year, the FDA passed new guidelines to end discrimination in the American blood donation system against MSM. Since the 1980s, there have been extra restrictions on blood donation by MSM. However, are the new rules antidiscriminatory, or are they simply veiling AIDSphobia in a new way that “treats everyone the same?”

To answer this question, I have split the presentation into four parts:

1. I will give an overview of terms and frameworks.
2. I will examine how, while Blood Purity is usually, and quite reasonably, read as a metaphor for White Supremacy, it can also be read as homophobia.
3. I will connect that reading of Blood Purity to the history of AIDSphobia and how that has affected MSM’s ability to donate blood.

4. I will examine the new FDA guidelines to see if they solve anything or are merely the newest facade to draw our attention while keeping queer blood out of straight patients.

Let's start by defining the key terms in this presentation.

Wix: Rather than defaulting to the masculine "wizard" or alternating between it and "witch", I will use the word "wix," plural "wixes," to refer to non-specific magical humans, and "wixen" to refer to their society.

MSM: A clinical term denoting a behavioral group. It is not a sexual orientation and can refer to transmen or transwomen based on context. MSM have a higher chance of HIV infection than other populations at 1:6; this number is higher still for MSM of Color.

Hegemonic Masculinity: "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy," which is taken to guarantee "the dominant position of men and the subordination of women."

The word "abject" comes from the Latin prefix "ab-" meaning "away from" and the root "iacere" or "to throw." It is comparable, both grammatically and theoretically, with "subject" (the individual or actor) and "object" (parts of the world or what is acted upon).

Julia Kristeva developed abjection or Abject Theory to describe horror from a feminist and psychoanalytical perspective, deriving it from—among other things—Freudian rejection of the mother. Elizabeth Grosz expanded upon the concept.

Through their work, we come to understand the abject as anything that threatens the boundaries of the autonomous subject or reminds us that our body is corporeal with tenuous boundaries, causing us to feel a sickness toward our own body because we recognize that "the

body is more than, in excess of—the clean and proper”. Things like vomit, shit, menstrual blood, and corpses are abject.

In short, the abject reminds us that our bodies are “icky goo sacks...[that are] leaky and porous and decaying.” HIV triggers the fear of the abject because it reminds us of how leaky, porous, decaying, and fragile we “icky goo sacks” are. Within hegemonic masculinity, the idea of MSM, which requires a penetrable (and therefore subordinate) male, is abject.

Next, let's look at Blood Purity in Harry Potter as a metaphor for AIDS and MSM phobias.

First, the standard reading of Blood Purity as a metaphor for White Supremacy in Harry Potter. Non-wixen creatures capable of speech are the stand-ins for racialized groups in Harry Potter. However, with the emphasis on Snape as a “Half-Blood Prince,” the fact that there is not a book in which Hermione’s muggle-born status is not at least a minor plot point, and the KKK-style hoods in the *Goblet of Fire* movie it is clear that blood status is a race stand-in in Harry Potter. In this case, blood refers not to the physical object but to the bloodline.

In a more literal vein (haha), the idea of pure blood in the homophobic sense relates directly to HIV and other pathogens associated with queer sexual practices being in someone’s blood. Contemporary medicine holds that some things “belong” in blood, others do not. HIV is one of the things that does not, and since MSM are more likely to have HIV in their blood, their blood is “impure.”

Impure blood is also part of the muggle-born experience. When Andromeda Black married Ted Tonks, a muggle-born wizard, her family, who were pure-blood obsessed, disowned her. She and her husband were never again recognized as family by the Blacks, and that lack of

connection extended to their daughter, much the way HIV can be passed perinatally from mother to child.

Similarly, Hermione is often referred to as “the brightest witch of her age,” but the caveat “despite being a muggle-born” is always (though sometimes implicitly) included, Othering her. However, one of the times this dynamic is most visible is when Draco Malfoy calls her a “Mudblood” for the first time. What is meant figuratively in Harry Potter can be taken literally in the real world, where Hermione’s “dirty” lineage translates to the idea of blood that contains the HIV pathogen.

These parallels become even more apparent when we compare the histories of MSM and muggle-borns.

In 1981, Los Angeles had an unusual cluster of pneumonia and cancer cases. Initially referred to as “gay cancer,” the CDC renamed the disease as Autoimmune Deficiency Syndrome or AIDS in an attempt to have a more “neutral” name. By the end of 1982, there was a public scare about tainted blood being donated. In 1984, Ryan White, a 13-year-old hemophiliac from Indiana, was infected via blood transfusion. By 1985, people with an “increased risk for AIDS” (read MSM and sex workers) were banned from donating. The AIDS crisis in America peaked in 1992; there were 2,332 AIDS deaths in San Francisco that year, and AIDS was the number 1 cause of death for men aged 25-44 nationwide. In 1998, the CDC established treatment guidelines for adults and teens. However, it wasn’t until 2010, when 30% of new HIV infections were among straight people, that the blood donation ban was lifted and replaced with a 3-month deferral period, during which MSM must remain celibate. Then, on May 11 of this year, the FDA officially eliminated “time-based deferrals and screening questions specific to [MSM] and women who have sex with MSM.”

While the history of muggle-born oppression in Harry Potter stretches back further, it shares some similarities to the history of AIDSphobia. In the 10th Century, during the founding of Hogwarts, Salazar Slytherin wanted to make Hogwarts a pure-blood-only school in the style of Durmstrang. When thwarted, Slytherin created the Chamber of Secrets, building anti-muggle-born sentiment into the institution's walls. In the 16th Century, Slytherin's descendant, Corvinus Gaunt, protected the entrance to the Chamber, disguising it into the plumbing of the second-floor girl's lavatory. In this way, anti-muggle-born sentiments were literally built into Hogwarts' walls. In the 19th Century, the Chamber of Secrets was opened, resulting in the death of Myrtle Warren. Things started looking up for muggle-borns when Nobby Leach was elected the first muggle-born Minister for Magic in 1962, though he was ousted in 1968. Two years after that, Voldemort and his Death Eaters rose to power for the first time. If they had achieved their goal, all muggle-born wixes would have been either killed or kept "in absolute bondage." In 1997, Voldemort rose again, taking control of the Ministry and enacting the Muggle-Born Registration Commission, which forced muggle-borns to either give up their wands and be incarcerated at Azkaban or live on the run. During this time, the Ministry also published anti-muggle-born propaganda, claiming they "stole" magic from "real" wixes. We have no record of how muggle-borns were treated after Voldemort's final defeat in 1998.

There are three points of comparison between these histories. First, MSM and muggle-borns face legislation regarding their participation in spaces and places. All MSM share a history of being banned from blood donation. Trans-MSM are also fighting against being banned from specific spaces, such as bathrooms and support groups. Similarly, muggle-borns have had to fight for space in Harry Potter and sometimes did not have the space to fight, relying on the goodwill of purebloods like the founders of Hogwarts to give them space.

Second, both groups have faced systemic prejudice built into their institutions. For MSM, these institutions are primarily conceptual. Laws, folkways, and mores are so deeply engrained with cisheteronormativity that queer spaces must be carefully carved out so that queer folks can have spaces in which they are safe. Muggle-borns, by comparison, could not be safe in Hogwarts as long as the Chamber of Secrets housed a basilisk tasked with killing them.

Finally, both groups have been painted as predators. MSM as monsters who infect people with AIDS indiscriminately or, when it comes to transwomen, “steal” space from “real” women in social spaces. Similarly, during Voldemort’s proxy rule in 1997-98, muggle-born wixes are portrayed as thieves who “stole” magic from “real” wixes. These portrayals are most easily seen in the recent controversy over bathrooms and other spaces designed with only ciswomen in mind and in how we see Mary Cattermole treated in *Deathly Hallows*, being seen as a danger to a peaceful pure-blood society and forced to prove her magical lineage or be sent to Azkaban.

Now that the stage is set, let's look at the newest guidelines for screening blood donors

On May 11, 2023, the FDA put out a news release from which I would like to read a few selections:

Today, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration finalized recommendations for assessing blood donor eligibility using a set of individual risk-based questions to reduce the risk of transfusion-transmitted HIV. These questions will be the same for every donor, regardless of sexual orientation, sex, or gender. Blood establishments may now implement these recommendations by revising their donor history questionnaires and procedures.

This updated policy...will potentially expand the number of people eligible to donate blood while also maintaining the appropriate safeguards to protect the safety of the blood supply

This policy eliminates time-based deferrals and screening questions specific to men who have sex with men (MSM)...Under the final guidance issued today, all prospective blood donors will answer a series of individual, risk-based questions to determine eligibility. All prospective donors who report having a new sexual partner, or more than one sexual partner in the past three months, and anal sex in the past three months, would be deferred to reduce the likelihood of donations by individuals with new or recent HIV infection who may be in the window period for detection of HIV by nucleic acid testing.

Additionally, under these final recommendations, those taking medications to treat or prevent HIV infection (e.g., antiretroviral therapy (ART), pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) and post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP)), will also be deferred. Though these antiretroviral drugs are safe, effective, and an important public health tool, the available data demonstrate that their use may delay detection of HIV by currently licensed screening tests for blood donations, which may potentially give false negative results.

Although HIV is not transmitted sexually by individuals with undetectable viral levels, this does not apply to transfusion transmission of HIV because a blood transfusion is administered intravenously, and a transfusion involves a large volume of blood compared to exposure with sexual contact...Individuals should not stop taking their prescribed medications...in order to donate blood.

(end quote)

These new guidelines are meant to level the playing field for MSM who want to donate blood. However, they have not removed the restrictions enacted in 2015. Instead, they remove the specificity of the restrictions. Now anyone who “report(s) having a new sexual partner, or more than one sexual partner in the past three months, and anal sex in the past three months, [or

are on ART, PrEP, or PEP] would be deferred.” Who are these people? Who is being defined by this statement? Let’s break it down with some formal logic.

As described on my slide, the new guidelines for donor eligibility can be formulated in a formal, logical expression. This formulation points out that donors are only disqualified if they have had anal sex with a new partner or if they have done so with multiple continuing partners, or taken medication to manage or prevent AIDS. Therefore, any monogamous donor will only be disqualified if they have a new partner and practice anal sex or take PEP, PrEP, or ART. Promiscuous and actively polyamorous donors will only be disqualified if they participate in anal sex or take these medications.

However, is this new policy anti-discriminatory? It is undoubtedly non-discriminatory; everyone has the same criteria and is asked the same questions. However, anyone taking medication or prophylaxis for AIDS is immediately disqualified. The primary market for these drugs is queer people in general and MSM in particular, so while the new guidelines are a significant step in lessening discrimination, there is still room for improvement.

The reason people taking medicine to treat or prevent AIDS are not allowed to donate is that none of these medicines kill the virus. In these cases, the virus is held at bay to prevent infection from exposure via sex, but intravenous blood exposure is still quite virulent.

All donated blood is tested for various pathogens, including HIV. However, these tests take resources, including time and money. It is considered by the capitalists that run things to be more efficient to limit blood supply and save money and work hours on testing.

To recap, MSM were banned from blood donation in the ’80s because of the double abjection they faced as men who highlighted male penetrability and the way that HIV also reveals to all humans that they are icky, leaky, porous, and decaying goo sacks. This abjection



parallels the way that Death Eaters and other pureblood-obsessed wixes referred to muggle-borns in Harry Potter as “Mudbloods.”

Also, the new FDA guidelines for blood donor screening are a considerable step forward in LGBT rights. However, there is only so far that current medicine and a flawed system can take things, so we must look for ways to improve the equity of the blood donation system.

I want to finish my talk today by thanking the people involved in making this fantastic conference a reality: our conference coordinators Karen Wendling and Patrick McCauley and their team, my fellow presenters, and last but not least, all of you. Each of you is someone that this presentation and the conference itself could not do without. As much as anyone else, the attendees have kept the HPAC going. Thank you so much for coming.

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