

Narith E.Nhek

Mother of the House



What, or who, is *mother*? This is the question at the heart of Nareen Meak's collage series *Mother of the House* featured in the *Lost in Translation* exhibition. Drawing on his experiences growing up gay with a complicated relationship with his biological mother, Meak creates mandalas of pop stars he considers mother, who have nurtured his sense of self. Deftly navigating the intersection of identity, perception, and imagery, Meak's work asks: Is motherhood merely a product of lineage, or does it transcend familial ties, embodying diverse interpretations and embodiments? Ariana Grande and Jennifer Coolidge are poignant touchstones for the artist, and they, along with many others, appear in his work multiplied and revered. Reshaping traditional and religious iconography of motherhood, Meak's collages highlight the evolution of language and what it can mean.

MOTHERLOGICAL STUDIES

When used to refer to cishet women, the term "mother" is often quite literal, referencing literal birth and lineage. Alternatively, when gay men refer to a woman as "mother," it means they're an icon, someone who stuck up for the gays, and someone who understands the struggles of the LGBTQ+ community. Beyoncé is mother. Beyoncé also gets the double meaning of the term. In her house-influenced remix track "Break My Soul (The Queens Remix)" from her 2022 homage to ball culture *Renaissance*, she reminds listeners she is "Mother of my house ... Mother of the house." She is both a literal mother, with three children at home, and a mother with the weight that it holds in ballroom culture. Meak describes her this way: "She mothered so hard to the maximum power that she could only ever serve and be the next face of Motherlogical Studies when her album *Renaissance* dropped."

Queer mothers precede ball culture (Levine 2023). In the 18th century London, Margaret Clap ran a Molly House, or place "where men could safely gather to enjoy each other's company" (City of London 2022). A haven for gay men, Clap's house allowed them to have sex and form a community with one another, making her the first known "mother" in this sense, as she went by Mother Clap. Meak



**Jennifer Coolidge:
The Unofficial
Mother but Mother
Manifested**

describes her this way: "She executed the motherboard so hard that she cut the other 17th/18th-century mother ropes off the ship to become the original face of Motherlogical Studies by helping gay men get out of charges of sodomy by covering for them."

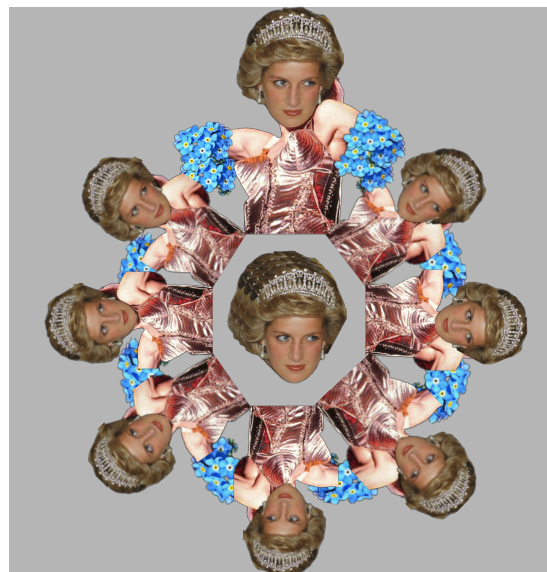
Beyond the term's endurance, we see how language itself helped protect LGBTQ+ folks. Writing about Polari, a secret language to communicate with LGBTQ+ members in the 19th century, queer author and literary scholar Jes Batts (2016) connects the language's origin in various others spoken by stigmatized and transitory groups, showing how it became popular within the LGBTQ+ community as a way of communicating in-group status secretly. Words that originated from Polari still used today is butch and femme. Communication scholar, Silje Tunes Huse says those words have "evolved in usage over time and have much more nuanced and varied meaning." The vocabulary of Polari was descriptive and volatile since it continuously changed over time to suit the dynamics of different cultures where it was spoken. There were elements borrowed from Italian Romani, as well as other forms of theatrical jargon including Cockney rhyming slang made simple structures with

Queens of Pop & Motherhood: Diana's Grace meets Madonna's Cone Bra - Iconic Matriarchs of the Gay Agenda

wide range sentence order choices aimed at conveying meaning through subtle hints, euphemisms, and coded words. The dialects associated with Polari were numerous which could change depending on individual or regional differences all contributing towards its enigmatic personality which encouraged exclusiveness.

THE WEAKENING

Language is dynamic and constantly evolving. As terms move between different communities and contexts, their meanings can shift and adapt. In some cases, the mainstream adoption of LGBTQ+ terminology can reflect greater acceptance and understanding of diverse identities and experiences. This evolution intersects with race, gender, class, and other facets of identity, serving as a tool for resistance against cultural hegemony, challenging traditional gender norms, and empowering individuals to assert their identities authentically. Historical perspectives reveal language as a site of innovation and cultural expression within marginalized communities, demonstrating resilience and creativity in the face of societal marginalization. By promoting education and awareness around LGBTQ+ terminology,

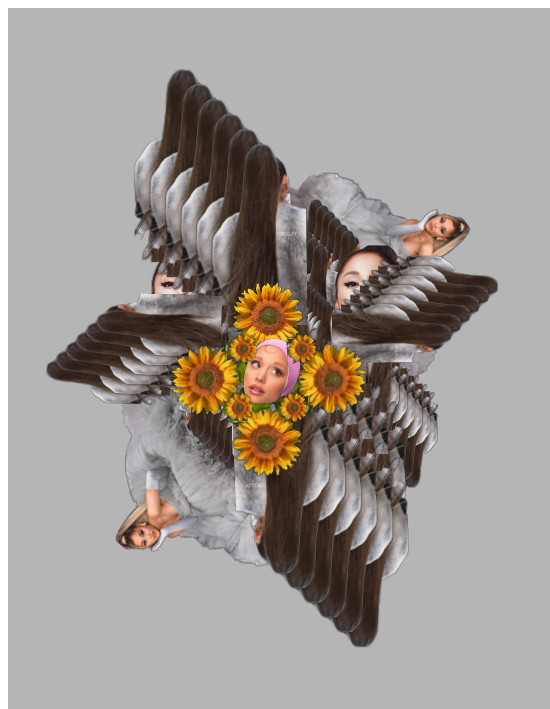


society can foster empathy and understanding, facilitating more respectful and inclusive communication across diverse communities. Ultimately, the evolution of language, particularly within LGBTQ+ slang, underscores the ongoing journey towards equality, representation, and social justice.

Social media platforms are pivotal in shaping contemporary discourse surrounding LGBTQ+ identities and language usage. The rapid dissemination of ideas and perspectives on platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok has facilitated conversations about the appropriation of terms like “mother” within the LGBTQ+ community. Hashtags like #LGBTQ+ and #QueerCulture often spark discussions about the evolving meanings of familial terms and their intersection with popular culture. Tweets like one referencing a water bottle filling station as “mother” quickly garner attention and prompt debates about the boundaries of language and identity.

But this is about more than online debates. This is about the lived experiences and struggles of LGBTQ+ individuals, like Meak, within their family's structures. Writing about anthropologist Kath Weston's pathbreaking book *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship*, anthropologist Ellen Lewin notes, “As blood relatives may ‘choose’ to reject or accept a gay family member, disclosure, Weston tells us, becomes ‘a process destined to uncover the truth of kinship relations...’ [I]f family love is conditional, then the lesbian or gay man may ‘choose’ to

Channeling Grande's Spirit: Ariana's Matriarchal Mantra Madness



a family on another basis” (1993, 997). Through his artworks, mothers in his life have displayed their unconditional love parasocially. However, Meak’s journey is not without its challenges. He recounts moments where his desire to express himself, such as emulating Ariana Grande’s eyebrows with makeup, met with derogatory questioning from his mother, while his father considered enrolling him in the ROTC conform to traditional notions of masculinity. Reflecting on his mother’s previous support for a Cambodian gay man, Meak hoped for acceptance in his own journey of self-discovery. Yet, he discovered his mother’s struggle to reconcile his identity with her expectations of motherhood. In turn, Meak grappled with a realization that the mother he envisioned differed from the reality he faced.

While playful reinterpretations of terms like “mother” may serve as expressions of identity and belonging in online communities, they may also inadvertently undermine the struggles faced by LGBTQ+ individuals navigating acceptance and recognition within their own families. By centering the debate solely on linguistic boundaries and identity politics, we risk trivializing the profound emotional and societal implications of terms like “mother.” To foster a more nuanced understanding, it’s crucial to engage with LGBTQ+ discourse in its entirety, acknowledging the complexity and diversity of experiences within the community while also respecting the multifaceted meanings of terms like “mother” across different cultural and social contexts.

Instagram and TikTok have also become platforms for LGBTQ+ individuals to express themselves creatively and assert their identities. Through memes, videos, and art, users challenge societal norms and celebrate the diversity of queer experiences. However, these platforms also raise questions about the commodification of LGBTQ+ culture and the potential for tokenization and appropriation by mainstream influencers and celebrities like Meghan Trainor. As communication scholar Rachel Laing notes, because “outgroup members who overhear or see the words being used do not have a natural fluency in the dialect... [they] either form create a different meaning for the word or misuse a term, phrase, or joke within the



An Illustration of Pose & Hereditary Crossing Paths

mainstream so that these new definitions become what is popularly recognized” (2021, 3). Rachel Laing’s insights shed light on the complex dynamics of communication within this context. As LGBTQ+ terms and expressions permeate mainstream discourse, there’s a risk of their meanings being altered or misunderstood. This process of linguistic appropriation can lead to the co-opting of LGBTQ+ narratives and the erasure of their original significance, further exacerbating issues of representation and visibility.

In navigating these challenges, it becomes imperative to strike a delicate balance between celebrating LGBTQ+ voices and preservation against exploitation. Platforms must actively work to amplify authentic voices from within the community while holding mainstream influencers and celebrities accountable for their actions. But fostering a culture of education and understanding around LGBTQ+ issues can help ease the risks of misappropriation and promote greater empathy and inclusivity both online and offline.

Ultimately, as we continue to navigate the ever-evolving landscape of social media and LGBTQ+ representation, it's crucial to center the voices and experiences of those directly impacted by these dynamics. By fostering genuine connections, promoting empathy, and championing authentic expression, we can work towards creating more equitable and inclusive digital spaces for all.

Meak's work disrupts these forms of appropriation, recentering fluent icons, like Ariana Grande, Princess Diana, Toni Collette, or even the Babadook who can move across communities in a non-extractive way. Choosing these LGBTQ+ icons inspired puts them on a pedestal. That both celebrates diversity empowers marginalized voices, his artistic choices offer a nuanced commentary on fame, identity, and representation in contemporary culture. Social media's ability to amplify diverse voices and perspectives has both positive and negative implications for discussions about LGBTQ+ identity. While it provides a platform for marginalized communities to assert their agency and reclaim language, it also exposes them to the risk of exploitation and erasure. Critical engagement with social media discourse is essential for understanding the nuances of contemporary LGBTQ+ culture and its intersections with mainstream media and popular culture.

Language serves as a means of identity expression and community building. It has facilitated communication and solidarity within queer communities throughout history. Mother is and is more than just a campy compliment. It embodies a sense of nurturing, protection, and belonging within queer communities. It represents a form of chosen family and a source of strength and support for individuals navigating their identities and experiences. Understanding the nuances of LGBTQ+ language allows us to appreciate the rich tapestry of queer culture and the resilience of LGBTQ+ communities in creating spaces of acceptance and affirmation.

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