

The ritualistic death in (and of) the male friendship: Dismembering embodiments of inter-male homosocial relationships in *Beastars*

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Abstract

Bromance in media often poses as a farce, but, oddly, also fortifies queer intimacies among men. According to Michael DeAngelis (2014), bromance acts with a dual function: ideologically and mythically. It plays a crucial role in representations of male-to-male friendship through its paradoxical capacity to both reinforce hegemonic norms and refuse heteronormative ideal for men. Imaginative illustrations of the antinomy of bromance is seen in *anime*, or Japanese animated cartoons whose most popular genre, *shonen*, depicts the hybridized goal of bromance to solidify male homosociality that often gets borderline homoerotic (if viewed through a queer lens). To demonstrate the hybridized capacity of bromance in media, this study presents a metaphorical analysis of the bromantic inter-male homosocial bonds in *Beastars* (Matsumi, 2019-2021), an anime featuring anthropomorphic animals. From an analysis based on bromance media studies, three thematic metaphors emerged: proximity, perversity, and concealment. These metaphors illustrate a reverence to “soft masculinity,” an East-Asia-formulated androgynous male performance which indirectly dismantle hegemonic representations of men by preventing the figurative death of the male-on-male friendship at the hands of the heteronormative gaze.

Keywords: anime, bromance, homosociality, masculinity, queer Marxism

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Since the day I swore to live by your side
The world changed little by little
All this time I've been acting tough
Hiding my weaknesses
When all at once those bright eyes
Showed me all the things I never knew
Simply having someone to protect
Was enough to give me strength

- 優しい彗星 (Comet) by YOASOBI (2021)

Devoid of any context, the poetic string of words above illustrates a romantic display of affection, a profession of love that is true to its core. However, its actual context provides an alternative scenic illustration: it is a tale of male friendship. In particular, these are the words of Ibuki (a male lion) communicated to Louis (a male deer, also the former's newly appointed mafia boss), both of whom are titular characters in *Beastars* (Matsumi, 2019-2021), an anime based on a graphic novel of the same name by Paru Itagaki (2016-2020). Because this affectionate imputation does not act as a lubricant to all (hegemonically-inclined) male-to-male bonds, the lyrical insinuations of Ibuki are susceptible to misinterpretation.

From a heteronormative perspective of the ideal Western man, the meaning of Ibuki's words fails to pass the Western straight man litmus test: a man is not supposed to be affectionate towards another man, unless it is done jokingly. The buddy film genre widely circulates this comedic take on male friendships. Linked closely to romantic comedies, buddy films, especially the contemporary ones, depict "the intensity of the masculine bond" (Radner, 2014, p. 81-82) by making male-to-male relations more explicitly expressed. Within the frames of these films, it can be gleaned that sudden closeness and intimacies in inter-male relationships served as the punchline to an otherwise platonic homosociality. It is for this reason that these homosocial relationships between men are almost always the butt of the joke because the epilogue of this type of films typically involves a heterosexual union demonstrated through the marriage of one of the male leads to another woman (Radner, 2014). This is presented in direct contrast to the male characters' undeniably tense chemistry. What these buddy films fail to address, however, is the crisis of masculinity at the hands of heteronormativity that oils the machine of sexist oppression against both men and women. Both are held hostage to maintain society's preconceived notion of how they should behave and express themselves in public.

As a theme, masculinity has been tackled and re-imagined by anime in more than a hundred different ways. In fact, several of the most revered anime such as *Naruto* (2002-2007), *Bleach* (2004-2012), and *One Piece* (1999-present), belong to the *shonen* (young boy) genre, which are stories targeted at boys aged 9-18 and whose protagonists are young boys themselves (McCarthy, 2014). *Beastars* (Matsumi, 2019-2021) belongs to this genre, as it featured the trials and tribulations of a young male wolf, Legoshi, who navigated his complicated hormone-filled high school life. In addition, *Beastars* is also considered a slice of life anime because of the didactic turn that its story explored in the latter volumes.¹ As a colorful and vibrant story-telling medium positioned as a commercial success among viewers all over the world (Condry, 2013), anime allows men and boys to be represented in a manner which is filled with color, personality, and vigor as compared to the image of a Western stoic, emotionless man.

Notwithstanding the metamorphic approach of Japanese society towards changing gender identities (Saito, 2014), a lot of these anime programs continue to propagate heteronormativity, othering, and toxicity in terms of dealing with alternative forms of gender expression (Dahlberg-Dodd, 2016; Dilullo, 2020; Vasan, 2013). Thus, a need to read into non-heteronormative animes like *Beastars* stands at the forefront of research. But despite this pressing need, few studies about alternative forms of male expression in anime have been published (see Cervelli, 2022; Christianna & Kurniawan, 2015; Mehta, 2021). The distinct position in which *Beastars* find itself in anime masculinity representation is expounding maleness through an anthropomorphizing of animals as bipedal sentient beings. Anthropomorphism, although often found in children's literature, has the capacity to tackle more mature themes through an animal's allegorical model of self-awareness and universal overlap of human experiences (Gallup et al, 1997; Markowsky, 1975). Furthermore, *Beastars* is a shonen that is valuably ripe for research not only because of its popularity (having 7.5 million copies printed and sold globally) (Harding, 2021), but also because of its inherent queerness—a parameter that is not found in most shonen titles—to be discussed at a latter section of this paper.

The primary aim of this study is to analyze how the depiction of male-to-male homosocial relationships in *Beastars* disenfranchises the hegemonic portrayal of masculinity. Written by Paru Itagaki (2016-2020), *Beastars* is originally a serialized shonen manga series which was animated into a television anime series by the studio Orange. The overarching narrative revolved around a modernized metropolitan civilization populated by anthropomorphic animals whose cultural divide was demarcated between carnivores and herbivores. Within its subplots, different male-male

friendships emerged, all entangled in a complicated network of relations of power and deceit. This study examines three depictions of male homosocial relationships—namely Legoshi x Louis, Riz x Tem, and Louis x Ibuki—against the backdrop of the characters’ complex history by identifying the metaphors that arose from their interactions. By triangulating where the (homo)social meets the personal, this research aims to understand what these inter-male friendship depictions in *Beastars* have in common thematically and metaphorically. Using bromance studies as an anchor to metaphorical analysis, this research examines three male-to-male interrelations in *Beastars* and dissects the emergent themes in which the narratives parallelize and intersect.

Hegemonic masculinity, bromance, and media representation

Hegemonic masculinity is the offshoot of a heteronormative ideal for male expression. Hegemonic masculinity thrives in Western depictions of men in movies, books, and TV shows as it draws its appeal from the thematic profitability of power, authoritarianism, and control (Allmendinger, 2021; Zorlu, 2021). It also has found its way into masculinity depictions in Eastern regions despite Asian history’s being pervaded by historical figures known for their soft maleness (Taga, 2005). Across all media, depictions of hegemonic masculinity are symptomatic of the chokehold that heteronormativity has on men, and how such representations manage to be profitable, marketable, and popular because they are so embedded into society’s image of an ideal man.

At the core of media depictions of inter-male relations is bromance, a portmanteau of the words brother and romance (Elliot, 2007), a “situationship” characterized by an “emotionally intense bond between presumably straight males who demonstrate an openness to intimacy” (DeAngelis, 2014, p. 11). In several male-targeted films and other media, bromance is used as a literary device to reinforce heteronormativity. For example, David Greven (2014) explained how Western gross-out teen comedies and rom-com movies capitalized on the discomfort brought about by the awkwardness between two men who exchange sweet gestures. On the other hand, Eastern media also has its fair share of heteronormative representations such as the exclusion of boys’ love subculture in Chinese online media, exemplified by the masking of male-male romance under the guise of homosociality to fit in with heteronormative censorship (Hu & Wang, 2020).

Bromance may also be used by contemporary media as a tool to explore non-hegemonic masculine representations. By analyzing NigaHiga’s music video, Isabel Soresca (2013) was able to explicate the antinomy

of bromance's adherence to hegemonic masculinity in that it inevitably "struggles to express itself without contradicting the traditional masculine nature" (p. 81). For instance, *Y tu mamá también* by Alfonso Cuarón (2001) presented a serious take on male-male interrelations as organically human by portraying bromance as a "palpable, sincere tenderness" (Weinman, 2014, p. 74) underscored by a scene involving a threesome between two boys and one woman (Davis, 2014). In addition, the popular anime *YURI!!! On ICE* erected a gay-friendly space for men's figure skating where bromantic elements (which sometimes gets borderline homosexually charged) were used to reimagine a non-homophobic world of sports (Chao, 2021).

It appears, then, that bromance, as a literary device, is an antinomy: a paradox waiting to contradict itself at every turn. It seeks to reinforce the heteronormative ideal of a man, but at the same time portrays an alternative non-heteronormative viewpoint. Not only does bromance prove that hetero-sexism pervades male-to-male intimacies, but it also allows men to liberate themselves from the crisis of masculinity brought about by late-stage capitalism: a state in which they are heralded as 'true men' only under certain conditions in which they exercise wealth, power, dominance, and influence (Jha, 2020). After all, with the acknowledgement that texts are gendered in many ways, Michael DeAngelis (2014) determined that bromance maintains a dual ideological function both in its mythical meaning-making and narrative structure. Succinctly, bromantic depictions are not only understood at face value but from a deeper subtext. These ideologies are necessarily created through denotation and connotation, out of which myths emerge (Barthes, 1977 as cited in Chandler, 2002). DeAngelis (2014) made it clear that a literary analysis that looks through a bromantic lens enunciates both the heteronormative and queer perspectives of a text.

Deploying masculine vantage points from DeAngelis' (2014) *Reading the Bromance*, this study seeks to extract the extra-literal meaning behind the homosocial depictions in three relationships in *Beastars* (Matsumi, 2019-2021), namely Louis x Legoshi, Riz x Tem, and Louis x Ibuki. Not only did the characters' narratives overlap at crucial points, but their intimate moments were critically employed to interrogate hegemonic masculine ideals. Following DeAngelis' claim that bromance hybridized narrative structure and ideology as a result of the interplay between the literal and figurative, this study aimed to procure the thematic underpinnings that the intermale homosocial relationships in *Beastars* explored.

Methodology

This study used a metaphorical analysis—a manner of understanding the text by identifying the metaphorical aspects used in it (Pitcher, 2013)—

anchored on bromance theory. The analysis of metaphors zeroes in on the intimate homosocial relationships between two men with the recognition of the two facets of bromance:

[I]ts mythical meaning- making strategies [providing] a way for straight men to be intimate, and its narrative structure [serving] to contain and [to] direct this intimacy in ways that ensure its accessibility to its mainstream and heterosexual target markets while also refraining from alienating viewers who do not identify as heterosexual. (DeAngelis, 2014, p. 28-29)

Although not particularly identified but merely scanted in DeAngelis' introduction to *Reading the Bromance* as an "investigation of bromance's narrative and representational strategies" (p. 36), this method is derived from the plethora of works in the said collection of essays which analyzed bromance through a semiotic lens that provided an explanation of connotative codes, denotative proportions, and metaphorical sensibilities of bromantic depictions in media as sign vehicles (Davis, 2014; Feil, 2014; Forster, 2014; Greven, 2014; Lennard, 2014; Sen, 2014). Functioning as a male character study overtly conscious of the pathologies of intimate masculine friendships, a bromantic metaphorical analysis focuses on the elucidation of the individual connotative aspects of two (or more) men's bromantic relations through visual and/or semantic examination—akin to a semiotic analysis—of their deep-seated inter-male masculine bonds. In other words, the metaphorical analysis of the inter-male exchange determines through visual and linguistic codifications what the men's actions/gestures/imputations towards each other imply beyond what is immediately apparent by highlighting what the media depicts denotatively and connotatively. Applying this method to audiovisual works, the analysis pivots on two essential sequences: frames which depict the intimate (note, bromantic), often illicit, inter-male bonds; and scenes which cock, if not assemble, the said relations. These matters do not function to entirely isolate the inter-male bonds from the bigger picture; rather, it is made to underscore the bromantic elements which erect male-to-male bonding experience. Once the bromantic scenarios and frames from the works are identified, the method proposes a follow-up contact with the text by asking the following precursory queries: "how is their bromance depicted?" "what do their actions, words, and gestures imply about their (intimate) homosocial relationship?" "how does the inter-male friendships function in relation to their society/world?" and other questions tailor-fit to the inquiry.

In this study, the intimate homosocial relationships between three friendships (Louis x Legoshi, Riz x Tem, and Louis x Ibuki) were distinguished from the main story of *Beastars*—the overarching narrative of which is tangentially discussed as a driving force into how the men have acted amongst themselves—by categorically isolating the following: (1) the (b)romantic dimensions of Louis and Legoshi's love triangle with a female rabbit—eventually subverted by bromantic tension between the two men themselves; (2) the sequences chronicling Louis and Ibuki's journey through the Black Market where all of their bonding moments occurred; and (3) the parts which rendered the secret friendship between Riz and Tem. These scenes were individually probed with a particular focus on the metaphorical and euphemistic visual portraits that they signalize through narrative-specific themes. Through the critical connotative scrutiny of the abovementioned scenarios, this research explicated thematic imputations about what the anthropomorphic animals' bromantic exchanges and bonding rituals reflect, how their bromance relates to their non-human society at large, how heterosexist and anti-hegemonic masculinities regulate their intimacy, and how their male-to-male homosociality operates against a cruel, heteronormative, and consumerist façade.

The beast within

The complicated setting of *Beastars* (2019-2021), Cherryton High School, is pervaded by consumer capitalism. According to Miller (2015), consumer capitalism is an economic (and political) cohesion of individuals that treats each of them as a commodity-focused consumer, whereby happiness is akin to materialistic endeavor. Manifested by a growing consumerist demand for food consumption, Cherryton High School showed the consumer strategies in its reception of the characters of *Beastars* as constantly thinking about consumption (of food). After all, the herbivores in this school were the natural prey of the carnivores. To resolve this crisis, plant-based protein and eggs (legally obtained from laying chickens) were the commodity of the anthropomorphic animals. Underneath this consumer capitalist exterior was the illegal meat trade in the Black Market which catered to the cannibalistic/carnivorous desire of individuals for the consumption of actual meat.

Such a setting placed the homosocial relationships in *Beastars* at wit's end—where, to maintain capitalistic order, hegemony tramples upon counter-ideological narratives that lurk in the underbelly of its society. Despite this, the three homosocial relationships discussed in this paper remained intimate in their depiction of male bonds as the bonding rituals

were placed away from the heteronormative Panopticon but still within clear view of the male-male homosocial interactors.

An overview of the three homosocial relationships in *Beastars* presents the relational and processual nature of each of the friendships under this society. Situationally, all the succeeding summaries involve the development of interrelations between a carnivore and a herbivore—between restrained power and closeted brutality.

Legoshi² x Louis³

Louis, an anthropomorphic deer, was the star-studded student theater actor. In the story, he was awarded the role of being the “Beastar,” a prestigious status symbol accorded to the most influential herbivore or carnivore who has attained critical acclaim for his or her contribution to civilized animal society. Underneath this frontage of what seemed to be a perfect clean-edged life was an underbelly of shame and trauma. For one, he used to be meat for sale in the Black Market, with his foot marked by a serial number indicating that he was a product to be traded, and not an actual sentient animal with rights. On the one hand, he was a sexual partner of the local garden club member Haru, a tiny rabbit who he frequently visited at the rooftop greenhouse whenever he wished to have a quick no-strings-attached coitus.

Legoshi, the protagonist of *Beastars*, was situated differently from Louis. Also a member of the theater club, Legoshi shared the stage with Louis as one of the backstage crew. As a Lycan carnivore, Legoshi restrained himself from devouring, let alone hurting, another animal, eating only protein that had been legally obtained. Legoshi was timid, shy, and unexpressive of his thoughts until he got a whiff of Haru, a petite female rabbit who tended to the garden. Like a predator fixated on a prey, Legoshi targeted Haru with his feelings, even though he knew Haru was the school’s whore. Complicated as it was, Legoshi got caught in a love triangle between himself, Louis, and Haru.

Over the course of their friendship, Louis grew to be the more socially powerful one who took charge of conversations and did not shy away from letting Legoshi know that he was the boss, while Legoshi was treated largely as a side character to his story even though Legoshi was the physically stronger one. However, their likely friendship was tested when, upon visiting the Black Market, Louis suddenly disappeared. His absence stirred quite a number of issues in Cherryton High School because he was, after all, the bejeweled crown, the Beastar. Legoshi, needing Louis’ presence back at the school, sought to bring him back by leaving school for a while to scour the Black Market.

Despite his diligent efforts, Legoshi was not successful in bringing Louis back to the school by himself. Eventually, it was Louis' own volition which compelled himself to come home. Unfortunately, Louis' return was welcomed by a growling fight between Louis and Riz, a huge, muscled bear who Legoshi discovered was the one who murdered a classmate. In the heat of the fight, Legoshi could not stand up to the gargantuan power of Riz until Louis, offering his serially numbered foot to Legoshi for consumption, gave him immense power. True enough, the delectable meat from Louis' now-dismembered hoof served as a power boost for Legoshi to defeat his huge enemy and eventually win the brawl.

Riz⁴ x Tem⁵

Tem was a grass-eating herbivore (lamb), while Riz was a honey-sucking carnivore (bear). They were two friends from either side of the prey-predator spectrum. Tem and Riz's unlikely friendship began with a simple statement: "You're quite scary aren't you?" Tem said to Riz while they were in the theater club's locker room. Riz found Tem's statement actually quite refreshing since he had always been seen as the cute and cuddly tall bear and nothing more. It was as if Tem stared right into his soul.

The intimidating aura of Riz was no myth; it was actually genetic. In order to suppress his immense strength, Riz—like other bears—was mandated to take a sedative pill to calm their senses and hold back their natural appetite for flesh. This was why Riz appreciate Tem's honesty to him.

Tem suspected that Riz had something to hide within him, and he was not wrong. Curious yet a bit scared, Tem confronted Riz with affirmations of friendship and open arms. Tem was caring and sweet when he asked Riz the tough questions. At one point, Riz was able to tell Tem about the medication he was using, which he had not told anyone but his family. This revelation prompted Tem's concern and reaffirmation that he was a friend that Riz could rely on.

Compelled by the desire to show Tem his truest unhinged self, Riz decided to skip his pills for one night to show Tem his wild and unmedicated self under the red moonlight. It was upon seeing a terrified Tem when Riz realized what he had done: he turned himself into an instaiable predator facing a weak prey. Down the hallways he chased Tem with a glare and hunger in his eyes: a hunger for both acceptance and Tem's flesh. Their chase ended in the projector room, lit only by the light emitting device. It was at this moment when Tem, engulfed in fear, said: "You carnivores are all monsters!" Surprisingly, Riz took this to heart more positively, thinking "As he said that, his words and eyes were more beautiful than ever. It was like true friendship." With his last breath, Tem carefully and reassuringly

whimpered: “You don’t have to hide anything anymore. We’re best friends, right? That tremendous power of yours is what makes you unique. I’ll accept you for who you are, Riz. No need to suffer anymore.” With tenderness and clarity, Tem caressed Riz’s abdominal area as they delicately enveloped each other in a grisly hug under a spotlight, as the perspective revolved around them and a soft melody from a piano played in the background. Tears welled up in Riz’s eyes as he looked at the camera after the warm embrace. Riz’s face now appeared to be covered in scratches and blood; he had just devoured Tem, the lamb’s ichor forming a crimson pool around his dismembered body. The sequence ended showing the title card of the episode: 蜜漬けの記憶 (Mitsuzuke no Kioku, or Honey-pickled Memory).⁶

Ibuki⁷ x Louis

Louis’ first encounter with Ibuki, a male lion, happened after a resounding gunshot. Louis had just killed the mafia leader of Shishigumi, an underground Lion *yakuza*⁸ whose office was located at the outskirts of the Black Market. Ibuki, as the principled *yakuza* second-in-line, informed the clan that Louis was the new boss of the organization as per the house rules.

Louis, as a herbivore, initially had difficulty asserting his dominance and rightful claim as the new head of Shishigumi. To show his faux-strength, Louis ate a chunk of meat in front of the lions even though he could not physically masticate it. Because of this, he gained the respect of the Shishigumi lion members, if only for the sake of the act. Throughout Louis’ exploration of the Black Market, Ibuki stood by his side as they exchanged many stories. Notably, Ibuki’s childhood appeared to be similar to Louis’, striking at the core of their homosocial bond. However, Ibuki grew to see the truth: that Louis was not happy with the position he was in. Ibuki had to devise a way to have Louis escape the organization at his own expense.

At a crucial point in his plan, Ibuki enlisted the help of another Shishigumi Lion member who had to shoot him if he attempted to eat Louis. This was merely a ruse; not once did he ever want to eat Louis, his friend, but that scenario would be a likely point of escape for Louis if he were to reacquaint himself with civilized society and go back into the limelight of a stage. Cherryton High School needed Louis back, and Ibuki had no other choice.

On a supposed late night road trip, Ibuki forced Louis to kill him with a loaded gun to facilitate his escape, but Louis was too weak-willed to pull the trigger at his trusted friend. Ibuki, with tears streaming from his eyes, faked the attempt to devour Louis only to be shot in the head by the lion he called earlier. Louis clutched Ibuki’s lifeless body in the driver’s seat and then ran away, distraught over seeing his friend die by right in front of his

eyes. Louis took Ibuki's sacrifice as a message of release. Tragically, Louis' final encounter with Ibuki also occurred after a resounding gunshot.

The beast without

Underpinned by an understanding that ideologies are concocted through the coalescence of the connotative and the literal, this research examined these homosocial relationships within *Beastars* by analyzing the codes and cues presented in their interactions. These bromantic illustrations between the three male-male interrelationships borrowed largely from buddy film tropes, and managed to demonstrate a compelling take on what it means to be a man showing affection to his male friend.

Foremost, *Beastars* is queer text. According to Jay Stewart (2017), queerness celebrates “transgression in the form of visible difference from norms” (p. 62). Corollarily, the queerness of a text may be apparent in its complex identification of anti-normative approaches to a structure or story, and not just from its depiction of homosexuality or illustration of non-conforming gender identities (Bryson et. al, 2006). In *Beastars*, the characters are anthropomorphic, thereby showing their bodies as already not occupying the privileged vessel of a hegemonic masculine man—the penultimate embodiment of a heteronormative body infused with power and privilege (Manning & Stern, 2016). Moreover, the story itself portrays interspecies sexual relations which reflect a revolutionized form of interpersonal (in this case, inter-animal) libidinal desire that has come to be one of the many elements of a queer utopia (Shahani, 2013). Despite its innate queerness, *Beastars* still refuses to canonically acknowledge the truthfulness of the homoerotic intuitions and subtexts that it inevitably sends to its viewers and readers apart from subliminal messaging. Considering that it is redundant to queerly read a queer text, a bromantic analysis—borrowing from both queer and heteronormative lenses—of *Beastars* is more appropriate in appraising the metaphorical messages incorporated in the queer text. In the succeeding discussion, such a bromance-focused metaphorical analysis is conducted.

Breaking down the narrative of these three homosocial relationships entailed a recognition of how the story turned out and what intimate moments they all shared with each other. Incidentally, the climactic resolution in each of these friendships centered around a moment involving a horrific display of blood. To employ an analysis on these stories meant to interpret it from a critical perspective in order to identify metaphors. From this analysis, three themes emerged: proximity, perversity, and concealment.

Proximity

The three homosocial relationships from *Beastars* typify proximity in two nodes: proximity in its literal sense, and proximity in its figurative sense. Throughout the depiction of the carnivore-herbivore friendships, closeness materialized as a centralized convergence of the boys' affection for their male friends.

In a literal sense, proximity describes nearness in physicality. Each of the homosocial relationships exhibited this closeness by showing an actual physical proximity between the characters in their actions. Normally, this type of propensity of skin-on-skin touch between friends is socially acceptable largely in friendships between women but, as *Beastars* presented, it can also be exercised by two male brethren. Instead of repulsively acting at the sight of propinquity between two male bodies, the characters in *Beastars* viewed it as something organic. When Louis pulled Legoshi closer, he invited him to be more attentive to his words in the same way that he held Ibuki's soulless body at the time of his death. Similarly, Tem hugged Riz as a gesture of his acceptance and endearment to his friend.

All of these presentations of new masculine modalities are what *Beastars* owes to East Asia's preservation of soft masculinity. In the East Asian region, soft masculinity pervades the cultural infrastructures of queer and female audiences by hybridizing hegemonic masculine ideals with feminine expressions that creates an androgynous mold for men (Hong, 2021). Standing in direct contrast to Western masculine ideal, soft masculinity positions itself to be queer in the global context. To be queer does not only relate to being homosexually coded, but it may also refer to a complicated and decontextualized orientation of identity, structure, community, social network, or social practice (Bryson et al., 2006). That is to say, Western masculinity is universally embraced as a part of social conformity while soft masculinity exists to defy such a privileged position. Due to its distinct positionality of the East Asian man, soft masculinity effectively decontextualizes the history of man from its oppressive, hyper-masculine hegemony and instead makes visible the vitality of the fair-skinned, effeminate, and emasculated male expression, body, and identity. In this light, the soft masculine man explores the world as a subject that is free from the deterministic and idealistic expectations of men. Because of such an 'unbecoming' (Jha, 2020), the masculine modality has deterritorialized the idea of masculinity in East Asian societies. Soft masculinity is, thus, queer in relation to Western masculinity's hegemonic disposition.

As a product of the incubatory cultural machineries of East Asia, particularly Korean new media, soft masculinity proves to be constituted, if not facilitated, by the intersectionality of gender performance and capitalist

production—an idiosyncrasy augmented by queer Marxism in the East Asian context (Floyd, 2009). To reconcile the dialectical frame proposing that societal factors like gender constructions are constantly reshaped by cultural work controlled by signification and power (Penney, 2014) with the Marxist concept of reification or the dehumanization of individuals of the exploited class, Petter Almqvist-Ingersoll (2019) explicated the theory of queer Marxism which presupposed “capital and gender identity... as interconnected concepts where capitalistic, neoliberal ideas, and legislative measures have historically affected [people’s] perceptions of sexuality and constituted genders” (p. 12; see Floyd, 2009). Speaking of the K-pop industry—out of which soft masculinity is primarily sculpted and popularly distributed—Petter Almqvist-Ingersoll (2019) explained how queer Marxism provides a clear picture of how gender performativity stands to be assertively choked by neoliberal commercialism which instructs how projected performances are specifically tailored to attract certain audiences. In so doing, Almqvist-Ingersoll illustrated how the presence of soft masculinity and other Korean masculinities in media reflects the commodification of gender by juxtaposing alternative male expressions with heteronormative frameworks of both masculine and feminine ideals in transnationally distributed content. In this light, a queer Marxist framework of soft maleness in East Asian media assumes that the critical shift that soft masculinity provides to gender construction cannot be separated from the socioeconomic, often capital-driven, forces which fine-tunes the gears of its production primarily for profit-generation. This quasi-inalienability from capitalist production accounts for the omnipresence of soft masculinity in transnationally distributed cultural media that is formed through machines of East Asian cultural production. Such a reverence to capital also accounts for the capacity of soft masculinity to question hegemonic ideals despite the prevalence of heteronormativity across East Asian societies (Jackson, 2020) because its mass production anchored partly on hegemonic frameworks generates more favorable appeal to the masses—effectively crafting soft maleness as a double-edged part-cultural part-socioeconomic sword. Much like how bromance operates to propagate hegemonic ideals and yet enforce counter-intuitive perspectives, soft masculinity is borne primarily out of socioeconomic hegemony (capitalism) but functions as a cultural anti-hegemony (queerness)⁹. Also trickling down from the tolerance of the presence of soft maleness in heteronormative East Asian societies, many of which emphasize the sanctity of the hegemonic nuclear family (Jackson, 2020), is the increased visibility of alternative male expressions that resonate among males with similar self-identified characteristics. Therefore, soft masculinity theoretically materializes as a vestige not only

of a culturally distinct masculine performance and identity but also of capitalist production—attributes that malleably procure the subsistence of soft masculinity as a cultural initiative of the socioeconomically tangent identity politics of East Asia.

Typically, soft masculinity is visibly and transnationally formed in East Asian singers' and actors' cultural production and transnational media distribution (Hong, 2021). Because of the well-accepted and well-received template of the soft modern man due to the affinity of East Asian media consumers to soft masculine image as both an identity and cultural product, *Beastars* is able to represent the male intimacies differently: by having the characters interlocked in a relaxed embrace, by maintaining convenient closeness among the male bodies, and by authorizing a man's shedding of tears when faced with great emotional pain. Likewise, because of the continuous production of representations of soft maleness in East Asian media anchored on the profitability of hegemonic masculinity, *Beastars* inevitably borrows, if not explicates, a heteronormative framework in its illustration of soft masculinity. This is similar to how bromance capitalizes on heteronormativity to enforce alternative perspectives, as will be explained in the succeeding paragraphs.

In the figurative sense, proximity in male-to-male interrelations refers to the thinly-created line that separates homosociality and homoeroticism (DeAngelis, 2014). To a non-queer audience, the homosocial relationships in *Beastars* present merely an out-of-the-ordinary display of affection between bipedal animals in a civilized society. However, for queer spectators, something romantic brews among the anthropomorphic characters.

By DeAngelis' (2014) account of Peter Forster's examination:

[B]romance's management of the potentially queer component of its close relationships between heterosexual men [illuminates] a dramatic narrative structure that urges its protagonists to deviate from the demands of heteronormativity even as they are ultimately called to reclaim this normativity by narrative's end. (Forster, 2014 as cited in DeAngelis, 2014, p. 37)

Utilizing this technique, *Beastars* portrays bromantic interrelations that collaterally attack the heteronormative dispositions of what male bonds should look like. On the flip side, *Beastars* makes no express or implied reclamation of masculinity post-bonding, as the male characters remained steadily intact without any recursive return to heteronormative expression after each proximal interaction. The characters neither showed repulsive reactions to the proximate engagements, nor did they emphasize their

masculinity through any sort of verbiage post-touch. If anything, the characters actively embraced the tenderness of the moments of closeness shared with their male friend and acknowledged their occurrence as a dialectical ontology.

The organic and normative treatment of the intimacy in (and of) homosocial bonds in *Beastars* opens itself to a bromantically queer reading. Despite the text being queer in and of itself, the male homosocial bonds are not necessarily and explicitly depicted to show the acceptance or prevalence of non-conforming gender identities, homosexuality, or anti-hegemony. Nonetheless, an analysis anchored on ideas by DeAngelis (2014) revealed that a bromantic reading of this queer text unearths another layer of homosexual undertone between and among male character interactions in *Beastars*—one that stands in direct contrast to the presumed heterosexual identity of the male characters. Delving into the queer fantasy, a spectator may inject quasi-romantic imputations and homosexual subtext to the homosocial relationships between Louis x Ibuki, Louis x Legoshi, and Tem x Riz. Often, these bromantic queer reading of texts are overlooked because they are counter-ideological. However, queer spectatorship still impacts the way in which films are distributed, made, and received (Greven, 2014). For instance, the queer reading of male friendships in *Beastars* procured independent fan-made cultural productions. These homosexual character pairings extend beyond the canonical episodes of *Beastars* and manifest themselves entirely at the hands of non-heterosexist spectators outside the text itself. Instead of imposing their non-canonical readings of the proximity between the characters onto the story itself, fans and queer lens viewers create an extra-textual world for (and around) the different ‘ships’ such as Lougoshi and Ibulouis.¹⁰ From these frames, it can be gleaned how the queer coding of the homosocial proximity was understood by the counter-ideological viewer. Louis’ act of pulling of Legoshi closer is read as an act of sexual foreplay, Riz and Tem’s hug is viewed as an act of love, and Louis’ manner of wailing at the sight of Ibuki’s demise is seen as painful guilt about the ritualistic death of their romance. Because of the textural plasticity of the character models in *Beastars*, the homoerotic male-on-male animalistic intimacies appeared perceptually inflated—as if they were frail air-filled objects that had the potential for “abject eruption and collapse” (Cannon, 2016, p. 265). If the characters exploded or erupted, all the emotions will be released like an uncontrollable churn of desire; if the characters remained steady, their inhibitions of feelings will appear constricted, dated, and ready to pop at any time. As such, the sexuality of the characters was placed in a limbic state of malleability: not quite straight, not quite gay but essentially just (b)romantic.

The metaphor of proximity in *Beastars* conveyed not only the actual closeness between the characters but also the propinquity of homosociality and homosexuality, exemplified both by the susceptibility of queer spectators to read it differently and by the plastic design of its character models. After all, the male body in and of itself is a body politic—a site of exploration both of dominant and repressed ideological facades. This eroticization of the male body and identity is linked to the apparent theme of perversity in these homosocial relationships in *Beastars*.

Perversity

Close relations between perversity and vulgarity have been augmented by textual analyses but rarely is the demarcation line drawn between them. Inasmuch as the two terms are synonyms of each other, the full-fledged semantics remain largely different in context and usage.

In the context of bromance, vulgarity is attributed to the use of strong language meant to solidify hegemonic masculine traits or reaffirm self-imposed maleness (Feil, 2014), while perversity refers to sexually coded interactions between two heterosexual men. Contextually, perversity, in its suggestive and lewd sense, defines the thematic spectacle between the analyzed homosocial relationships in *Beastars*.

The shift in tonal and modal homosocial entrées in *Beastars* focused on the bonding ritual of each relationship, particularly the scenarios which involved bloodshed: Legoshi's consumption of Louis' foot¹¹, Ibuki's premeditated suicide, and Riz's act of devouring Tem. On the surface level, these scenes involved an exertion of brute force whereby the male characters vigorously thrust themselves onto their male friend. These references include Legoshi's teeth gnashing on Louis' foot involving jaw strength, Riz's gobbling of Tem requiring a violent rending of flesh, and Ibuki's head slamming on Louis' body. On a denotative level, these frames involved gut-wrenching fountains of gore to elicit disgust from the audience, in a similar way that heteronormative viewers are appalled by two men sharing an intimate bonding moment.

In audiovisual depictions of men-to-men interrelations, the male body is eroticized through the display of testosterone-driven interactions, making it susceptible to homoerotic perversity. Ultimately, homoeroticism is typically expressed through violence between men (Greven, 2014). Likewise, *Beastars* showed this perversity of bromance by presenting a literal dismemberment of the male body in a fetishized and ultraviolent manner: devouring. Interpreting Michel de Montaigne's *Des Cannibales*, Frank Lestringant (1982) explained how this type of devouring of another living sentient creature can represent an "absorption of otherness as a means of

arriving at an enhanced understanding of [oneself] and of [one's] relations to others" (Lestrington, 1982 as cited in Marchi, 1999, p. 35). Locating this within *Beastars* through Riz's imputations as he relished Tem's flesh shows the following:

The blood and meat scraps scattered around, the desperate traces of resistance, and even the memories I shared with Tem... I could not let it all slip away into the dust of the past. (Matsumi, 2019-2021, Season 2 episode 19, 20:48-21:01).

By his own words, Riz perversely wanted to collect Tem through every inch of his guts, and to absorb all the memories in his act of eating, a recognition of the absorption of another that occurred in Riz and Tem's cannibalistic bonding ritual. In a similar manner, Legoshi absorbed Louis' dark past (of being a Black Market commodity) by eating away at his foot marked with a serial number. Perversely, Legoshi absorbed all the pain and guilt that came with the serial number, which has controlled Louis' inner thoughts about his perceived worthlessness. Legoshi turned Louis' emotional baggage into his own physical strength in his battle against Riz. In other words, these savage consumptions are more than just titillating tableaux; they are sincere illustrations of the male bond that goes beyond just emotional connections to also include physical sensations. By using the mouth, the characters bonded with their male friends in an interlocked, tasteful, and blood-driven carnage. Instead of throwing invectives, verbally and physically, at each other like male friends do in Western movies (Greven, 2014), the characters of *Beastars* brutalized each other in a grisly manner by shedding blood in their own exploitatively poignant but narrative-specific manner: devouring or suicide.

Such a sublimated perversity assaults heteronormative sexuality in its supposed feminization and eroticization of male bonding and the male body (Feil 2014). This is where perversity and proximity intersect in *Beastars*: the queerness of the act of eating a fellow male friend. Diana Fuss (1996, in Greven, 2014) argued that Freud found links between homosexuality and orality, saying that "male homosexuality is represented as fixated at the earliest stage of the libidinal organization—the oral-cannibalistic stage—in which the recalcitrant subject refuses to give up its first object" (p. 138). Such an oral-cannibalistic interpretation of eating the mother in Freudian theory is said to "[unleash] sadistic impulse" (Greven, 2014, p. 93), and this impulse is depicted in the act of devouring in *Beastars*. Understanding the perversity in the act of eating another traces back to orality and homosexuality of wanting to be the mother by effectively eating her alive and absorbing her femininity. Situated differently in a skewed but parallel manner, Riz viewed

Tem as the quintessential acceptance from the friend that he wanted his whole life so he desired to consume that acceptance wholly and physically by devouring the very person (or sheep) who embodied this acceptance. In a similar way, Legoshi wanted to ingrain in himself brute strength that came from the (consumption of the) foot of Louis, which signified his dark history of being a market product. By using homosexual and oral subtexts from Freudian theory, the *Beastars* characters showed the ferociously savage and brutally honest feeling of what it meant for one man to show affection to another man—an emotion so visceral that it whipped up the bestial impulse to want to eat him in whole or in part for personal and/or social gain.

Stated differently, Greven (2014) described the whole ordeal of male-male pain and pleasure by explaining how male-on-male-violence-as-intimacy is a perverse imitation of heterosexuality. Furthermore, this male-on-male violence acts as a substitute for heterosexual sex between man and woman, a parody of the heteronormative sexual relations (Greven, 2014). Thus, one can see Riz's devouring of Tem and Legoshi's consumption of Louis' foot as satirical takes on heteronormative sex—a perversion of the sexual intimacy between man and woman, in an intensely stomach-upsetting display of blood. Instead of engaging the male characters in an act of sexual intercourse (a defiance of the homosociality of the bonds), *Beastars* effectively attributed the perversity of cannibalistic violence as a euphemistic pastiche of heterosexual intercourse and its painfully pleasurable passion through male-on-male ingurgitation. In this light, the intimate bonding ritual in a homosocial relationship is shown perversely through a thoughtful critical lens. Perversity here is thematically exemplified through a man consuming another man.

The perversity in Ibuki and Louis' interactions was not as apparent as it was at the time of the suicide itself. Ibuki's perversity lay in his willingness to die for the sake of Louis' escape; the cost of one own life in exchange for the well-being of his male friend was presumably highly important to him by hegemonic standards. Similarly, Tem also sacrificed his own life for Riz to feel accepted in a society that ostracized the power of carnivorous appetite that was innate in Riz. Nothing is more parallelistic to these male-for-male oblation than the ambiguity of Patroclus' queerly interpreted sacrificial offering of his own life for the sake of Achilles (Clarke, 1978). Perversity here is thematically exemplified through a man sacrificing his own life for another man.

Concealment

Coinciding with the vulgar and perverse nature of these depictions of homosocial intimacy in *Beastars* is the blanket of darkness that surrounded

the characters. It is not by happenstance that these intimate moments between animal boys happened under the cover of darkness; it was a deliberate sketch. The night often denotes the hours when the moon is up and the sun is down, but it also connotes a shrouding of the characters in an empty shade of black.

True enough, the occurrences of male intimacy in *Beastars* are better depicted in a canopy of shadows lit only by either natural (moon) or artificial (projector) light to signify secrecy. The bonding ritual between each of the homosocial relationships happened at night: Louis and Legoshi's midnight battle with Riz, Riz's devouring of Tem, and Ibuki's car suicide. In contrast, sunshine and stage lights were used in *Beastars* to illuminate and focus on main characters when they required an audience: fireworks in the night sky, Louis' stage performances in front of the school community, among others. On the other hand, the bloodshed (i.e. devouring and suicide) was committed in the eerie darkness to conceal its perverse and proximal intimacy.

As if perpetually shadowed by a cloud of darkness, intimacy in homosocial relationships are discouraged by heteronormative expectations and are often kept secret. In Western movies, the intimate inter-male relations are jokingly kept behind closed doors, quite literally, where only the film's audience are able to perceive the intimate moments between two men, such as it was depicted in *Send Me no Flowers* (Jenison, 1964) (Weinman, 2014). This is not far from the truth: in the shared intimacy between two presumably heterosexual men, both of them are the only spectators to their libidinally-charged exchange. *Beastars* capitalized on this Western trope to depict the climactic portrayals of its male characters' intimacy by cloaking them in darkness to emphasize the concealment of the intimacy. The picture it paints is bleak: the gloominess of having male intimacy secluded from the limelight of society's gaze, free from judgement, oppression, and ridicule. More powerfully, *Beastars* did not toy with these intimate moments to arrive at a comedic punchline; rather, it presented bloody male bonding rituals to corrupt the senses and depict intermale relationship intimacy as painfully familiar, gruesomely cherished, but also better off undisclosed.

If displayed out in the open, these occurrences would cause social disturbance within the consumer capitalist network of relations in *Beastars* because these commodified interactions would be disruptive to the social order of carnivore-herbivore non-consumption. In addition, Greven (2014) associated this tumultuous reception by society of male-male bond among its members to fears of changing sexual identity and gender roles. By presenting the gore, blood, and guts of perversity, it presented a disturbingly figurative take on homosexually-charged homosocial intimacy. This anxious portrayal

is deliberate in its demonstration of the haunting visual effect of viewing homosocial relationships from the perspective of heteronormativity, which conceives an audience that is viscerally flabbergasted at the sight of two men being less than one inch closer to each other. After all, there is no denying that these actions between the platonic relationships of Louis x Ibuki, Louis x Legoshi, and Riz x Tem, were erotically charged bonds which, if blatantly presented to Cherryton High School, would probably have caused a huge disruption in the same way that supposed homosocial depictions disrupt the perceived social order of gender and identity.

Conclusion: The beast(s) inside of us

Mercilessly, a reverberating gunshot tore through the night
I hear your final breath gush out
How heartless, that glint of a split-second meteor
All my prayers vanish, unheard and unanswered
The delicate, golden comet
Slowly burns out in my hands
I clasp at that elegant mane
As I am left alone in this darkness

- 優しい彗星 (Comet) by YOASOBI (2021)

Lyrical reflecting on Ibuki's death, YOASOBI spoke through Louis when she sang about the lamentable quietus of the homosocial relationship from the bulleted stare of heteronormativity by painting intermale intimacy (and Ibuki in particular) as a serene shooting star.

This death of the male friendship illustrated in Louis and Ibuki's last moments is a tragedy of two things: of losing a friend, and of slaughtering the homosocial intimacy. Ibuki's last breath triggered the deeply seated affections of Louis, compelling him to shed tears. This ritualistic death of Ibuki is a tragic depiction of both Ibuki's last moment and of the platonic homosocial affection's demise: one is a tragedy of homicide by a bullet, the other a tragedy of murder by heteronormative gaze. It is only under the cover of darkness that a man will be able to cry over the loss of his friend, but this should not (and cannot) always be the case. As *Beastars* fleshed out in its complex narrative of a utopian-dystopian world of anthropomorphic animals, male-male homosocial relationships must be allowed to flourish outside the bounds of men's social expectations—that male-male platonic affection can be emancipatory in foregoing stereotypes, and cataclysmic in erasing the (judgmental) beast that resides within us.

Intermale homosocial depictions in media are reliant on dominant ideologies of hegemonic masculinity in order to deliver its message. Drawing primarily from previous bromantic depictions but adding their own anthropophagous twist, *Beastars* capitalized on homosocial intimacy tropes to display fetishized bonds between two males operating under an environment that allowed soft masculinity. As men's image moved from speaking with their fists to being fashionably articulate and effeminate (Maliangkay, 2013), *Beastars* located itself as a rich text that provided a different, if not queer, model for male friendships and men themselves.

The display of male friendship in *Beastars* solidified the presence of humanness within each of the characters. Despite having anthropomorphic characteristics that are defined by their species-specific traits, the characters in the show are deeply, innately, and emotionally human. While the characters' identity politics are vastly different in the literal sense, the narrative portrayed metaphorical sensibilities that are universal. Its spellbinding male character study permeates through the homosocial bonds in which each of the characters are caged. In tackling the intersectional themes of proximity, perversity, and concealment, *Beastars* challenged hegemonic expectations of inter-male relationship head-on to prevent another artificial death of male intimacy in the eyes of the heteronormative public. Men are less convinced to practice George Mosse's (1966) idea of self-restraint as *Beastars* communicates that it is up to them as contemporary males to reorient their understanding of the perversity and proximity of their often concealed homosocial affectionate relations with other men, and to redefine what it means to be a man in this modern wolf-eat-deer/bear-eat-lamb/lion-eat-deer world which heteronormativity holds in captivity.

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Endnotes

¹ This tonal shift midway accounted for the increased readership of *Beastars* even though it was primarily published in *Weekly Shōnen Champion*, a Japanese magazine targeted at 9–18 year-old boys. The trajectory of *Beastars*' readership from this initial springboard reached audiences that included young adults and late adults. Even though the inclusion of queer themes presupposed the increased female readership of the manga, it appears that the intention to inject homoeroticism into the story was to make alternative perspectives visible to the general population rather than an attempt at appeasing female readers. Nevertheless, *Beastars* as shonen is still emphasized because of its initial reception as such and its continued publication in the said magazine until its final chapter.

² A profile of Legoshi can be found here: <https://beastars.fandom.com/wiki/Legoshi>

³ A profile of Louis can be viewed here: <https://beastars.fandom.com/wiki/Louis>

⁴ A profile of Riz can be checked here: <https://beastars.fandom.com/wiki/Riz>

⁵ A profile of Tem can be read here: <https://beastars.fandom.com/wiki/Tem>

⁶ In the Netflix page of *Beastars*, the official English title was *Unforgettable Sweetness*, which captured the palpable tenderness of the friendship but was not a literal translation of the title.

⁷ A profile of Ibuki can be glistened here: <https://beastars.fandom.com/wiki/Ibuki>

⁸ A group of organized crime syndicates originating in Japan. Also loosely referred to as Japanese mafia.

⁹ Such a cultural queerness can be illustrated through Japan's Shinjuku Ni-chome gay bar subculture. According to Baudinette (2021), soft masculine gay men in Japan flock to Shinjuku Ni-chome bars, which they consider as a safe space for their performance of gay identity. However, it is also a site where their identities are excluded considering that the highly stratified social order in this area privileges hegemonic 'hard' masculinity as the primary siphon of gay desire, thereby other-ing non-hegemonic male expressions. This goes to show that, despite its commercial imperatives, soft masculinity, as an alternative male expression, remains to be peppered with discrimination, deterritorialization, and dislocation; thereby marking its subsistence, especially in media, as a necessary intervention into the changing nature of modern masculinities across East Asia.

¹⁰ "Ship" in fan studies is the slang version of "relationship," meaning two characters who are not canonically in love are imputed to be engaged in a romantic relationship with each other. A detailed fan archive of Lougoshi/Lougosi ship can be read here: <https://shipping.fandom.com/wiki/Lougosi> while a digital archive of Iboulouis fanart can be seen here: <https://www.tumblr.com/tagged/iboulouis?sort=top>

¹¹ Consuming the the leg would have decapitated Louis, hence Louis only offered his foot.

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