As the world shifted into social isolation at the onset of the Coronavirus pandemic, many found remote dating to be their only outlet for romantic and sexual interaction. In this paper, I examine the constructed reality of personal advertisements in the COVID-19 era. I focus on the meaning individuals find in online dating and how they use their imagination in the development of online relationships. I followed the stories of those individuals who took out personal advertisements in the New York Review of Books at the beginning of the Coronavirus pandemic in March 2020. Although I draw on textual analysis of these advertisements, I am less concerned with the genre and more concerned with the ad authors’ relationships to online dating. By conducting interviews, I found that online relationships offer their own distinct pleasures and that their format affords individuals more freedom of self-presentation and expression than in-person dating, thereby setting participants up for potentially more successful romantic first impressions.

The NYRB advertisement guidelines forbid the inclusion of pictures and require authors to anonymously describe themselves by means of their physical traits, personality, interests, age, location, and profession. The personal ad section generally reflects the readership of the NYRB: most of the individuals who post or respond to ads are white, affluent, heterosexual, and well educated. In a 2017 NYRB survey, researchers found that 96% of subscribers held a college degree, 79% held post-graduate degrees, 75% were male, 52% had a net worth over $1,000,000, and subscribers’ average household income was $239,994. Tellingly, the most listed employment status is retired academic. Although a majority of the ads do not indicate a specific marital status aside from “single,” several individuals describe themselves as widowed. I have not seen a post that explicitly describes someone as in a relationship or as a divorcee. In general, the freedom of self-presentation and expression that online dating provides sets participants up for potentially more successful romantic first impressions while offering its own distinct pleasures.

At the outset of my research, I assumed that modern, picture-based dating platforms like Tinder might engender more superficial relationships than the NYRB personal ads posted in the back of the arts, culture, and literary publication New York Review of Books (NYRB). NYRB cranks out 20 issues annually, featuring cultural and literary critiques followed by a section of personal advertisements typically written by individuals aged 50–90 seeking sexual and romantic partners. I have conducted an ethnographic study of the NYRB personal advertising world in an attempt to deconstruct the acts of imagination and personal reinvention that facilitate online romantic exchanges. Although my larger project includes more participants, in this paper, I pull from my interviews with three female ad submitters, whom I have renamed Edith, Margaret, and Cleo for this text.
ads, which rely on text to attract potential matches. However, I found that many of my interlocutors exchanged photos with potential partners at some point, regardless of the initial NYRB limitations. One of my interlocutors, Edith, experienced an awkward situation with a potential romantic partner who sent pictures of himself that appeared to be twenty years old in an attempt to seem more attractive. A more unwonted case was Cleo, a woman in her late 20s, who received messages from a suitor imagining what she looked like before they exchanged photos.

Cleo’s ad, referencing her ethnicity, age, and sexuality, caught my attention because she is an outlier relative to the rest of NYRB readership: “PUNKISH, ALTERNATIVE BI/PANSEXUAL Asian woman seeks love during biocrisis: a lazy, late-20s millennial poet; sardonic & facetious. You: incisive, knowing, affectionate, w/o COVID-19.” After speaking to Cleo, I found out that her ad caught the attention of many others as well; she had received fourteen responses, all from straight men, within a matter of days. This was significantly more attention than the other women received, all of whom told me they were written between five and ten messages per advertisement. In my interview with Cleo, I asked if she received any particularly negative responses. “One response I got was from an older gentleman who sent me a description of a slim, petite, BDSM scenario with this version of me that he kind of cooked up which is...weird.” At no point had Cleo described herself as slim, petite, or into BDSM, and this description was received as totally bizarre. This man also sent unsolicited, lengthy descriptions of imagined sexual scenarios. Many of the other individuals who responded to Cleo’s ad explicitly referenced her ethnicity in a fetishistic way.

Judith Butler and Assumed Bodies

In “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” Judith Butler characterizes the body as “understood to be an active process of embodying certain cultural and historical possibilities, a complicated process of appropriation” (1988, 521). According to Butler, there is always assumed cultural and historical associations with a body. Because Cleo described her body as young (“late 20s”), her responders assumed that her physical body was not only beautiful and sexually active (“slim... BDSM scenario”) but also physically smaller (“petite”) based on assumptions tied to her gender and ethnic identity. Another man went so far as to inquire about Cleo’s ability to perform domestic tasks: “They would respond with lines of inquiry like ‘Do you do house cleaning? Do you wash windows? Did you know that Milton made money while washing windows and writing poetry?’” The same man who referenced Milton also explicitly mentioned Cleo’s ethnicity in a fetishistic way, seeming to associate her “Asian” feminine identity and domestic work. Cleo’s responders operated under the assumption that their imagination of Cleo’s physical body based on her brief description was reality.

As noted by Butler, “Just as a script may be enacted in various ways, and just as the play requires both text and interpretation, so the gendered body acts its part in a culturally restricted corporeal space and enacts interpretations within the confines of already existing directives” (526). Social and cultural stereotypes of how men and women enact gender lay the groundwork for many people’s assumptions about how specific individuals will present themselves in real life. Regardless of how the writers of personal ads described themselves, readers filled in the gaps and created a dynamic imagined body they continued to shape as they acquired new information over the course of the online relationship.

Kinks and Empowerment in Online Dating

In general, the personal advertisements themselves are fairly tame. Although most of the advertisements are flirty in some way, a majority are not overly salacious and do not explicitly reference sexual kinks. However, one advertisement struck me as an obvious exception, “CHANGING TIMES: Retired professor and lifelong nepiophile in his fifties, tall, handsome, and loving, seeks passionate, nurturing, and adoring Mommy for spiritual fulfillment.” After reaching out to this man over email in my initial desperation to find interlocutors, I learned that he had an adult baby fetish and was seeking a woman to literally play out the role of his mother.

In “The Privilege of Perversities” by Elisabeth
Sheff and Corrie Hammers (2019), they discuss possible reasons for the overwhelming percentage of white, middle class, highly educated individuals in BDSM and polyamorous communities. The predominately white researchers who study kink communities argue that race and class are a major deterrent from participating in kink communities as racialized individuals who are already seen as socially deviant are less likely to be sexually deviant. If true, it implies that the white people I encountered in the NRYB community (in other words, the majority of my interlocutors) were relatively more likely to be interested in sexual kinks.

It is also possible that my interlocutors’ sexual desire and that of their pursuers was magnified by a lack of sexual outlet in old age. In The History of Sexuality, Michel Foucault describes what he calls the repressive hypothesis, which details the process by which sexualities are meticulously defined as diverse and isolated so as to be controlled: “The implementation of perversions is an instrument-effect: it is through the isolation, intensification, and consolidation of peripheral sexualities that the relations of power to sex and pleasure branched out and multiplied, measured the body, and penetrated modes of conduct” (1978, 48). Elderly bodies are normally classed as asexual, and thus may have fewer opportunities to express sexual desires. According to psychologist Leni Marshall, “in North American youth-oriented cultures, an aged face and slower movements can brand a person as being less valuable” (2012, 58). The association of elderly bodies with inferiority or unattractiveness has the potential to act as a repressive force on the sexuality of older individuals. In the case of my interlocutors, sexual interaction via email exchange gave them the opportunity to escape their elderly body as means to achieve sexual pleasure.

Although the fetishistic interest that Cleo attracted seemed exceptional, Edith also mentioned discussing imagined sexual scenarios over email with a man who had responded to her ad. "I had met up with a man a while back in Seattle. The sex was okay, I mean we had discussed at length over email before I came out to meet him and I wasn't impressed.”

Through online dating, Edith not only had the opportunity to partake in a romantic and sexual exchange but also to simulate sexual intercourse free of the reality of her physical body.

When conducting my research, there was a sense of avoidance regarding being characterized as unattractive due to old age. One of my interlocutors, Margaret, made it a point to constantly insist that she was young and beautiful for her age. Although I never asked about her physical appearance, over the course of an hour she reminded me that she was beautiful seven times. Although men referred to themselves as handsome in only about half of their posts, almost all the ads posted by women described themselves as attractive in some way. Unlike the men who focused on other aspects of their identity, most women used language in order to fulfil unrealistic beauty requirements and appear young and beautiful to attract more attention.

**CONCLUSION: LOVE, SEX, AND BODIES IN TIME OF PANDEMIC**

Constructed identities and the resulting assumed bodies were central to the romantic and sexual exchange between individuals who had posted personal ads in the NRYB and their responders. This is not to say that the assumptions made about the imagined bodies were irreversible, as they were constantly changed as new information was exchanged. In general, most of my interlocutors found the experience of posting a personal ad satisfying and empowering in some way. Although in Cleo’s situation her assumed identity subjected her to racial stereotypes and objectified her as a young and therefore sexual being, for the two older women I with whom I spoke (Edith and Margaret), their engagement with this form of self-presentation enabled them to experience exciting and satisfying new relationships and pleasures during a period of pandemic crisis.

**WORKS CITED**


Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality*

