Mediated Communities Andy Warhol's Screen Tests and Wendy Clarke's Love Tapes

While few people have ever stood in front of a film camera, the act of seeing yourself on video is now a daily occurrence that happens in as varied places as the liquor store, the bank, and perhaps the privacy of your own home. More often than not, these technologies let us know we are being watched by including a video monitor that allows us to see ourselves as objects—as if from outside of ourselves. While this experience of seeing ourselves is becoming increasingly common, it is rarely, if ever, remarked upon. This is partly a result of just how ubiquitous the experience is, and also that we hardly ever can view these images with more than a passing glance as we continue on to the task at hand. Nevertheless, these monitors do much more than let us know that we are being watched by an unseen panoptic viewer—they let us watch ourselves in ways and from angles that we would otherwise not be able to. This destabilizes the way we normally envision our bodies as through a mirror image that always stares back at us. As such, it is important to understand how the medium makes us appear and what kinds of performances and behaviors are encouraged when we enter into this intra-subjective relationship with the recording apparatus, and with ourselves.

Some of the first people to really explore this peculiar auto-spectatorial position were avant-garde filmmakers and videographers. As a community building practice, some would engage in early moving image media literacy projects, which would allow various people a chance to experience not just what it is like to be a spectator of film and video, but also its onscreen subject (and sometimes producer). Two artists who are particularly prolific in this regard are the pop-artist-filmmaker Andy Warhol and the videographer-psychoanalyst Wendy

Clarke. From 1964 to 1966, Warhol filmed around 200 friends, colleagues and visitors at his Factory art studio in what he would eventually refer to as *Screen Tests*. While around 500 *Screen Tests* are still viewable today, it is unclear how many were actually filmed. Instead of using media to connect people across large spaces and create spread out communities, Warhol used the technology to transform the small community of the Factory space itself, with him at the center.

Clarke, on the other hand, traveled across the United States starting in the late 1970's with video camera equipment in an effort to capture as many people as she could on video speaking on the topic of what love means to them. To date, she has made what she calls a *Love Tape* for over 800 people. The community that is created through these interactions is almost entirely virtual and acts in some ways to reassure those who are alone that there are many others who can empathize with your situation. These situations inspire very different reactions and performances from their onscreen subjects, which is largely due to the larger production apparatus employed as well as the differences between film and video production. While both present postmodern ways of creating and exploring what constitutes a community, they go about it in radically opposing ways that each underline particular aspects of the postmodern experience.

While many have analyzed *The Screen Tests* as being a direct response to the Hollywood method by which actors are filmed to determine whether they would be suitable for a role, a number of influences and interests conspired to start this momentous and laborious process.

While Warhol had previously been interested in the portraits created by photo booths and Polaroid cameras, perhaps the most important motivating factor for this work was a New York Police Department Brochure he saw that contained mug shots of the *Thirteen Most Dangerous*

Criminals.¹ Like the rogues galleries of the 19th century, which were very popular publicly shown collections of photos of notorious criminals, these brochures held the audience and Warhol's attention by foregrounding the pleasurable fear and fascination that is attached to seeing the faces and bodies of dangerous criminals. While rogues galleries were originally featured in spaces such as fairs, circuses, and other entertainment forums, these tourist stops were first and foremost useful for educating the public as to the physical characteristics of the various swindlers, pickpockets, murderers and ne'er-do-wells of the big city: these photographs were used "to mark and keep track of the criminal, serving as an essential element in new systems of identification" that began to rely on iconic images rather than (symbolic) writing as the place where evidence and truth could be most clearly seen.² This is the relevant history of the photographic portrait into which Warhol's work was both born into and reacted against.

While the various histories on the early days of the Factory are conflicting, it is clear that after seeing this brochure, Warhol began work on a mural for the outside of the New York building at the 1964 World's Fair in Queens called *Thirteen Most Wanted Men*. This consisted of silk-screens of mug shots of dangerous criminals, perhaps taken directly from the brochure. Unfortunately, there were complaints from government officials who felt it might be insulting to the Italian delegation because most of the *Most Wanted Men* were Italian. While these murals remained up, they were quickly covered in silver paint by officials at the fair. In *Popism: The Warhol Sixties*, Warhol reflected,

In one way I was glad the mural was gone: now I wouldn't have to feel responsible if one of the criminals ever got turned in to the FBI because someone

¹ Callie Angell, *Andy Warhol Screen Tests: The Films of Andy Warhol: Catalogue Raisonné* (New York: H.N. Abrams: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2006), 5.

² Tom Gunning, "Tracing the Individual Body: Photography, Detectives, and Early Cinema," in *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life*, ed. Leo Charney and Vanessa R. Schwartz (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), 20.

had recognized him from my pictures... But since I had the Ten Most Wanted screens already made up, I decided to go ahead and do paintings of them anyway. (The ten certainly weren't going to get caught from the kind of exposure they'd get at the Factory). ³

Warhol does not just stress his lack of desire to use these images in the way they were intended, but also shows a complicity between his art project and their criminality. This is only fair as the community of gays, lesbians, queers, activists, anarchists, speed-heads and pin-up girls in which he belonged was not exactly law-abiding itself.

While making this mural, Warhol, "ever anxious to eroticize the illicit," began to work on a series of portrait films called the *Thirteen Most Beautiful Boys*. This work is a combination of *Screen Tests* of Factory workers and groupies, like Gerard Malanga, Freddie Herko, and Winthrop Kellogg Edey who were chosen for their photogenic qualities. They are not named in the film and often only their head is in view. However, as *The New York Times* reviewer put it, "They all exude sex appeal by simply existing and being noticed by the camera, in the way that the accused men in the mural present a rougher sexuality." While the sexual nature of criminality is an implicit part of the rogues' gallery, Warhol makes it the explicit purpose of his *Most Wanted List*. Through this focus on the sexual aspects of the pieces, the film portraits no longer are primarily useful in leading one back to their referent, as it is the image itself that gives off a sexual aura and therefore the actual person does not necessarily need to be located.

While these specific *Screen Tests* were singled out for the spectacular bodies they contain, they started out like any other. For the most part, *The Screen Tests* were made in a small and slightly removed area of the factory, where a Bolex camera and large light source were set

³ Andy Warhol and Pat Hackett, *Popism : The Warhol '60s* (Orlando: Harcourt, 2006)., 71-2.
⁴ Ara Osterweil, "Andy Warhol Screen Tests: The Films of Andy Warhol, Catalogue Raisonné,

Volume One," *The Moving Image* 7, no. 1 (2007).

up in front of a plain background. Warhol or one of his assistances like Malanga or Billy Name would load the camera with a 100' cartridge of black and white film and often tell the subject to sit very still and look without blinking directly at the camera until the film ran out, which would take around three and a half minutes. The cameraperson almost never moves the camera after the subject has been framed in a medium close-up, though rarely is this framing centered or even sized to fit the entirety of the subject's head to fit within the frame.

These films fall into what Paul Arthur has termed the Portrait genre of filmmaking. Arthur broadly defines this genre as often favoring "frontal mid range compositions in which subjects' face and hands are privileged foci of information and/or expression." He unconvincingly defines the genre against home movies, which "are made strictly for domestic consumption" and biopics, which are focused on discussing the history of a subject instead of its present. Even though Arthur presents the *Screen Tests* and the rest of Warhol's mid 1960's corpus as "the signal achievement in avant-garde portraiture," these films do not exactly meet his definition for the genre as a whole. These *Screen Tests* provide no information about who is actually being filmed, nor do often give a good sense of what the person actually looks like. Often the light source is located slightly to the side or on top of the camera itself, which creates huge shadows that often cloak large portions of the persons face. These lights and their shadows create a film noir effect and seem to further allude to the rogues' galleries that inspired their insemination.

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⁵ Paul Arthur, "No Longer Absolute: Portraiture in American Avant-Garde and Documentary Films of the Sixties," in *Rites of Realism: Essays on Corporeal Cinema*, ed. Ivone Margulies (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002). 94.

⁶ Arthur, 94.

⁷ Arthur, 107.

While David James suggests that the *Screen Tests* "do not document their subjects' ability to manifest an autonomous, unified self so much as a narrate their anxious response to the process of being photographed," it often seems that the subjects are more affected by the light than they are by the camera itself.⁸ As in the interrogation rooms of detective films, these light sources tend to make it nearly impossible for many of the subjects to actually look directly at the camera for an extended amount of time since it also means that they will simultaneously be looking at an exposed light bulb. Those that do end up staring into the camera for the allotted period of time are also almost always the ones who are in shots with softer light that does not seem to be directly in their eyes.

While some continually try and fail to simply stare at the camera, others are obviously less inclined to even make the attempt and either momentarily glance toward the camera or continually look around at everything in front of them. Often the subjects are shown reacting to people who are out of the frame with smiles, laughs, or short statements that cannot be heard via these silent films. These moments gesture toward the act that these *Screen Tests* should to some degree be considered home movies because they do not seem to be intended for any audience other than the people at the Factory themselves. When Warhol wrote, "The ten certainly weren't going to get caught from the kind of exposure they'd get at the Factory," he was not just being modest, but was also declaring that the films had a specific intended audience and while this audience is a public, it is an intimate one that consists of like-minded individuals.

More importantly, these films are really quite boring if you do not know who you are watching. While I neither know, nor know of most of the people in the *Screen Tests* by sight, I am constantly being made aware by these quick glances to the side, or a sudden smirk that for

⁸ David E. James, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989). 69.

those who were actually there at the time of the filming, these *Screen Tests* would serve a similar function as a home movie. At this point in time, Warhol's Factory has a mythical aura of constant excitement and production that these films only hint at. For the uninitiated viewer, every nod to the world beyond the frame of the *Screen Tests* seems to allude to something that is more interesting than what is actually being filmed. Those that were actually there can view these *Screen Tests* and (hopefully) remember what was actually happening and what was being said.

This question of whether the Screen Tests constitute home movies, portrait films, or both is important because each implies a different relationship between the subject and the camera. While in a portrait film, the intension behind filming is to create a representation of a person for an unknown public to experience; home movies are usually created with the intention of showing to a group that already intimately knows you. In describing his rationale for making the Screen Tests, Warhol said, "I only wanted to find great people and let them be themselves and talk about what they usually talked about and I'd film them for a certain length of time and that would be the movie." That Warhol wanted the people to be able to "talk about what they usually talked about" is illuminating since filming them without sound suggests that the general public is necessarily only experiencing a very small piece of either these particular people or the Factory in general. As such, I think it would be useful to discuss these works as being akin to process art, whereby the most important and artful aspects of the pieces is located in their creation rather than their final product. While it is unclear whether these pieces should really be considered art or not is less important than the question of where (or when) the value of this type of creation is located—in its production, or in its finished state. This is even more complicated by the fact that

⁹ James, 67.

these pieces do not really have a finished state. While he did make *The Thirteen Most Beautiful Boys* and later *The Thirteen Most Beautiful Girls*, the large majority of these films have never been compiled into any larger pieces. Instead, they were shown, often at random as background images at the Factory while other things were going on.

As Arthur argues, these films also had a performative aspect in that they simultaneously both introduced newcomers into the Factory and let them in. ¹⁰ Like a combination of a hazing ritual and driver's license test, the process of being filmed both allowed people who may have otherwise never had an experience with a camera the chance to engage with it as a mode of production and it also assured, or proved to everyone who was already a part of the Factory community that you were willing and interested in taking part in the same embarrassing and bizarre situations that they were.

In the Factory, this collection of *Screen Tests* together constituted something of a community archive or database, from which Warhol or others could randomly display and thus showcase separate members. While Warhol would at times specify which he wanted to see, mostly the decision of whose to project was random and allowed for a certain level of equality among those who were part of this particular scene. For those who were not part of this group, the *Screen Tests* can appear to be thoroughly insular and exclusive.

However, the way these *Screen Tests* have been repackaged and reshown since their creation has helped to radically change the way they, and the Factory are perceived. In 1967, Malanga and Warhol published *Screen Tests/ A Diary*, which was a collection of blown up still frames from the films along with a poem for each person included. While the subjects are left anonymous in the films and are only rarely recognizable, the 28 people included in the book are

¹⁰ Arthur, "No Longer Absolute: Portraiture in American Avant-Garde and Documentary Films of the Sixties." 108.

all identified by name, though many of the people included are recognizable by their faces. The only people in the book are famous in their own right, like Lou Reed, Alan Ginsberg, Jonas Mekas, and Salvador Dali; or they are superstar celebrities that Warhol created, like Edie Sedgwick and Baby Jane Holzer. They are for the most part framed in the center of the stills and their entire heads are visible and lit. Almost everyone is also staring into the camera. When this is not the case (as in Lou Reed's still), the effect makes the framing look very intentional, as if the composition were allowing you to gain a great deal of insight into the subject. This may be true and the photos do bring out the portrait-aspects of the *Screen Tests*, what is ironic is that while the centered, well-lit subject, looking at the camera is common in the book and looks relatively ordinary, this type of framing is very incongruous and singular in comparison to the experience of watching the films themselves. This is perhaps why James, Arthur and others are so quick to describe the tests as normally consisting of "frontal, evenly lit, eye-level close-ups framed against mostly blank backgrounds," when this is really a fairly rare occurrence in the films.¹¹

Like in Malanga and Warhol's book, the only *Screen Tests* that get shown now in galleries, museums and theaters are those of people who are at least relatively famous and are therefore not anonymous in the way that most of the *Screen Tests* are. By only showing the Allen Ginsberg and Dennis Hopper level stars, these films are made to appear to be about celebrity and Hollywood, which is only a small part of their message. These curatorial decisions also move the interest and importance of the *Screen Tests* away from the process of their production and put it back into the finalized product. This is particularly upsetting, as what is most interesting about these pieces is the way they are endlessly producible and the process by

¹¹ Ibid.

which they were originally made is easily reproducible. That many of the people filmed are relatively unknown beyond the walls of the Factory community is much more important than that a few of them are famous. In an era when media is constantly being used to create more geographically and physically dispersed communities, Warhol's *Screen Tests* in some ways offer an example of a way in which media can affectively be used to generate localized communities that are still spatially locatable. While the cataloging of everyone at the Factory is important, what really makes it clear that this community is not simply virtual is the off-screen space and the knowledge that what is holding the people together is not what is in front of the camera, but around it.

Unlike the community created and strengthened by the *Screen Tests*, Wendy Clarke uses a similar medial method to create an amorphous and virtual populace organized around an abstract thought. Before starting work on *The Love Tapes*, Clarke was a feminist video artist and psychoanalyst who was "interested in video's capacity for play." She had devised several video "toys," or games in which people would interact with technology as producers or users instead of simply consumers. She wanted to use video "in a way that intentionally scaled down the technology, diminishing its importance to the point where you could approach it naturally, playfully." In one video "toy," Clarke set up an installation in which participants "were able to draw their own profile while looking at two monitors, one showing their profiles, the other revealing their efforts at drawing." This type of "toy" allows participants to experience the medium and its denaturalizing effects without forcing the participant to learn an unnecessary amount of technical skills before starting. While both Clarke and Warhol are interested in the

¹² Melinda Barlow, "Feminism 101: The New York Women's Video Festival, 1972-1980," *Camera Obscura* 18, no. 3 (2003). 14.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

process aspect of artwork, Clarke is much more interested in using the media as a tool for media literacy. She is not just interested in videotaping people, but also wants them to become comfortable enough that they may eventually produce and use media technologies on their own.

Starting at UCLA in 1978, Clarke traveled all over the United States filming people discussing their opinions on love. At each location, whether a school, office building, community center, or prison, Clarke would set up a small booth with a video camera and monitor. Participants were first shown a few previously made *Love Tapes* and then were sent into the private booth to record themselves for approximately three minutes. At the end of the three minutes they were called out and could decide whether they wanted to add their recording to *The Love Tapes* project, or simply erase it.

In contrast to the *Screen Tests*, which were heavily influenced by, and used the tropes of the rogues gallery and detective genre, *The Love Tapes* has no desire to judge its participants, either ironically or not. Instead, the scenario is designed to allow the participants themselves to retain a certain large amount of control over their own image. With the addition of a video monitor that allows the participant to se themselves and everything that is being recorded, there is no need for anyone else to be behind the camera. While they cannot control absolutely everything in the frame, they can at least frame themselves the way they would like. Virtually everyone takes advantage of this by sitting squarely in the center of the frame so that his or her entire head is visible. This may not seem like a sign of the participants' control over their own image, especially as they all choose the same position, but when set in contrast to *Screen Tests*, the importance of this ability and control is readily apparent.

This monitor also plays an important part throughout the videotaping process as the viewer's eyes are constantly looking down or to the side of the camera in order to look at their

own image instead of at the camera. One participant comments on this phenomenon by suddenly saying, "I must love myself since I'm looking at myself—trying to look better in this television than I really look—baggy eyes and all. I love me too." Like the light source in Screen Tests, the monitor plays as much, if not more of a role in controlling how people perform while being recorded than the actual camera does. This property of the monitor is discussed by Rosalind Krauss, who compares looking at oneself in a video monitor to Jacques Lacan's "mirror phase," saying that "the immediate mirror-like feedback of the monitor allows the negotiation and renegotiation of the narcissistic image to the point of its stability, allowing the 'fragmented bodyimage' to assume a "form of its totality," even to assume 'the armour of an alienating identity."¹⁵ Krauss sees this as a negative because the monitor does not allow for a reflexive fragmenting of the viewer's subjectivity and the accompanying acceptance of internal difference that it implies. Instead, the monitor allows for what she refers to as "reflection...a move toward an external symmetry." Instead of occurring within the psyche, the mirror phase that is brought on by video occurs in an intra-subjective arena, wherein "the self and its reflected image are of course literally separate. But the agency of reflection is a mode of appropriation, of illusionistically erasing the difference between subject and object."¹⁷

While it is true to some degree that the confrontation with oneself as other in video occurs in actuality, I do not think it really constitutes a mirror phase event because one is never able to actually make eye contact with their own image. A major aspect of Lacan's mirror phase is that your reflection, or yourself as other, will return your gaze, which is literally impossible in video. Instead, what occurs is a constant aversion to looking directly at yourself. This is due to

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵ James, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties.* 69.

¹⁶ Rosalind Krauss, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," *October* 1 (1976). 9.

the fact that whenever people start to look down at their image and away from the camera, their image immediately looks down as well. The only way to see oneself staring directly at you in this booth is to look via your periphery, which hardly constitutes a gaze. Instead, this way of seeing yourself is actually radically transformative as you are denied the ability either to gaze or be gazed at.

For many in these *Love Tapes*, this results in the participant becoming frozen in a state of shock—not knowing whether to look at the camera or themselves. When this happens, they also often lose their train of thought and begin to simply repeat a series of declarative "I think love is..." phrases until their three minutes ends. One four year old girl ended her love tape by staring intensely at her own image while she said, "I love the plants and trees and animals and I love the ocean and beach I love to find rocks, and I love to do lots of things in life..." While this is a particularly cute example, it is not out of the ordinary.

In general, the people in these tapes often start out looking very self-assured and excited to speak, but by the end they often appear to be exasperated and uncomfortable. The change occurs at the point when the person has come to the horrifying conclusion that they actually have nothing else of interest to say on the subject of love but still have some time to fill. The people in these tapes often speak as if they are imparting a great deal of wisdom to the general public and therefore are often very performative in their mannerisms and mode of address.

This is in contrast to The *Screen Tests*, in which the subjects who chose to look directly at the camera gradually become less and less animated until it is hard to tell if they are expressing any emotion at all, As these films are made in something approaching the home movie mode, the subjects eventually give up all pretenses concerning the possibility that they might be performing for a public via the camera. Instead, they begin to look as though they are viewing the camera

not as a recording device, but simply as an object that they are being forced to stare at for far too long. Watching these tapes feels slightly wrong, as if I am sitting in on a conversation between the camera and the subject that I am not a part of.

Surprisingly, even while many who made *Love Tapes* have obvious problems trying to fill the allotted time with their discussions on the many kinds of love very rarely do they ever leave the booth early or ask for it to be deleted. While a guest on the *Five All Night* New York (public access?) late show, she told the host, "I think that everyone who did the project *did* it, because they all saw other people doing it and it was a risk for everyone who made the tapes, but it was a decision that they all made and they are a all unique...Lots don't want to do this, but they make the decision to not do it before they get in". The fact that people are able to see some *Love Tapes* before they make their own is an important aspect of the project as it implies a more inclusive model for community building. Unlike the *Screen Tests*, one does not have to enter into the taping without any preconceived ideas of what the tapes should look like and what their purpose is. By watching the *Tapes* first, the participant is allowed to arbitrate whether they want to join the community of people who have shared their thoughts on love or not.

These tapings were open to the public and neither Clarke nor Warhol have any say in the matter of who should be recorded or not. Warhol was only interested in hearing from "great people," and while his definition of what constitutes "greatness" is probably much more diffuse than most peoples, this still constitutes a relatively strict guideline for who should and should not be filmed. Clarke was interested in hearing from anyone who felt they had something to say. While this in and of itself constitutes something of a selection process, the participants were self-selecting instead of selected. In a very new age moment, Clarke pointed out, "What really

¹⁸ "Wendy Clarke Interview," in *Five All Night Live* (Wendy Clarke Collection, UCLA).

impresses me the most is that I see myself with everyone else, I see all of us as one huge person and each tape is adding another little piece of this huge human experience. They all shine out, some I am more attracted to in a sense, but they are all incredibly unique and I can identity with every tape." This all-inclusive, literally humanist project is a very different animal from the *Screen Tests* and implies a different kind of community structure. The *Screen Tests* implied the possibility for greatness in the Factory by their name alone, even as they were only the equivalent of home movie footage. The archive of *Love Tapes* is so massive that it is all but certain that some of the *Tapes* will never actually be seen by anyone except for the cataloguer who will more than likely fast-forward through large segments. Even as unseen documents, they remain important because, their presence implies a creation of a certain kind of community that, while not being spatially or even temporally locatable, is still meaningful.

While the community of people who feel they have a stake in what love is, is massive if not completely totalizing, those who feel they actually have something important to contribute to the conversation and are willing to put themselves out there is a much smaller group. From watching only a large handful of these tapes compared to the total number, it is clear that they are joined not just by an interest in love, but also a desire for it, as people repeatedly end up discussing their personal experiences with love and either point out how happy they are to be in love, or how depressed they are that they have not yet found someone to love. While a community of depressed people in search of love who are willing to tell you all about it seems like it might have a definite possibility of being both a bit incestuous and more importantly, unpleasant, these tapes are often surprisingly engaging as even those who are flummoxed by the

¹⁹ Ibid.

question are so passionately flummoxed that even the process of watching them realize that they actually have no idea what constitutes love becomes provocative.

For Clarke, *The Love Tapes*, which she always thought of as process art, revealed that this process of taping alone, even if you know that the footage could be seen by others, allows people to say, or "confess," personal thoughts that they would not otherwise utter for others, least of all the public en masse.²⁰ When asked why she thought the camera booth was a freeing space, Clarke responded, "My own feelings and what happened to me is that when you are alone you aren't performing for another person. You're not having contact and worrying about whether they like you or not. It's like you are talking to yourself and we are all ok when we are talking to ourselves I think. Everyone was incredibly articulate which I didn't know before. Even if people were struggling with it and not knowing, the answer isn't important, it's the process..."²¹ Unlike Warhol, who used media to make interesting people experience the extremely banal, Clarke's medial situation allows for ordinary people to express themselves as articulate and interesting, even when they have nothing to say.

In the process of forming the community environment of the Factory, it is telling that Warhol employed the *Screen Tests*, a media situation that borrowed heavily from crime genres and panoptic surveillance techniques, as a way of introducing people into the club. Even as an ironic statement, this emphasized the exclusivity of Warhol's group, a property of art and fame that Warhol continually finds compelling. In contrast, Clarke set up a system through which anyone could contribute his or her own perspective and through which earnestness was not a blasphemy. While Warhol's practice of making *Screen Tests* faded after only a short time,

²⁰ For a discussion of these tapes as confessionals, please see Michael Renov, "Video Confessions," in *Visible Evidence*; the Subject of Documentary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

²¹ "Wendy Clarke Interview."

Clarke is still intermittently making *Love Tapes*, and other groups, have started their own *Love Tapes* archives. This is not because Clarke's model is better or worse than Warhol's, but rather because it seems to fit in better with the contemporary desire for communities that are virtual in nature and which stress the similarities between disparate groups rather than the differences.

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