STORY 1: THE LION AND THE BAT

It's just a regular day at a university for walking and talking animal people. Raul the lion is student council president, an accomplished student, and he has a very bright future ahead of him. He's a bit obsessed with what other beasts think of him, because he desperately wants to be seen as the ideal male lion: trusted, respected, and admired. It would certainly be admirable to live a noble life, but to seek that reputation? Well, that's just vanity isn't it.

One day he's asked by a teacher to prove his worth by seeking out a student that has been absent for a year now and convince him to return to school. When Raul finds Azmo the bat, he's been living in an abandoned building, fending for himself all this time. Azmo fucking hates Raul. Why? Because it turns out, a lion devoured his entire family. That's why he hasn't been at school. Because this story takes place in a setting where society is made up of animals that eat each other.

Now, Raul is so unused to rejection that he lashes out at the bat, which only serves to prove Azmo right. But over the course of this manga Raul continues to visit Azmo. He begins to grapple with how selfish he's been, only performing good deeds when they benefit his reputation. In turn, Azmo overcomes his prejudice when he's forced to reckon with the fact that Raul has nothing in common with the lion that actually hurt him. Finally, he's able to move on, and he takes to the night sky in search of a fresh start in life.

Introduction

If you watched any anime during the pandemic, you're probably thinking, "boy, that sure sounds like a deleted scene from Beastars, that one homoerotic furry show." And well… kind of! In fact, Legoshi even appears on the second page, and he eventually gets a few chapters of his own. But this is actually Beast Complex.

Beast Complex? I find it rather simple.

That's right, I'm making this video because it has come to my attention that a bunch of you don't know that there has been even more Beastars this entire time. In fact, Beastars has not one but two predecessors.

Back when Paru Itagaki was still a student, she made a small independent comic called Beast Complex. Very few copies of this one exist.

> "I sold the manga at a festival at my art college. […] I had so much fun that I decided to try to break into the professional manga world while looking for a full-time job."

This extremely early iteration already featured Legoshi and Haru in some form, who would go on to be main characters of Beastars. Unfortunately I can't tell you much about this version of

the story because while there are frustrating photos all over the internet of entire stacks of these things, they're not available today in any real capacity. Of those in the Beastars community who have obtained a copy, they seem to have opted not to scan or translate them.

I've also been able to find evidence of a Beast Complex animation, featuring hand-painted cels, in which we can see versions of Collot and Jack. Here's Paru talking about a screening in 2015 that claims it was completed all the way back in 2013. Where are all of these? Send them to me. Look at this, it's Legoshi and Jack giving you directions to a panel all the way back in 2014.

Anyway, Paru Itagaki did eventually succeed in breaking into the manga world, and Beast Complex became serialized in Shonen Champion in March 2016. The same month I became a full time YouTuber. Weird. Not *that* Beast Complex, by the way, *this* Beast Complex. The college zine and the serialized manga share the same name, confusingly, so fans have taken to calling the old one "Original Beast Complex," or OBC.

This Beast Complex that we'll be talking about today is an anthology of highly allegorical stories featuring furry characters living in a modern city. The title of each story always mentions two animals, seeming to intentionally evoke Aesop's Fables, aka "The Lion and the Mouse," "The Hare and the Tortoise," "The Fox and the Grapes," and hundreds of other morality tales dating back to over 2500 years ago.

But then, shortly after Beast Complex went into publication, Disney released a furry movie called Zootopia.

> "After BEAST COMPLEX was published, an animated movie featuring animal characters was created near the castle located in the country of a certain world power and became a zootopian hit. My series BEASTARS began right after that.
>
> I'd already been drawing the series behind closed doors for a while, but the timing wasn't good."

And I know you know what Beastars is because, well, statistically you're only here because you watched my three hour video about it. I'm sorry. And I'm back. And I'm still annoying.

Paru Itagaki only ended up putting out four chapters of the Beast Complex anthology before starting what she's now famous for. Seriously, Beastars was in Shonen Champion only six months later. So the first volume of Beast Complex has this quirky discontinuity where its fifth story suddenly has a drastically different art style, having been printed nearly a year and a half later than the previous story. It would be yet another year and a half before the sixth story. And then nothing, with Beast Complex sitting dormant all the way until Beastars had reached its conclusion after four years and 196 chapters.

During its revival period Beast Complex received another dozen back to back stories, but it has once again become a side project while Paru Itagaki works on Sanda, a manga about Santa

Claus. I don't have answers for you, except that in Paru's Graffitti, her autobiographical manga, she says that she's horny for Santa Claus.

> "My type are hardworking, large guys. And there's one guy that's just my type that comes around this time of year. I guess you could say… I have a fetish for Santa."

Beautiful.

In the meantime Beast Complex seems to be back to getting about one new chapter a year. Because of all this, the manga has a strange place in history. It's technically the predecessor to Beastars: I mean, that chapter I just summarized lays the groundwork for the entire setting. But 18 of its 24 chapters and counting are actually newer than the finale Beastars. A few of them even feature Legoshi and other characters after the events of the story.

Whatever you want to call this sister series, it's interesting to discuss alongside Beastars because it is all still written by Paru Itagaki. And while I doubt that any of this is going to ever be adapted into an anime, it is still canon to the setting. In a way it's a relief that it's an anthology. After all, a lot of the most fun parts of the second half of Beastars were its unhinged worldbuilding, but a lot of its worst parts were how poorly that worldbuilding was connected back into the plot. I don't think anyone would have hated Kyuu and her Role-Reversal Stands if she was just in a chapter of Beast Complex, is all I'm saying.

So to celebrate my Beastars video hitting one million views, I figured that I'd extend my queer reading of Itagaki's work to the rest of the Beastars universe, as a treat.

Queer Reading Framework

Alrighty, before we get into the meat of it I need to give you a primer on what kind of analytical framework we're using here. If you want the long version you can go back and watch my video "Legoshi is Gay: A Queer Reading of Beastars," where I spent 5200 words setting this up, but we're going to try for the short version today.

For me, breaking down the queerness of Beastars is a very layered process. There's the surface level, which is just noticing that certain characters or interactions sure do seem gay, don't they? Dudes shoving their hands in Legoshi's mouth, Legoshi cross-dressing, overt queercoding, and so on. This stuff is prevalent, and it's a large part of why we're having this conversation, but if that was all there was to it this wouldn't be all that interesting.

Instead, the queering of Beastars comes from a combination of its worldbuilding and tone. The setting is made up of 50% herbivores and 50% carnivores. Logically, each of these populations should have an even gender split, but it quickly becomes apparent that herbivores are disproportionately represented by female characters while carnivores are disproportionately shown to be male. With this split comes the matching expectation that carnivores are

aggressive and herbivores are submissive, an expectation that is simultaneously animalistic and gendered. This makes female carnivores and male herbivores feel more out of step, crossing the wires in how they're coded.

But then things get much weirder. Carnivores are known for eating herbivores in this setting, which sounds villainous, but then the story makes the interesting choice of frequently making carnivores the protagonist. Stranger still, the act of eating meat is constantly conflated with sexuality, which I'm going to be pointing out left and right. You'll frequently be hit with the visual of a slavering carnivore who is currently thinking about how horny they are, there are a lot of scenes in beds, there's an herbivore stripper dancing for a carnivore audience, and look how Haru is posed when the leader of the Shishigumi is threatening to eat her.

This stuff permeates the entire story, but what especially interests me is the myriad ways that this dynamic is queered. When we're aware of how devouring connects with sex, how are we meant to interpret stories about men hungering for other men? We're also given a binary where carnivores should only be in relationships with other carnivores, and the same goes for herbivores. So when their diets are coded as sexuality, what do we call a carnivore-herbivore relationship, other than a queer one?

Suddenly things get a lot more complicated than that original vibe where you just felt like Louis was acting sus around Legoshi.

> TeamFourStar: "Legoshi, do you know what a power bottom is?"

It's worth mentioning that doing a queer reading, or any reading really, isn't the same thing as a fan theory. My previous video was never about proving that Legoshi is canonically gay, because he obviously isn't. But thank you for the hundreds of comments arguing with the first half and only the first half of the title. Didn't read the rest I guess, but that was a great boost for the algorithm. No, these videos are about interrogating the themes and subtext of the art. And yes, some of it is kind of vibes-based. It's less a math problem and more standing in front of a painting and interrogating how it makes you feel. But I have formed those feelings into words. A lot of them.

Alright, that's enough of a primer, it's time to get to business. And you might be thinking, Keith, there's only like four volumes worth of Beast Complex so far, so how often could this really come up?

Don't check the runtime.

Beast Complex I

STORY 2: THE TIGER AND THE BEAVER

Our first story follows Mogu the beaver and Gon the tiger, who grew up together as next door neighbors. In this world, schools split carnivores and herbivores into separate dorms starting at the age of 10. Despite this, Gon has gained a reputation as the tiger who keeps sneaking over to the herbivore dorm to spend time with his best friend.

One night the two overhear a bullying incident between upperclassmen, photograph it, and make a break for the principal's office. During the chase however, the bullies, who are all carnivores, try to recruit Gon. After all, he's going to be a huge, strong tiger in a couple of years, so shouldn't he just accept his nature? He's expected to join them in their craving for meat, a trait that seems to have not manifested in him yet. He rejects them, but in doing so he denies in futility his own coming of age.

Here's a question though: why are they separated at the age of 10? If this is about racism, aren't racists racist against all ages? So the segregation must be serving a different purpose. The desire to eat meat, right? But that's weird too, because why would you write a setting where the carnivores seemingly only become carnivores at the age of 10?

The answer comes when you remind yourself of how Paru Itagaki conflates meat eating with sexuality. Right, ten years old is approximately the time where these kids are going to begin puberty. Hormones are going to change how their bodies develop, and they're going to start getting strange new feelings that they'll need to learn how to navigate. They weren't that different from each other a few years ago, but now adults are going to start separating them and having very different conversations based on which side of that binary they land. It's just like our gender binary, where we have so many complexes about it that we've split our entire world along that line.

This makes Gon the tiger very interesting to unpack as a queer character. Everyone thinks that he's weird because he doesn't conform to the binary that's forced upon him by society. He crosses the threshold every day, right in front of everyone, to be with Mogu.

> "I can't believe you go to all the trouble of climbing over that wall just to see him. It's not like you're in love or something."

From Gon's perspective, he was doing just fine until the grownups went and made things weird by placing these expectations on them. Like Legoshi, he exhibits self-hating thoughts. He's going to grow up to be a massive, powerful tiger, but he lies and claims that he's actually been shrinking lately. Mogu sees the changes that will happen to their bodies as natural, but Gon, sensing his own queerness, is terrified of that happening to him. He's going to be forced to

develop into a completely different category of person? And he has no say in that? How is that fair?

We're left to wonder whether someone can be sorted onto the wrong side of a binary, or going deeper, whether or not such a binary should exist in the first place.

On that note, this is probably why people find it so compelling to portray Louis or Legoshi as trans. The main characters of Beastars spend the bulk of the story trying to break down a society-defining binary from both sides, and they arguably succeed. Fans are just responding to the obvious subtext at the core of the story. I mean, Legoshi cross-dresses twice and Louis spends an entire arc trying to eat meat, it's not exactly subtle.

STORY 3: THE CAMEL AND THE WOLF

And speaking of devouring and sexuality, this is the story that binds those two concepts together before we even get to meet Haru and Legoshi.

Garom is a camel who works as a journalist for a newspaper. He's sick of his job, where he apparently writes about nothing but carnivore devourings every day, which frankly comes across as a bit bigoted when there must surely be plenty of other things happening in this world.

He's going to retire tomorrow, but he can't figure out how to finish his final article, which is meant to answer why these devourings happen. Abby, a female wolf, sits at his table, so he asks her if she's ever wanted to devour an herbivore before. She's offended, so he takes her out on a date to apologize.

They end up having a one-night stand together, but the way they hook up at the hotel is very peculiar…

> "I've never had the… desire.. to devour an herbivore before. You're my first, […] I think I could truly fall in love with you."
>
> "You'd devour me while falling in love with me?"
>
> "Strange, isn't it?"

It's fascinating to see the main theme of Beastars established here so early on. She's horny, so she's hungry. In the Beastars universe, you can't spell LOVE without VORE.

Garom is miserable before he meets Abby, ready to quit his job forever, but after their night together it's like he has a whole new lease on life. I know it sounds strange to say this, but getting his finger bitten off was a positive experience for him. It was a permanent change to his body that marked a transition in him: an event where he learned something important about

himself that changed him forever. It's not far off from how people get tattoos to mark major life events.

But the story of the camel and the wolf is made more even interesting by its queer undertones. It's already quite subversive for a carnivore and herbivore to be sleeping together in this setting, but in this case we have the additional twist of the carnivore being a woman and the herbivore being a man. So perhaps it's unsurprising that their sexual dynamic is the inverse of what would be assumed about their gender roles. She devours him, and hundreds of chapters later a woman devouring a man has remained exceedingly rare.

When you combine that with how their very relationship is considered taboo, well, whatever this is it certainly isn't heteronormative. She even ate the ring finger of his left hand, so he can never wear a wedding ring.

Beast Complex II

STORY 7: THE PIG AND THE PEACOCK

Okay, time to get weird.

Eugene the pig is a taxidermist. That's right, this is the story that establishes that fucking taxidermy is a thing in this furry universe. And no, it's not for regular animals, it's for the furries. People are bringing Eugene the cadavers of their loved ones, and he is stuffing and posing them, completely nude, within glass cases. It's unhinged. I love it. Honestly why even bother building a setting if you're not going to put something insane in it.

> Eugene: "Every form is unique. Thus everyone is a work of art worth preserving."

One day he meets Gerbera Daisy, a male peacock that works as a police officer. He derides Eugene's business as being shady.

The queercoding is pretty overwhelming with this character. Not only is Gerbera drawn as beautiful and effeminate, he's named after a flower and is a peacock just like Dom from Beastars. Dom was the first character in the setting who was confirmed to be canonically gay. My understanding is that his dialect in the original Japanese makes this more obvious.

Gebera himself explains that male peacocks have such elaborate feathers because they're a weapon meant to charm women. Oh this bit is fun to interpret. In Beastars, Dom doesn't have tail feathers. He's either an adult or about to be one, so they should have grown in by now. But the feathers are both a male gender signifier, and are specifically meant to charm women. So perhaps Dom clips his feathers because he's not interested in women, nor in presenting as masculine.

Anyway, right after Gerbera tells Eugene that the feathers are meant to attract mates, he then plucks one from his body and gives it to Eugene. Oh, what did he mean by that? He literally just finished loading that gesture with meaning. So is he courting Eugene?

Gebera starts visiting Eugene all the time, and they often go out for drinks together.

> Eugene: “He was beautiful even when inebriated.”

One night Gerbera apologizes for having insulted Eugene’s career when they first met. He says that he’ll do anything to make it up to him. Anything. And so, Eugene asks Gerbera to enter one of his glass cases, posing in the nude for him like one of his subjects. It’s as if Paru Itagaki’s characters will die on the spot if something intensely homoerotic doesn’t happen at least once every 50 pages.

> Gerbera: “Would you turn me into a stuffed peacock, Eugene?”

This is when Gerbera chooses to reveal that he’s being transferred to a very deadly precinct soon, so he wants Eugene to kill and preserve him instead. He begs him to do it, going so far as to place his hands on his throat. Eugene agrees to Gerbera’s demands, but claims that he needs time to prepare.

> Oh hey Legoshi. (Page 27)

When Gerbera returns, he’s instead greeted by 500 gerbera daisies that Eugene bought him to celebrate his transfer. It’s a surreal scene: a series of nude taxidermied men posing in glass cases like models among a field of flowers.

Afraid to face his future, Gerbera had begged Eugene to stop the march of time by preserving him. This is tragic because Gerbera is choosing suicide for reasons that are tied innately to who he is as a person. He, as a peacock, doesn’t believe that he has the strength to face what life has in store for him. Given the mess of symbolism surrounding peacocks and his depiction, it ends up feeling like he’s choosing death because he’s gay.

This is what makes Eugene so special as a character, framed here as a sort of gay elder: a mentor figure. He became someone that Gerbera could confide in. That’s why Gerbera visits him so often: because they share a kinship that he can’t find anywhere else. He got Gerbera to drop his defenses and be honest with him. And so, when Gerbera is at his most vulnerable, it’s Eugene he comes to about ending it.

This is a story about the life-saving value of queer community.

Gerbera is saved by a queer coded, and frankly, romantically charged gesture, which itself came in response to his own original romantic gesture. He lives on to face his future in District 17,

where we last see him smiling and loudly flamboyant among the countless flowers he brought with him. He's out and proud, confidently himself, and handing out those flowers to the very same people that he was terrified of to begin with. Whatever comes next, he's better off facing it as his true self than not at all.

STORY 8: THE SHIBA INU AND THE SHIBA INU

> Furry 1: "It's time to buy next year's calendar!"
>
> Furry 2: "I'm going to buy a Mugi calendar again!"
>
> Furry 1: "She's so cute every single year! You can't not love her!"
>
> Mugi: "Zzzz…"

Mugi is a Shiba Inu that makes a living as a popular calendar model. Contrary to public perception however, Mugi is not a girl, but a nearly 40 year old man. He's content to wear the frilly outfits and the sequins for a paycheck, but he lives out his other 364 days a year as a masculine-presenting dude on the streets.

One day he gets in a fight with some tigers that recognize him from his modeling, and their confrontation shows up on the news. He figures this must mean that his career is over, since the image of the character he presented as a model is destroyed. But the idea of a Shiba Inu with a short fuse has potential, so he ends up rebranding.

> Mugi: "Could this work…? Nah…"

We last see him cracking a beer while sitting proudly under a blown up photo of his public incident, his future uncertain.

So, I don't think that Mugi is meant in any way to be canonically transgender, but his story sure the hell is. Or more specifically, it's about the concept of gender performance. In this case, extremely literally.

Mugi presents himself as a masculine figure in his daily life. That is where he's comfortable. But whenever he goes into work he has to dress and act in a way that convinces people that he's a woman. Regardless of how contrived the scenario is, that's what society expects of him, and his livelihood literally depends on him maintaining this performance of gender.

When Mugi has his scandal, he's publicly outed against his will. He fully expects that the truth coming out about him means that his career is over, since when you're outed, you can't just take it back. The public's understanding of who he is as a person has changed on a fundamental level, forever. The question is whether that change can be for the better or not.

There's a fellow Shiba Inu that works retail where he usually shops. She's there to contrast against his normal day-to-day demeanor. She puts on a fake smile for the customers all day, just like he does when he's modeling. They both perform.

But after Mugi's incident, her expression changes. She applauds him for risking everything to stand up for himself. He's her role model. This is actually what leads to Mugi embracing the rebranding and giving his new life a shot: seeing her reaction.

This is ultimately a story about why representation matters, and how it helps people to see themselves and their experiences in the media around them. But there are countless ways to tell that story, so I find it especially interesting that Paru Itagaki chose to make it about a person who is publicly outed. Not just that, but the value that him being publicly out holds for his audience.

And like, I get it. I've met so many of you at conventions at this point, and you've told me yourselves what my coming out meant to you. The scale of it all is staggering. It's too much to process. But what I do know is that when someone claims that this kind of thing doesn't matter, that person is an idiot.

-

There's also a chapter where a prolific author is assumed to be a female mountain hare based on their writing, but they actually turn out to be a huge male moon bear. Another story playing with gender, but… we just did this. I don't really have anything to add besides pointing out that it does, in fact, exist. Overall "The Chipmunk and The Mountain Hare" reads, perhaps, as an outlet for Paru Itagaki's imposter syndrome. The bear is a male carnivore that's known for his herbivore stories, and she's a woman who recently married a man but is famous for writing a story that is perhaps best known for its homoeroticism. But that's just a guess.

It is strange however that two stories in the same volume were about men who were mistaken for women because of their art. Two nickels and all that.

STORY 12: THE WOLF AND THE RABBIT

Surprise Legoshi chapter!

This story actually serves as a short epilogue to Beastars, where we revisit Haru, Louis, and Legoshi after the events of the finale. Haru is turning 20, so it's time for her coming of age ceremony. But after that comes a different ritual: the wound purification ceremony.

During this event, carnivores make amends with the herbivores that they'd once hurt. Legoshi had scratched Haru's arm when they first met, so here at the very end of the story we're going full circle all the way back to Volume 1.

Amusingly, Legoshi is distracted by the thought of whether he should be doing this ritual with Louis instead, since he did eat his entire leg. Even in a Haru and Legoshi epilogue, we're still struggling with the fact that he both has more chemistry with and has been through more shit with Louis than he ever has with Haru. Instead, Louis is attending the ceremony with Bill over a wound that I promise you don't remember happening in the first place, especially since the anime cut out Louis' gun. This all feels like such a lampshade moment.

All that aside, this is still a pretty interesting chapter because it feels like the story is grappling with the tension between its text and its subtext. We've watched these queer characters make sense of their attraction to each other over 22 volumes, but because of the setting, that love had always been built upon a foundation of violence.

Indeed, many bounced off of Beastars because of the fact that for every empowering interpretation there is to be had of its story, there was another, much more unsavory read to be had. For instance, if you picked up on the carnivore herbivore gender split, then this is a setting where violence against women is extremely common, and yet it foregrounds a man's perspective while sidelining its female cast.

And, I mean, Legoshi is literally called a predator. This dissonance has been baked into the series's DNA, and I think that it's to its credit that it leaned into that discomfort and grappled with it instead of resolving it and trying to move on like it never happened. There's something unrealistic about having clean answers.

When you hurt the people that you care about, what is that if not a contradiction of your love? And how do you resolve that contradiction? You apologize, and you agree to move on. That's all you can do.

I love you. I hurt you. I'm sorry.

It's purely ceremonial, because that's all that it can be. You can't ever really undo anything. You can only acknowledge it and move past it, and hope that that's enough.

The tiger and rabbit ahead of them are still arguing at the altar. Some haven't truly reconciled, so for them this ritual seems pretty pointless. But Haru?

> "Legoshi… the truth is… I don't really care whether my scar gets purified or not. I just wanted to attend this ceremony! It's like a wedding!"

This is kind of wild for Haru to say here. This is a series that has been conflating sexuality with the carnivore desire to devour. Even Haru felt an instinctive reflex to let herself be devoured all

the way back when she and Legoshi stayed in that love hotel after he rescued her from the Shishigumi. And now, at the ritual that's all about reconciling that feeling, she says that it feels like a wedding. Paru Itagaki really never misses a chance to reinforce that connection, does she?

MARRIAGE

Speaking of marriage, that's worth unpacking. On its face, Beastars is about racism and the struggles of an interracial relationship right? So you would expect this to be a setting where Legoshi marrying Haru is illegal, right? It just feels intuitive. But that's not actually the law. It's completely legal for a wolf and a rabbit to get married, and surprisingly there aren't really many people who seem interested in stopping them. It's kinda odd, considering that most would probably say that their relationship is the core conflict of the story.

Instead, Louis is the reason why Haru and Legoshi can't marry. More specifically, the fact that Legoshi ate his leg. Legoshi isn't forbidden from marrying because he's a wolf. He's forbidden from marrying because he's a Registered Meat Offender. That itself is a pretty wild phrase to hear, isn't it? Like even if you're not following the subtextual connection between devouring and sexuality, you're probably gonna pause for a moment and think, "hang on, that sure sounds a lot like Legoshi is a Registered Sex Offender." And that's disturbing, because the list of reasons that come to mind for why someone would be marked like that are upsetting.

On the other hand, it's worth considering that depending on what year it is or what country you're in, engaging in homosexual acts can itself be a crime. I bring this up because whatever you want to call what happened between Louis and Legoshi, it was ultimately an act carried out by two consenting men. And getting caught ruined Legoshi's life.

It's the opinion of the police that Legoshi is a criminal whose rights should be restricted, but do you agree? And for that matter, does the story itself agree with that punishment? Louis begged him to do it, and then Legoshi basically turned Super Saiyan and saved the day. It doesn't really feel like something that he has to atone for. Instead, it feels like a thing that happened between Louis and Legoshi that frankly isn't anyone else's business.

This is why this all feels so queercoded. Legoshi is attracted to herbivores, but he can't get married because he was caught with Louis, a male herbivore. His motivation for much of the second half of the story is that if he becomes a superhero (an unofficial "Beastar") he might get his record expunged and finally get to marry who he loves. He's marginalized, and that is used as leverage against him. Even the ability to marry herbivores at all only became legal ten years ago. Incidentally, next year will be the ten year anniversary of gay marriage becoming legal in the United States.

Hashtag relatable.

Back at the purification ritual, no one else in that line is worried about not being allowed to get married. But Haru? If Legoshi never got his record cleared, she'd have to settle for this moment being "like a wedding," because it's as close as she would ever get.

Beast Complex III

STORY 14: THE JAPANESE DEER AND THE SNOW LEOPARD

Luke the snow leopard and Rose (accent) the Japanese deer are the lead actors in Dinner, a "hit film about the forbidden love between a carnivore and an herbivore" that ends in a "climactic devouring scene." They each win an academy award for their performance, but then Luke confesses that he only did such a great job because he wasn't just acting. He has actually devoured someone before, and now he wants to come clean about it.

Amusingly, Rose doesn't actually give a shit about the devouring. She's just pissed that Luke's scandal will ruin both of their careers. She tries to convince him to keep his secret, but eventually says that she'll accept his choice, whatever it may be. He confesses to his devouring of a male duck on live TV, and Rose does her best to pretend that she's hearing this for the first time.

This chapter dropped a bit of a bombshell right there on the first page. I've been discussing in both of these videos how Paru Itagaki repeatedly conflates devouring with sexuality, but then we get to see a scene from the movie that Luke and Rose starred in. It's only the climax, but that's more than enough.

> Luke: "I love you! I want all of you…"
>
> Rose: "Go ahead then… devour me!"

What's wild though is that this movie exists within the setting of Beastars, which means that the people of Beastars don't just happen to exist in a story that keeps overlapping these themes. This connection is a known entity within the world itself. They make art about it. The setting of Beastars produces art with enough mature self-reflection that the characters from within this culture could feasibly be expected to reproduce the manga Beastars. That's wild. It's an explicit confirmation that I'm not projecting a connection onto the art, but that the connection is instead so widely understood that it has developed into cinematic language.

Being correct all of the time sure is a curse.

There's also still yet more depth to be mined by applying a queer lens here. The chapter literally just made it clear that the connection between devouring and sexuality is there. So then how are

we meant to interpret the fact that Luke devoured Bob the duck? That's gay. Like, I would have already called it gay because of the analytical framework I've been applying here, but this time it's also just gay within the logic of the chapter.

Audiences cheer when Luke pretends to engage in these kinds of relationships on the silver screen, but if word were to get out that he did it for real, that's a scandal. With another man, no less.

This makes Rose's reaction interesting because when she tries to keep Luke's proclivities a secret she's essentially offering to be his beard. For those that don't know, "beard" is a term for a woman who publicly dates a gay man in order to maintain his reputation as being straight. You might have seen this play out in Sense8, which was incidentally also a story about a gay actor because that's exactly the kind of person who has a lot to lose if public perception of him changes.

So with this whole mess of themes, this chapter of Beast Complex ends up reading as the story of a closeted gay actor who won an academy award, and then came out publicly, promptly destroying his career.

STORY 15: THE TURTLE AND THE SHEEP

Kiyosumi is a female sheep whose growing horns will one day pierce her skull and kill her. She knows that she needs to get the surgery to remove them, but she's too passive a person to make the choice herself. In a self-destructive gamble, she's waited years for anyone to notice her suffering and push her to save herself, but no one seems to care.

But then she meets Abu, a turtle. People are afraid of Abu because he looks like he's a member of the yakuza, but he's actually an aspiring tattoo artist that practices on himself. He's noticed Kiyosumi's horns, and he wants to make them beautiful.

He inks flowers onto her horns, and they spend a special day together, traveling the town and sharing smiles. After that day, Kiyosumi finally gets the surgery.

> Kiyosumi: "Yeah. I took a week off from school and got the surgery."
>
> Classmate: "Wow… you look different! Happier though."

This chapter is very interested in the power that we have over our own bodies. From tattoos, to piercings, to surgery, we have a level of control over ourselves that surpasses that of most living beings. But it goes beyond that.

If you somehow haven't figured out where I'm going with this, I read Kiyosumi as trans.

I'm no expert on sheep, but as far as I could find, it does seem to be true that some species can have horns that might errantly grow into their own skulls or otherwise cause problems. But the distinction to make here is that those are the male sheep, the rams. Female sheep seem to have much shorter horns that look nothing like Kiyosumi's.

It seems feasible that Kiyosumi was assigned male at birth, but she has chosen to live and present as female. If we take her horns as a sign of her perceived birth gender, they become a fascinating visual metaphor for her need to medically transition.

Kiyosumi's horns are pointing at her head, threatening to pierce her skull. The problem started out small during her adolescence, but the horns became more and more sinister as she was left to endure puberty unassisted. Her body, in its natural state, is going to kill itself. It's not clear when it's going to happen, but it'll definitely be sooner rather than later. There's a sad horror to the fact that she's so obviously and demonstrably in danger, but no one has cared enough to help.

> Kiyosumi: "I keep waiting for someone to ask if my horns are a danger to me. I want someone to care enough to tell me to get them removed. I guess I want to be saved. But for 17 years, I've gotten closer and closer to death and nobody's even noticed. I'm so stupid…"

Unfortunately, for a variety of fucked up reasons, the trans community is known for its high rate of suicidality. These tragic statistics notably improve significantly with the aid of trans-affirming care. But Kiyosumi's plight has gone ignored for too long, and she's incapable of moving forward because she feels like she needs permission to exist.

Here the story zeroes in on a very human mistake, which is that we often make important life decisions based on what other people think. It's often not about what will make us happy, but what will make others happy with us. There is where the trans metaphor collides with body mod culture. Abu says fuck that.

> Abu: "We're all going to die someday. Everyone's preoccupied with their own lives. They don't have time to worry about anybody else. The first tattoo I got was the one on my shell. Hardly anyone noticed. That surprised me."
>
> Kiyosumi: "You mean… we might as well… do whatever we want?"

It's important that Abu never actually made the decision for her. Despite her learned helplessness, it was never anyone else's decision to make. What Kiyosumi needed was support. She needed community.

I've been thinking a bit about some common trans slang terms. When someone is trans, but they haven't figured that out yet, they're called an egg. When they do finally realize this about themselves, that's called "cracking the egg," which is apt, because once they've hatched, well,

no one can put Humpty Dumpty back together again. You can't un-realize something. It's one of life's many great thresholds that can only be crossed once.

Abu tattoos flowers onto Kiyosumi's horns. I feel like the introduction of body modification softened the blow for her, a permanent change to portend a much larger permanent change. It gives her a forward momentum as she finally faces what her future may bring.

> Abu: "Come on, lets go out tonight and make your flowers blossom!"

Abu accompanies her around the city to help her feel safe as she faces the world as a quite visibly changed girl. And then the next time we see her' she's had the surgery.

> Classmate: "Wow… you look different! Happier though."

Community doesn't just go one way, either. Soon after their encounter, flowers begin to bloom on Abu's shell as well. This is where this chapter becomes really interesting to re-read, because what is Abu's deal, exactly? You might begin to question why he's so interested in body modification. Why he isn't comfortable showing his face in public spaces. How he literally lives in a shell, and why the first thing he did when he started with tattoos was to label his own body "Hell."

Hang on, is he…?

STORY 16: THE TIGER AND THE ALPACA

Help, this chapter is so horny. But a bit of background first.

In Beastars, Utsugi was a jackal, and a high-class, successful businesswoman. She was our introduction to Melon's club, where we learned that she likes to masquerade as an anonymous herbivore and hook up with other women as the manga's first demonstrably gay character.

There's an element of role reversal here, where her partner is shown to be a zebra that's dressed up as a predator. This is also mirrored in Legoshi's choice to disguise himself as a deer, like Louis. Because of course he did.

This is all to say that there's already precedent for this kind of storyline when this chapter of Beast Complex introduces Aisha, a tiger who is a hardworking businesswoman with her own sapphic method of blowing off steam.

She visits a masseuse, a female alpaca named Marilyn, every week. She tells herself it's because this is the only place in our modern "woke" society where she can order an herbivore around, but Marilyn sees right through her. Aisha is actually here for the intimate contact. She

wants to be handled. Marilyn doesn't mind Aisha's ulterior motive, though, because she also enjoys their reversal of roles.

There is one line that Aisha has yet to cross, however. She's afraid to show her belly, because to carnivores this gesture means surrendering completely to someone. She'd be making herself vulnerable. This leaves her at a crossroads, since their interactions are escalating in intimacy, but true intimacy requires honest vulnerability.

But all day every day she's walking on eggshells at work. As a tiger, she has to put extra effort into how she comes across to her coworkers so that they don't feel threatened. It's a bit like how a professional women in real life needs to be assertive in order to function, but may struggle to not be seen as "bitchy" because of the unfair double standards that she's forced to navigate.

Aisha keeps coming to the same masseuse every week, always with the same ulterior motive. But if she ever wants the full effect, she needs to admit to herself what she's actually looking for: a break from being a tiger.

> Aisha: "Ohhhh… I had no idea… that not having to be a tiger… would feel so good."

In a breakthrough, Aisha lets Marilyn roll her onto her back and pin her wrists above her head. Now that she's exposed, Marilyn observes that Aisha has no stripes on her belly, which is normal for most animals, but serves as a visual metaphor for how she's seeing a whole new submissive side of her. It's a break in her pattern: the one place where she's not a tiger.

Aisha cries, but she does so alongside the internal monologue about how good she feels, so it's likely that her tears are more a sign of how intensely she's feeling her emotions right now. She has fully submitted herself. To another woman. To an herbivore. And the role reversal is complete.

What follows is ambiguous, but not really. We're told that it's all a blur, that it didn't feel real, but alongside that we're given very real observations of how soft alpaca fleece is, and how thankful Aisha is that the street outside is far too noisy for anyone to have heard them.

It's implied that Aisha has overcome something as a result of this breakthrough, and that she's a healthier and happier person now.

> Marilyn: "Your posture is so straight I almost didn't recognize you. Well… take care… kitten."

Ah, there it is. It's like pup play. [Wow this prop that is demonstrably too small for my head sure keeps coming in handy.] It's a form of role play where you, well, reduce yourself. You become something that's obedient, and too-simple minded to understand silly things like student debt. It's a form of escapism where you let someone else take charge, the results being both kinky and therapeutic.

Or so I've heard.

STORY 19: THE ALLIGATOR AND THE COW

Heise the cow is rich, and Nagumo the alligator is poor. They get caught in the rain together, so they stop by Heise's house to wait it out, taking turns having a bath. But when it's Nagumo's turn he starts drinking Heise's gamer girl bathwater. He calls it beef bouillon.

There's some other stuff going on in this story about class disparity and whatnot, but that's all off topic for the purposes of this video. So I'll just leave you with that. When Heise catches Nagumo drinking his bathwater, lost to his carnivore urges, he might as well have caught him holding his used underwear.

Beast Complex IV

That's all three printed volumes of Beast Complex down, but…

Okay, so it turns out there's still more Beast Complex to go. Which is a little annoying? Because I meant for this video to be more or less comprehensive. I guess the idea of the series being three volumes long just felt satisfying, and Paru Itagaki has obviously been working on Sanda for years now, so I figured that Beast Complex must be done by now and forgot to, you know, actually check.

And yeah, while Volume 3 is years old now, (older than my Beastars video) she has been very occasionally putting out a new chapter here and there, and Volume 4 is probably about to be finished. In fact, she's said that she could keep writing stories in this setting forever. Does that just mean a trickle of Beast Complex chapters over the coming years or decades, or might she one day start a second main series set in the world of Beastars? Who knows.

Either way, we've still got another volume to go!

STORY 20: THE BLACK PANTHER AND THE SEA OTTER

Chapter is a lot, so let me set the stage for a moment.

In Chapter 100 of Beastars we learn that on the subway it's recommended that you only ride in the herbivore-only car if you can, along with the rest of polite society. This is because if you board the interspecies car, well, things get rowdy. And rumor has it that if an herbivore touches their cheeks three times, they're saying "go ahead, devour me!"

This didn't make it into my last Beastars video because I wasn't sure there was enough to talk about, but when I first read this chapter I couldn't help but think, "is this… cruising? And Flagging?"

We'll get to the Beast Complex chapter in a minute, but for context:

Cruising is a term that originated all the way back in the 1960's. It refers to searching for public, anonymous sex. This might have taken place deep within large city parks, near canals, or really anywhere that makes it easy enough for two or more people to hide themselves from the view of passersby.

This kind of behavior comes with its own risks, obviously, but depending on your family, your religion, your state, and the decade you were living in, as a queer person you might not have the luxury of pursuing the mainstream avenues towards carnal pleasures. So you meet up with a stranger under less-than-ideal circumstances, you don't exchange names, and then you part ways.

This is what happens when stigma forces people to hide: folks make do. It was an open secret that many bathhouses survived largely off the backs of their gay clientele, the abundant steam providing ample opportunity to have some fun without getting recognized.

I'm saying all of this because some countries are known to have a very particular recurring cruising spot. As shown in the manga: the back of a train, particularly at night. It makes sense, I suppose. You're temporarily cut off from the rest of the city, and you can get on or *get off* wherever you want.

But, when you do find your way to a cruising site, how do you tell which dudes are there searching for a hookup and which are just obliviously playing Pokémon Go? This is where flagging comes into play.

Growing up in the 90's, I already knew about "The Gay Ear" as a child before I even really knew what gay people were. If a man had a single piercing on their left ear, they were straight, but if it was on their right ear, they were gay. Not much of a secret if even I knew about it, but apparently it originated back in the 70's.

The 70's also gave us the somewhat more obscure Hanky Code. Men would wear colored bandanas hanging out of the back pockets of their pants. Left pocket for tops, right pocket for bottoms, and the color of the bandana indicated what kinds of action you might be searching for. The Chart is very long and full of all sorts of words I can't say here.

But wait, there's more. Aesexuals would wear a black ring on the middle finger of their right hand to signal to other ace people that they're not alone. Lesbians have been known for wearing their keys hanging from their hip on a carabiner clip. Once again, left for top, right for

bottom. Oh, and they had their own code where they'd paint all of their fingers a single color, except one, and the color of that lone nail followed the same logic as the Hanky Code.

So, knowing all of this, and knowing how much the series already conflates devouring with sexuality, my brain lit right up when I saw Seven board the rowdy car of the train, walk right up to Legoshi at random, and tap her cheeks three times to flag to him. This is where you go to be eaten, right? Eat me.

At the end of volume 16 of Beastars, Paru Itagaki included a lengthy explanation meant to give context for chapter 100. I feel the need to bring this up because, just like when I talked about Legom, people are going to "um actually" me about the "official explanation." Even though that's kinda missing the point, since little of what I'm doing here has anything to do with divining authorial intent.

But in her story she says that she was going through a rough time and, with a look, tried to seduce a man on the train into kidnapping her. Upsetting implications aside, this does mean that she took a real life story where she attempted to attract a man's sexual desire, and represented it as a manga chapter where a sheep tries to get eaten by a wolf. Devouring and sexuality. This connection is only reinforced when Legoshi and Seven next meet, where he's bricked up on meat withdrawals and pulls her into his bed.

Anyway, context-giving tangent aside, this chapter of Beast Complex brings us back to the subway once again.

Gil is a black panther, and an office worker. Po is a sea otter, who recently moved onto land from the ocean, and is very useful at Gil's company because he can speak both languages. They share a train commute, but whenever Po reaches up to grip the handhold, Gil is overcome with the desire to devour his hand.

Gil confesses to and apologizes for his urges. In his tearful explanation, he admits that the reason that he wants to eat Po so badly is because he's just been so lonely lately. That's certainly not the justification that you'd expect him to use, unless of course you're reading this chapter while already conflating the eating of meat with physical intimacy.

Po confides that he'd never even heard of the word "lonely" until he left the sea to live among the people on land. This is interesting because the only major difference we know of between the sea and land animals in this setting is that it's a crime to eat meat on the surface, but it's not a crime to eat meat in the ocean. It's a reminder that queerness is inflicted upon us, rather than being innate. By which I mean how what makes us different is considered shameful rather than a mere neutral fact.

In the ocean Po was merely Po, but now that he's on land, Po is queer. He's valued for his talents as a translator, but he's shunned by his coworkers because they view his lunch as

monstrous, even though he's just living the same way that he always has. He's being otherized for the first time in his life, and so, for the first time he has become lonely.

Po says that Gil is welcome to eat him whenever he wants to. He then holds Gil's hand, at which point it's helpfully explained that this is something that sea otters do with their mates so that they aren't separated by the ocean currents while they sleep. Their mates.

In case this all wasn't romantic enough already, the train car doors open and a tide of bodies threatens to separate them. They refuse to let go of each other, so they're both swept outside together. Having been left on some random subway platform, the two decide to make the most of the evening and go out for drinks together, still holding hands.

So in this reading, this was a story about two men who felt isolated (one of which was explicitly shunned by society for who he is), who then found companionship through a moment of intimacy on the train.

STORY 21: THE ZEBRA AND THE WHITE TIGER

Mika is a zebra who is catfished by an actual cat. Her dating app match is Atari, a white tiger who claims to be a fellow zebra online.

They clash at first, but eventually accept that most people are a bit dishonest when they're trying to find dates. Mika ends up going along with it even though she's an herbivore and her date is a carnivore claiming to be an herbivore. It turns out that white tigers are extremely rare: about one in a hundred, and Atari has struggled to fit in with his own kind. His last girlfriend, a tiger with color, only took black and white photos, seemingly because she was embarrassed to be with him, and other tigers call him slurs.

Mika embraces him, and takes him to an all-zebra dance club where his stripes can blend with her kind, unquestioned. To their credit, no one seems to reject Atari, but he freaks out and flees the premises, seeing himself as a monster. The chapter ends with Mika asking him to find her again when he's ready, without the app, as if by fate.

I loved this chapter. I love how Atari is drawn, just this big soft man with large, naive eyes, chaotic stripes contrasting against his solid black shirt, it's a great design. I love how we're shown their forearms matching from across the table, and how the window blinds connect them in stripes of shadow and light as they bond.

I'm not super attached to this interpretation, but I do see a subtle transness to Atari's story. After all, the idea that one in a hundred tigers is randomly born colorless isn't that far off from the percentage of the population that has a queer gender expression. It's a bit of a stretch, but it invites some interesting connections.

Speaking of which, Atari is cagey about his identity and unwilling to show his face online, which has made dating a challenge. Worse, he knows that once he actually meets someone he's going to have to broach the thorny subject regarding the parts of him that he kept a secret, and why he wasn't up front about them to a person that might now be mad at him. It puts him at a disadvantage, forcing him to navigate some very difficult social situations. He's willing to take that risk however, because the one thing he does know is that the life that he's been living as a tiger definitely isn't working.

Today he's lucky in meeting Mika, who is surprised at first but quickly adapts to the news. But when Atari gets exactly what he wanted, he has a bit of an episode. In that club he's immersed within the very identity that he had assumed as his own, and no one rejects him. No one but himself. In an act borne of internalized self-hatred, he removes himself from the party, disgusted in himself.

To me, his reaction, the sudden insistence that their stripes were nothing alike all along, reads as dysphoric. This is what's so interesting to me about this bittersweet ending: that Atari's conflict here comes from within. It's the ugly, but honest feeling of someone that hasn't fully processed what they're going through. He's not ready. But Mika, recognizing this, sweetly reminds Atari that when he has come to terms with himself, she'll be waiting. She accepted him. Now he just needs to accept himself.

Lightning Round

Okay, I actually tried to write a mini-essay about every chapter, but I ended up cutting most of them because the script got really confusing if I didn't stick to my thesis. But if you're wondering what else goes on in Beast Complex, here's a lightning round:

Chapter 4 establishes the Black Market before Beastars was even published.

Chapter 5 is about a cooking show with two hosts, a carnivore and an herbivore, which brings the politics of cooking in this universe to the forefront.

Chapter 6 is about a fox girl suffering from stereotype threat while paradoxically praising a chameleon boy for embracing his nature.

Chapter 9 tells us that animals with white fur are called "Brights" and that they get poached for their fur so they live in a separate district. But one kangaroo has spots on her inner thigh so she's upsettingly forced to sleep with anyone who finds out to keep her secret. It feels oddly like "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas."

Chapter 10 is about a lazy bird who is about to lose his easy gig flying his rodent housemate to and from work.

In Chapter 13 a python discovers that his hyena classmate hung himself so he panics and swallows him whole. The vore vored vorily that day.

Chapter 17 is a Legoshi story that expands on sea creature morality, but we got into that stuff elsewhere.

Chapter 18 expands on Ako, a minor Beastars character, and makes her kind of fascinating, challenging the idea of the perfect victim.

In Chapter 22 for some reason Paru Itagaki wanted to share with us the fun fact that snakes have two penises. She actually drew them. He's a nurse.

Chapter 23 shows us a dog that's so fixated on people's smells that he stalks them, but the wolf he's stalking turns out to be Hannibal Lecter.

In Chapter 24 a chameleon is saddled with taking care of a baby penguin, which basically cures his alcoholism.

And then just last week we got Chapter 25, where we learn that after three years together Haru and Legoshi still haven't had sex. In fact, they're still sleeping in separate beds. I'm not sure if they've even kissed. I'm honestly not sure what Paru Itagaki has planned for these two at this point. I mean, he's basically still been more intimate with Louis than he ever has been with Haru. It's wild, but that's where we've left off.

Conclusion

I skipped over those chapters because they didn't compliment my thesis, and I have to admit that that makes me feel like a fraud sometimes. A volume of Beast Complex generally has six chapters, and on average I spoke about three of them from each book. So, two videos deep now I ask myself, am I cheating?

There are some stories I could try harder to make fit in some way or other. Like that chapter about the brights, which highlights how a minority group is still capable of cruelty, and may contain a smaller intersectional group whose needs aren't met. But then you have chapters like the one about the classmate who hung himself. That one's a pretty straightforward story about how the people who are cruel to you might be dealing with their own stuff. I could find more to write about it, but I can't really stretch it back to my original topic.

And "stretch" is probably the right word for it. At the end of the day Beastars is a very flexible story setting filled with reoccurring subtextual implications. It's about carnivores and herbivores. It's about racism and interracial marriage. It's about how all cops are bastards. It's about the women that live in daily fear of sexual violence. It's about the men that feel tainted by what other men have done. It's about queerness and living under stigma. It's about facing an uncertain

future and choosing to live it as yourself. Given how many plates this thing has spinning, it's a wonder that it still ends up with a queer narrative even half of the time.

And that last bit about the future might be the truest thing that I can say about Beast Complex. So many of the stories feature a character that stands at a threshold in their life, needing a push to face what lies beyond. It's easy to see why this setting was so meaningful to me two years ago when I was on the cusp of finally coming out as gay.

But here's the thing, that choice to face your future is an illusion: your future is coming whether you choose it or not. Time doesn't stop to wait for your self-doubt to clear. The only thing that's frozen by your indecision… is you.

> Aughra: "The Great Conjunction is the end of the world! Or the beginning. Hm! End, begin, all the same. Big change. Sometimes good, sometimes bad."

Raul, Gon, Garom, Gerbera, Mugi, Kiyosumi, Abu, Aisha, Gil, Po, Atari… Legoshi. Each of these characters is to varying degrees coming to a realization that marks the end of their life as they've known it. And then the story just ends. Rarely do we get to see how things play out. We just know that they were faced with a choice: keep living as a cobbled together amalgam of what society has told you to be, or face uncertainty and live as your true self. And considering how every chapter begins with a character that is stuck in time and ends when they become unstuck, Beast Complex has found its answer:

Thrive.

SOURCES:

https://www.queerevents.ca/queer-corner/blog/history/queers-community-flagging