UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Santa Barbara

Coming-Into-Identity: Sensory and Linguistic Resistance in Multi-Ethnic Lesbian Literature

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in English

By

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June 2024

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I want to express my deep gratitude to my dissertation Co-Chairs, Dr. Melody Jue and Dr. Candace Waid, and dissertation committee members, Dr. Daniel Reeve and Dr. Matthew Richardson. Melody, this dissertation would be a very different creature if not for your guidance and feedback; it was you who, upon reading my first chapter draft, recognized that I was writing about sensory experience without naming it. You helped me see the connections between long rants on lesbian politics, my interest in genre, and my commitment to queer, trans, and racial liberation. Your Queer and Feminist Science Studies graduate seminar planted the seed for my first peer-reviewed publication. I cannot thank you enough for how generous you have been with your time, energy, and mentorship. Candace, your continued

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My parents, Jim and Brenda Cook, have always encouraged my passion for books and politics. They have long believed in my ability to complete this degree and meet my goals. Their faith in me has driven me to be confident and to speak up when I have something to say. Mom, thank you for making me read every day after school when I was young, and for always making room in the family budget for the many books I requested throughout my childhood and teenage years. I've put those reading skills to good use here. Dad, I watched you go back to school later in life, complete a PhD in your fifties, and start a successful career in academia. I knew what to do and how to make it possible in part because I watched you do it first.

At its core, this project is a love letter to lesbian culture, with all its messiness, flaws, and fractures. When I came out at the age of sixteen, I needed lesbian community more than

anything. I found that community lacking at my high school, so I turned to novels: lesbian coming-out novels, lesbian romance, lesbian thrillers, lesbian detective novels, lesbian fantasy, lesbian vampires, lesbian witches, lesbian aliens – if lesbians were involved, I was sold. It has been such a privilege to channel my deep identification with and love for lesbian community into this dissertation project. I believe deeply in the possibility and promise of a more coalitional, diverse, and non-hierarchical lesbian politics, and I hope that comes through in these pages.

On this note, I want to express unending gratitude and appreciation for my wife, Amy, who has supported me through the highs and lows of graduation school and beyond. She has talked with me about almost every novel analyzed here; allowed me to rant for hours on the latest iteration of white-centric or transphobic lesbian politics; extended my thinking on somatic and sensory knowledge with her own expertise and skill in somatic therapy; and persuaded me to take gentle walks with her when the overwhelm crescendos. Thank you for moving to Santa Barbara with me, and for supporting this long-held dream of mine. I can't imagine having done this without you. I love you.

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Vita of Jamiee Nichole Cook

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PUBLICATIONS

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"Sensory Speech, Embodied Silence: Queer Self-Recognition in Carla Trujillos' *What Night Brings*," forthcoming at *Diálogo: An Interdisciplinary Studies Journal* volume 25.2, "Queer Latinx."

Public-Facing Scholarship

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SELECTED CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

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"Coming Out and Into Community Dialects: Language and Lesbian Identity in Carla Trujillo's *What Night Brings,"* Modern Language Association [MLA], San Francisco, January 2023

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"When 'Sisters' become 'Cis-ters': Failed Coalitionalism in 1970s Lesbian Separatism and its Twenty-First Century Remnants," Pacific, Ancient, and Modern Language Association [PAMLA], Bellingham, November 2018

"Intersectional and Inherited Trauma: Healing Rifts Among Queer Communities in the Academy," LGBTQ Wellbeing in the Academy, Santa Barbara, November 2018

"The Politics of Distinction: Mechanics of Passion in the Novels of Jeanette Winterson and Sylvia Brownrigg," CSU State-Wide Research Competition in the Humanities, April 2016, Bakersfield, California

"Who Said It Was Simple?: Intersectional Feminism and the Dismantling of Cultural Hierarchy in the Poetry of Audre Lorde," PCA/ACA National Conference, Gay and Lesbian Studies Panel, March 2016, Seattle

EQUITABLE PEDAGOGY WORK

Anti-Racist Pedagogy Series, Co-Lead TA, Organizer and Facilitator, UCSB Department of English, Academic Year 2020-2021

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Critical Thinking: Cultural Myths and Systemic Inequity (Fall 2016)
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College Composition and Reading (Fall 2016 and Summer 2017)
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ABSTRACT

“Coming-Into-Identity: Sensory and Linguistic Resistance in Lesbian Literature”

By

Jamiee Cook

“Coming-Into-Identity: Sensory and Linguistic Resistance in Lesbian Literature” argues that novels of lesbian identity development should not be subsumed by the Western literary genre of the Bildungsroman — a traditionally male-centric, white, affluent genre depicting the journey from adolescence into adulthood. I show how certain narratives “of formation,” such as those written by and featuring multi-ethnic and gender diverse lesbians, are incompatible with the Bildungsroman tradition, which in addition to its Eurocentric history tends to prize linear narratives, an arc wherein identity formation concludes as adulthood commences. Identity-based oppression significantly impacts the temporality, methodology, and challenges faced by marginalized protagonists, so while tellings of lesbian identity development may include or interact with tenets of the Bildungsroman, these narratives call for a new distinction. In “Coming-Into-Identity,” I argue lesbian writers of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century move away from the prescriptive Bildungsroman and are shaping a new genre: the coming-into-identity novel. As an alternative to the Bildungsroman model, I offer “coming-into-identity” as an emergent and often hybridized generic form, one which prioritizes lingering in-between spaces, dwelling in embodied multi-sensory experience, and perception through situated visions. The coming-into-identity novel rejects binary concepts of “coming out” and “staying in the closet,” tropes central to existent critical studies of LGBTQ+ literature. Instead, coming-into-identity narratives illustrate the

radical potential of queer and trans self-formation grounded in the interiority of sensory experience and fluid self-knowledge, as opposed to common Bildungsroman tropes which privilege ageist linearity, social recognition as narrative resolution, and mind-body dualism.

Methodologically, "Coming-Into-Identity" brings together memoir, speculative fiction, graphic novels, realism, and young adult literature to uncover the multi-sensory methods by which lesbian writers from the mid-twentieth century to the first quarter of the 21st depict the complexities of identity formation in the coming-into-identity genre. The project engages with the history of contentious and exclusionary politics in social justice movements during the 1960s and 1970s to trace the literary methods, such non-linear narrative structure, genre experimentation, and multi-sensory and synesthetic description, that emerge in response to these historic conflicts and exclusions. I think with and critique these movements to trace the imposed identity-based boundaries of social justice communities to challenge limits of genre and canon in American literature. In doing so, my work illustrates the coming-into-identity genre's efficacy in revealing the many sensory and linguistic ways that multi-ethnic lesbian writers and characters navigate and overcome multiple forms of marginalization in the sociopolitical context of the United States.

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Chapter One: Sensory Aesthetics and the Lesbian Coming-into-Identity Novel

There are so many roots to the tree of anger
that sometimes the branches shatter
before they bear.

Sitting in Nedicks
the women rally before they march
discussing the problematic girls
they hire to make them free.
An almost white counterman passes
a waiting brother to serve them first
and the ladies neither notice nor reject
the slighter pleasures of their slavery.
But I who am bound by my mirror
as well as my bed
see causes in colour
as well as sex

and sit here wondering
which me will survive
all these liberations.

-Audre Lorde, "Who Said It Was Simple" (1973)

Lesbian literature, and in fact LGBTQ literature more broadly, is often framed through recurring narrative tropes. Some of the most popular narrative frameworks include the coming-out story, wherein a queer character declares their sexuality to some form of public; the love story, wherein a queer character experiences queer sex or love, often for the first time; or the trauma story, wherein a queer character is ostracized, bullied, tormented, attacked, or even killed as a result of their sexuality or gender identity. Across these three familiar approaches to reading queerness in literature, there is a commonality: a persistent focus on external, public response to disclosures of deviant sexual identity at the expense of

attention to the development of an internal sense of self. Writers, scholars, critics, and readers from all backgrounds are likely to focus on these external factors (like familial acceptance or rejection, the threat of social exclusion, and questions of political rights and protections) because they have great bearing on the character's safety and sense of self. Yet, there are other layers of lesbian identity and life that deserve sustained attention by writers, critics, and readers alike: how does one come to a sense of self-recognition amidst these external forces? And how central is that sense of self-recognition to survival under a white supremacist, cisheteropatriarchal system?

It is imperative that work toward equity, safety, and social recognition for queer and trans people in the United States continues fervently and with urgency, especially as we observe the non-linear nature of progress toward these goals in the sociopolitical context of the United States. However, because political progress on the legislative level does not necessarily produce greater safety or acceptance for queer and trans people in their varied, diverse, and intersecting communities, it is as necessary to queer and trans survival that we offer our collective attention to the myriad of ways diverse sexual subjects develop an internal sense of self — often in spite of social and political violence and erasure. This is why I focus on questions of self-recognition in this project; I argue that the formation of a sense of self, the act of self-recognition cultivated through sensory details and experiences, is one important and often overlooked tool in the fight for LGBTQ+ liberation.

The pursuit of self-recognition is far more complicated than staring at ones reflecting in a mirror, or speaking one's identity aloud. For the lesbian subject, self-perception is often clouded layers of misogyny, homophobia, and sometimes racism and transphobia, structures

of oppression so imbricated in the fabric of U.S. culture that it can be difficult to disentangle one from the other. Audre Lorde's 1973 poem "Who Said it Was Simple" speaks to the complexity of self-recognition for multiply-marginalized people amidst these imbricated layers of identity-based oppression. The poem begins with the image of the "tree of anger," offering a metaphoric depiction of identitarian intersections from her position as a Black lesbian woman: "There are so many roots to the tree of anger / that sometimes the branches shatter / before they bear" (lines 1-3). Lorde's use of multiple roots to express the various points of origin of this "tree of anger" points to the varied, unseen, and nurtured nature of systemic oppression, an image she revisits throughout her vast body of writing, spanning decades, genres, and social movements. Through the image of these many roots, Lorde offers a structural, intersectional understanding of oppression that speaks back to the troubling perseverance of single-issue political frameworks in movements for social justice. Her verse reminds us that the source of harm is not singular, not only racism and racial hierarchies, but misogyny, homophobia, and classism, all of which characterize Lorde's own experience of rights-based political movements in the 1960s and 1970s, leading up to this poem's composition.

The particular social movement Lorde critiques in "Who Said It Was Simple" comes into focus in the second stanza: this is an indictment of second wave feminism and its racist focus on white women to the exclusion of women of color. As the women sit in a popular diner, Nedicks, speaking of the "problematic girls / they hire to make them free," Lorde exposes the hypocrisy of a social movement for women's liberation that centers white affluence. Gesturing toward the trend among upper-class white families to hire working-class

women of color to perform childrearing and domestic duties, a continuation of U.S. slavery-era racial hierarchy that isolates and alienates Black women from their own families and forecloses their public-sphere opportunities, Lorde's use of "free" here gestures toward the limits of reformist feminist thinking. According to bell hooks, reformist feminist ideology was "solely about women gaining equality with men in the existing system" (hooks 3-4). As an activist, participant, and theoretician of radical feminist ideology, hooks writes: "it was clear to black women (and to their revolutionary allies in struggle) that they were never going to have equality within the existing white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (4). Black and other racially marginalized women are not featured in the feminist march Lorde depicts here because the structures of white supremacy and capitalist exploitation necessitate that they work in service of white women and their families, a de facto exclusion from the movement. The rhetorical tension between "pleasures" and "slavery" in line eleven suggests that, from the speaker's perspective, the women sitting in Nedicks are not enslaved at all — rather, they are beneficiaries of racially hierarchized capitalism. Rather than dismantling a system in which women are solely tasked with domestic and child-rearing duties, they instead outsource their gendered labor to those who cannot afford to reject the association of womanhood with caretaking: working class women, many of whom are women of color. Lorde's speech at the Second Sex Conference in New York in 1979, later published as "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" in the essay collection *Sister Outsider*, supports this reading: "How do you deal with the fact that the women who clean your houses and tend your children while you attend conferences on feminist theory are, for

the most part, poor women and women of Color? What is the theory behind racist feminism?" (*Sister Outsider* 112).

This question – "What is the theory behind racist feminism?" – is central to anti-racist critiques of feminist movements, and clear parallels can be drawn between single-issue frameworks in feminist activism and other identity-based social movements, like the LGBTQ+ rights movement in the United States. As U.S. politics continues to veer unheedingly toward the political right, implementing "don't say gay" legislation that eradicates LGBTQ+ education in the South,[1] reversing Roe v. Wade[2] and making abortion access illegal across many states, accusing trans-affirming parents of child abuse,[3] and labeling drag performers as pedophiles, the importance of queer and trans stories of resistance, survival, and self-recognition cannot be overstated. In a socio-political environment that seeks to eradicate queerness and transness from all social and legal life, as well as strip women and childbearing people of bodily autonomy and the right to a life free from violence, those who reside at the cross-sections of multiple marginalized identities have little recourse for survival outside of community formation and self-recognition.

Yet, as Lorde's poetic meditation on the threat of single-issue politics amid second wave feminisms shows, identity-based community as a foundation for resistance to oppression may be made vulnerable by exclusionary politics, racial, gendered, and class-

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[1] "What you need to know about Florida's 'Don't Say Gay' Law." National Education Association. 2022.

[2] United States Supreme Court. Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization. No. 19–1392. Argued December 1, 2021—Decided June 24, 2022.

[3] Thoreson, Ryan. "Texas Officials Threaten Transgender Children and Families." Human Rights Watch, 26 Feb. 2022.

based hierarchies, and the self-interest of those with the most proximity to power. LGBTQ+ community is a similarly fraught foundation for resistance; we are an ethnically, regionally, and politically diverse group that holds little cohesion outside the identitarian space of resistance to sexual normativity – and even this cohesive thread frays at the intersections, giving way to cisgender supremacy and homonormativity.[4] Contrary to conservative political sentiment that positions queer and trans people as "woke" and always inevitably to the political left, racism, transphobia, and misogyny continue to divide LGBTQ+ people and politics in the United States. This means that those who are most vulnerable to state-sanctioned and de facto oppressive political dictates – people of color and those who are trans or gender non-conforming – are more likely to be denied community and protection than their white cisgender counterparts. "Coming Into Identity" analyzes the formal and affective methods that diverse lesbian narratives – from Lorde's biomythography to contemporary science fiction – use to depict the process of coming-into-identity, despite these intersecting and overlapping forms of social and political oppression.

This dissertation bridges queer and feminist studies, critical race theories, and the study of sensation to investigate the ways queer multi-ethnic women writers depict sensory experience as both a vehicle for identitarian exploration and a method of resistance to racial

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[4] I use "homonormativity," a term coined by Lisa Duggan in *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, cultural politics, and the attack on democracy* (2003), to describe the way that the adoption of heteronormative values within LGBTQ+ culture has stifled the radical potential of the movement. Duggan's primary examples are illustrative for my purposes: the focus on marriage equality and the right to serve in the armed forces became a core component of LGBTQ+ organizing in the United States during the first two decades of the twenty-first century. An alternative to homonormative organizing does not seek admittance into established power structures, like the military, but seeks to eliminate all roots of oppression.

and gendered oppression. In an effort to map the aesthetics of what I call lesbian "coming-into-identity" narratives, I question how cisgender and transgender lesbian protagonists are able to achieve a sense of identity and self-recognition amidst hostile social and political circumstances, including racism, homophobia and transmisogyny, and the hierarchized structure of the modern LGBTQ+ community. Beginning with Audre Lorde's germinal biomythography *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982) and reaching forward into twenty-first century texts such as Mia McKenzie's *The Summer We Got Free* (2012), Carla Trujillo's *What Night Brings* (2002), and Ryka Aoki's *Light From Uncommon Stars* (2022), among others, I follow in Ramzi Fawaz's assertion that the histories of social and political movements for women's and queer liberation are "formal projects that cohered countless expressions of queer existence in the hopes of radically altering and broadening what people can think and feel about gender and sexuality" (11). Here Fawaz creates a relationship between literary and political forms created and reinvented by queers to tell queer stories, and the radical potential of those forms to impact and shape feelings and perceptions of gender and sexuality. I take this relationship as a starting point to ask: how do multi-ethnic queer and trans women writers reshape and refigure dominant literary forms to represent their own feelings about gender, sexuality, and race? How do these feelings become imbued with a sense of agency, shaping the depiction of socio-political resistance and reshaping intra-communal relationships? And ultimately, how do these authors use feelings and sensations to map their characters' unique paths toward self-recognition and narrative resolution?

I place feeling and sensation in conversation with resistance to oppression and intra-communal relationships because, like the broader LGBTQ+ movement, the political and social history of queer women's community in the United States is fraught with exclusionary politics, gatekeeping, and identitarian conflict along the lines of race and gender. These historical and present conflicts take literary form in the novels I analyze, and characters respond to these conflicts through what I am calling *sensory resistance*: the act of resisting the dehumanizing and disembodying tactics of racism, homophobia, and transphobia through focusing on sensation as a means of connection to and recognition of the self and others. I show how the emerging multi-ethnic lesbian coming-into-identity novel is working toward an anti-hierarchical restructuring of political and relational barriers between marginalized identity categories within queer women's community via a dissolution of perceptual boundaries between the senses.

The novels I analyze embrace synesthesia, the crossing of the senses, and multi-sensory forms of knowledge-making to foster radically relational depictions of lesbian kinship and community that acknowledge difference while rejecting racist and transphobic ordering. And above all, these synesthetic and multi-sensory experiences cultivate a sense of self-knowledge for queer and trans characters, liberating them from the confines of socially determined, linear processes of self-knowledge, like the "coming out" narrative. At the close of Lorde's "Who Said it was Simple," the narrator wonders "which me will survive / all these liberations." This line gestures toward the question of self-recognition for those, like Lorde, who are at once the subject and the gendered or racial other of a social movement: how does one achieve a sense of self-recognition, and how does one even go about survival, when the

community meant to shield you from political and physical violence is interested in only one facet of your identity, and in fact may be outwardly hostile to another?

Race and Gender in Lesbian Politics

I specifically use the word "lesbian" in the title and throughout this project as a sort of reclamation: lesbian politics have been subjected to rightful critique by the larger queer and trans community as a result of the divisive transphobia and racial hegemony in the era of lesbian separatism (1970s). Meanwhile, lesbian culture has evolved in the last fifty years to become an identitarian site of active resistance to transphobia, misogyny, homophobia, and racism. With more Black, Latinx, Indigenous, Asian-American, transgender, and non-binary lesbian voices emerging on the political and literary scene, lesbianism can serve as an important intersectional identifier for those seeking a space of active resistance to both patriarchal misogyny and gender and sexual normativity. I do not attempt this reclamation as a way of erasing the histories of racial exclusion and transphobia in lesbian culture in the United States. These ideologies remain pertinent to a vocal subset of lesbian-identified trans exclusionary radical feminists; rather, I center these histories as sources of still lingering identity-based oppression to reveal the ways those who have historically been excluded from (white, cisgender) lesbian community continue to expand the identity category's boundaries and grow its political efficacy. Critiques of trans-exclusionary and white-centric ideologies remain key interlocutors in each chapter of this project in order to expose the conditions upon

which these characters mount a resistance to oppression. This resistance comes from and through multi-racial and gender diverse lesbian embodiment and sensation.

In considering how characters achieve a sense of self-recognition in the lesbian coming-into-identity genre, it is necessary to note how identity categories like "woman" and "lesbian" have been constructed by radical political movements for social justice in a ways that reify existing power structures. White and cisgender supremacy are the major power structures I am concerned with here. This narrow construction of womanhood and lesbianism is the root of transphobia in lesbian separatist communities of the 1970s, a movement Fawaz describes as an "anarchist project" that "argued for the necessity of complete divestment from male dominated society" (Fawaz 5). In my critique of cisgender lesbian culture's deep history of transphobic exclusion, I want to be clear that it is not the exclusion of men that I admonish, but the ways that essentialist signifiers like "male-dominated society" are leveraged against people who are neither men nor part of dominant social structures of patriarchy and heteronormativity; namely, transgender women and non-binary people, and women of color whose involvement in Civil Rights organizing and anti-racist activism necessitates kinship and connection with men of color who endure oppression under these systems of power. Lesbian separatists took a radical approach to women-centric society, arguing for this "complete divestment" from men. The Combahee River Collective's 1978 statement describes why many Black lesbians rejected this separatist logic:

> Although we are feminists and Lesbians, we feel solidarity with progressive Black men and do not advocate the fractionalization that white women who are separatists demand. Our situation as Black people necessitates that we have solidarity around the

> fact of race, which white women of course do not need to have with white men, unless it is their negative solidarity as racial oppressors. We struggle together with Black men against racism, while we also struggle with Black men about sexism. (np)

The Combahee River Collective's statement offers useful concepts for considering the role that white lesbian separatists played in the regulation of identity for lesbian women. First, the Collective's use of the term fractionalization works to give visual representation to separatist demands, which did create fractions amongst women's political community in the 1970s in the U.S. by imposing radical ideological and coalitional constraints on lesbian's activity. The lesbian separatist ethos, while admirable in its commitment to women's divestment from patriarchy, effectively ostracized all who could not or would not comply with its more extreme demands – to separate from men entirely, including one's brothers, sons, and fathers, as well as queer men. This demand becomes more fraught when one abandons a white-centric framework and recognizes the importance of racial coalition, or upon considering the instrumental role lesbians played in caring for gay men during the AIDS epidemic; caretaking used as resistance amid disastrous — criminal — governmental neglect. As The Combahee River Collective states, the "situation" of white supremacy does in fact "necessitate" that Black women have solidarity with other Black people, including Black men, around racism. The Combahee River Collective's statement offers a Black lesbian theory of coalition that centers resistance to oppression over a single-issue identity-based political strategy.

Lesbian separatists were not the only progressive political voices that reified white centrism in their politics. As Lorde's poem critiques, the feminist movement, most notably in

its first and second waves in the United States, has historically ignored or overwritten the struggles of women of color in service of white upper-middle class women's liberation. Angela Davis offers a review of the existing scholarship on slavery to point out this major lack. Davis calls for a serious consideration of the experiential realities of Black women during slavery, including their lives as slaves, as members and/or leaders of the family, and as subjects who resist. While I focus on lesbian literature and culture from the 1970s to the present day, the "legacy of slavery" heavily influences how Black women are able to access, participate in, and shape social movements like lesbian feminism and the LGBTQ+ rights movement. The protagonist of Alice Walker's 1982 lesbian novel *The Color Purple* offers an example of the effects of both the legacy of slavery and the attempted rewriting of Black gender dynamics in the 1965 Moynihan Report.[5] Celie, Walker's protagonist, is caught in an intersecting system of racist social and political practice, patriarchal dominance that renders her property, and reproductive injustices that deny her bodily autonomy and the right to mother her children. These various racial and gendered injustices are compounded by deep fiscal inequities characterizing the racial divide in the U.S. South. Celie's narrative is one of profound struggle and loss, and only after years of estrangement from her sister and children is she afforded the opportunity to regrow that connection and live her life outside of patriarchal abuse. The novel ends with Celie's reflection that despite their age, "this is the

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[5] Also known as "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action," this report was written by Daniel Patrick Moynihan who severed as the Assistant Secretary for Labor under President Lyndon B. Johnson. The report attempts to trace inequities among Black and white families to the existence of non-normative gender roles in African-American families. In other words, the report has been interpreted by many as arguing that matriarchal structures wherein men are not granted dominance and superiority are to blame for the number of single Black mothers in the United States.

youngest us ever felt," effectively upending the idea of a linear process of identity development by which queer characters come into their identity at the precipice of adulthood (Walker 288). Another famous lesbian protagonist, Rita Mae Brown's Molly Bolt, passes as white, and while her rural upbringing and impoverished background provide sufficient barriers to her survival under capitalism, her whiteness creates opportunities for social and individual transformation that are inaccessible to Celie; she becomes enmeshed in the lesbian social and political scene in New York City and is afforded access to both feminist and queer spaces of community and resistance. This notion of the "legacy of slavery" as a crucial force that shapes the contours of Black life in the U.S. gives way to a crucial truth that should shape any conversation around feminism or lesbian feminism: white standards of womanhood have been (and continue to be) both irrelevant and a tool of violence against women of color.

This truth went largely unacknowledged by those in power in both feminist and lesbian-feminist spaces during the crucial activist decades of the 1960s and 1970s. Barbara Smith's germinal 1978 essay "Towards a Black Feminist Criticism" questions why more white women writers have publicly declared their homosexuality than Black women writers, and her response points toward racist gatekeeping endemic to the women's liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s. This wave of U.S. feminism placed cisgender heterosexual white womanhood as the identitarian center of the movement, often giving lip service to issues of race and sexuality without centering intersectional liberation in their political agendas. Smith writes that white women were able to "make the leap" of coming-out in print because "they have had the strength and support of a movement behind them"

(Smith 26). Smith is referencing the movement for women's liberation, which infamously centered white, cisgender, heterosexual women, at the expense women of color.

But support for lesbian identity in the feminist movement – even one centered in whiteness – was hard-won. At Smith's time of writing, white lesbians were largely accepted as a part of the women's liberation movement, but in the movement's infancy in the late 1960s and early 1970s, lesbians were seen as a threat to second wave feminist aims of "equality" with men. The "Lavender Menace" title, originally coined as a derogatory term by feminist organizer Betty Friedan in 1969 but later reclaimed by vocal lesbian feminists like writer Rita Mae Brown, author of *Rubyfruit Jungle* (1973), suggested that lesbianism posed a threat to (heterosexual) women's liberation (Gilmore and Kaminsky 96). It wasn't until 1971 that the National Organization for Women, under pressure by "Lavender Menace" activists, passed a resolution that acknowledged lesbian rights and equality as part of a larger national agenda (96). Even with this resolution, though, the feminist movement in the United States retained a focus on issues affecting cisgender, heterosexual women, relegating concerns over race, sexuality, and gender identity to movements based in Civil Rights activism and LGTBQ+ equality, respectively.

The revisioning of LGBTQ+ political history as one invigorated by white cisgender gay men is another poignant example of how the multi-dimensional roots of social justice activism can be obscured by white supremacy and cisgender normativity. As a theoretical approach, I take direction from queer of color critique t to disrupt exclusionary politics within queer and BIPOC communities and to offer more recognition to those whose identities are mutually entangled. In the epilogue to *The Queer Limit of Black Memory: Black Lesbian*

Literature and Irresolution, Matt Richardson writes that the naming of President Obama's 2009 Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act upholds the idea that "anti-Black violence and anti-gay violence are separate" (Richardson 160). I read what Richardson points to here as another form of gatekeeping. As Hortense Spillers articulates in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," the history of slavery and racial violence has attempted to strip Black people of gender and reduce Black people to sexual bodies; this attempt produces what Richardson identifies as a cultural logic in which Black death is always only about Blackness (rather than also about gender or sexuality). Simultaneously, Black queers are sometimes seen within the Black community as failing to conform to the conditions of their humanity under white heteropatriarchal rule; this supposed failure is met with queer and transphobia, reinforcing Black queer and trans invisibility or physical hyper-visibility. Roderick Ferguson's writings on the multi-dimensional roots of the gay liberation movement reveal a contradictory revisionary history that upholds the exclusion and invisibility

Richardson critiques.[6] This multi-facetted exclusion and violence points to the ways that Black queers, especially Black lesbians, Black trans women, and Black femmes, have been gatekept from LGBTQ+ spaces and Black communities. To return to the narratives of identity development that are central to this project: if our anti-racist and anti-homophobic legislation cannot imagine the possibility of Black queer subjectivity, it follows that the cultural texts and tools available to actual queer youth of color are in short supply. Legislation like Florida's "Don't Say Gay" bill only deepen this existing disparity, obscuring the cultural texts and creative tellings of multi-ethnic queer and trans life from public view.

And not unlike the erasure of Black queer and trans activists and storylines from popular retellings of the LGBTQ+ rights movement, Latina, Latinx, and Latiné lesbian experiences and narrative forms have been neglected in the queer cultural imaginary. As with Black lesbian activism, Latinx lesbians have been harmed and excluded in United States

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[6] Ferguson links this revisionism to capitalism and what I will refer to as representative gay politics: the desire to achieve admission into normative economic, social, and familial systems. Considering the white masculine neoliberal realities of the modern gay rights movement, Roderick A. Ferguson recalls the "multidimensional roots" of gay liberation. He writes that revisionist histories of the gay liberation movement elide "the ways in which queer politics were emerging as ways to engage anti-poverty and anti-racism" (44). This revisioning of Stonewall as the origin of a movement based on singularity and the "uniformity of queer struggles" required the "disappear[ing] [of] trans and queer of color activisms as linchpins between a variety of political struggles" (44). Ferguson argues that the origins of the gay liberation movement were multidimensional and worked in solidarity with other civil rights movements, such as anti-racism and anti-capitalism, despite the devolution of the movement. The erasure of trans, black, and brown people, as well as women and especially women of color, afforded gay rights leaders the power of patriarchy and white supremacy to achieve their desired admission into a normative capitalist economy. This strategy not only abandons the most vulnerable populations of the queer community, it reproduces normative iterations of sexual desire in service of white capitalist hegemony. It is precisely this normativity and desire for assimilation into corrupt systems of social and political power that produces the identitarian gatekeeping I critique here.

queer activism as a result of the imposition of single-issue politics, and racial hierarchy. Single-issue political frameworks that seek to prioritize sexual identity over all other forms of identification impose barriers to full participation by lesbians of color by requiring one to choose one facet of their identity over all others. For example, the legalization of gay marriage does little to protect Chicana lesbians facing deportation, unless their married partner has acquired the privilege of documented citizenship (and even then, naturalization processes are complex and do not favor people of color). This single-issue framework which prioritizes whiteness as the assumed racial identity for all queer people produces these identity-based ruptures within the larger LGBTQ+ community, a community that is sprawling, diverse, and one which cannot be adequately served through a focus on gender and sexuality alone.

This single-issue framework that often curtails possibility for multi-racial coalition in LGBTQ+ spaces also works as a way to ostracize queer and trans people from their cultural communities. Latina lesbians have historically faced significant backlash from their Latiné cultures for defying the traditional expectations of women. Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga have written extensively about the experience of being both Chicana and lesbian, and together compiled and edited *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color.* This was a watershed text in its focus on the experiences of women of color navigating their racial and ethnic cultures alongside movements for sexual and gendered liberation. Anzaldúa and Moraga have been for many years the most vocal and visible Latina lesbians in academic and literary publishing, an issue of representation that Carla Trujillo sought to remedy with her publication of the 1991 edited collection *Chicana Lesbians: The*

Girls Our Mothers Warned Us About, featuring specifically Chicana lesbian poets and essayists. Trujillo, whose 2003 novel *What Night Brings* is the subject of chapter four of this dissertation, writes about Chicano/a culture's tendency to ostracize lesbian Chicanas:

> Our culture seeks to diminish us by placing us in a context of an Anglo construction, a supposed *vendida* to the race. More realistically, it is probably due to the fact that we do not align ourselves with the controlling forces of compulsory heterosexuality. Further, as Chicanas we grow up defined, and subsequently confined, in a male context: daddy's girl, some guy's sister, girlfriend, wife, or mother. By being lesbians, we refuse to need a man to form our own identities as women. This constitutes a 'rebellion' many Chicanas/os cannot handle" (ix).

Here Trujillo identifies the source homophobia within Chicano/a culture as patriarchy, claiming that lesbians are labeled a traitor to Chicano/a culture because they threaten the heteropatriarchal structure that is central to the formation of the traditional Chicano/a family. This form of inter-communal exclusion is taken up in her 2003 novel, which gives voice to a young Chicana lesbian struggling with homophobia and patriarchal abuse in her family, and is the subject of chapter four of this project.

But, as many Latinx and Chicana lesbians have articulated, this exclusion is experienced from both white Anglo culture and Latinx culture. While often labeled as *vendidas* and associated with whiteness by their cultural communities, Latinx lesbians also face racism, ostracization, and exclusion in white lesbian cultures. Gina Montoya's poem "Baby Dykes," published in Trujillo's Chicana Lesbians, gives voice to this experience of multiple forms of ostracization:

How many years of oppression must

there be to be considered trust

worthy in Lesbian culture and lifestyle?

More rules to learn. What is politically correct?

Another sub-culture for me that

doesn't let me in just as the Spanish

did not want us, just as the Indians

did not want us. Now the "Hets"

do not want us.

The question that concludes Montoya's first stanza -- "What is politically correct?" -- is a familiar one to many Latina lesbians and other racially marginalized queer and trans people who engage with feminist and LGBTQ+ politics in the U.S. Because LGBTQ+ politics is deeply embedded with white supremacy culture, despite the instrumental role that queer and trans people of color played in catalyzing and fueling the movement, this results in the institutionalization and boundary-policing of queer of color, language, articulation, and identity. Montoya's poem shows the deeply isolating experience of being excluded from one's gender, sexual, and cultural community, as evidenced by her repetition of "did not want us" in the second stanza.

Montoya's poem was published in 1991, but similar sentiments are expressed in Gabby Rivera's 2016 novel *Juliette Takes a Breath,* a portrait of a young queer Puerto Rican woman living in the Bronx who moves to Portland to work as an intern for a well known

white feminist writer named Harlow Brisbane. This novel begins with Juliette taking the summer internship in Portland and imagining it full of "young, gay weirdos" who are "able to chill and be free without hassle from anyone" (36). When one of these "young, gay weirdos," who happens to be the assistant to Harlow Brisbane, questions her about her gender identity using a variety of unfamiliar terms, she panics: "Trans? Ze? PGPs? Those words weren't a part of my vocabulary. No one in the Bronx or even in college asked me if I was a ze or trans. Was that even how they fit into sentences? I felt small, constricted, and stupid, very stupid" (67). Juliet is plagued by these interactions throughout the first half of the text, reifying her status as a racial "other" in the intellectualized queer scene of Portland – a place she had envisioned as a sort of queer, feminist utopia. Juliette is not able to fully grapple with all she still has to learn about queer and trans culture while under the influence of Harlow, who provokes these feelings of shame in her when she is unable to converse using a primarily privileged feminist and queer lexicon. As bell hooks reminds us, feminist frameworks – especially those that hooks calls "radical" – began as and remain "privileged discourses" that are often inaccessible to those outside of intellectual, academic, and materially privileged circles. It is not until Juliette visits her queer cousin Ava in Florida and is introduced to a thriving multi-racial queer and trans community that she is able to successfully interrogate her existing assumptions about gender and her own sexuality. While Ava expresses disappointment that Juliet has not learned more about trans issues, she reassures Juliet: "It's okay not to know things, prima. I'm always here for you" (226). Her conversations with Ava, while difficult, represent the first time in the novel that Juliet is able to truly grapple with her own understanding (or lack thereof) of identity, especially as it

relates to gender. For example, when Ava calls Harlowe's "linking of genitals to gender" "violent as hell," Juliet questions her own role in perpetuating this violent link. She thinks, "I hadn't thought anything of Harlowe's pussy worship before. In fact, it was the opposite. I was here because of her words about my body parts and my womanhood. So was I also somehow being violent too?" (230). It is important that this moment of self reflection and personal growth is facilitated by queer and trans of color community. Juliette is able to find the inclusive community, the absence of which Montoya mourns in her poem. I offer these literary examples to illustrate that Latinx lesbian writers have been grappling with the challenge of multiply-marginalized identities and the exclusivity of single-issue cultural and political spaces for decades, illustrating the urgent need for an intersectional social justice praxis in queer and trans spaces.

Sensation and the Sapphic Novel

It is tempting to categorize many of the novels analyzed here as Bildungsroman - a wide genre category that has been expanded and refined across cultural and national traditions, and often is associated with the phrase "coming of age." The Bildungsroman was coined by Karl Morgenstern in 1819 and has come to be regarded as a key genre in literary studies in Europe and North America.[7] These narratives traditionally present protagonists who, aside from a sort of sensitivity to the philosophical questions of the world, possess politically privileged identities (white, cisgender, heterosexual, middle class). The

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[7] See Tobais Boes' *Formative Fictions: Nationalism, Cosmopolitanism, and the "Bildungsroman"*

protagonist usually faces a loss or a disruption early in the narrative, often coinciding with their coming-of-age epoch and resulting in a narrative arc that tracks their journey to cope with that loss and reestablish or discover a stable understanding of the self and its relation to the social world. Notably, many traditional Bildungsroman protagonists survive this journey and pass into adulthood as normative members of society, prepared to contribute to capitalist systems of labor, production, and exploitation. Despite some similarities in narrative structure and form, the novels I study in "Coming Into Identity" break from this tradition in protagonist archetype and the inciting event. Rather than suffering a loss or disruption of an otherwise stable sense of self, the lesbian protagonists centered here must work toward the same understanding of the self and its relationship to their larger society, but they do so while inhabiting identities that are decidedly outside that which is mandated as normative, acceptable, and afforded privilege. It is often in their identitarian exploration that they experience loss and disruption of whatever marginal stability they previously possessed; this frequently takes the form of familial rejection, loss of educational or career opportunities, religious trauma, physical violence, and/or mental health challenges. The Bildungsroman typically features an inciting loss as *outside* the realm of normal, predictable events in the characters' life. In contrast, the social, familial, and physical traumas the protagonists featured in "Coming Into Identity" experience are very much *within* the realm of the predictable and expected. This is a significant departure from the traditional Bildungsroman form, and it requires an analytic reorientation. Rather than focusing on this inciting loss as an opportunity for self-exploration and reestablishment of a stable sense of self in society, multi-ethnic lesbian narratives of identity development ask readers to consider how an internal

sense of self can be achieved at all within a cisheteronormative and white supremacist social structure that limits opportunities for gendered and raced subjects to achieve social recognition and assimilation.

This project is indebted to the long line of feminist, queer, and critical race scholars who have sought to expand, and critique the traditional Bildungsroman model. Perhaps the most expansive work in this area has been accomplished by feminist literary critics, who position the Bildungsroman as both a genre that lays bare the social inequity of women[8] and presents possibilities for radical self-determination[9] (Lazzaro-Weis 17-18). Critical investigations of LGBTQ+ Bildungsroman follow in this feminist tradition, but there is significantly less critical attention paid to queer and trans texts. Meredith Miller's "Lesbian, Gay, and Trans Bildungsroman" is one key text in the emerging field of the queer Bildungsroman. Here, Miller argues that lesbian, gay, and transgender Bildungsromane "work to historicise the individual and her desires, posing the individual precisely between two epochs (before and after sexual liberation) at the threshold of social recognition" (241). Miller's notion of the "threshold of social recognition" bestows upon characters the power of social cognizance, and is akin to a metaphorical gate imbued with the power to grant admission to identity-specific spaces. Miller's use of the word "threshold" is intriguing for its ability to resist climactic pull of temporal binaries, such as "coming out" and "staying in the closet." Her attention to identity development as a process, rather than simply a destination, illustrates her attention to the ways that identity development for queer and trans people is

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[8] Annis Pratt's concept of "growing down" is important to this approach

[9] Joanna Frye's concept of multiple feminine selves in her study *Living Stories, Telling Lives* informs this more positive iteration of the genre

often non-linear, rejecting a sense of heteronormative temporality. However, her figuration of the individual as "between two epochs" [...] "at the threshold of social recognition" reifies the traditional Bildungsroman model by positioning the threshold state as one that can only end in social recognition. If the two epochs which these LGBTQ+ protagonists find themselves suspended between are pre- and post- "sexual liberation," and this this state between said epochs positions protagonists at the "threshold of social recognition," it follows that sexual liberation is achieved alongside, and perhaps as a result of, social recognition. The novels I center in "Coming Into Identity" reject social recognition as the primary pathway to liberation and instead turn inward toward embodiment and sensory epistemologies as a pathway toward self-recognition and acceptance.

As a rejection of heteronormative temporality, I intentionally include novels marketed for both "adult" and "young adult" readers. While the substance of this dissertation is largely unconcerned with the ways that novels are marketed and significantly more concerned with their engagement with the communities they reflect, it is important to note the implied hierarchy in labeling a text "young adult," or YA. Rachel Falconer's *The Crossover Novel* questions the twenty-first century phenomenon of adult interest in "children's" texts, and offers an immediate criticism of the infantilization argument made by many literary critics who reaffirm the separation of "Young Adult" and "Adult" novels**.** This argument suggests that *adult culture*, a particularly opaque term itself, has become more juvenile in its interests and cultural pursuits since the beginning of the twenty-first century, leading to a "dumbing down" of the American adult populace's taste in fiction (Falconer 4). Falconer's argument suggests that this infantilization argument falsely implies that "adult

literature" has a "monopoly on seriousness" -- a claim which the narratives included in this project will strongly refute (4). This marketing hierarchy is similar to the ways in which lesbian fiction has historically been reduced to overly-sexualized "smut," or other forms of marginalized narratives considered unserious, fringe, typified, or simply less sophisticated than the established literary canon. YA fiction's status as juvenile or only appropriate for children reveals more about the collective, norm-enforcing conception of young adulthood than the value of the literature for analyzing and understanding complex processes of identity negotiation amidst social and political exclusions. Pairing young adult texts with novels that feature older protagonists provides opportunity to consider queer identity as one which challenges normative figurations of temporality. Rather than assuming all people come into their identity at a certain age, like young adulthood, this comparative approach shows that the challenges faced by queer and trans young adults as they come to recognize themselves and their desires are not unique to young adulthood; rather, common obstacles like religious opposition, familial tension, lack of exposure to queer and trans culture, and internalized homophobia affect queer and trans people of all ages and in all phases of their coming-into-identity process.

Coming-into-identity acts as a malleable category meant to encompass narratives across genre, identity category, and literary form. The texts I have selected speak to one another through two key elements, despite their often radically different forms and genres: they depict the coming-into-identity process of queer, sapphic, and/or lesbian-identified women, femmes, and nonbinary people, and they use sensation as a formal tool to direct the plot and evolution of the character. In addition to including novels in the young adult genre, I

feature science fictional narratives in chapter three as a way of illustrating how the coming-into-identity novel reaches across genres. Science fiction is a particularly engaging genre for studying identity and sensation because there is an imperative to suspend disbelief and to allow a certain questioning of established norms that may not feel accessible outside the genre. The reader expects that ideas they may hold firm in their real lives – like the centrality of humanness, the fixed nature of the human body and its capabilities, or current limitations on technological and scientific advancement – may be questioned, upturned, or contradicted in the science fictional novel. Wendy Gay Pearson, Veronica Hollinger, and Joan Gordon argue through a close reading of Judith Butler's work in *Undoing Gender* that queer theory can be understood as "both utopian and science fictional, in the sense of imagining a future that opens out, rather than forecloses, possibilities for becoming real, for mattering in the world" (Pearson et. al. 5). This task of imagination is central to the coming-into-identity process in both realist and science fictional novels of queer and trans identity; characters must cultivate the imaginative capacity to envision themselves, alive, real, "mattering in the world," despite social and political hostilities that seek to deny them this realness and aliveness. This imagining cannot be only in the realm of the speculative, though – it must become real in order to sustain life, and as such, it cannot rely on an imagination of a newly formed social rule that accommodates queerness. This isn't to say that imagining the transformation of modern society into one that is more just and ethical is not valuable or desirable. In fact, that kind of imagination forms the structure and content of liberation movements across the world. Instead, I mean that for characters who are marginalized due to their race, gender, sexual orientation, or other identity categories, this imagination must first

be directed inward in order to cultivate a sense of self can withstand the social, political, and oftentimes physical violence of world re-making.

To direct one's imagination inward in the service of creating a livable life, the lesbian characters I analyze become attuned to sensation as a way of making meaning and making peace with themselves. A key part of my figuration of the coming-into-identity novel is its reliance on sensation as an epistemological orientation. While many Bildungsroman and coming of age novels are known to be didactic in their presentation of so-called universal themes, the texts I study here reject this universalizing compulsion and instead position their lesbian protagonists as uniquely attuned to sensory input and experiencing. Importantly, though, the sensory knowledge these protagonists pursue are not easily categorized, nor do they work within the western framework of the five senses. Erica Fretwell and Hsuan Hsu write that "sensory discipline – for example, the hierarchy of the five classical senses – has been mobilized in the service of colonial, racist, and heteronormative models of embodiment and epistemology," and that "the modern sensorium cannot be disentangled from the histories of racial and colonial capitalism" (449). Fretwell and Hsu call attention to the history of the five classical senses to critique the ways that imposing hierarchy and orderly divisions among these senses has been used as a tool of oppression across race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. As with literary genre and its categorization, the impulse to create order and regulation among the senses is primarily a colonial one that is extractive. Derived front the Aristotelian model of the senses, this figuration of five distinct and non-overlapping sensory experiences mobilize sensation as a means of extraction – "extracting information from the outside world" via sensory perception (449). Expansion of the classical five-senses model is

not a new or novel interpretative move. First Nations and Indigenous cultures typically do not ascribe to the reductive ordering and hierarchizing of sensation, and much of the work of both affect theory and posthumanism in literary studies is indebted to Indigenous epistemologies. Likewise, women of color feminisms have often located feeling and sensation as information that is valuable in the pursuit of racial and gendered liberation, and have criticized Western mind-body dualism which separates the functionings of the physical body from that of the mind. Notably, certain sensory experiences that are excluded from the classical model, like proprioception and thermoception, "focus more on perceiving how we neuronally and metabolically interact with our surroundings" (449). The move between an external, extractive orientation of the senses to a focus on sensation as a way of understanding ourselves and our interactions with the world are at the core of this project. Because I consider the narrative resolution of the coming-into-identity novel as one primarily of self-recognition over social assimilation, it is imperative that sensation as a method of knowing be refocused on the self and its relation to the world.

Multi-sensory and synesthetic experiences form the key sensory methods by which the lesbian protagonists analyzed here come to a sense of self-recognition. I distinguish between multi-sensory and synesthetic experience here because, at times, characters may be directed by multiple forms of sensory input, such as waves of increased proprioception[10] combined with the somatic sensations of pain, which are not necessarily crossed in the way

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[10] Proprioception relates to the sensation of the body in space. It is multi sensory, and defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as: "Proprioception confers with the other senses, especially vision, to inform our notions about space and physical properties" [OED, 1994 entry in *Sculpture*]

that the definition of synesthesia indicates. Synesthesia is cross-sensory, in that it involves the neurological or perceptive crossing of the senses, such as smelling a color or seeing a sound. Regardless of whether cross- or multi-sensory input is depicted, sensation is mobilized in these narratives to compel the character toward a certain realization or action that facilitates their process of recognizing and accepting their identities as queer and trans people. Importantly, none of the characters or texts I study here involve formal diagnoses of synesthesia as a processing disorder, or as a diagnosable pathology. As Patricia Lynn Duffy states, there are many tropes of synesthesia in literature, including "synesthesia as indicative of a pathology," in which the writer presents synesthesia as "symptomatic of a dark psychological pathology caused by repression of his own humanity" (Duffy 661). I position synesthesia and multi-sensory depictions as forming the pathway toward a more thorough acknowledgement of a character's humanity as they strive to make sense of a world which does not welcome them. Failure to comply with the rigid ordering and separation of the senses is not a problem in these texts, but a solution.

Genre, the classical five-senses model, and identity categories like "lesbian" have something in common: they attempt to categorize and to create order within a system. By blending genres and senses, and by acknowledging "lesbian" as a category that has been constructed by social and political movements along the lines of race, class, and gender, "Coming-Into-Identity" asks, what merit is there in disorder? What unique assemblages of feelings and forms might come together when we abandon the desire for clear generic categories, for mono-sensory knowledge making, and for unchanging and clearly defined thresholds for admittance to identity communities? Each chapter of this dissertation explores

these questions through the lens of select texts meant to draw out the intricacies and complications of coming-into-identity for protagonists whose identities have been subject to these various forms of exclusion and marginalization.

The second chapter, "Learning to Feel: Sensory Methods of Resistance in Black Lesbian Fiction" considers anti-Black racism and its intersections with homophobia in two Black lesbian coming-of-age narratives. I read Audre Lorde's biomythography *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* as a formative parent-text to Mia Mckenzie's contemporary novel *The Summer We Got Free* (2012) to illustrate the ways Black lesbian writers shape literary genre to better represent their own sensory processes of coming into identity. Lorde invents the genre "biomythography" through *Zami*, which combines elements of life-writing, creative fiction and non-fiction, poetry, and myth. Her genre invention — additive in meaning — acts as a revelatory tool for exposing the overlapping structures of white supremacy, homophobia, and misogyny, structures which acted as gates that limit her full participation in the identity-based communities that should have represented her. This manipulation of genre occurs in McKenzie's text to similar ends: both writers must reject the generic boundaries of the traditional Bildungsroman to articulate a self that defies identitarian boundaries and exclusions. In depicting these exclusions, both writers carve space for new understandings of identity that reject gatekeeping structures and embrace a return to the subjective body through a focus on artistry and sensory experience.

In Chapter 3, "Learning to See: Multi-Sensory Epistemologies in Trans and Gender Non-Conforming Lesbian Speculative Fiction" I turn to science fictional coming-into-identity narratives to consider how speculative narratives of identity development deploy

multi-sensory methods of meaning-making, which work to destabilize bio-essentialist notions of gender. Science fiction itself has been subjected to gatekeeping tactics, often relegated to genre-specific courses and labeled "low brow," rather than being fully integrated into periodized canons. Yet, as a genre, science fiction opens up, rather than forecloses, possibilities for non-normative expression. I feature readings of April Daniels' *Dreadnought*, which features a young transgender lesbian protagonist's evolution into a superhero, Tillie Walden's graphic novel *Are You Listening,* which depicts two lesbians' friendship and struggle to overcome grief and interpersonal violence during a road trip through a mystical Texas landscape, and Ryka Aoki's *Light From Uncommon Stars*, which features a young transgender violin prodigy in an epic interstellar battle for her soul. Here, I turn to the identity politics of the 1960s and 1970s lesbian separatist movement to trace the transphobic and bio-determinist logics of some influential lesbian separatist ideologies and their continued influence on gender politics in the twenty-first century. I do so with attention to each author's refiguration of vision and visuality as embodied and engaging multiple forms of sensory knowledge in order to call attention to the methods by which these writers offer new notions of the epistemological utility of vision. These new orientations toward vision bolster self-determination over determinism and enable the formation of queer kinship structures that support self-recognition.

In Chapter 4, "Learning to Speak," I analyze the motifs of language, speech, and silence in Carla Trujillo's novel *What Night Brings* (2003) to map the ways these motifs can both facilitate and impede sensory and embodied practices of queer self-recognition. I trace eleven-year-old Marci's navigation of her queer identity through sensory-laden speech acts:

speaking back to her abusive father, speaking up in the Catholic confessional, speaking to God through prayer. I analyze Marci's sensory tactics for acquiring a language of queerness to describe her identity, her efforts to affect change in her circumstances through sensory-driven speech, and her eventual embrace of the transformative potential of embodied silence as she journeys toward a sense of queer self-recognition not bounded by heterosexist dictates.

In bringing these characters and writers together under the "Coming-Into-Identity" framework, I hope to convince readers of three key assertions. First, heteronormative and Eurocentric temporal frameworks limit the cultural understanding of when and how queer and trans people come to recognize their queerness or transness. By privileging adolescence as the expected epoch of identity development and recognition, opportunities for evolution and later-in-life recognition of identity are foreclosed. Second, across genres, styles, and decades, multi-ethnic lesbian writers are practicing embodied sensory aesthetics to depict this process of coming-into-identity. This is both an observation about the formal valences of these genre-diverse works, and an argument about the connection between these writers' sensory forms and their narrative resolutions: characters in these novels are driven by their sensory experiences, making sensation and synesthetic experience the catalyzing force of the plot. Beneath this sensory-laden form lies a strong connection between embodied sensation and knowledge, power, and agency, creating a sensory epistemology of resistance that allows these multi-ethnic lesbian characters to respond to and survive the oppressive dictates of overlapping forms of prejudice. And finally, I argue that the success of this resistance to oppression is demonstrated by a sense of self-recognition, rather than social acceptance or large-scale political change. These characters do not overthrow cisheteropatriarchy; they do

not assimilate into cisheteronormative culture; they often do not even succeed at mending the intercommunal rifts that plague LGBTQ+ communities as they intersect with racial and gender-based movements (although affinity and community certainly play a role in their development). The resolution of the coming-into-identity narrative is one of self-recognition; an ability to recognize oneself as evolving and complex while coming to terms with their lesbian identities, which are often intersected by racialized or gendered perceptions and identifications. In this way, self-recognition constitutes a form of emotional survival and liberation, despite the myriad of challenges that remain for diverse lesbian-identified people.

Chapter Two: Learning to Feel: Sensory Methods of Resistance in Black Lesbian Fiction

"The white fathers told us, I think therefore I am; and the black mothers in each of us – the poet – whispers in our dreams, I feel therefore I can be free."

Audre Lorde, "Poetry is Not A Luxury," 1985

Audre Lorde was born almost blind, and struggled with her eyesight as a child. In her biomythography, she writes of the perceptual shifts in her worldview as a result of acquiring eyeglasses at the young age of three: "When I was three, the dazzling world of strange lights and fascinating shapes which I inhabited resolved itself in mundane definitions, and I learned another nature of things as seen through eyeglasses" (31). Lorde describes her experience of limited visual clarity as "dazzling" and "fascinating," showing her early curiosity for that which she cannot define, and her delight in sensory stimulation, here represented by vision. Notably, she describes her vision after acquiring eyeglasses as resulting in "mundane definitions," effectively linking the experience of seeing as others presumably see with tedium and boredom. She writes, "This perception of things was less colorful and confusing but much more comfortable that the one native to my nearsighted and unevenly focused eyes" (31). These excerpts from Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* illustrate that in Lorde's retelling of her extraordinary life, her perception of the world is often shaped by her unique sensory experiences. She retains the memories of her visual perception prior to this

visual correction, reminiscing about the dazzling and fascinating character of her early visual life, where her imagination filled in the gaps left by her poor vision.

Yet, once accustomed to her glasses, Lorde begins to find the excitement and inspiration in this new form of perception; she reminisces about the moment of "sudden revelation" when she first noticed "each single and particular leaf of green" on the trees lining Lenox Avenue, each "precisely shaped and laced about with unmixed light" (32). She is taken by the complexity and specificity of the colors and edges of the leaves on the trees, reflecting that she "had known trees as tall brown pillars ending in fat puffy swirls of paling greens," like the pictures in her sister's storybooks. Immediately after this reflection on the quality of her vision before and after eyeglasses, Lorde links her visual perception of the world to language and poetry; she writes that her mother's "special and secret relationship with words" offered her access to "a world of comment" ripe with "picaresque constructions and surreal scenes" (31, 32). Lorde's relationship with her mother was characterized by its difficulty. Her mother was light-skinned, and Lorde was dark-skinned, and this difference, along with Lorde's queerness and propensity to question otherwise unquestioned truths, meant that their relationship was a continual source of longing and pain for Lorde. Lorde is nonetheless clear that these early reflections about her mother's own unique poetry and the sensory experience it allowed Lorde as a young child influenced Lorde's later poetry and prose, which is ripe with depictions of feelings: touches, smells, tastes, sights, and sounds, sometimes crossing in a sort of sensory spectacle.

Despite this early recognition of the profound associations between words and sensations, Lorde does not come to understand the importance of feeling to her own writing

until she is a young adult, studying abroad at the National University of Mexico. Of her first days in Mexico City, Lorde writes "Moving through street after street filled with people with brown faces had a profound and exhilarating effect upon me" (154). Lorde begins to feel at home in Mexico, and becomes part of a community of queer women of color for the first time in her life. In New York, she was often the only person of color in queer spaces, and the only (undisclosed) queer person in predominantly Black spaces, and this experience of queer of color community leads to a shift in Lorde's understanding of her own writing. "For the first time in my life, I had an insight into what poetry could be. I could use words to recreate that feeling, rather than to create a dream, which was what so much of my writing had been before" (160). This realization represents what I argue is one of Lorde's profound contribution to lesbian writings about identity development: she begins to see the sensations and experiences she *actually* has as the seed and core of her writing, rather than hopeful aspirations of future experiences she *could have* if circumstances were radically different.

In this chapter, I consider the central role that feeling and sensation plays in facilitating resistance to and liberation from identity-based oppression in Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of my Name* (1982) and *The Summer We Got Free* (2012) by Mia McKenzie. I argue that in her attempt to exert agency and free herself from oppressive social dictates around race, gender, and sexuality, Lorde's *Zami* introduces a sensory feminist epistemology, one which reemerges decades later in McKenzie's contemporary novel of Black lesbian becoming. As Lorde learns from her experiences of both sensitivity and desensitization, so too does McKenzie's protagonist Ava. By relying on sensation as a way of making meaning, they each cultivate a greater sense of self-recognition as Black lesbian

women who have historically been ostracized from both the mainstream white feminist movement and race-based social justice activism. As I show in this comparative close reading of Lorde and McKenzie's work, Lorde's sensory epistemologies have shaped the legacy of Black lesbian writings about identity, and can be located in McKenzie's novel as she stages a series of sensory disruptions that lead her to acknowledge her lesbian identity.

Sensation is mobilized in Audre Lorde's biomythography *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982) and Mia Mckenzie's *The Summer We Got Free* (2012) to oppose intersecting forms of oppression and marginalization such as homophobia, anti-Black racism, and classism. Deriving "whatever was inextricably female" from historically male-dominated literary traditions like autobiography, history, and mythology, Lorde's biomythography centers generic and identitarian hybridity, and relies on sensation as a primary literary technique in the telling of her own queer coming-into-identity process (De Veaux 314). Lorde's defiance of established generic forms inspires my understanding of the Black lesbian coming-into-identity narrative I investigate here. I pair *Zami* with *The Summer We Got Free* to illustrate that the legacy of Audre Lorde's nonlinear, hybrid, and sensory-driven form lives on in Black lesbian writers from the twenty-first century. In fact, Mckenzie's novel is just one example of the enduring influence of Lorde's biomythic form in Black lesbian coming-into-identity writing from the twenty-first century – two recent examples are Junauda Petrus' 2019 novel *The Stars and the Blackness Between Them* and Chinelo Okparanta's 2015 novel *Under the Udala Trees,* which both speak to the importance of sensory exploration and generic hybridity in depicting the coming-into-identity processes for their Black lesbian protagonists.

This chapter is fundamentally about Black lesbian protagonists' effort to achieve self-realization – to come into their identities amidst a hostile social and political landscape. I position the recognition and reclamation of *feeling*, including both emotion and sensation, as an integral step towards this goal of self-realization and as a literary trope that characterizes the Black lesbian coming-into-identity genre. Lisa Corrigan writes in the introduction to *Black Feelings:* "black memories, remembrances, commemorations, imaginings, fantasies, and counterfactuals all work to resituate black subjectivity within political time in ways that resist erasure and assert new agency" (xiv). Through readings of pivotal scenes, themes, and tropes in Lorde and Mckenzie's work, this chapter calls attention to the ways that these particular writers mobilize feelings and senses to "resist erasure and assert new agency." Notably, this is accomplished while developing and cultivating a sense of self-acceptance that is not dependent on social recognition or integration into normative heteropatriarchal culture.

Feeling as an Antidote to Loneliness in *Zami*

Genre and gender share the same French etymological origin, meaning "kind" or "type," and have both been subject to categorical ordering.[11] In the New York Times' 1982 review of Audre Lorde's biomythography *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, a writer named Rosemary Daniell attempts to recategorize Lorde's genre according to her own understanding, falling into the trap of hegemonic categorical ordering. Daniell writes that,

[11] "Genre." Oxford English Dictionary, Oxford University Press, 2019, https://www.oed.com/oed2/00093719.
"Gender." Oxford English Dictionary, Oxford University Press, 2019, https://www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/77468

“the publisher's claim that in "Zami" Miss Lorde 'creates a new form, biomythography, combining elements of history, biography and myth,’ is a bit pretentious.” Instead, she asserts that “the book is, actually, an excellent and evocative autobio-graphy.”[12] While Zami is autobiographical in many respects, Lorde’s use of myth, poetry, history, and sociocultural reflection rejects the boundaries of traditional autobiography characterized by linear retellings of life history — boundaries that act as limitations on artistic, sensory, and spiritual articulations which might fall outside the realm of verifiable fact. This sort of imposed genre categorization is not the only method of gatekeeping Lorde endures in her lifetime: Lorde’s account of her experiences in politically active circles during the Cold War and in the decades that followed are filled with instances of exclusion, sometimes due to her skin color, her lesbianism, or her identity as a woman. Identity gatekeeping, as I use it here, is a contemporary term for describing the ways that people and institutions limit admittance to certain spaces as a result of one’s identity, perceived or actual. These accounts of identity-based gatekeeping offer a framework for considering how race, gender, and sexual orientation overlap and intersect to characterize unique experiences of injustice that cannot be addressed by single-issue or monocausal approaches to community cohesion; similarly,

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[12] Daniell’s 1988 review of *Zami* is not the only instance in which Lorde’s categorization of her work is overridden. In Monica Pearl’s "‘Sweet Home’: Audre Lorde's Zami and the Legacies of American Writing,” Pearl writes that Lorde’s *Zami* is not beyond traditional categorization, and that her work can be traced back to American slave narratives and the lesbian coming-out genre. She writes “While in *Zami* Lorde progresses her alienation from the identities that constitute her, *Zami* does ‘fit in,’ after all, textually. As I have shown, by fusing two traditions of American writing, *Zami* is a text that emerges from extant American literary legacies” (317).

these experiences could not be contained within a pre-established literary form like the traditional German Bildungsroman.

Despite the rejection of the biomythography label by some reviewers and critics, understanding Lorde's experience of gatekeeping and her sensory-driven literary depictions of survival under such exclusions necessitates a closer look at the utility of the genre. It is widely accepted that Lorde coined the term biomythography to describe *Zami*, and it has since been adopted by literary critics to understand how creative self-writing by marginalized people continues to evolve. Katie King suggests that "biomythography might well name a variety of generic strategies in the construction of gay and lesbian identity in the USA," and that it might "refer to the histories (in the plural) of lesbian and gay pasts, as they all construct our momentary identities, our current 'us'" (331). Indeed, King's formulation of gay and lesbian identity as shaped by plural and perhaps imagined or mythic histories, and of queer identity as "momentary," illuminates the non-linear, anti-progressive structure of *Zami*, particularly in the ways that Lorde lingers in threshold states and prioritizes self-recognition over social legibility. For example, in the prologue to *Zami*, Lorde articulates an understanding of her identity that is predicated on these plural and perhaps mythological pasts: "*Woman forever. My body, a living representation of other life older longer wiser. The mountains and valleys, trees, rocks. Sand and flowers and water and stone. Made in earth*" (7; italics in original). Lorde weaves poetic language with natural imagery, centering her gender and her body as a limitless and timeless representation of the movement of nature – mountains and valleys that peak and dip, flowers that grow, water that moves over stone. Her writing transcends the generic categories of autobiography (and the Bildungsroman) much

like her body and her being transcend the limitations imposed on womanhood and humanness by white supremacist and heteropatriarchal social systems.

I state Lorde's biomythography transcends the generic category of autobiography with recognition of the important history of Black creative autobiographical writing in the United States – from early American autobiographical narratives by enslaved people to the autobiographical fictions of Black writers like Zora Neal Hurston, whose 1942 autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road* maintains critical attention as a contentious representation of Black life writing. Hurston's *Dust Tracks,* enduring an overwhelmingly negative critical reception, likewise undermined the expectations of a singular, progressive life history; at one point, Hurston writes that "This is all hear-say. Maybe, some of the details of my birth as told by me might be a little inaccurate, but it is pretty well established that I really did get born," immediately warning readers of the constructed and subjective nature of her autobiography (Hurston 53). Black autobiography and memoir remain an important part of Black literary cultures in the United States. As Joycelyn K Moody writes, "African American readers look to each other for life narratives of diverse Black experiences that enable the construction, constitution, and promulgation of a credible Black self" (3). This assertion might explain why Michelle Obama's autobiography *Becoming* was one of the "bestselling life writing texts in recorded history" (2). And, Black creators and readers have been expanding the autobiography genre through creative approaches, much like Lorde; Beyoncé's visual album *Lemonade* was read as autobiography by fans and critics alike. Certainly Lorde's *Zami* has a pivotal place in this longer history of creative Black life writing in the United States, and her hybrid generic structure does not separate her from this lineage.

In addition to the autobiography, there is another established literary tradition which Lorde expands and refigures through her biomythography: the Bildungsroman, also commonly referred to as the novel of formation or the coming-of-age narrative. The German Bildungsroman is a form which relies on temporally and developmentally progressive narrative structures, following a protagonist from their coming-of-age epoch into their narrative resolution as a functioning member of society. In Karl Morgenstern's 1819 lecture "On the Nature of the Bildungsroman," he coins the term, meaning "novel of formation," and maps its contours by first examining the novel (Bildungsroman) in opposition to the epic. Morgenstern frames the relation between the epic and the novel: epics often carry the fate of nations, while the novel focuses on the individual; epics rely heavily on the marvelous or fantastical, which may not present in the novel; and finally, "the epic [...] portrays the hero as acting on the external world and as bringing about important changes," while "the novel [...] depicts the influence that men and environment exert on the hero and explains to us the gradual formation of his inner being" (Morgenstern 653-656). What Morgenstern scaffolds here is indicative of a colonial desire to order and reorder literary genres as fixed systems which reflect a capitalist progression of an individual from childhood into the capital-producing adult class. Although the Bildungsroman is ostensibly a "coming-of-age" narrative for anyone, the canon that Morgenstern drew on overwhelmingly featured young white cisgender boys, who have historically been the unmarked universal protagonists of the genre. Geta LeSeur asserts the fundamental differences between the European tradition of the Bildungsroman and its reformulation by Black writers in her book *Ten is the Age of Darkness: The Black Bildungsroman*:

> Black women writers do not concentrate only on youthful recognition by the dominant society; rather, they collectively depict the Black woman's internal struggle to unravel the immense complexities of racial identity, gender definition, and the awakening of their sexual being. In short, they seek to discover, direct, and recreate the self in the midst of hostile racial, sexual, and other forms of societal repression, producing a literature not confined to the "usual" Bildung model. (101)

LeSeur's framing of Black women's writing as writing which must deal with the "immense complexities" of racial, gender, and sexual identities and oppressions points to the necessity of intersectional attention to this literary form and the identities it represents. To reject such a structured genre landscape necessitates a move away from the Bildungsroman form toward a recognition of hybrid forms, like the biomythography. Lorde's impulse to draw from elements of autobiography, myth, history, and the coming-of-age narrative might reflect a queer impulse to disidentify with normative genre categories and instead imbue outdated or prescriptive generic structures with new life.[13]

While LeSuer retains the language of the Bildungsroman in her work, I seek a move away from its prescriptive, linear, and capitalist formations. Instead, I propose a new term: the coming-into-identity narrative. The coming-into-identity narrative is meant to provide a more flexible and less prescriptive way to characterize lesbian writings that depict the often tumultuous and deeply-felt experiences achieving a sense of queer self-recognition amidst intersecting forms of identity-based oppression. I borrow LeSeuer's important framing that

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[13] On "disidentification," see Jose Esteban Munoz's *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999)

the Black Bildungsroman seeks to "discover, direct, and recreate" the self, but I emphasize that this pursuit of discovery, direction, and recreation are in pursuit of self-recognition, rather than social. In pursuing this greater sense of self-recognition, Lorde herself and Mckenzie's protagonist Ava take their direction from sensory experiences: they feel their way through this process of discovery and recreating, allowing their sensory experiences and artistic impulses to guide their way.

For many multiply marginalized people, social assimilation and acceptance is not possible. This impossibility is a key rational for the coming-into-identity narrative's focus on self-recognition over social assimilation. Lack of social acceptance and denial of assimilation is often due to what is popularly known as "gatekeeping," a crucial tactic employed in political groups and identity-based communities like lesbian feminism, white feminism, and the broader LGBTQ+ social justice movement. Gatekeeping provides a productive metaphoric framework for both mapping and destabilizing exclusionary politics that produce barriers to the coming-into-identity process for marginalized protagonists. Gatekeeping is an assertion of normative power: an imposition of particular admittance criteria onto distinct spaces, be they ideological or physical. In Barbara Smith's 1978 essay "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," she questions why many white women writers have publicly declared their sexuality, while many Black women writers remain closeted. Her conclusion points to gatekeeping structures that reinforce white privilege and white complacency on issues of racial justice:

> I am convinced that it is our lack of privilege and power in every other sphere that allows so few Black women to make the leap that many white women, particularly

> writers, have been able to make in this decade, not merely because they are white or have economic leverage, but because they have had the strength and support of a movement behind them. (26)

Smith is pointing to the second-wave feminist movement, which afforded white women structural support to declare their deviation from heteronormative gender roles and is known for popularizing ideas like "equal pay for equal work," "the glass ceiling," and "the personal is political" (Biklen et. al. 451). Despite the importance of such ideas for reframing popular understandings of gender difference and its political stakes, Sari Biklen writes that "second-wave feminism forced many women to choose between their racial and gendered identities," reflecting that the second-wave feminist movement was a majority-white institution that privileged gender identification over other categories of difference, like race and class (451). White women, as the majority in the feminist movement and part of the larger power structure of white supremacy, were not asked to make the choice "between their racial and gendered identities" (451).

The implementation of this "choice" — which is of course not a choice at all, but a mandate to reject part of one's identity in service of another — permeates Lorde's writing in *Zami*. Within the mid-twentieth century progressive political movement, Lorde is mandated to hide her homosexuality in order to participate; within the predominately-white feminist movement, her Blackness must come second to her gender identity; within the gay rights movement, both gender and race are elided. These single-issue spaces employ gatekeeping tactics by imposition of rigid monolithic notions of identity. Rather than valorizing

representational politics[14] (like neoliberal "feminist" notions of "breaking the glass ceiling") as a solution to this problem, I instead focus on the ways Lorde's writing depicts the cultivation of a complex and whole sense of self through sensory experiences of affinity, community, and pleasure.

Lorde's journey toward a more genuine and complex realization of identity is riddled with social and political dilemmas that ask her to prioritize one facet of her identity over others, illustrating the personal ramifications of social movements' failures to attack "the entire edifice of interlocking oppressions" (Ehrenreich 225). Lorde was a student at Hunter High in 1948, at the very beginning of the Cold War. The resolution of the second world war brought with it a revolutionary fervor for many youth, and Lorde writes in *Zami* that she and her "first true friend" Gennie "felt ourselves a part of" this "time of powerful change all over the world" (Lorde 87). And yet, Lorde remained conscious of her exclusion from this sense of progressive change, even as a teenager: "Thousands of American boys had died to make the world safe for democracy, even though my family and I couldn't be served ice cream in Washington, D.C.," she writes, referring to the racist segregationist policies that caused her family to be refused service at an ice cream parlor due to their race (87). That Lorde felt herself at once a part of this new wave of political progress and apart from it comes to represent the duality of Lorde's socio-political life, consistently dedicating parts of herself to

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[14] By "representational politics," I mean the impulse to associate diversity and inclusion in oppressive systems with political progress. I situate the political struggle for queer representation in imperialist politics and capitalist formations of power as representational politics. This term is not to be confused with larger questions of queer representation in literature, media, and art.

causes that would come to reject her as a whole. It is notable, though, that Lorde's most referenced experiences of identity gatekeeping during the Cold War era were not at the hands of the government or the anti-communist propaganda machine, where exclusionary politics were to be expected, but within the progressive movements of the time. These progressive political movements had yet to recognize homosexuality as an acceptable variation of human sexuality. Despite her dedication to one popular progressive political cause - the Committee to Free the Rosenbergs – she continually and fearfully imagined the day when one of her progressive colleagues might question her about her sexual orientation (149). Although this particular progressive group was made up of people from different socio-economic backgrounds and racial groups, the exclusion of homosexuality from their progressive ranks constituted a form of intracommunal gatekeeping that rendered Lorde an outsider to the movement.

Lorde's writing about her involvement with the protests against the state-sanctioned killing of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg in 1953 is one early example of the importance of feeling in Lorde's understanding of identity and community.[15] Alexus DeVeaux reveals in her biography of Lorde that the Rosenberg trial was Lorde's first foray into political activism and the launching-point for what would become a lifetime of deeply committed social justice work. In *Zami*, Lorde reveals her retrospective thinking on her early involvement with the Rosenbergs protests, and her complex feelings about the political left:

The Rosenbergs' struggle became synonymous for me with being able to live in this

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[15] The Rosenbergs were accused of espionage on behalf of the Soviet Union in the early years of The Cold War and were found guilty in their 1951 trial (Pessen 82)

> country at all, with being able to survive in hostile surroundings. But my feelings of connecting with most of the people I meet in progressive circles were as tenuous as those I had with my co-workers at the Health Center. I could imagine these comrades, Black and white, among whom color and racial differences could be openly examined and talked about, nonetheless one day asking me accusingly, 'Are you or have you ever been a member of a homosexual relationship?' For them, being gay was bourgeois and reactionary, a reason for suspicion and shunning. (Lorde, *Zami*, 149)

In this excerpt, Lorde gestures toward what she later expands upon in her germinal essay "There is No Hierarchy of Oppression": despite investments in interconnected social justice causes, those who are most marginalized, whose social locations are formed by the contours of white supremacy, cis-heteronormativity, ableism, and economic privilege, are rendered nomadic, constant visitors in the often monolithic identity-based spaces of the "progressive" left. Lorde illustrates this nomadism when she writes that her "feelings of connecting" with those in social justice communities were "tenuous"; for Lorde, to be in community with others is to experience this *feeling*, a feeling she is denied on the basis of her sexual identity. Sara Ahmed's writing on queerness and the feeling of being comfortable is an appropriate interlocutor here. Ahmed writes that **"**to be comfortable is to be so at ease with one's environment that it is hard to distinguish where one's body ends and the world begins. One fits, and by fitting, the surfaces of bodies disappear from view" (148). She continues, "heteronormativity functions as a form of public comfort by allowing bodies to extend into spaces that have already taken their shape" (148). Despite the progressive leanings of Lorde's political community, it has been designed in such a way that this dissolution of the body and

its boundaries and surfaces so integral to Ahmed's notion of comfort is rendered impossible. Even the intellectual connections based on shared political commitments are "tenuous," constantly threatening to sever her connections to the community.

Sexual expression and erotic feeling offer Lorde an antidote to the isolation she experiences as a Black lesbian in a predominantly white and heterosexual movement; these emotions bring her closer to this feeling of comfort Ahmed describes. Lorde begins to illustrate the transformative power of sensation by describing her sexual experience with a woman named Bea, whom she meets that night, following the execution of the Rosenbergs: "That night, I invited Bea to stay over. The rest was surprisingly easy. I made love to a woman for the first time in my very own bed. This was home, feeling the physical tensions of the last month of hope and despair loosen inside me, as if a long fast had broken" (150). Here, the image of a sexual experience with another woman mirrors the breaking of a fast, suggesting that Lorde's participation in political movements which required her to fragment her identity are akin to a sort of deprivation that can only be remedied by indulgence – indulgence in physical, sensory, and sexual exploration with women, the very thing that has rendered her an outsider.

Indulgence in forbidden sensation acts as a remedy for the "hope and despair" of her effort on behalf of the Rosenbergs, but her sexual relationship with Bea, an upper-class white woman, still falls short of her needs. Lorde writes that sex with Bea was "a very pleasant pastime," but laments Bea's lack of "visceral response" despite her "intellectual commitment" to lesbian relationships (151). "Bea's acknowledged gayness was some connection, some living reality within the emotional desert around which I existed," Lorde

writes. “And she was always quite honest about what she didn’t feel” — once, she even exclaimed “I think I almost felt something” at the resolution of their intimacy (151). This lack of emotional and sensory connection is disappointing for Lorde. Her desire for more feeling in her life suggests that her coming-into-identity narrative is not about inclusion, social recognition, or achieving a stable, easily-labeled identity category. Lorde longs for relief from an “emotional desert;” hers is an embodied desire for feeling and viscerality. While Lorde’s relationship with Bea does provide some sense of relief from this emotional desert, that Lorde remains in want of a more visceral sensory and emotional experience illustrates that it is not only heterosexual spaces and with heterosexual people that produce queer discomfort. As Ahmed writes, “some queer spaces might extend the mobility of white, middle-class bodies” (151).

I now turn to Lorde’s relationship with Kitty, a Black woman who Lorde depicts as an incarnation of the African Goddess Afrikete, to illustrate how good feelings – true comfort – are depicted by Lorde.[16] The scenes depicting Lorde and Kitty’s interactions offer an important opportunity to illustrate that conventions of the traditional Bildungsroman are insufficient, since this moment in her coming-into-identity journey is neither linear nor progressive. Lorde’s mythographic form also takes shape in her depiction of Kitty as Afro-

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[16] “Kitty” is short for Afrekete, an Afro-Carribean mythical figure that comes to represent “linguistic skill and Black female strength, intelligence, and sexuality” for Lorde (Provost 46). As Kara Provost and Judy Grahn write, Afrikete is the female side of the Afrikete / Eshu mythical trickster, the latter of which Lorde writes about as the “youngest son” of Mawu-Lisa, African deity of dual creation, in *The Black Unicorn* (46). In the Epilogue to *Zami*, Lorde writes of “the women who helped give me substance,” including “MawuLisa, thunder, sky, sun, the great mother of us all; and Afrekete, her youngest daughter, the mischievous linguist, trickster, best-beloved, whom we must all become” (Lorde 255).

Caribbean goddess Afrekete. When Lorde meets Kitty, first at a late-night lesbian party and again later at a lesbian-friendly bar, her retelling of their sexual and romantic relationship is imbued with references to scent. The consistent reference to Kitty's various smells enriches the narrative language of the final chapters of Lorde's biomythography as Lorde depicts her struggle to heal from a sudden breakup with her longtime white partner, Muriel. Suffering a profound loss, Lorde chooses to open herself up to more sensation, more feeling and smelling and touching, rather than retreating into her grief and constructing barriers between herself and others. It is through these new sensations that Lorde achieves greater self-knowledge and self-recognition – an achievement that serves as a narrative resolution in the lesbian coming-into-identity narrative.

Upon first meeting, while Lorde was still in a relationship with Muriel, Lorde "kept thinking she [Kitty] was bigger than she actually was, because there was a comfortable smell about her that [she] always associated with large women" (Lorde 243). When they meet again two years later, after Lorde and Muriel's breakup, she writes that Afrikete had a "spicy herb-like odor" that she "later identified as a combination of coconut oil and Yardley's lavender hair pomade" (Lorde 243). She takes in this familiar scent as they dance to the "oiled music" of a slow Sinatra song. Lord writes, "I felt who I was and where my body was going," a comment that marks both her assuredness in her own identity and her newfound comfort in rejecting the imposition of gender roles through the butch/femme dichotomy. As Lorde details earlier, she "never knew whether to lead or to follow" while dancing, suggesting that her role must be one of control or of obedience (245, 243). Experiencing Kitty on a sensory level – smelling the coconut oil and hair pomade in her hair, "straightened

into feathery curls," while dancing to the "oiled music" – allows Lorde to feel connected to her own identity and move her body absent of anxieties around lesbian gender norms. Scent and sound cross to create a synesthetic experience of both erotic and identity-based connection that resists stable categorization – there is no singular scent or sound, only feeling, only experience.

These sensory, sensual, and embodied experiences with Afrikete open a metaphorical door through which Lorde steps into a more complete and nuanced understanding of her identity. When Afrekete disappears after an unknown number of months with Lorde, Lorde goes to her house to find only a locked door. She later receives a note from Afrekete passed through a local bartender, announcing Kitty's sudden relocation. While the locked door here represents an end for Lorde and Afrekete, it does not have the same traumatic resonances as Lorde's previous breakup with Muriel, which she describes as a period of "mourning" (244). Instead, she writes of Afrikete, "We had come together like elements erupting into an electric storm, exchanging energy, sharing charge, brief and drenching. Then, we parted, passed, reformed, reshaping ourselves the better for the exchange" (253). Even here, as Lorde reflects on the importance of their relationship, there is connection to be drawn between sensory experience and identity. Their relationship felt like "elements erupting into an electric storm," evoking the sensation of an electric shock to the skin; they shared a "drenching" sort of "charge," evoking a feeling of wetness that acts as a conductor of that electric charge; and, in their parting, these intense sensory experiences allowed for a "reshaping" of their selves, indicating the transformative potential of their sensory, sexual exploration.

Lorde's repeated references to Kitty's scent and her sensory-driven description of their relationship suggest a sensorially permeating experience of affinity and connection. *In Funk the Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures*, L.H. Stallings uses funk's "etymological triad" of "nonvisual sensory perception (smell/odor), embodied movement (dance and sex), and force (mood and will)" to position "black funk as an intersectional epistemology of knowledge about embodiment, aesthetics, sensory experience, and labor" (Stallings 4). By suggesting that sensory perception is a primary vehicle of becoming in Black lesbian coming-into-identity narratives, I am indebted to Stalling's concept of "black funk as an intersectional epistemology." I position Lorde's use of sensory knowledge as a way of rejecting white supremacist and heteronormative notions of identity development and group belonging in Black lesbian coming-into-identity narratives. Sensation and embodiment are not in opposition to thought or intellectualism, as the feeling/thinking dichotomy might suggest; instead, these sensations come to form Lorde's epistemological orientation to her identity, shaping her understanding of identity as cultivated through careful, creative, and embodied thinking and theorizing.

Lorde's sensory and erotic experience illustrates Kitty's significance in Lorde's negotiation of her own identity – an identity that is continually shaped and refigured by what Le Seur calls the "internal struggle to unravel the immense complexities of racial identity, gender definition, and the awakening of […] sexual being" (101). Kitty does not just represent Lorde's recovery from heartbreak and intention to reintegrate into (dominant or marginal) society, but instead shows her profound internal and physical craving for affinity and connection with someone for whom these complexities and internal struggles are well

known. Reflecting on her last moments with Kitty, Lorde's writing slips into italics, indicating a poetic shift in narrative voice. Recalling "*the moon rising against the tilted planes of her upthrust thighs*," Lorde describes their sexual connection: "Afrekete Afrekete ride me to the crossroads where we shall sleep, coated in the woman's power. The sound of our bodies meeting is the prayer of all strangers and sisters, that the discarded evils, abandoned at all crossroads, will not follow us upon our journeys" (Lorde 252). This slip into poetic narration offers a rich sensory tapestry: the sound of their bodies meeting, the feeling of being "coated in the woman's power," which could be read as either a metaphoric ode to a refiguring of heterosexual power dynamics through woman-centered sexuality or as a sensory description of their sexual interaction. To return to Ahmed's figuration of comfort as the ability to "sink in" to one's environment like a body might sink into a comfortable chair, Lorde finds this ability to "sink in" to her environment through sensual and sexual exploration with Afrikete. Her marginal status in The Committee to Free The Rosenbergs leaves her feeling unable to imagine a world of safety and freedom for people like her; in contrast, her sensual and emotional connection with Afrikete is itself a prayer, its own sort of imagining, for this very world where the boundaries between bodies and environments are dissolved.

Sensory Awakenings in *The Summer We Got Free*

Lorde's *Zami* is an investigation of the politics of Black lesbian identity through rich sensory description; McKenzie's The *Summer We Got Free* experiments with desensitization to illustrate the barriers to identity development without sensory experience. The novel

ultimately follows in Lorde's tradition by illustrating the power of sensation in the pursuit of self-recognition. McKenzie's novel tells the story of Ava Delaney and her family, who have lived on the same street in a predominantly Black neighborhood in Philadelphia for decades. The novel begins in 1976, when Ava and her sister are in their thirties, but is interspersed with flashbacks to the 1950s, slowly revealing the insidious story of Ava's brother Geo's murder, which marks the beginning of Ava's psychological dissociation. Ava is desensitized in the literal definition of the word – not only is she removed from the emotional life of her family and her husband, but she is routinely depicted as being unable to experience sensations like taste and smell, and despite her once impressive artistic talent, adult Ava no longer paints. She is not simply ostracized from her family and community — she is experiencing a state of disassociation, unable to recognize or even remember her past self.[17] Ava is unable to break out of this state of desensitization until her husband's estranged and closeted lesbian sister, Helena, appears at their door, catalyzing a sensory awakening that leads her toward the resolution queer self-recognition in her coming-into-identity journey.

McKenzie's *The Summer We Got Free* follows in Lorde's footsteps by rejecting the linear identity development that is central to the Bildungsroman, instead lingering in threshold states to embrace the in-between of historical memory and present conflict in its

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[17] Disassociation is a psychiatric occurrence that is characterized by a disconnection from the world and the self, and in Ava's case this disconnection manifests as an inability to experience sensory input, like taste. See Vedat Sar's "The many faces of dissociation: opportunities for innovative research in psychiatry." *Clinical psychopharmacology and neuroscience : the official scientific journal of the Korean College of Neuropsychopharmacology* vol. 12,3 (2014): 171-9. doi:10.9758/cpn.2014.12.3.171

depiction of gendered violence within the novel's Black community.[18] In doing so, McKenzie maps the conflicted relationships between closeted lesbian protagonist Ava Delaney, her husband and family, and the larger, mostly Black religious community that forms the setting of the novel. McKenzie employs a non-linear, episodic structure, moving back and forth between Ava's childhood in the 1950s and her adult life in the 1970s and 1980s, omitting over two decades of undepicted life in which Ava remains dissociated from her senses, artistic practices, and sexual identity. The episodic structure of McKenzie's novel allows readers to slowly and methodically uncover the story of the family's exclusion from their community, mirroring the protagonists' trauma-induced lapses in memory and estrangement from sensation.

McKenzie's use of time works to position readers in a threshold state alongside Ava, suspended between the past and present, known and unknown (or unremembered). Instead of offering a linear narrative that illustrates a clear and progressive sequence of events, from Ava's non-normative childhood behavior to her brother Geo's death, her subsequent mental

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[18] My use of the term "threshold states" is indebted to Meredith Miller's "Lesbian, Gay, and Trans Bildungsroman," a key text in the emerging field of queer coming-of-age studies. Although Miller relies heavily on the *Bildungsroman* genre as a generic map, her notion that lesbian, gay, and transgender *Bildungsromane* "work to historicise the individual and her desires, posing the individual precisely between two epochs (before and after sexual liberation) at the *threshold* of social recognition" inspires this flexible generic label (241; italics mine). Here, Miller's notion of the "threshold of social recognition" bestows upon characters the power of social cognizance, and is akin to a metaphorical gate or door imbued with the power to grant admission to identity categories. These categories - be they parsed in racial, sexual, or gendered entry points - are closely policed by social institutions and ideologies of all political persuasions. Both McKenzie and Lorde position their characters (or themselves, in Lorde's case) in various threshold states, questioning their ability and desire to move between and integrate into political and cultural groups, like progressive politics, Black religious communities, and lesbian-specific spaces.

dissociation, her marriage to Paul, and concluding with her meeting Helen in the present, McKenzie starts at what a linear timeline would position as the end – years after the death of her brother. By building intrigue and creating a sense of mystery around Ava's coming-into-identity process, McKenzie positions the reader to linger in the unknown moments and recollections between chapters. These fragments allow the reader to become privy to the intra-communal disputes and identity-specific exclusionary tactics that rendered Ava's sensory dissociation a necessary, albeit self-destructive, survival tactic. This structure allows readers to participate in Ava's process of self-discovery as she slowly regains her sensory and artistic capacities.

McKenzie's telling of Ava Delaney's coming-into-identity process is filled with references to feeling, sensation, and artistry, defying typical Bildungsroman scholarship which focuses on social recognition and white heteronormative notions of citizenship. While I assert that Ava's true "coming-into-identity" occurs in the 1970s, when, as an adult, she makes the choice to leave her husband Paul for his sister Helena, this coming-into-identity could not occur without revisiting her fragmented and traumatic memories of the childhood past in which she struggles against social and familial norms to nurture and develop a sense of self. McKenzie's structural choice to alternate between Ava's present moment in 1976 and various points throughout her childhood in the 1950s illustrates the complexity of the coming-of-age and into-identity process when it is intersected by anti-Black racism, violence, trauma, and gender-based oppression. The fact that 1976-Ava has little recollection of her childhood disrupts the linear notion of aging and progress as it relates to identity development. As Stella Bolaki asserts, many multiethnic Bildungsroman,

> ...reframe and multiply the sites of tension between individual desire and the demands of socialization. In this process of revision, the texts collide with normative conventions of the genre and grate against its naturalised assumptions, bending and stretching the form so that it reveals the multiple patterns and figures hidden under the generic 'carpet' that has served to define a largely Eurocentric and patriarchal form. (Bolaki 12)

I want to call attention to Bolaki's "generic 'carpet'" metaphor to describe the structural and generic expansions of the Bildungsroman genre by multiethnic women writers. Both Audre Lorde and Mia McKenzie are successful at "bending and stretching the form" of the Bildungsroman to "reveal," or, more accurately, subvert the normative form of the genre, so much so that I contend the Bildungsroman genre is applicable only as a literary-historical landscape and not as a contemporary generic categorization. So while the carpet metaphor may not apply to my conception of Lorde and McKenzie's use of genre, it does metaphorize an important truth present in both *Zami* and *The Summer We Got Free:* identity-based gatekeeping and exclusion such as Ava and Lorde experience through their lifetime do not succeed in destroying the marginal identities each character holds. These exclusions and discriminations only cause concealment, much like a carpet might be used to conceal what lies beneath. Lorde and McKenzie's texts reveal the complex and creative process of revelation, metaphorically ripping up the carpet of normative ideologies to expose the layers of Black lesbian identities and narrative trajectories.

Though less concerned with political activism, large parts of Mia McKenzie's *The Summer We Got Free* are, like *Zami*, set in the Cold War era, and tensions around gender,

sexuality, race, and religion constitute the political backdrop of the oppression Ava Delaney and her family suffer. Early in the novel, readers are introduced to the gatekeeping strategies employed by the community around the Delaney home, continuing even twenty years after the culminating event, the murder of Ava's brother, Geo, and Pastor Goode's son, Kenny. Before Helena arrives, one of the neighbors throws a brick through the window of the Delaney's home in the early hours of the morning (McKenzie 14). Ava and her husband, Paul, had been having unfulfilling sex ("Ava stifled a yawn" during their intimacy) when they heard "a loud crash and the tinkling sound of shattering glass" (12). When the rest of the family awakens to the noise, they find the brick in their living room, with a note written in marker on the side: "Do not make a treaty of friendship with them as long as you live" (McKenzie 13; Deuteronomy 23:6). This violent warning reveals two important points central to understanding Ava's complex psychological dissociation. First, it points to the long history of community trauma and division that will be revealed to readers through the collage of 1950s flashbacks. Second, the Bible verse written on the brick that smashed the Delaney's window introduces a core assertion of the novel: the rigidity of organized Christianity and the influence of conservative politics on church and local community reproduces normative notions of gender and sexuality, which in turn acts as fodder for interpersonal exclusion, structural gatekeeping, internalized homophobia and misogyny. These forms of oppression mandate Ava's sensory dissociation: if she can sever her sensory and artistic experiences that act as the catalyst for her transgressive behavior and identity, she might keep herself and her family safe from this homogenizing, regulatory violence.

The rigidity of the church doctrine, especially concerning issues of gender and sexual expression, are at the heart of the conflict in McKenzie's novel. McKenzie's implied critique of organized Christianity does not elide the foundational contributions of Black community churches and religious groups to anti-racism and civil rights in the U.S., but rather points to the danger of single-issue politics in marginalized communities. While a segment of the Black church[19] led by Martin Luther King Jr. in the 1950s and 1960s served as a "radical protagonist for black rights," Douglas and Hopson argue that the relative silence of Black church leaders on the HIV/AIDS crisis illustrates the way that the "black church appears ambivalent, at best, and oppressively unprogressive, at worst" on some social justice issues, like queerness (Douglas and Hopson, 95-96).[20]

McKenzie's portrayal of this particular Black church community is nuanced, like the church's social justice history itself. The church provides a community center for the majority-Black neighborhood Ava lives in, and through church politics and organizing, it "essentially creates its own independent hierarchies and networks of power" outside of white

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[19] Because the Black church adheres to certain religious doctrines, and because their social justice work is largely centered around Black liberation as a single-issue politic, the church's stance on LGBTQ+ civil rights has been historically lacking. But despite the institution's oppressive stance on some social justice concerns, like homophobia and transphobia, Black churches have historically been integral to Black life in the U.S., offering social, economic, and political communities that center the Black community (Douglas and Hopson, 98).

[20] I use the term "The Black church" for ease of reference, but it is important to acknowledge the term's reductive nature. As Douglas and Hopson write, "The black church is a multitudinous community of churches, which are diversified by origin, denomination, doctrine, worshiping culture, spiritual expression, class size, and other less-obvious factors. Yet, as disparate as black churches may seem, they share a special history, culture, and role in black life, all of which attest to their collective identity as the black church" (96).

culture, which Douglas and Hopson point to as a key contribution of the Black church to Black life in America (98). And yet, the Delaney's find themselves unwelcome in Pastor Goode's church, excluded from these hierarchies and networks of power which constitute the social center of their community. McKenzie reveals that this exclusion from the community culminates in the death of Ava's younger brother, Geo, who was killed alongside the Pastor's son Kenny in 1959. The origin of their exclusion, though, is in Ava's own defiance of Goode's authority. Pastor Goode understands his son's death as divine retribution on the Delaney family because of young Ava's sinfulness, and thus feels compelled to "protect" his "flock" from her "influence" (247). This rationalization of his gatekeeping efforts and his attempt to deflect blame points to the difficulty of theorizing exclusionary politics as a question of (subjective) morality: if taken at his word, Goode feels very clearly that he is acting in the best interest of his community – his biblical brick through the window of the family home then becomes an act of community preservation: divine retribution. This church, and Pastor Goode specifically, has enacted harm on the Delaney family, but has provided social, political, and spiritual support for countless others. This morally conflictual depiction illustrates the importance of perspective and intersectional understandings of identity: Ava is not only Black, but a woman, and queer, and it is these intersections that render her an outsider in her community. My readerly sympathies remain firmly with the Delaneys, but contextualizing Pastor Goode's seemingly contradictory motivations illustrates that critiques of gatekeeping structures and efforts should be situated politically in terms of possibilities for transformative coalitionism and self-determination, as subjective, individuated morality provides little stable ground for effective disruption of imposed normative constraints.

I position coalition, broadly defined as an alliance between two or more parties, as a solution to structural and political gatekeeping: theoretically (although not always in practice), coalition's basis is inclusion, rather than exclusion. If exclusionary politics produces isolation and loneliness, much like the feelings Lorde experienced within political progressive movements in the 1950s and the Delaney's experience at the hands of their church, then coalition might offer an opportunity to repair those rifts and negotiate differences in a less harmful way. Ava's mother Regina attempts to build a coalitional bridge with Pastor Goode in 1976, seventeen years after their sons died together, but her efforts are unsuccessful. Regina visits Goode and appeals to their shared history of racialized violence at the hands of white supremacy: "My father was killed when I was a child. By white men. Just like yours" (245). Regina attempts to build this coalitional bond with Pastor Goode through their shared experience of losing a child, but the two cannot reconcile their differences. Pastor Goode is unable to hear Regina's plea to see their similarities, rather than their differences. This confrontation points to the root of Goode's gatekeeping impulse to "protect" his "flock." Regina reads this refusal as his attempt at "controlling everything they do" (247). In response to Regina's assertion that her story is "just like" his, Goode reveals that his father was a "drifter" who "didn't like to feel stuck," and so they moved frequently and "never got to know [their] neighbors" or join a church (McKenzie 246). When white police officers jailed and subsequently murdered his father, who supposedly satisfied the description of an accused rapist in the area, "there wasn't no neighbors who could say that he was at home when that woman was attacked, because no neighbors stopped by. There wasn't no church to rally behind him. No reverend to vouch for his character" (246). Goode then vows that he

"would never be without those things," and to "make sure that nobody I knew went without them, either" (246). This impulse to build community as a response to state-sanctioned racial violence speaks both to the protective potential of identity-based communities, and the danger that gatekeeping poses to the strength of such coalitions.

Some level of gatekeeping has historically been necessary to preserve identity-based communities; all-Black spaces, or all-queer spaces, for example, are integral to safe-space preservation and coalition. What Pastor Goode fails to realize, despite Regina's prompting, is that he has rendered the Delaneys drifters, without community protection, and his doing so does not increase the safety or sanctity of his church. He has put them in the position of his father, despite their shared experience as Black people who have experience racism at the hands of the state and interpersonally. To reject gatekeeping does not mean to invite white people into Black spaces, or to include cisgender heterosexual people in queer spaces; rather, it is a signal of one's understanding that identities are not monolithic, that Black spaces will and should include queer people, and queer spaces must include Black people. The singular view of identity that is at the core of community gatekeeping renders those most marginalized — in this case, a young, queer woman in defiance of traditional standards of Christian womanhood, and her family — nomadic, unwelcome in the identitarian communities that represent some part, but not the whole, of their sense of self.

While it remains unclear what a fully intersectional and inclusive coalition against white supremacy and cisheteropatriarchy might look like, is it clear that a relationship to socio political power is at the root of both individual and community identity development, and that the desire to maintain power acts as a driving force behind gatekeeping actions.

Rosie Braidotti writes in her book *Nomadic Subjects* that "one becomes a subject through a set of interdictions and permissions, which inscribe one's subjectivity in a bedrock of power" (Bradotti 12). These "interdictions and permissions" which form subjecthood are controlled by those with the most proximity to political power: no single person is therefore responsible for the implementation of these interdictions and permissions. Rather, this "bedrock of power" is formed via compounding layers of white supremacy, homophobia, transphobia, and misogyny. Supremacy's gatekeepers relegate certain subjectivities to a marginal status that works to cement this larger, layered, imbricated infrastructure of normative ideologies. Pastor Goode, as the primary gatekeeper in McKenzie's novel, is then both an agent of these oppressive ideologies and their victim, as his retelling of his father's murder demonstrates. This point does not excuse the launching of bricks through the Delaney windows, but advances the argument that sometimes, even those who weaponize their proximity to social privilege and power to preserve exclusionary formations are likewise harmed by those structures. As a Black man with a traumatic family history of police violence, Pastor Goode does not benefit from the Delaney's exclusion or from his repeated attempts to stifle Ava's identity and expression. Yet, the "bedrock of power" which both marginalizes and empowers him has convinced him that compliance with normative standards will protect him. Any effort to undermine this socially violent system must therefore go beyond Regina's attempt at interpersonal mediation. As McKenzie and Lorde demonstrate, artistic expression and sensory experience can allow the individual to reclaim parts of their identities that have been suppressed by gatekeeping. But, if this type of identity gatekeeping is to be combatted on a structural level, the community must question the wider framework that awards gatekeeping

power to marginal subjects whose performance of normativity meets the threshold for the continuation of an oppressive status quo.

In depicting Ava's self-concealment in service of this oppressive status quo, McKenzie begins to depart from realist writing and embraces elements of the speculative, showing her generic expansion of established forms like the *Bildungsroman* or mystery novel, genres the narrative interacts with but fails to conform to. Both Pastor Goode and Ava herself work within what Bradotti calls the "bedrock of power" to suppress Ava's gendered, sexual, and ideological deviance, but Pastor Goode does so on behalf of his parishioners, hoping to preserve what he sees as his only defense against the racist power structures that have murdered his father. Ava's self-suppression is a response to external trauma, and works on behalf of her murdered twin brother, Geo. In a genre-expansive move, McKenzie slowly reveals that Ava's disassociation in the 1970s timeline is a result of a sort of haunting: Ava has internalized the spirit of Geo, who works to keep her safe from the violent exclusion of the community by imposing barriers between her gendered performance and her internal self. McKenzie writes that several hours after Kenny Goode and Geo Delaney were found dead, "Ava realized her brother was with her" (268). As she learns to live with the feeling of Geo's spirit cohabitating with her own, she begins to change. As a result of his traumatic death, McKenzie writes that Geo's spirit was "always scared, and Ava often had the feeling now of being consumed with fear" (269). Geo's spiritual occupation of Ava can be read as a literal possession, or, as I read it here, an psychologically inventive attempt on Ava's part to literalize the fear and trauma that she has experienced. Ava must cope with Geo's death like the rest of their family, but unlike her sister or parents, Ava was publicly blamed for Geo's

murder: “This is the Lord’s judgment,” Pastor Goode says, pointing at Ava, “This is his judgment on you” (257). Whether we read Geo’s cohabitation as a literal possession or a metaphor for Ava’s guilt and trauma is largely inconsequential to the larger theme of the novel. In either reading, Geo’s influence acts for Ava as both a self-preservation strategy by encouraging her compliance with gendered, racial, and sexual expectations, and as a self-destructive entity, leaving Ava “hard-pressed to hold up under the weight of the busted up soul of her brother” (270).

An inability to reconcile identitarian differences is at the root of both Ava’s experience of oppression and McKenzie’s intervention in the form of the *Bildungsroman*. In “Mapping the Margins,” Kimberle Crenshaw writes that “the problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference, as some critics charge, but rather the opposite- that it frequently conflates or ignores intra group differences” (1).[21] McKenzie offers a subtle but meaningful critique of the women’s liberation movement and its failure to recognize intra group difference through Helena, the central figure representing Black queer femininity in the novel. In McKenzie’s telling of the Delaney family in 1976, years after the death of Geo and her resulting subconscious resolution to bury her sexuality (and her social and political opinions alongside it), Ava sits with Helena on the porch, deep in discussion. Ava is desperate

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[21] Felice Blake takes up similar questions regarding Black community and the conflation or ignorance of difference in service of a sort of Black unity in her 2018 book *Black Love, Black Hate: Intimate Antagonisms in African American Literature.* This conflation and ignorance of intra-group differences that Crenshaw critiques, and the impulse to totalize the Black experience in service of community that Blake investigates is reflected in Lorde’s experience of her mostly-white queer community in New York City, and in Ava’s experience of gatekeeping and exclusion within the Black religious community in Philadelphia.

"to understand everything about her [Helena], so that she could discover the one thing that was causing all these changes in her" (McKenzie 122). Ava asks Helena, "Why aren't you married? [...] I mean, do you want to be?" to which Helena responds resolutely, "No. I don't" (121).[22] Ava follows Helena's resolute response to her question with another: "Why not? [...] You're not one of those women's lib types, are you?" to which Helena responds, "Not really. That movement's not really about us, is it?" Notably, the narration then reads: "Ava had no idea what that movement was really about" (122). Helena does not respond to this question with a clear "no," or a statement indicating her disagreement with the overarching aims of the movement, but voices her perception that she is not welcomed within its ranks. Ava, rather than feeling left out by the movement, is unfamiliar with its aims entirely. Helena's assertion that the women's liberation movement, in which many queer white women found community, was not "about" her illustrates the ways a single-issue framework can ostracize those most in need of the mediated space between the public and private sphere.

Although Helena's identity development is not recounted in detail like Ava's, it is revealed that her coming-into-identity process was marred by violence in her youth. Helena's sexuality is implied by her transgressive views of marriage and her intense physical and psychological connection with Ava, but it is not named until the end of the novel, when readers learn that Helena's first sexual partner was murdered by her brother Paul, Ava's husband. It is not until conflict arises between Helena and Paul that Helena overtly declares her lesbian identity, cementing the association between sexual deviance and violence. In this

[22] State bans against same gender marriage were only rendered unconstitutional in the United States in 2015 with the supreme court decision in Obergefell v. Hodges, so when Ava questions Helena about her views on marriage, there is a clear heterosexual implication.

conflict, the reason for Helena's visit is revealed: she has come to tell Paul that the girl he murdered when he was fifteen, the young girl he caught "hurting" his sister, was not hurting her at all. "She wasn't hurting me, [...] I liked what she was doing. She wasn't hurting me, Paul" (Mckenzie 231). This vocalization constitutes another threshold state in which the familiar closet metaphor falls short; this is not a coming-out, a claiming of identity, but neither is it an act of concealment or closeting. She does not say the word "lesbian," she does not clarify for Paul what "I liked what she was doing" might mean for her identity or her future, but she does reject secrecy to correct a grave misconception. Paul spent several years incarcerated for the murder of Helena's childhood girlfriend, and for the last several decades he has been under the impression that Helena was sexually assaulted by his victim. Neither Ava nor her family was aware of Paul's history, or that he was incarcerated at all. The revelation that his victim was participating in a consensual sexual exchange with his sister challenges Paul's perception of himself entirely:

> It wasn't possible that he had killed that girl for nothing. She had been hurting his sister. He had been trying to protect his sister. He had not meant to kill the girl, he had never meant to do that, but he had grabbed her and pushed her because she had been hurting his sister. Doing things to her. Wrong things. (231)

Here we see Paul exhibit a deeply-entrenched, gate-kept understanding of normative, acceptable sexual behavior — an understanding that is notably not of his own invention, but inherited from heteronormative social dictates. His perception of the intimacy between young Helena and her sexual partner as immediately "wrong," and his impulse to "protect" Helena from the girl who was supposedly hurting her illustrates his internalized understanding of

heterosexual propriety: Paul takes this child's life based on an assumption that his sister, whom he knows to be kind and good and worthy of protection, could not possibly consent to this sexual act which carries immoral and transgressive connotations. Notably, Paul's internal dialogue implies that he did not act on a conscious homophobic bias — when he realizes that Helena was consenting, he thinks, "it wasn't possible he had killed that girl for nothing," implying clearly that the sex act itself did not warrant his intervention, despite its wrongness (231). The unconscious homophobic bias that propels Paul to intervene is rooted both in patriarchal notions of masculinity and his supposed duty to protect his sister, and in an understanding of normative sexual behavior that excluded non-heterosexual sex.

Despite the early trauma of witnessing her brother kill her lover in her supposed defense, Helena remains an ally to Paul, hoping to resurrect their sibling relationship after years of Paul's incarceration and their separation. It's not possible to deduce whether Paul would have been incarcerated, or for how long, if he were a white man in the same situation. It is also clear that Paul did commit murder, albeit based on a false assumption that his sister was under attack. The protective brother is therefore not a perfect representation of the overwhelming number of Black men and other people of color who are wrongly convicted under a racist United States legal system, but he is a representation nonetheless. I consider these racial dynamics in Paul's conviction and sentencing to contextualize Helena's experience of identity development as a young Black girl in the mid-twentieth century: her experience with racism and the penal system are undeniably tied to her understanding of her own sexuality. Whether implicitly or explicitly, it's likely that Helena's experience witnessing her brother murder her lover provoked a longstanding association of her sexuality with

deviance, violence, and punishment. As a young Black person in the United States, it is also likely that Paul was not the first young Black man she witnessed facing incarceration. To return to her earlier declaration that the women's liberation movement is "not really about" people like her, one must question: how could Helena feel included in the women's liberation movement when that movement failed to acknowledge, let alone center, racialized experiences with the carceral system that characterized her early development? Or the developmental trauma she faced as a result of her sexuality?

Black feminists in the twentieth century criticized white feminist and lesbian-separatist groups for their lack of attention to the racialized implications of misogyny and homophobia. Mostly-white lesbian separatists groups which emerged in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s were one iteration of lesbian involvement in the wider women's liberation movement, and they called for a complete separation from relationships and social systems which involved men. Some lesbian separatists groups, such as The Dykes and Gorgons, became emblems of exclusionary politic masquerading as safe-space preservation, excluding not only men, but women who were not lesbians, transgender lesbians, and often Black women, if not by a matter of policy then by fact. The Combahee River Collective's 1977 statement, which coincides with some of McKenzie's temporal setting, offered a Black lesbian-feminist critique of separatism. This excerpt, quoted also in chapter one of this project, is repeated below for emphasis:

> Although we are feminists and Lesbians, we feel solidarity with progressive Black men and do not advocate the fractionalization that white women who are separatists demand. Our situation as Black people necessitates that we have solidarity around the

> fact of race, which white women of course do not need to have with white men, unless it is their negative solidarity as racial oppressors. We struggle together with Black men against racism, while we also struggle with Black men about sexism. (5)

What the Combahee River Collective articulates here is not only a desire but a necessity for coalition with Black men, despite their gendered and sexual difference and because of their shared racial experience. This anti-separatist sentiment is echoed in Alice Walker's figuration of the "womanist" in 1983 to describe Black feminists committed to women's community.[23] Separatist approaches to feminist and lesbian activism then become exclusionary if not hostile to Black women, who must also "have solidarity around the fact of race," rather than gender and sexuality alone. This fragmentation is echoed in the ways that Helena, Ava, and Lorde's identities as Black lesbian women are rendered incompatible with the singular aims of many iterations white-led gender-based activism, like lesbian separatism and feminism's second wave. Both Lorde and Ava find solace and self-recognition in relationships with other Black queer women, suggesting that affinity and multi-issue (race, gender, sexuality) approaches to community formation are more successful in building the sort of community many separatists sought. Notably, these reparative relationships are sexual and romantic: they center sensory exploration through a kiss, through sex, through smell; they catalyze artistic expression; they awaken the senses. They reinforce the importance of learning to feel outside the boundaries and gates erected by white, heterosexual, and patriarchal figurations of morality.

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[23] See Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*, 1983

As Bolaki asserts that the multiethnic Bildungsroman "collide[s] with normative conventions of the genre and grate[s] against its naturalised assumptions," so too does Ava's hidden self grate against the naturalized assumptions of Black femininity imposed upon her by the religious community — namely, the assumption of compliant heterosexuality and the false stability of the gender binary. In *The Summer We Got Free,* these sites of tension between the self and social expectations are communicated via Ava's sensorially rich art, which served as her primary way of expressing complex feelings. As a child, Ava became a topic of much discussion and community infighting for the provocative nature of these artistic feelings, which were routinely deemed inappropriate by church leader Pastor Goode. The breaking point for the local pastor occurs when childhood Ava paints a mural for the church in which all the churchgoers are shackled, representing what young Ava experiences as Pastor Goode's enslavement of the community to his religious doctrine (McKenzie 208-209).

Not only does Ava's art challenge religious authority by invoking carceral imagery to depict religious oppression, it pushes back against notions of gendered propriety — notions which act as a gate, keeping Ava from full inclusion and acceptance in the community unless she succeeds in concealing her deviance from these norms. One instance of this artistic and gendered gatekeeping occurs in 1955, when Ava is in elementary school. She paints the school janitor, a man, wearing a red dress, high-heeled shoes, and lipstick. Upon being scolded for her artistic choice, readers learn of her inspiration: "She had painted him that way after seeing him stand up to a teacher who was talking down to him and she had decided he was bold and interesting, two things she associated mostly with women and the color red"

(109). Here we see Ava's art reflect her defiant notions of womanhood — namely, that it is not linked to biological notions of "woman" as female, but to positive character traits: "bold" and "interesting." This subjective rendering of femininity is articulated not through speech or language, but through color and texture. The overwhelmingly negative response to Ava's painting by her teacher and parents speaks to the presence of restrictive constructions of gender as a binary, transphobia, and other toxic biological essentialisms that have plagued both conservative religious communities and lesbian feminist movements in the U.S. for decades. Aside from the implicit transphobia in the community's reaction to this piece, Ava's painting is an example of her malleable approach to thinking about gender and identity, and speaks to the critical importance of sensory-driven art to her understanding of gender, identity, and relationality. This is a personal, subjective malleability that pushes the normative boundaries of race and gender in her small community, expressed through her manipulation of color and texture on a canvas. That she rendered the school janitor, a man, in a red dress and lipstick simply because she found him "bold and interesting, two things she associated mostly with women and the color red" illustrates how the repression of her gendered and sexual identity leads to her own loss of this "bold and interesting" artistic practice.

Though red once represented bold womanhood for Ava, the brutal murder of her brother Geo catalyzes her dissociation and renders red a color associated with fear and violence. Through the policing of her artistic depiction of womanhood, Ava is taught from a young age that she must adhere to certain gendered conventions in order to be considered a valuable member of her community. She fights back against this mandate until her gendered

impropriety and artistic expression is positioned as the rationale for the brutal murder of her brother, Geo, and Pastor Goode's son, Kenny: "He was badly beaten, his face bruised and cut and bloodied, his lips busted, a spray of his blood staining the white paint that covered what had been, for a very little while, Ava's mural" (McKenzie 256). That Geo's red blood sprayed against the wall which once housed Ava's illicit mural featuring shackled churchgoers creates for young Ava an indelible link between the death of her brother and the transgressive art (and its associated feelings) which caused such turmoil in their community. The color "red," which Ava associated with women and which came to symbolize her identity as a "woman-identified-woman," is now associated with the striking color of her dead brother's blood.[24] This complicates Ava's relationship to artistry and gendered expression: rather than allowing her freedom to articulate her identity and perspective, artistry is now what she associates with the confinement and psychological turmoil of her brother's murder and her family's exclusion from the community. To further produce this conflation of violence with her artistic articulations, Pastor Goode turns to Ava, "glaring," and shouts, "I said the Lord would send down his wrath on this family, and he has! This is his punishment for your arrogance and your blasphemy!" (257).

Ava's art is the vehicle of expression through which she articulates and preserves the self, so when she loses this attachment to art as an articulation of feeling, she loses herself. Lorde takes up the question of art and artistry as a mechanism for survival in her 1985 essay "Poetry is Not A Luxury." She solidifies this liberatory potential of poetry – taken here to mean artistic expression more broadly – for gendered subjects: "For women, then, poetry is

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[24] See Radicallesbians' essay "The Woman Identified Woman," 1970.

not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action" (2). When Ava's sensory and artistic expression is stifled, or to use Bolaki's language, "carpeted" by the "largely Eurocentric and patriarchal" culture, so too is her ability to hope, to dream, and to produce tangible action in service of her own freedom. She then becomes complicit in her own exclusion, a complicity which persists until she is reawakened by Helena's appearance across a threshold. That Ava "tasted color" upon kissing Helena indicates that the repression of the senses for so long has provoked a tidal wave of sensory input, causing her to perceive taste and vision simultaneously. This marked departure from her flat, disinterested affect suggests that Lorde's assertion that creative expression "is a vital necessity of our existence" rings true for Ava, who before her reawakening was not Ava at all.

Adult Ava's self-concealment, psychological dissociation, and detachment from feeling speaks to the power that community exclusion exerts on the coming-into-identity process. These psychological symptoms of oppression are depicted in the text through an interplay between moments of intense depictions of rich sensation and desensitized prose that mirrors Ava's attempt at concealment; this use of sensory language to depict Ava's oscillation between a true, authentic, creative self and her effort to conceal that self defines the formal features of the coming-into-identity novel. Oppression via single-issue politics and intracommunal gatekeeping constitutes a major challenge in multi-ethnic lesbian novels of identity development (challenges which are typically less present in traditional *Bildungsroman* featuring white cisgender heterosexual boys). This structural and

interpersonal marginalization is one of the social and political conditions that compels these novels toward genre-expansive forms and styles, like cross- and multi-sensory language, which work to guide the protagonists toward greater self-knowledge.

Taste is one sensation that drives Ava toward a narrative resolution of self-knowledge and self-recognition. The connections between Ava's artistry and sensory experience are explored through repeated references to the taste and texture of butter. The novel opens with the peculiar assertion that "Ava did not remember the taste of butter," despite the fact that she ate butter at both breakfast and dinner most days. "She did not know that she was only tasting milkfat and salt, the things that make up butter, which, of course, is not the same thing. She certainly did not know that the taste of butter was a thing that had once made her moan. Ava did not remember what it was to moan" (7). Her disassociation from the sensory experience of taste is connected to her disassociation from sexual desire and the experience of pleasure, as represented by the last line of this excerpt, "Ava did not remember what it was to moan." This inability to recall a vocal expression of sexual desire references her sexual dissatisfaction with her husband Paul, which is made apparent early in the novel, when, during sex, Ava is thinking only of how she must mend the floorboard creaking underneath them while stifling yawns (12).

After Helena appears at the door and she and Ava share a kiss, Ava's sensory dissociation begins to wane, and she starts to experience sensation and desire. As Ava, Paul, Helena, Ava's father George, her mother Regina, and her sister Sarah sit around the table for dinner, Paul begins to talk to Ava about moving out of her family home – a move which would certainly please the community they had become estranged from. She is not willing to

do so, and much like during their intercourse, her mind wanders elsewhere: "Ava was aware that they were all looking at her, but she was watching the butter, seeing the way its color changed as it softened on the bread and how the light from the fixture above the table caught in the tiny bubbles of butterfat, making them gleam" (148). Ava studies the butter atop her slice of bread like one might study a painting, noticing its color, texture, movement, and light. Paul continues to pester her at the dinner table while Ava proceeds to take a bite of the buttered bread: "The moment the butter entered her mouth, the second it melted on her tongue, she knew she had not tasted it before, not really, not in a very long time. The taste was overwhelming, cream-thick and heavy-rich, and devastating" (149). McKenzie calls it a "pleasure like none she could right then remember," writing that it caused her to emit a "moan, long and wonderful and obscene," right at the dinner table. Much like Afrikete catalyzed a sense of self-recognition and acceptance for Lorde in *Zami*, Helena's kiss appears to be the only sensation that can reach the true Ava settled far beneath the normative carpet of Christian morality imposed on her.

As Ava emits this moan, she is suddenly visited by a lost memory of herself at age thirteen, "standing in a small, dark room in Blessed Chapel Church, in the bishop's nook, behind the pulpit, with her mouth pressed against another girl's mouth" (149). This scene offers a poignant connection between artistic expression, the sensory experience of taste, and sexual desire. It also marks a disruption of linear time as a taste-catalyzed memory transports her to the youthful exploration of her sexual identity. Ava first studies the butter as though she might paint it, noticing the evolution of its color and the "gleam" of the bubbles exposed by the light above the dinner table. When she tastes it, the sensory experience – which she

could not access before Helena's arrival and their kiss – overwhelms her, causing her to disregard the social norms which suggest a woman should not offer a sexual display at the dinner table (or anywhere that is not the marriage bed). For readers, this vocal emission of sexual desire is explicitly homosexual, as she remembers her childhood rendezvous with another girl. The connection between Ava's artistry, sensory experience, and sexual desire further illustrates that structures and communities which gatekeep deviant sexual and gender expression and in turn produce a disconnection between the self and the sensory embodiment of identity. Much like the way Lorde's scent-driven and electricity-laden experience of Afrekete allows them to part "better for the exchange," Helena's appearance in Ava's life allows her to reawaken from a sort of sensory slumber, reigniting her passions and jumpstarting Ava's coming-into-identity process. Unlike in the traditional Bildungsroman, Ava's coming-into-identity is not about negotiating the self in society; rather, it is about rejecting the dictates of society in favor of self-recognition and reintegration. In both Lorde and McKenzie's writing, it is feeling and sensation that drives the narrative toward a greater sense of freedom and self-knowledge for our lesbian protagonists, suggesting that feeling and sensation constitute a sort of epistemology of liberation that underlies both Lorde and Ava's coming-into-identity narratives.

These are genre-expansive primary texts, drawing on autobiography, memoir, myth, speculative fiction, and realism. Despite, or perhaps because of, their generic differences, these texts offer ways of conceptualizing the problematic binary imposed on "fiction" and "truth." As Lorde's *Zami* illustrates, sometimes the most meaningful path to writing the self is through multi-genre creative paths; as one breaks down the barriers between the self and

other, one must also break through the barriers — like genre conventions and bounded identity categories— that attempt to regulate self-expression. This is a starting point for understanding the conflictual relationship between a primarily white, euro-centric genre (the German Bildungsroman) and the generic ingenuity of Black lesbian writers who discover, direct, and recreate their relationships in spite of white heteropatriarchal literary forms. Moya Bailey, formerly associated with the online Crunk Feminist Collective and writer of *Misogynoir Transformed: Black Women's Digital Resistance*, writes in her review of *The Summer We Got Free* that "the novel won't let you go as it surges forward with truth only fiction can tell." This truth told through fiction resonates through Lorde's biomythic form, asking readers to reconsider what truths they treat as such, and which they dismiss as figments of the perspective of the other.

Chapter Three: Learning to See: Multi-Sensory Epistemologies in Trans and Gender Non-Conforming Lesbian Speculative Fiction

The butch-femme dichotomy may be the most culturally acknowledged form of gender expression in lesbian culture, but gender experimentation and transgression have been a cornerstone of lesbian politics and community since the term "lesbian" became socially legible as a descriptor for women's homosexual identities in the twentieth century. This chapter is chiefly concerned with the expansion and transformation of the gendered boundaries of lesbian identity in transgender lesbian science fiction – an expansion which occurs when the identity-based terminology like *lesbian* is claimed by those not previously thought to be a part of that group. I suggest that a transformative expansion of the gendered and sexual category of "lesbian" is necessary to achieve equity and inclusion for transgender and non-binary lesbians, and that transgender lesbian science fiction offers a multi-sensory epistemological lens through which lesbian identity can be rethought outside of cissexist ideologies.

The political struggle for inclusion of transgender women and nonbinary people in lesbian communities and women's spaces is one site upon which this struggle over the expansion of gendered terminology is routinely fought. Ramzi Fawaz asserts that, despite the known controversies over transgender exclusion in lesbian and feminist spaces, the expansion of gender and sexual categories is one of several areas of epistemological coherence between gay cultural politics and feminist movements: "This project [gay cultural politics] resonated with, and ran parallel to, feminism's radical reinvention of what women could be, what new roles they might play in social, political, and cultural life, and how

categories like ‘woman’ or ‘lesbian’ might be modified and expanded when different subjects claim then as their own.” (26) Fawaz’s book *Queer Forms* seeks to show the ways that social movements for gender and sexual liberation are often recast as highly contentious, anachronistic, and exclusionary, and that critics of these movements tend to focus not on the unique ways that each movement has contributed to the expansion of gender and sexuality but on where they fail to account for difference.

In this chapter, I consider the meeting point between lesbian identity politics and transgender liberation – undoubtedly one of these highly contentious sticking points that Fawaz says is over-emphasized in gender and sexuality theory – to understand the resistance to the modification and expansion of the category of “lesbian” to include transgender women and nonbinary people who self-identify with the term. I take Fawaz’s point that the retrospective focus on the exclusionary and contentious iterations of gay liberation, lesbian feminism, and feminism more broadly tend to flatten the political dynamism of each movement. I center my analysis of transgender lesbian science fiction at the political intersections of trans-exclusionary radical feminism, lesbian separatist ideology, and transgender liberation. In doing so I seek not to marginalize, elide, or flatten lesbian feminism, the history of which has shaped some iterations of Trans-exclusionary Radical Feminist politics today, but to show the potential for increased social and political liberation for lesbians through the multi-sensory expansion of the category of lesbian to include lesbians of all genders. In fact, by locating April Daniels’, Tilly Walden’s, and Ryka Aoki’s transgender and non-binary lesbian characters at the political intersection between trans-exclusionary and trans-inclusive formations of lesbian identity, I follow Fawaz’s imperative

to illustrate the overlapping and interconnected potential of queer, trans, and feminist approaches to identity categories and their potential for radical transformation.

Rethinking Gender Categories through a Multi-Sensory Framework

"Sex is real." Navigate to any social media page or news story about "gender critical" feminism, and you will undoubtedly see this refrain. I first became aware of this TERF rallying cry when Maya Forstater, a UK tax expert and researcher formerly employed at the Centre for Global Development in London, was denied a contract renewal because of online writings that repeatedly misidentified transgender women as men and expressed disdain for attempts to reform the UK Gender Recognition Act of 2004. Forstater, supported financially through crowdfunding, initiated a legal battle over her lack of contract renewal, arguing that her trans-exclusionary rhetoric should be covered under the 2010 UK Equality Act as protected speech (Bowcott). Employment Tribunal Judge Tayler disagreed, writing that Forstater's "absolutist" views on the fixity of biological sex to the point of creating a hostile work environment "is not worthy of respect in a democratic society" (Tayler 25). Forstater's story gained global traction when J.K. Rowling, once-revered author of the *Harry Potter* series, tweeted:

> Dress however you please.
>
> Call yourself whatever you like.
>
> Sleep with any consenting adult who'll have you.
>
> Live your best life in peace and security.
>
> But force women out of their jobs for stating that sex is real?

#IStandWithMaya #ThisIsNotADrill

Rowling's tweet introduces two facets of trans-exclusionary ideology that this chapter works to refute. First, the implication behind the first two lines of the tweet is clear: self-determination is, for Rowling and other TERFs, illegitimate. Gender expression (implied by "dress however you please") and self-identification ("call yourself whatever you like") may be within your rights, but those modes of expression and identification are not "real" in the way that Rowling and other cisgender women's bodies and identities are real. Second, Rowling's tweet encapsulates what many trans-exclusionary thinkers, activists, and politicians attempt to persuade the public of: that transgender women constitute a threat to cisgender women. This is made clear by the unnecessary nod toward questions of "consent" in the third line of the tweet, which is a dog whistle for false accusations of sexual violence against transgender women for using women's bathrooms and other single-sex spaces. Rowling suggests that Forstater is a victim – a woman who has lost her source of employment for stating what she would have us believe is a simple, uncomplicated truth: "sex is real."

Rowling and other trans-exclusionary public figures often invoke the scientific language of biological sex to support their ideological attacks against trans people, especially transgender women. Cisgender supremacy and heteropatriarchy are the ideological architects of this biological framework of gender, both of which are invested in continuing a gendered and racial hierarchy that supports white, cisgender, heterosexual power through stable binaries. I argue that a key weapon of this trans-exclusionary effort is an over reliance on visual knowledge – the idea that sight is automatically a reliable, uncomplicated, and

legitimate source of information untouched by perspective, bias, and other forms of sensory knowledge. This reliance on visuality to determine gender is pervasive, despite the fact that biological rhetoric alludes to the nonvisual: DNA. The over-reliance on the visual perception of physical bodies as indicative of gender is a problem which both cisgender and transgender women share. Bio-essentializing rhetoric has long been used to subjugate, control, and repress women, regardless of their sex assigned at birth.

Moving away from vision as a primary method of knowledge-making, I argue that multi-sensory experience is a productive epistemological framework for coalition-building between cisgender lesbian and transgender lesbian communities, which have historically been positioned as at odds with one another.[25] Visuality as a singular, stable method of knowing is levied against both cisgender and transgender women through objectification and charges of gender deception. If one does not present as normatively feminine, both visually and in affect, one's gender identity is likely to be questioned. This charge of deception is frequently levied against transgender women, and its root is in a bio-essentializing idea that there is a fixed number of ways to look like a woman. Through an analysis of transgender and gender-nonconforming science and speculative fiction, I trace how notions of scientific objectivity become tied to the sensory experience of vision; I then explore the liberatory

[25] Here, I am referencing the historical transphobia of lesbian separatist communities, including the trans-exclusionary separatist writings. These tactics and logics can be traced to modern iterations of Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminism, such as J.K. Rowling's public writings and the work of British philosopher Kathleen Stock, who in 2021 penned an anti-transgender monograph titled *Material Girls: Why Reality Matters for Feminism* attacking the concept of gender identity.

possibilities of multi-sensory and cross-sensory forms of knowledge in transgender speculative and science fiction.

In order to refute formulations of vision as a reliable, singular method of knowing with regard to gender and sexual orientation, a distinction must be drawn between *visuality* as a totalizing epistemological framework and *visibility* as an indication of representation. The question of the utility of visibility for lesbians, and especially for transgender and non-binary lesbians, is a fraught one: does visibility confer legitimacy, or does it invite critique, exclusion, or even violence? How does the western privileging of visuality as a central method of knowledge-making limit or foreclose possibilities for empowering iterations of lesbian visibility? By "empowering," I specifically mean self-determined – that is, if visibility is upheld as an indication of lesbian legitimacy or a measure of lesbian inclusion in culture more broadly, is it possible to celebrate the ways that lesbian visibility can improve the lives of lesbian people without imposing a restrictive reliance on the visual to determine who is (and is not) a lesbian?

Twenty-first century queer SF (science fiction and speculative fiction) writers–including April Daniels, Tillie Walden, and Ryka Aoki–have crafted works of fiction that separate the importance of visibility for queer and trans people from western iterations of a totalizing, objective visuality. Cultural critic Chris Jenks writes that "in Western society we have, over time, come to regard sight as providing our immediate access to the external world," foreclosing other methods of knowing that are less reliant on the complex association between vision and objectivity (Jenks 1). Trans and gender non-conforming lesbian SF features multi-sensory depictions of formative experiences in the lives and coming-into-

identity journeys of transgender and gender non-conforming protagonists; I argue that this sensory-driven form decenters vision as a singular method of knowing, and refutes the bio-essentializing rhetoric that an over-reliance on vision enables. Rather than rejecting the utility of vision as a meaning-making method entirely, I argue that an embrace of cross-sensory methods of meaning-making allow us to respond to Donna Haraway's imperative to "become answerable for what we learn how to see" (Haraway 583).

In considering how synesthesia (cross-sensory) and multi-sensory exploration can act as a method of self-recognition in trans and gender non-conforming narratives of identity development to push back against trans-exclusionary ideologies, I also show how trans lesbian writers and characters reject the formal constraints of the Bildungsroman. To repeat, the Bildungsroman, or the novel of development, was coined by Karl Morgenstern in 1819 and has since been considered the "fundamental form" of the European novel (Frow et. al. n.p.). The traditional European Bildungsroman often presents a cisgender character, usually a boy who is racially and/or economically privileged, who encounters a test or challenge that facilitates character growth, moving the character away from childhood and into adulthood. The move into adulthood often marks a move away from provinciality and into social integration. The texts I analyze here offer a strong shift from this traditional form in both genre (science fiction) and identitarian focus. As I discussed in chapter 1 and 2, there has

been significant revisioning in Bildungsroman scholarship from a feminist and critical race perspective, but less has been said about trans Bildungsroman.[26]

Transgender coming-into-identity narratives require specific attention within the category of LGBTQ+ literary criticism because trans people, and trans adolescents in particular, face a very different set of social, cultural, and legislative challenges than their cisgender counterparts. These distinct social, cultural, and legislative challenges necessitate a new framework outside of the Bildungsroman model: the coming-into-identity narrative. The move from childhood to adulthood so central to the Bildungsroman may be represented in transgender narratives, but that transitory period is much more likely to be intercepted by transphobic authority figures who restrict the freedom of the protagonist than in cisgender narratives of entering adulthood, and may not follow normative temporalities in their depiction of the boundaries between adolescence and adulthood. This trans-ing of the temporality of adolescence is sometimes called a "second adolescence," especially when medical interventions like hormone therapy produce a sort of puberty in adulthood. Additionally, social integration may be a goal in transgender narratives, like in the cisgender Bildungsroman, but survival and self-recognition are likely to precede social integration as

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[26] Annis Pratt's concept of "growing down" and Joanna Frye's notions of multiple feminine selves in the Bildungsroman inform many of these feminist approaches to the genre. Geta LeSeur's *Ten is the Age of Darkness: The Black Bildungsroman* offers an analysis of Black iterations of the genre and a critique of male dominance in the field. These are formative texts in the study of the marginal Bildungsroman, and represent an opening of the generic frame that has historically restricted these narratives of young adult emergence, but the scholarship on LGTBQ+ iterations of the coming-of-age narrative are lacking. Meredith Miller's essay "The Lesbian, Gay, and Trans Bildungsroman" offers important critical insight into queer coming-of-age narratives, but focuses primarily on cisgender gay or lesbian narratives at the expense of explicitly transgender writers and characters.

trans characters navigate both internal and external sources of pressure and potential violence.

I argue for a lesbian feminist reclamation of embodied, sensory epistemology that is transgender inclusive and gender-expansive – one which pushes back against the ideal of a stable gender aesthetic entirely, and instead centers lesbian self-recognition and self-determination central to my concept of coming-into-identity. This reclamation must be lesbian feminist because it is through lesbian feminist politics that much of "radical feminist" transphobia is enabled and upheld.[27] Through analyses of April Daniel's novel *Dreadnought*, Tillie Walden's graphic novel *Are You Listening?*, and Ryka Aoki's novel *Light From Uncommon Stars*, I argue that the development and recognition of trans lesbian identity, so central to the intersectional lesbian coming-into-identity narrative, necessitates an individual and collective renegotiation of the relationship between vision and problematic notions of objectivity. Daniel's *Dreadnought* makes clear the limitations of visuality as a primary epistemological framework and instead reveals how multi-sensory forms of recognition offer trans protagonists agency and self-determination; Walden's *Are You Listening?* responds to the limitations of visuality by liberating vision from its association with objectivity, instead allowing vision to act as an agentive tool for constructing new literal and figurative pathways through both vision and reception of sound (listening); and finally, Aoki's *Light from*

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[27] Here, I gesture both toward the history of lesbian separatism, which was notoriously trans-exclusionary, and to the ways that both lesbian and straight cisgender activists have used lesbians to uphold contemporary transphobia, arguing that transgender women who are lesbians should not be included in lesbian spaces. Transphobia mounted in supposed defense of cisgender lesbians has been parroted by TERF writers and thinkers, including Julie Bindel, J.K. Rowling, and Kathleen Stock.

Uncommon Stars mobilizes the concept of multi-sensory forms of queer kinship and relation that enable its transgender lesbian protagonist to achieve self-recognition through community.

Multi-Sensory Recognition in *Dreadnought*

Just pages into April Daniels' *Dreadnought*, teenage Danny takes the bus downtown, past curfew, risking the ire of her strict parents, to complete a seemingly mundane task: purchase a bottle of nail polish. Known as Daniel to her family, Danny paints her toenails in an empty alleyway, exercising one of the only methods by which she can safely embody her gender. Soon, her harmless, covert feminine ritual is interrupted by loud explosions -- and then she is hunched over the dying body of a superhero named Dreadnought, who bestows his powers upon her in his final moments. Through this transfer of power, Danny is physically transformed: she can now "pass" as female, granting her both literal super powers of strength, agility, and flight, as well as the social power of an ideal feminized body that correlates with her gender identity. A process that would have taken years of hormone treatments and surgical intervention has miraculously happened in just moments. And yet, despite this super-powered transition that materially and irreversibly modifies Danny's body, and despite her self-identification, people close to Danny still fail to see her as a girl.

Dreadnought presents this familiar challenge of transgender acceptance and recognition alongside a gripping plot featuring young Danny's attempt to save her city from the impending danger of a murderer, the cyborg named Utopia. Daniels' superhero narrative works alongside the thematic focus on transgender visibility and acceptance to provoke

questions about visuality, identity, and perspective, offering a rich and suspenseful trans-feminist coming-into-identity narrative for young adult and adult readers alike. Daniels' narrative problematizes the centrality of visuality as a method of stable categorization, showing that Danny cannot be perceived as the lesbian she is while transphobic ideologies limit her ability to be seen as a woman. Unlike Audre Lorde and Mia McKenzie, who use sensory input like taste, smell, and touch to facilitate their own self-recognition amidst virulent homophobia and anti-black racism, as I discuss in chapter two, *Dreadnought* reveals how a lack of multi-sensory attunement limits infringes on our ability to recognize others for who they are, while pointing toward sensation's potential to cultivate recognition of the self and others. Danny's understanding of her own gender and sexual identity is deeply embedded in multi-sensory forms of knowledge, even as her transphobic detractors who challenge her self-declaration demonstrate an over-reliance on vision, foreclosing their ability to recognize Danny as Danielle.

Much like the pervasiveness of "coming out" stories for lesbian and gay narratives of identity development, the transition storyline has become a pervasive point of interest in transgender narratives, especially young adult works like *Dreadnought*. The focus on physical transition in transgender coming-of-age narratives, and especially in narratives about transgender girls, often relies on what Jennifer Putzi calls the "born in the wrong body" convention: the idea that transgender people are born in the "wrong body" and must transition to the right body in order to achieve self-actualization (Putzi 425). This discourse fails to acknowledge the socially constructed nature of gender and its forced application to biology, reaffirms the link between gender and genitalia, and overlooks the experiences of

non-binary people and binary transgender people who choose not to pursue medical intervention. Daniels' *Dreadnought* offers a picture of lesbian transgender sovereignty and self-actualization rarely seen in depictions of trans and gender nonconforming stories. Often, narratives of transgender youth focus on this linear path from one constructed biological sex marker to another, highlighting family and societal strife and the journey toward hormones and surgical transitional care (Bittner et. al. n.p.). Through fictional technologies in Daniels' SF world, Danny's narrative begins where others often end. Instead of marking Danny's physical transition as the conclusion of her coming-of-age narrative, Daniels positions her physical transition at the very beginning of Danny's journey, illustrating that transgender agency, growth, and development does not hinge on or end with medical intervention or visual compliance with the gender binary. Relatedly, the forward positioning of Danny's transition also illustrates that a "passing" body does not necessarily afford transgender people the right to unquestioned self-determination. In this way, Daniels' formulation of Danny's coming-into-identity journey rejects "wrong body" discourse (although such discourse is not entirely absent from the narrative) by illustrating the pervasive problem of assigning physical characteristics to gender identity.

Despite the challenges posed by transphobic notions of biology and normative gender identity, *Dreadnought* offers Danny one important ally in her coming-of-age process: Doc Impossible, the doctor and scientist for The Legion of Superheroes. Apprenticeship is a strong thematic focus of many Bildungsroman in the original German form, and that connection is clear in *Dreadnought,* despite its thematic and formal divergence from the genre: Danny, as a newly-transitioned superhero, must learn the rules and expectations of the

trade (and, in *Dreadnought*, superhuman capabilities *do* function alongside capital to constitute an occupation or trade; for example, those who can fly might become employed as couriers). As a scientific and medical authority on superhuman powers and technology, Doc Impossible is a highly capable mentor for young Danny. However, her role here is unique to the trans lesbian coming-into-identity narrative because she both reflects Danny's identity as a woman, and validates Danny's transgender identity as a scientific authority. As Maroula Joannou's writing on the female Bildungsroman asserts, same-gender mentorships are typical for male protagonists, but exceptional for women: "the guidance of a mentor of their own sex is *de rigueur* for the male hero but not the female characters in the classical Bildungsroman" (2019, p. 211). This is yet another way that *Dreadnought* departs from the Bildungsroman tradition, establishing the narrative as a coming-into-identity text.

Doc Impossible's mentorship does more than break Bildungsroman convention masculine-led apprenticeship by positioning a woman as a key authority figure; she offers young adult readers a different model for thinking about the relationship between science, medicine, and transgender identity. At several important junctures in Danny's early post-transition life, Doc Impossible offers her solace and defense against biological essentialism, most of which comes from superhero Graywytch, who embodies a trans-exclusionary radical feminist. Graywytch repeatedly deadnames and misgenders Danny, and goes as far as to ask Danny if she "even know[s] how to put in a tampon" in her attempt to delegitimize her gender (58, 65, 66). The harm that Graywytch inflicts with her words is compounded during Danny's medical examination at Legion Tower (an examination all new superheroes are subject to), when Doc Impossible discovers that Danny, despite her transition that defied the

limits of current medical science, does not have a uterus. Danny's reaction is one of extreme dejection, provoking an emotionally violent outburst. She says to Doc Impossible, through tears, "I guess I just thought that I was finally a real girl" (Daniels 53). Danny's invocation of the concept of *realness* in delegitimizing her own identity calls back to the cisnormative conditioning she has been exposed to throughout her life; she too has come to ascribe to Graywytch's conflation of constructed biological categories with gender identity. Doc impossible, enacting her role as mentor, replies, "Hey! None of that! You think it's a uterus that makes a woman? Bullshit. You feel like you're a girl, you live it, it's part of you? Then you're a girl. That's the end of it, no quibbling. You're as real a girl as anyone" (53). Doc Impossible's response here emphasizes subjective feeling ("you feel like you're a girl"), lived experience ("you live it"), and identity formation ("it's a part of you") to provide Danny and readers with a model of scientific practice that both acknowledges the realities of the body and validates the importance of subjective experience and perspective. Importantly, she positions her reassurance as multi-sensory, suggesting to Danny that if she "feels" like a girl, those sensory experiences – the sensation of her gender being "part of [her]" – are legitimating. Doc Impossible does not specify what it means to "feel" like a girl; she does not delineate how this feeling might be experienced in the body or the mind; she does not place any sensory-specific language on this feeling. As a scientific authority, her choice to validate Danny's experience of gender through the language of feeling as an undefined and undifferentiated sensation gives Danny agency to interpret this feeling as a valid personal truth. This contradicts what Danny has been conditioned to believe: that her body must look and function like a cisgender female body in order for her feelings to be legitimate. In Doc

Impossible's worldview, and in the coming-into-identity genre, non-visual sensation and emotion are as reliable as any other form of knowledge. Doc Impossible's mentorship as the didactic voice of the novel asserts the value of self-determination and recognition, affirming Danny's self-knowledge rather than imposing notions of biological determinism and adult intellectual superiority that often plague young adult narratives of coming-into-identity.

Part of *Dreadnought*'s diversion from the traditional Bildungsroman lies in its use of multi-sensory experience as a form of knowledge. This is evident from the very beginning of the novel, when Daniels depicts Danny's super-powered transition at the hands of the dying superhero Dreadnought. Daniels' relies primarily on multi-sensory descriptions to depict Danny's slow recognition of her new body after her physical transition: "My hips ache. My chest burns. My skin feels tight and wrong [...] when I move my clothes seem to pull on me in ways they haven't done before" (Daniels 13). This is how Danny is made aware of her newly transitioned body – through the physical pain associated with her expanding hips and chest, which cause her clothes to fit differently. This excerpt invokes two sensations lesser known than the widely-acknowledged five senses: nociception, the perception of physical pain, shown through the burning and aching Danny experiences; and proprioception, the awareness of the body in space, which is invoked through Danny's awareness of how her body is taking up space in her clothing (see "nociception" and "proprioception," Oxford English Dictionary). Engagement with these sensory experiences allows Danny to recognize the ways her body has transitioned, and although they are imbued with descriptions of pain and categorized as "tight and wrong," these experiences mark Danny's first engagements with the body she has so desperately desired. As Danny becomes aware of her newly

transitioned form, she turns to see Dreadnought lying on the ground next to her. She calls out to him, urging him to wake up, and then the chapter closes with a final moment of recognition facilitated through sound: “I stop, and listen to myself. I have a girl’s voice” (Daniels 13).

Danny’s ability to recognize her newly transitioned body is facilitated by these three sensory experiences – nociception, proprioception, and hearing – with a marked absence of vision. Rather than relying on vision as an immediate method of describing Danny’s interaction with her body, Daniels centers other sensory experiences, illustrating one of the several ways that the novel invokes multi-sensory modes of knowledge and perception to advocate for a less ocular centric mode of recognition. Daniels also rejects the idea that the pain and discomfort associated with Danny’s transition is negative. When Danny notices the smaller size of her hands, the breasts that have erupted across her chest, and the transformation of her genitals, Daniels writes: “Everything is wrong, but so perfectly right,” and “I’m free. I’m finally free,” suggesting that Danny’s transition, albeit sensorily painful and unexpected, has liberated her (18).

Although Danny recognizes her new body with joy, her super-powered transition is met with disbelief by both her family and the structural powers that govern superhero activity in the novel. Unlike her predecessors who have taken on the mantle of Dreadnought and also experienced physical modifications in the process, the legion of superheroes questions Danny’s legitimacy as both a woman and a superhero. This questioning is a direct result of her transgender identity. “Some got a little taller, one grew back some lost toes, that sort of thing. But they were all cis -- that is to say, they weren’t trans -- so their bodies didn’t change

to match their gender identities because they were already matching" (Daniels 53). Although each carrier of the mantle has undergone a physical transformation that gifted them with their ideal physical forms, Danny is questioned by The Legion of superheroes and her family after her transition, as though she is playing a joke or attempting to deceive them. Despite that her body now passes, she is the first transgender person to receive the mantle of Dreadnought, and this provokes suspicion and distrust. This inequitable distrust offers an important parable for modern-day narratives of transgender people as deceptive or uniquely performative, allowing readers to question what it would take for a cissexist society to recognize and accept transgender people as valid and legitimate in either world.

Through the depiction of negative reactions to Danny's sudden transition, *Dreadnought* critiques visuality as a primary and objective method of knowing, instead advancing multi-sensory forms of recognition and knowledge-making. My critique of mono-sensory visual epistemologies is indebted to "unmarked objectivity," derived from Donna Haraway's 1988 essay "The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," as well as work by Sandra Harding. I use unmarked objectivity here to signify the partial perspectives held by those in seemingly unmarked bodies and identities – bodies and identities that possess (racial, gendered, sexual) privilege and therefore have been positioned as universal, rather than specific and marked. Haraway's work is part of a larger conversation in feminist science and technology studies, continued by Sandra Harding in her 1995 article "Strong Objectivity," that questions whether objectivity is necessary or even possible in attempts at scientific knowledge. As Harding and Haraway show, when certain bodies and perspectives are positioned as unmarked, unbiased, and universal, they are often mistaken as

objective, rather than deeply entrenched in personal experience and influenced by specific cultural and social constructs, including the gender binary.

Vision is similarly positioned – as the old adage goes, "to see is to believe." Western culture has associated vision with objectivity at the expense of an attention to the ways that perspective, positionality, and non-visual sensory input inform how we interpret what we see. In terms of gender identity and sexual orientation, this failure to attend to perspective and unavoidable bias leads to problematic visual associations with gender, like believing that one can know someone else's gender identity or sexual orientation just by looking at them. Other forms of sensory knowledge do not necessarily escape this bias. For example, that Danny recognizes her new voice as a "girl's voice" suggests that there is an auditory expectation tied to gender (13). And yet, much of the transphobic resistance to Danny's gender identity is derived from ocular centric understandings of gender, while many of Danny's moments of self-recognition are imbued with multi-sensory descriptions. *Dreadnought* responds to ocular centric understandings of gender by invoking multi-sensory descriptions of Danny's coming-into-identity process, decentering mono-sensory visual epistemologies in favor of complex, intersecting, and embodied knowledge-making.

Visuality is often closely associated with the idea of objectivity, or the absence of bias, but as Haraway, Harding, and other scholars of feminist and queer science studies argue, this distance is actually a space where bias and self-interest thrive. As Haraway writes, "the eyes have been used to signify a perverse capacity [...] to distance the knowing subject from everybody and everything in the interests of unfettered power" (Haraway 581). This distance between the "knowing subject" and "everybody and everything" is, in Haraway's figuration,

an attempt at power: the power "to see and not be seen," "a god trick" (581, 582). The association between objectivity and vision is often used to delegitimize transgender people by suggesting that because a transgender person's body may not replicate the dominant perspective (figured as the objective truth) of what a particularly gendered body should look like, their gender is then false, a misconception, a ruse, or a psychological condition.

This relationship between visuality and objectivity is at the root of problematic notions of "passing," or the act of "clocking" a trans person. The association of visuality with ways of knowing, recognizing, categorizing, or delimiting gender is complex and can cause harm to gender diverse people who are not offered such an extreme science fictional transition as Danny's in *Dreadnought*, people whose visuality may not appear to coincide with cultural expectations of gender. Eric Stanley writes about this phenomenon of weaponizing visibility as a tool of violence against trans people. In "Anti-Trans Optics: Recognition, Opacity, and the Image of Force," Stanley analyzes the CCTV footage Duanna JohJohnson'sson's brutal beating at the hands of Memphis Police Officer Bridges McRae: "Her being 'clocked' as trans led to her initial arrest, subsequent beating, and, even perhaps, her murder. Being clocked, or being seen as trans, enacts the double bind of recognition: being seen by the other brings you into the world, but more often than not it is also that which might bring you out of it" (Stanley 617). This "double bind of recognition" reveals the limits of visuality as both seeing and as representation: though representation and being seen may offer a sense of self or social recognition, when combined with learned transphobia and discriminatory ideologies, this recognition can be dangerous, or even fatal.

The limitations of visuality as an objective method of knowing is made evident through Danny's interactions with her parents following her transition. When Danny returns home, unaware at this point of her superhuman capabilities, her father Roger is unable to recognize her. Despite the fact that her mother recognizes Danny as some version of the child that left her house that morning, Roger's reliance on vision as a method of objective knowing prevents him from this same recognition. When Danny says "Hi, Dad," Roger immediately reads her body as a young woman's, and therefore *not* Danny's: "Wh- I don't have a daughter" (Daniels 22). Once Roger is finally convinced that the girl who stands before him is, in fact, Danny, he vows to "fix" her, and sets in place a plan to force Danny into de-transitional medical care (24). While readers can infer that Roger does not believe that Danny's bodily transition makes her a girl, he somehow believes that bodily detransition will make her a boy. The limitations of visuality here are Roger's: Danny's gender identity is now perceived by most to "match" her appearance (a problematic and essentializing idea itself). Despite this "matching" and the fact that Danny articulates repeatedly that her transition was desired, the perspective held by Roger, derived from his position as her father and as a cisgender heterosexual man, interferes with his ability to actually recognize her. In this instance, Roger's over reliance on visual input impacts other sensory functions. Not only is he unable to see Danny as a girl, he is unable to hear her when she identifies herself as his child. His reliance on his own visual perspective interrupts his ability to see meaning outside his preconceptions, while, at the same time, restricts his ability to rely on other forms of sensory knowledge to recognize Danny for who she is.

Roger claims what Haraway calls the "power to see and not be seen" in his rejection of Danny's new body and her now-visible identity as a girl. Meanwhile, Danny's mother recognizes her through sight and sound. When Danny's mother corners her in the living room as she tries to sneak into the house, she begins to tell Danny that she should leave, assuming she is a stranger in their home. When Danny says "Mom, Wait!" Daniels writes that "she looked like someone slapped her," noting the moment of recognition (Daniels 22). Danny realizes that she still resembles her old self, but now with a face "softened by the puberty I should have had" (22). The relative similarity of Danny's features – "same short blonde hair, same basic face" – coupled with Danny's vocal assertion that she is Danny leads her mother to the point of recognition. This recognition is multi-sensory, facilitated through both visual and auditory information. For Roger to achieve this same act of recognition, he must listen to his wife. Danny's mother encourages Roger to pause and attempt to recognize Danny: "This is Danny. Look at… well, *look*" (23). Danny's mother is able to achieve some preliminary recognition of Danny through multi-sensory perception, but her imperative to Danny's father is mono-sensory, imploring him to "look." Daniels then writes that Roger's eyes widen, apparently evoking his attempt to follow his wife's direction. But, clearly, all Roger can see is what Danny is not:

> "We're going to make this right. I love you. You're my son."
>
> I take a half step back. "Well… not anymore."
>
> "We'll go to the doctors. We'll get this looked at," he says. Dad doesn't sound like he's all here anymore. He's not really looking at me. He's looking past me, toward some kind of pathetic optimism where he doesn't have to deal with who I really am. (Daniels

23-24)

Roger takes his wife's instruction to look as an opportunity to look for the person he wants to see — his son, a mirror for his own masculinity. Because he allows (consciously or otherwise) his perspective as the father of a son to masquerade as objective and unmarked, he can only recognize Danny in context of a mistake requiring medical intervention. He even pulls Danny into a "rough, manly hug," demonstrating his recognition of Danny as his child while also affirming his misrecognition of Danny as his son (24). He does not know himself to be the father of a daughter, so therefore Danny must not be a girl. As he looks "past" Danny, feigning vision but seeing someone who isn't there, he demonstrates the limitations of a marked perspective that cannot acknowledge its own partiality. He cannot see, nor can he sense, the girl who clearly stands in front of him: his daughter who now meets all normative cultural criteria to be viewed as a girl, and who responds to his statement that she is his son with a clear statement to the contrary: "Not anymore" (Daniels 23-24).

Despite Roger's lack of multi-sensory attunement and the unreliability of his sensory capacities in the face of his own desires, Danny learns to cultivate a reliance on and endurance through various sensations, many of which are painful, in order to fulfill her newly acquired identity as a superhero. As she navigates her body through its new gender presentation and superhuman capacities, the novel builds toward a climax of an epic battle between Danny and the supervillain Utopia. As Danny fights Utopia in an effort to save society from her plan to turn "the entire human species into software simulations she could control," Danny experiences intense pain, which Daniels describes as a "white bar of agony" being "punched through [her] chest" (280, 270). The lattice – a sort of scientific grid that lies

behind all reality, like a sort of technological netting – has been broken open by Utopia, leaving the shared reality of human life open to interception. In order to repair the lattice and fight back against Utopia's plan, Danny must pull at the broken threads and "yank them together" until they reattach, "like magnets" (272). As she works to repair the lattice, each yank and reattachment brings a new sensation: "a flash of new pain," "nausea flush[ing] through [her]," "ice and knives saw[ing] at [her] bones" (272). "But it's only pain, and pain doesn't kill," Danny reminds herself as she endures the physical sensations. Danny's ability to endure this pain is strengthened by her resolve to prevent Utopia's grand plan: "In the world I'm building, humanity will only be able to observe what I allow them to, only think what I give them permission to think. Until I am God, nobody is safe," Utopia says (273). Danny's experiences of cisnormativity and a controlling patriarchal father have taught her the danger of such a proposal, and in defiance of Utopia's attempt at an ultimate "God-Trick," Danny recognizes these sensory experiences as indicators of her successful attempts to repair the lattice. Before Utopia even realizes that Danny is no longer incapacitated, she is killed by Danny, and society is rescued from a cunning plot to limit and control human experience.

Dreadnought's Danny offers readers and scholars of the genre a new model for the transition between childhood and adulthood by centering self-determination and staging a rejection of unmarked objectivity via multi-sensory depictions of Danny's path toward greater self-recognition and determination. Although Danny's gender transition does not render her a woman in the eyes of her father, Roger, or the superhero and TERF-archetype Graywytch, it provides her with a sense of self-assuredness and a feeling of legitimacy, marking a move away from adolescent insecurity to (an imperfect, but enduring) sense of

validity in her identity. At the end of the novel, after Danny has succeeded in an epic battle and saved the lives of several people, she holds a press conference as the new holder of the mantle of Dreadnought. In an act of public visibility, she tells the press: "I am transgender, and a lesbian, and I'm not ashamed of that" (Daniels 281). For Danny, this articulation of her identity is a reclamation of power, an act of self-recognition; it allows her to tell her own story, rather than only asserting her identity when faced with the essentializing rhetoric of others. This important act of self-recognition is immediately followed by sensory description: "Saying it out loud gives it power and my nervousness fades away. I feel good" (281). In spite of pervasive transphobic attacks which constitute the major social and internal challenges in this coming-into-identity narrative, Danny is now able to recognize the power inherent in asserting her own marked perspective, and the way she is able to acknowledge this power is through feeling. This revelation marks an important characteristic of the coming-into-identity narrative: characters may undergo transformation into a state of maturity *by* the outside world, as in the Bildungsroman, but it is through an internal sense of recognition and acceptance that queer and trans characters are able to achieve self actualization.

In presenting this what-if scenario of an instantaneous and physically painless medical transition, *Dreadnought* asks readers to question the epistemological limits of visuality as a singular sensation – to question how our perspectives and preconceptions shape what are are able to perceive, and to validate the existence of that which we have not yet learned to see. Like so many science fictional narratives of marginalization and struggle, *Dreadnought* implores us to hold space for the identities, perspectives, and experiences that

our always inevitably marked perspectives have yet to offer us access to, and gestures toward a future in which deviance from cisheteropatriarchy is not delegitimized by an unmarked, bodiless, "conquering gaze from nowhere" (Haraway 581).

Externalizing Internal Sensation in Tillie Walden's *Are You Listening?*

In this chapter I have offered an analysis of how multi-sensory modes of knowledge-making can interrupt ocular centric notions of objectivity and cultivate greater self-recognition and acceptance for transgender protagonists in April Daniels' *Dreadnought*. My reading of Tillie Walden's 2019 graphic novel *Are You Listening*? takes this critique of objectivity a step further, positioning reality malleable, personal, and evolving, and directly impacted by complex internal experiences and sensations. My reading of Walden's graphic novel centers the relationship between protagonists Bea and Lou's physical bodies and the mystical West Texas landscape to show how their developing sense of proprioception enables a greater multi-sensory attunement and connection between the interiority of the characters and their exterior circumstances. In other words, their feelings have the power to shape physical and perceptual reality, offering new emotional and physical pathways forward for Walden's gender non-conforming queer protagonists.

Are You Listening? manipulates the connection between visuality and material reality via a road trip through an uncanny Texas landscape, and a mysterious cat who appears to have the ability to manipulate land and space. Featuring an eighteen-year-old protagonist named Bea who has run away from home to escape repeated sexual abuse by her older cousin, the story begins when Lou finds Bea alone at a gas station in rural Texas. Lou is a 27-

year old lesbian mechanic who lives down the street from Bea and her family, and decides she should help Bea as repayment for Bea's mother Lin's assistance removing a fallen tree from her property. Readers learn that Lou is also running away from her grief around her mother's death. Lou offers to drive Bea to her next destination, only to find out when they get there that Bea has no destination. They continue on Lou's journey through west Texas together, with no real plans, aside from visiting Lou's aunt, whom she hasn't seen since the death of her mother. Along the way, Bea finds Diamond, a seemingly lost cat, and they embark on a journey to return the cat to the address on her collar: 43 Glenwood Road, West, West Texas, a town that does not exist on any map (Walden 86, 94). Their journeys away from their respective traumas cause them to look for new pathways, and this search for new routes constitutes their main challenge in the narrative.

Notably, both Lou and Bea are illustrated in a way that resists any stable gender identification. Both sport short hair, round, youthful faces, and what would widely be considered boy-ish garments that are in fact nondescript, plain attire. Bea dons the occasional skirt coupled with an oversized hoodie, but aside from this small gesture toward a traditionally feminine piece of attire, Walden resists the binary aesthetics of the two-gender system, identifying the pair only as "gay" and having had girlfriends. Gender presentation and identity has long been a site of categorical contestation in lesbian communities; as Jack Halberstam writes of the tensions between cisgender butch-identified lesbians and transgender men (FTM),

> Some lesbians seem to see FTMs as traitors to a "women's" movement who cross over and become the enemy. Some FTMs see lesbian feminism as a discourse that

> has demonized them and their masculinity. Some butches consider FTMs to be butches who "believe in anatomy," and some FTMs consider butches to be FTMs who are too afraid to transition. The border wars between transgender butches and FTMs seem to proceed on the assumption, shared by all sides, that masculinity is a limited resource, available to only a few in ever-decreasing quantities. (287)

These "border wars" Halberstam writes of are persistent tropes that can be traced through many examples of lesbian literature. For example, Radclyffe Hall's 1928 coming-of-age narrative *The Well of Loneliness* features a protagonist whose gender is highly contested by literary scholars, with some reading Hall's protagonist Stephen as an undeclared transgender man and others a butch lesbian. Hall's fascination with the late nineteenth-century sexology movement and the concept of sexual inversion championed by sexologist Havelock Ellis complicates the readings of Stephen's identity labels, blurring the boundaries between homosexuality and what was considered cross-gender identification. The supposed tensions between lesbian and transgender identity labels present in Hall's writing are representative of a trend in canonical lesbian literature: the lesbian character, especially when in adolescence, typically experiences some tension between their sexual orientation and gender identity due to rigid gender norms and their enforcement. This is true of Rita Mae Brown's famous lesbian protagonist Molly from her 1973 novel *Rubyfruit Jungle*, who defies gender expectations at every turn but ultimately develops a more gender-normative stance on lesbian gender expression, stating "What's the point of being a lesbian if a woman is going to look and act like an imitation man?" (Brown 132). This simplistic reading of lesbian gender expression gestures toward a series of border wars within the lesbian community that extend

beyond Halberstam's focus on butches and transgender men. Gender, its presentations, its aesthetics, and the imposition of a binary, often constitute a formative challenge for lesbian characters in realist novels of identity development.

Speculative narratives, though, often circumvent this common trope of realist lesbian literature by introducing gender or sexual orientation as already non-normative and malleable.[28] Although Walden does not label or classify her lesbian characters' gender identity, it too achieves a departure from the realist trope: there is no crisis of gender here. In fact, the graphic novel manages to be relatively unconcerned with gendered labels, prompting readers to dwell in unknowing. Despite the structure of the novel which enables imagination to act as an agentive entity in creating new visual realities, Walden's text does not pursue Bea or Lou's gender or sexual orientation as an objective of this construction. Walden's *Are You Listening?* takes self-determination seriously, rejecting maps that point its characters in a particular direction or toward a particular expression of gender, instead allowing them to wander without destination. Its title, coupled with its graphic form, constitute a multi-sensory call to hear – through visual modalities of the graphic novel, and through language – the truths that Bea and Lou create through their sensory experiences.

The interrogative form of the title appears in the dialogue of the graphic novel, and the linguistic and visual elements of the scene center sensation as a method of connection. In fragmented dialogue which mirrors the fragmented panels of the page, Bea tells Lou about her cousin, who sexually assaulted her and "kept coming back," prompting her to leave without telling her family for fear that "they would never forgive" her (202, 203). Lou

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[28] A short review of gender systems in feminist and queer science fiction is included in chapter one.

attempts to reassure Bea that "none of this is your fault," and again invokes the title of the book, asking her, "Bea, are you listening?" (204; see figure 2). As figure 1 shows, the white line that splits the panel does not completely sever the page. Instead, the line stops three quarters of the way up the panel, and the two figures stand looking at each other, united by the coral, pink, red, and white background, representing their tumultuous and formerly disconnected friendship slowly transforming into one of connection and mutual support. Bea and Lou remain on opposite sides of the dividing white line, except for at two points: the tip of Lou's hair extends through to Bea's side of the panel, and Lou's hands reach out to touch Bea's shoulders. Tears stream down both of their faces, and with her hands on Bea's shoulder, Lou asks her: "Are you listening?" This implores Bea to recognize – through the supportive sensation of touch on Bea's shoulder and the tearful representation of Lou's sensitivity to Bea's pain – that she is not responsible for the harm that has been inflicted on her.

Figure 1. Tillie Walden, Are You Listening? (204). Lou reaches out to Bea, placing her hands on her shoulders, reassuring her that her experience of sexual violence was not her fault.

The exchange in figure 1 is a moment of sensory connection for Bea and Lou, but this connection comes only after several days of frustration, irritation, and lack of connection between the protagonists. Some of this frustration comes from their inability to understand the mysterious, transitory landscape they find themselves lost in. After trying and failing to

read maps and settle on a direction, Bea and Lou begin to understand that West Texas lacks the stability of physical and visual reality, an observation which seems of little concern to the locals. When Lou asks a man in a pickup truck if he knows any good breakfast restaurants in the area, he replies, "There's Black-Eyed Susan's – 'bout 20 minutes west of here. They have some fine pancakes. But I don't know if they'll be around today" (67). Lou asks, "Oh, they closed?" to which the man replies, "closed? 'Course not. They're always open" (67). Lou and Bea don't question the man, but this strange interaction suggests that Black-Eyed Susan's isn't always in the same physical location. This is the first of many indications that the landscape of West Texas where Walden has set her character's journey is not a traditional depiction of space, but an imaginative one in which stable roadways, county boundaries, and landmarks may shift, or disappear and reappear all together.

As is true of other coming-into-identity narratives, this story is largely about Bea and Lou finding pathways – though not forward or backward, but toward some indefinite destination in which they can reconcile who they are with what they've experienced. For both characters, traumatic experiences have disrupted their sense of self, catalyzing a coming-into-identity journey that is less about the specifics of gender identity or sexual orientation, and more about reconciling how their trauma has impacted their self-conceptions. As they navigate the ever-changing landscape of Walden's West Texas in search of literal and metaphoric roads, they discover that they're being followed by two men from "the Office of Road Inquiry." Spoiler alert: these men are searching for the cat, Diamond (123).

Figure 2. Tillie Walden, *Are You Listening?* (219). Bea and Lou attempt to escape The Office of Road Inquiry by driving on a still-materializing road toward the sky.

Driving them off the road and into peril, Lou urges Bea to "DRIVE" into what appears to be thin air — that is, until a road appears right in front of their car (see figure 1). As Walden's illustration in figure 2 indicates, the road appears in front of them as they drive, materializing

from the fragmented pieces of asphalt as they progress along their desired path, allowing them to continue forward in hopes of escaping the men from the Office of Road Inquiry. In the top panel of figure 2, Lou responds to Bea's command to "DRIVE" by questioning "how," to which Bea shouts "JUST GO," asking Lou to have faith in the magical materialization of this path away from their pursuers. The road bends upward toward the sky, still organizing itself from fragments of asphalt into a wheel-worthy path as Lou proceeds. Whatever forces are at play here, Lou must trust them whole-heartedly, risking great injury or even death to ensure that Diamond is not captured. As they surge forward, the road remains stable, but Lou's car begins to overheat; they eventually topple over the edge of the road, falling into blackness. Lou and Bea have been separated, leaving Lou and Diamond to find West, Texas on their own.

Bea unflinching trust of Diamond and her abilities comes to represent her developing trust of her own sensations and emotions. Bea believes that Diamond has saved them from the Office of Road Inquiry by creating this road from fragments, but when Bea finally finds Diamond's caretakers, she is surprised to learn that the magical appearance of gravity-defying roadways is not unique to Diamond. "Oh, she's just a regular cat," they tell Bea.

> Cats are sensitive critters. They take the cue of where they are. Take her somewhere typical, well, most she'll ever do is sleep. But out here… Well, West Texas is the perfect blend of giant and tiny. The land, the sky… it's got its own mind, its own heart. She just taps into that. Out here, building a road is as easy for her as rolling on her back" (253-254).

The description of Diamond as a "regular" cat, and cats as a species as "sensitive critters," points to the centrality of sensation in Walden's world. Sensitivity is clearly associated with sensory input; the Oxford English Diction's first description of the word "sensitive" is "Having the function of sensation or sense perception" ("Sensitive, OED, np). Sensitive as an adjective has taken on a multitude of social and political meanings, too, sometimes referencing a person or animal's proximity to intense emotions, or an entity's intense reactivity to external stimuli. When Diamond's caretaker describes Diamond as sensitive, and the land and sky of Texas as having "its own mind, its own heart," a connection is drawn between Diamond's attunement to sensory input and her ability to transform the physical space through the sensations evoked by the mind and heart of the landscape. Her ability to "tap into" the heart and mind of the Texas land and sky model for Bea a way in which she, too, might tap into the sensory experience of this magical landscape, creating her own unique pathway toward recognition and resolution.

Diamond's caretaker makes clear that this multi-sensory attunement of vision/sight, sound/hearing, and (less tangible but still imbued with sensation) feeling/emotion is not specific to cats. Bea, incredulous, responds, "but… if it's not just her, it's the place, does that mean…" to which Diamond's owner says, "of course. Everyone, everything has potential for magic. You just gotta be standing somewhere in the world and in the body that lets you see it" (254). This depiction of the relationship between physical reality and perspective clearly avoids Haraway's God Trick, the myth of all-seeing vision absent perspective. Rather than "seeing everything from nowhere," as Danny's father in *Dreadnought* might be accused of, in Walden's world one can only see *anything* from *somewhere* (Haraway 581). The idea that one

must be situated as a specific body in a specific space in order to access magic invokes the sensation proprioception, or the sense of one's body in space. Although invoked in a context distinct from *Dreadnought*, both writers use the idea of proprioception to advocate for sensory attunement and recognition of marked perspectives. In *Are You Listening?*, this sensory attunement directs the shifting landscape, suggesting that one's thoughts, emotions, and feelings do constitute a physical, visual reality. In this way, Walden imbues sensation with its own sense of agency. In this materially morphing "west," internal feelings become agents of external change, shaping the landscape according to the needs of those who are sensorily situated.

The shifting material and visual landscape in *Are You Listening?* acts as an exteriorization of interiority, reflecting Bea's feelings and creating an agentive relationship between individual emotions and the physical, visual world. After Bea is told that anyone can harness the magic she experienced with Diamond if they are in the right place, she is doubtful. Diamond's owner tells her that "here, everything is listening. The roads, the clouds, the trees… they know all your secrets. Everything you've seen is built by you" (256). Invoking the title, this excerpt links visuality to another sensory experience: hearing. Evoking anger through the use of bold font, Walden writes Bea's response to this idea that "everything is listening" to her: "That's **bullshit**. If that were true, then everything around me would be on fire because that's how I feel" (257). When Diamond's owner assures Bea that everything is not on fire because "if that were the case, then we'd smell smoke. Some part of you is still solid, because, well… everything is still here," Bea is reminded that her status as a survivor of sexual violence has ruined her (257). Creating a relationship between the visual elements

of the novel and the internal state of the characters allows Bea to see that the trauma she has experienced has not irrevocably damaged her creative, emotional, and intellectual capacity. In this sense, visuality acts not as a signifier of a stable, unified, and objective reality, but as a tool for expressing interiority and specificity. When the novel asks *Are You Listening?*, the landscape responds affirmatively.

The depiction of the landscape as always listening draws a sharp contrast to the men from the Office of Road Inquiry, who are decidedly failing to listen. Like Roger and Graywytch in Daniels' novel who insist on their own fixed understanding of gender and identity, the Office of Road Inquiry fulfills the role of the skeptical detractor, representing ocular centric understandings rather than an embrace of evolving, multi-sensory modes of recognition. Diamond's human tells Bea that "the fact that they can't control everything that moves only makes 'em try harder," referring to their aggressive pursuit of Bea, Lou, and Diamond. When Bea asks if she is afraid of them, Diamond's human replies: "I try not to be. Lucky for us, they haven't spent any time getting to know the land they want so desperately. Texas is water. And the office of Road Inquiry treats it like a place they can grab and hold forever" (Walden 255). This characterization of Texas as "water" subverts realistic physical and visual understandings of the land; Texas is not water, it is in fact the geographically largest state in the continental U.S., and the West Texas landscape is largely a flat, dry plain. Yet, in Walden's narrative, the landscape *is* like water, moving of its own accord, resisting confinement, moving in response to the internal sensations of its inhabitants. The landscape is listening, and it changes in response to the internal cues Diamond, and presumably Bea and Lou, offer. Like the novum of the superpowered transition in *Dreadnought*, the listening

landscape which visually constructs itself according to the characters' interior needs and desires functions as a metaphor for the importance of self-determination and self-construction for gender diverse lesbian protagonists. Dreadnought listens to Danny, and thus gifts her with the physical, visual body she so deeply desires; the landscape listens to Lou and Bea, and delivers them safely from peril by manipulating visual and physical reality in accordance with their shifting sensations and feelings.

By creating a relationship between hearing and vision, as well as other sensory experiences like touch and nociception, Daniels and Walden's texts together argue for the importance of multi-sensory experience in facilitating recognition – of both self and other. Their success relies on the embodied and multi-sensory nature of their depiction of vision. In their avoidance of the essentialism and single-mindedness that an over reliance on visual epistemologies may enable, these works of fiction point to the liberatory potential of vision when unshackled from its singularity and reconsidered as a part of a larger multi-sensory knowledge-making structure.

Sensing Queer Family Ryka Aoki's *Light from Uncommon Stars*

In *Light from Uncommon Stars* (2021), Ryka Aoki's protagonists, a transgender teenage violin prodigy named Katrina Nguyen and a world-renowned violinist and teacher Shizuka Satomi, are drawn together through Katrina's sensorily impactful music that transcends spatial limitations. Fleeing an abusive and transphobic father who has threatened her life, Katrina leaves home with little more than her clothes, estradiol, and her beloved violin to seek refuge with an acquaintance. Like many trans youth who are displaced by

transphobic family systems, Katrina engages in online and occasional in-person sex work to survive, and to support her true passion: the violin.[29] Though the quality of her playing is adversely impacted by lack of parental support and formal training, there is an emotive and cross-sensory quality to her playing that draws Shizuka Satomi, so-called "Queen of Hell," away from Tokyo and to Los Angeles to seek out the melodic player. Shizuka long ago made a contract with Tremon Philippe, a demon from Hell, that required her to deliver the souls of seven violin prodigies within forty-nine years or be subject to the infernal flames herself. Aoki writes that Shizuka's quest for her seventh and final soul has been delayed as she "became more and more obsessed with a music playing just beyond hearing," gesturing toward a sensory experience outside of auditory processing that only a certain kind of musician could offer (Aoki 11). While in Tokyo, Shizuka finally senses this music beyond hearing: "Through the din of thirteen million people, and vending machines, ramen joints, Internet cafés, electric trains, and cherry blossoms for each of them twice over, she heard it – coming not from within the city, but from far across the seas. Coming from, of all places, home" (11). Shizuka is able to hear, or more accurately sense, this music from across the world, calling her back to her Los Angeles home. Although she does not initially know that it is the music from an untrained transgender runaway that is beckoning to her from across the planet, it is significant that as Katrina becomes homeless, Shizuka is called to return home. Their meeting sets the stage for a telling of a queer family system that is predicated on multi-

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[29] For data on prevalence and contributory factors regarding trans youth and sex work see: Wilson, Erin C et al. "Transgender female youth and sex work: HIV risk and a comparison of life factors related to engagement in sex work." *AIDS and behavior* vol. 13,5 (2009): 902-13. doi:10.1007/s10461-008-9508-8

sensory modes of connection and relation. Aoki demonstrates this multi-sensory epistemology of the family by crossing music/hearing and food/taste with vision, enabling both Shizuka and Katrina to build new futures.

The focus of my analysis in this chapter has so far been on the ways that transgender and gender non-conforming characters build new pathways toward self-recognition through multi-sensory knowledge. In Aoki's *Light from Uncommon Stars* , protagonist Katrina Nguyen is likewise on a path toward greater self-recognition, but for Aoki's cast of queer and trans characters from all parts of the universe, that recognition is facilitated through relationships – the development of a chosen family. Like both Danny in *Dreadnought* and Bea in *Are You Listening*, Katrina has suffered trauma at the hands of her biological family. Aoki offers poignant multi and cross-sensory descriptions throughout the novel, which both literally and figuratively draw the diverse cast of characters together into a queer and trans family formation, which offers Katrina a sense of stability and enables self-recognition amidst virulent transphobia and violence from her family of origin and cisnormative society at large.

Light from Uncommon Stars does not rely on clear heroine/villain archetypes, and its generic transgressions are fueled by its multi-sensory aesthetics. Shizuka Satomi may be the Queen of Hell on a self-preservationist mission to doom another violinist to the underworld, but she ultimately offers Katrina both training and mentorship in music and the safety and love of a parent. Faced with Hell, Hell's Queen chooses to protect Katrina at her own expense. She is neither a heroine or villain. Through a queer romance with Lan Tran, a local donut-shop owner and alien from another galaxy in disguise, Lan and Shizuka both grow as

characters while confronting the challenges of parenting in their non-traditional family structures. Lan struggles with her relationship with her daughter, Shirley, who is a computer program, and Shizuka struggles with her mentee Katrina, feeling pulled by the call of Hell but ultimately learning to recognize and honor the parental love she feels. The structure of Aoki's novel is complex; perspective switches between Katrina, Shizuka, and Lan, and the larger politics of the interstellar war and coming end-times that Lan is desperately fighting against are sometimes vague, obscured by Katrina's trajectory as Shizuka's next violin prodigy. In this way, the novel combines several genre traditions: science fiction, coming-of-age, climactic adventure, and romance. Despite its various plots and subplots, I assert that the most poignant commentary *A Light From Uncommon Stars* offers is on the importance and vitality of queer and trans connection, cultivated through multi-sensory experience. Through sensorily rich moments of shared experience, communication, and relation, Aoki's work suggests that queer and trans family structures emerge through embodiment and multisensory epistemologies of relation.

It is noteworthy that Aoki's focus on queer and trans family and relationship is centered around a cisgender lesbian parent-figure and a young transgender girl as a child-figure. In context of the historic tensions between lesbian and transgender communities, which also emerge in relation to Danny's TERF-nemesis Graywitch in *Dreadnought*, Aoki's figuration of the lesbian parental unit protecting, mentoring, and loving young transgender teen runaway Katrina functions as a reparative narrative: a true representation of a chosen family. The term "chosen family" is often applied to the support structures queer and trans people develop when biological family is absent or unaccepting, and has been in colloquial

use by the LGBTQ+ population for decades. In scholarship, the term can be traced back to Kath Weston's 1991 book *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship.* Weston offers a thorough study of the circumstances that require the development of lesbian and gay chosen families, as well as their various and evolving structures, power dynamics, and modes of relationality. Importantly, transgender people are left out of both the title and content of the text. I do not call attention to this erasure to position Weston as a trans-exclusionary radical feminist; those who take up the TERF ideology tend to make their position on the validity of transgender identity clear, rather than committing acts of omission. I call attention to this erasure to illustrate what has been a pervasive dividing line between in the LGBTQ+ community: false notions cisgender supremacy have historically produced divisive politics and created communal divisions between cisgender queer people and transgender people. Aoki's choice to bring together a cisgender lesbian parent figure to support and care for a young transgender teen speaks back to these divisions.

The familial love and protection that develops between the queer and trans characters in this novel is nurtured and cultivated through sensation: sound, taste, and sight. These sensory experiences work in tandem, rejecting the division of sensation into five (or more) categories and instead offering a figuration of seeing as deeply embodied and connected to a wide array of cross-sensory experience. During one of their practice sessions, Shizuka is enthralled by Katrina's playing: "*Listen to her!* Just listen. The girl had technical limitations, but whatever. Her perception was easily the equal of any of Shizuka's previous students. A nuance, an aside, a subtle turn in tone, color or mood — Katrina was detecting them all" (129). Here we see Aoki introduce a central theme in the novel: the importance of cultivating

and honoring a deeply situated and embodied sense of perception. Despite Katrina's technical limitations due to lack of traditional training, her perception — musically and sensorily — allows her to "detect" the intricacies and subtleties in her music, leaving an impression on Shizuka that even her most talented past students had not elicited. Part of Katrina's talent for cultivating this immersive and emotionally charged musicality is due to her method of learning. Rather than formal training, Katrina has taught herself to play the violin by studying videos of other violinists, many of whom play video game music rather than the classical melodies prized in the professional violin world. So when Aoki writes "just listen," and that "Katrina was detecting" the "subtle turn in tone, color, or mood," she points toward an artistic and sensory ability that exceeds technical training. In fact, when Shizuka first hears Katrina playing, she characterizes her music as having "echoes of hatred, of insanities, of melodies one sings only when one has survived" (37). This suggests that Katrina's level of musicality is deeply embedded in her situation: it is her experiences and identity that imbue her music with such a unique quality that Shizuka is pulled across the world, to a park in Los Angeles, to hear Katrina play. It is this bonding over a "music beyond hearing" that ultimately causes Shizuka to betray her agreement with Tremon, sparing Katrina's soul and escaping via spaceship with Lan. This description of a "music beyond hearing" stretches conceptions of the senses as compartmentalized and unattached to other sensory experiences, creating its own sort of gravitational pull that draws Shizuka across the world and into a burgeoning queer familial system that ultimately provides her and Katrina with the sense of community and acceptance heretofore absent from their lives.

Katrina's otherworldly playing speaks to Shizuka in such a way that she is compelled to become open to queer kinship, both with Katrina as a sort of child / mentee and with Lan as her lover. Katrina is unable to realize the depth of the bond she and Shizuka have begun to create because, unbeknownst to Shizuka, Katrina is aware that there is a cost attached to her support and mentorship. Shirley, who is a computer-programmed consciousness imported from the brain of Lan's biological daughter who died as an infant, discovers Shizuka's secret and attempts to save Katrina from her hellish fate. Katrina calls for Shizuka to protect her from Shirley's attempt to erase her memory. Here, Aoki reveals that Katrina expected there to be some consequence for the shelter and mentorship Shizuka provides for her: "If being queer had taught her anything, it was that there was *always* a price" (162). Katrina fundamentally understands her existence as one of deviance from the norm, as constituted by its relationship to normative gender and sexual culture; this is why she understands, without Shizuka having named it, that there will be some sort of price she must pay for the transactional nature of this mentorship.

As part of her coming-into-identity journey, Katrina's assumptions about the transactional nature of relationships are replaced with an understanding of the possibility of mutually-desired and sensory-driven connection. Shizuka's choice to deny Katrina the cursed violin bow, saving Katrina's soul from Hell and endangering Shizuka's, upends Katrina's understanding of their relationship as one of transaction and recasts it as one of relation, and of care. Eva Hayward's "More Lessons from a Starfish: Prefixial Flesh and Transspeciated Selves" charts her "critical enmeshment" with the Antony and the Johnsons song "The Cripple and the Starfish" and her identification with the starfish as a trans entity (65). She

writes of the taxonomic relationship between species: “Indeed, species are relationships between species – relationality is worldhood. We are not human alone – we are human with many” (69). For Hayward, her enmeshment with both the metaphor of the starfish as trans and the starfish itself become “sensuously intertwined,” resisting “primordial division” (69). Hayward’s work – and Aoki’s – position relationality and sensuous entanglement as a way of repair; in “making sense of the song,” Hayward writes that her metonymic attention to the starfish and the physical transformations - “generative cuts" - of her transgender body “intertwines a sensate ontology” (82). For Shizuka and Katrina, musicians who themselves make meaning from the sensory experience of music, this sensuous entanglement and sensate ontology is cultivated through a multi-sensory experience of music, and produces a queer and trans cross-species familial alliance that rejects a capitalist mode of relation that relies on transaction as a means of connection.

Hayward’s assertion that “relationality is worldhood” and that the taxonomy of species should be reframed as one of “relationships between species” (as opposed to divisions) is resonant with Shizuka’s understanding of identitarian differences and prejudice. When Lan asks Shizuka, “how can music lovers be so hateful when they find a musician is transgender? How is the person eating waffles with her grandchildren the same one who calls me a Chink?,” Shizuka replies simply: “Too many sections” (313). Lan’s attempt to understand how people united by some common love or practice, like listening to music or eating waffles with their grandchildren, can at the same time harbor such intense hatred, fear, and distrust of racial and gendered others. Shizuka offers her own understanding of how this xenophobia operates in musical terms:

> "One usually learns to play a piece a section at a time. Within each section, the musician will memorize passages, phrases, movements until the sections reach from beginning to end."
>
> Lan nodded. That made sense. Of course you would break a large task into smaller ones.
>
> "And so many live the same way. One becomes a good plumber, or mother, or Christian, or Dodger fan, or teenager. One lives section by section, one stage to the next." (Aoki 313)

Here, Shizuka suggests that the pursuit of success in singular, non-integrative understandings of identity and the pursuit of normativity is the basis for how many people live. This separation, the tendency to live "section by section," to be "human alone," as Hayward suggests, is akin to a deeply categorical and mono-sensory epistemology. Like Roger in Daniels' *Dreadnought*, or the mystery of the Texas landscape in Walden's *Are You Listening*, understanding requires a sense of whole, an impulse to take in information from a variety of sensations and perspectives. Shizuka continues explaining her theory of sections to Lan, explaining how this sectioned-off way of living gives way to a fear of and prejudice toward the unexpected or unknown:

> "But sometimes, sections change keys, tempos. They change moods. Timing… Some melodies don't resolve in an expected way. Some don't resolve at all. So people begin to fear playing beyond the sections they have played out of habit, out of fear. [...]
>
> "However, imagine if one works in a completely different way. Imagine a music with no sections, with every note resonating with the whole composition. Whether it is at

> the end or the beginning - *it does not matter.* [...]
>
> "Imagine what would happen if they could perceive their lives not as separate sections to be entered and left behind, but with a continuous forward, backward and all places in between? [Aoki 313-314]

Shizuka's framing of the xenophobia Lan is struggling to understand relies on a rejection of division and sectioning as a way of coping with the complexities of life, instead focusing on connecting formerly fragmented parts into a sense of infinite connectedness. This sense of connectedness is present in Hayward's framing of continuity in her own transgender embodiment: "There is no absolute division, but continuity between the physiological and affective responses of my different historical bodies" (73). This sense of continuity rejects concepts of wholeness as a finite state and instead resonates with Shizuka's call for a world in which people perceive their lives not as sectioned and labeled but as having a "continuous forward, backward and all places in between" (Aoki 314). The introduction of this intertwined temporality is in direct opposition to the traditional Bildungsroman template, which tends to prize linear temporality as the main character grows from a state of immaturity into adulthood. Importantly, this temporal wholeness and relationality is predicated on a sensitivity to multiple sensations – as Shizuka notes, sections may offer sensory and temporal changes, in keys, tempos, moods, and timing. A lack of sensory attunement might result in a return to familiar sections to avoid the uncertainty of a shifting sensory landscape. In other words, unfamiliar sensations and feelings are scary, and managing them requires not a sectioning off of those sensations as illicit and distressing but an embrace of their uncertainty and difference. The success of relationships across

differences then becomes dependent on a willingness to navigate shifting sensations, reasserting the centrality of multi-sensory knowledge in *Light From Uncommon Stars.*

Aoki's novel extends the continuity and relational thinking present in Hayward's work to all sentient entities, including Shirley, Lan's AI daughter. Shirley's existence as both a character with thoughts, feelings, and sensations as well as a computer program serves as a relational mirror for Katrina, who identifies with the way Shirley is treated as less-than-human, and as a relational connection, offering her a sense of queer kinship outside of Shizuka. As Bassi and LeFleur articulate in their essay on Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminism and gender critical social movements, "In both the avowedly feminist and the explicitly conservative articulations of gender-critical thinking, mobilization relies, in great part, on the ability of the addressee to identify politically and culturally as an "authentic woman," which is itself a particular gender identification" (312). This fraught question of authenticity plagues both Katrina and Shirley in their identities as transgender and a technological entity. Through this shared experience of enduring the leveraging of inauthenticity as a way to negate their identities and experiences, Katrina and Shirley are able to find ways to utilize their own identity-specific abilities to facilitate sensory experience and feeling for each other. This relational connection occurs at their first meeting, when Lan projects Shirley into Shizuka's music studio so Shirley can help Katrina create a video programming software that will allow her to create immersive projections to accompany her online music videos. When Katrina says to Lan of Shirley, "Your daughter?" Lan looks away in silence, and Aoki notes: "It happened so quickly yet Katrina caught it easily. Lan's expression was one she had seen in her parents far too often. Shame" (134). Despite their

different physical and identitarian circumstances, Lan's inability to look at Shirley or affirm that she is her daughter strikes a poignant cord in Katrina's own experience, causing her to recall the many times her own parents looked away from her transgender body in shame.

Katrina develops this identificatory affinity with Shirley, and Shirley provides Katrina with access to an unimaginable resource: the ability to generate images and visual experiences through her violin playing and internal dialogue. Shirley equips Katrina with a recording software that calibrates her "brain waves to the presets," allowing her to "change scenes by thinking about them" (134). This technology is not a simple illusion. As Katrina feels herself transform into a woman in a "glistening jade and rhinestone ball gone" with "bigger boobs," she reflects: "And these changes weren't merely visual – they felt *real* (135)." Shirley explains that the projector "focuses energy from the reactor into a state very close to matter – in essence, virtual mass" which "permits the projections to interact with the physical world as if real" (135). This technology is ultimately "decorative," and the transformations it enables do not change Katrina's physical body (135). Later, when Shirley realizes she can make this virtual reality a physical one for Katrina, she offers to use her technology to truly transform her physical body: "We could reduce your height, change your voice. It would not be a projection. It would be real. And you would still be you, just altered" (Aoki 310). This technology offers something akin to Walden's landscape in *Are You Listening?* and Daniels's super-powered transition in *Dreadnought*: an externalization of internal feeling. Importantly, Shirley offers this physical transformation as an option for Katrina; in Danny's circumstances, her transformation is instantaneous, and happens without her informed consent. Aoki offers her protagonist the option of a physical transition made

possible through science fictional technologies. Katrina declines. She tells Shirley that she would have to "relearn the violin," and that it's about more than just the size of her hands: "It's my body. Everything it's been through, everything it's felt. It's all become part of the way I play" (310). Despite Katrina's desire for a body that physically passes, she has discovered through her training with Shizuka that the body she inhabits is imbued with the unique history of sensation and experience known only to her.

In framing Katrina's decision not to accept Shirley's offer of a physical transition as an act of self-preservation, Aoki's text wades into complex debates about transgender identity and the centrality of transitional medical care to trans life. Much of the current discourse around transgender identity focuses on gender affirming health care, and especially for transgender children and teenagers who are the current target of a number of legislative efforts in the United States to limit access to puberty blockers and hormone replacement therapies.[30] Despite the importance of gender affirming care for transgender people, which we know is life-saving for many and must be fought for on every level to ensure fair, affordable, and equal access, transitional medical care is not a universal requirement for all trans people, and acknowledging the validity of those who choose not to pursue medical interventions is just as crucial for addressing mental and physical health in trans communities. Austin Johnson writes that the DSM-5 definition of gender dysphoria "remains

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[30] For an egregious example of a successful limitation of adolescents' rights to gender affirming care, see Texas governor Greg Abbot's letter to James Masters: Abbott, G. "Letter to James Masters, Commissioner of the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services." https://gov.texas.gov/uploads/files/press/O-MastersJaime202202221358.pdf. (2022).

focused on embodiment as the vehicle of discomfort and distress" experienced by transgender people, rather than accounting for "the social consequences of gender ideology, transphobia, or cissexism" which is also a significant source of mental and emotional distress (Johnson 804). The nuance surrounding debates on gender affirming care has been flattened in current political discourse, which suggests that all transgender people seek hormone replacement therapies and surgical intervention. Many transgender people seek gender affirming care, and many others do not; some of those who do not receive gender affirming medical interventions are blocked by access issues and conservative politics, and many others simply do not desire medical intervention.[31] Aoki's framing of Katrina's choice not to seek a physical transition *could* be read as an implied criticism of those who do choose to pursue medical intervention. This implication is present in the contextual framing of Katrina's choice to decline: "It's my body" could be read as implying that those who medically transition obtain a "new" body that is no longer theirs, and that the lived experiences embedded in their bodies might be disappeared through transition.

Another reading of Katrina's choice, which I want to advance here, is that her decision not to accept Shirley's offer of physical, technologically driven transition is not about her rejection of transitional medical care, or even about her desire to remain in her existing body, but is about her connection to the sensations she has experienced in her current physical form. Katrina's ability to cultivate multi-sensory experiences through her music

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[31] Johnson writes of the DSM's focus on gender-affirming healthcare: "Both the current and previous definitions of gender variance in the DSM position medical intervention as the next logical and necessary step in dealing with Gender Dysphoria. While intervention may indeed be the next step for some transgender people, the DSM's definitions tend to overemphasize the importance of medical intervention for all transgender people." (805)

would be threatened by re-learning the violin in a body with smaller hands and a shorter height, as Shirley offers. While she would still carry the same lived experience of transgender identity if she accepted this technological transition, Katrina clearly feels that something meaningful about her experience in her current body shapes the way she plays music, as she asserts that her lived experience in this body has "all become part of the way I play" (310). Even Shizuka, who is so accustomed to her very directional mode of teaching, has learned that given Katrina's embodied experience, the most effective way of mentoring her is to "let her listen, let her follow" (316). Shizuka initially believed that Katrina's ability to learn through listening and following – a kind of sensory attunement – was due to a lack of formal training, but she realizes that this mode of learning has far more to do with Katrina's embodied experience as a transgender girl than her training history. "Her tonality had been honed by a lifetime of being concerned with her voice. Her fingerings were liquid, born of years of not wanting her hands to make ugly motions" (316). Shizuka recognizes this experience of attention to the movement of her hands and sound of her voice as a different kind of training, once which has imbued her music with a sensitivity that cannot be taught. Importantly, this sensitivity has been cultivated through adversity; Katrina has had to mediate the sound of her voice and movement of her hands because she is transgender and has been rendered vulnerable by a cissexist and transmisogynistic culture.

In rejecting this offer of a technological transformation of her physical body, Katrina's coming-into-identity narrative reaches the important point of self-recognition. As I discuss in chapters one and two, self-recognition (as opposed to social recognition and visibility) acts as a sort of climactic goal in the coming-into-identity narrative. When Katrina

explains her decision not to accept Shirley's offer, she says "besides, I'm already a girl," illustrating her now strengthened sense of self-recognition in her gender identity. This sense of self-recognition extends to the culminating musical performance of the text: the Golden Friendship Violin Competition, where Shizuka is expected to gift Katrina with the cursed violin bow, damning her to hell. Shizuka, in an act of love, decides not to curse Katrina with the bow, and instead sacrifices herself. Katrina, who is alerted to her fate by a nighttime visit from demon Tremon Philippe, attempts to steal the bow to protect Shizuka, and when she plays the highly unusual and difficult music by composer Bartók at the competition, she believes she is playing with the cursed bow. She is overcome with the sensations evoked by the music, and for several pages, Aoki draws connections between the pace and tone of the music and embodied experience. "*Risoluto, non troppo vivo*. Resolutely, not too alive. As how you smile when a stranger spits at you. As how you keep breathing while a friend rapes you. As how you think calmly as a parent is kicking down your door" (Aoki 337). Then, "...*Melodia*. Katrina thought of her mother arranging pork buns and tamales in the big family steamer. [...] She could taste the turkey legs and funnel cakes she shared with her cousins that afternoon at the Los Angeles County Fair" (338). And of the quick-paced *presto*, Aoki writes, "this was the frantic chaos of refugees escaping a war" (339). Aoki writes Katrina as actively experiencing the sensations of her past life, and the lives of others: Katrina's smile, breathe, and thought patterns as she survives abuse; her experience of the taste of turkey legs and funnel cakes in a rare pleasant memory of her biological family; the pace of refugee feet running, frenzied, chaotically in effort to escape unthinkable violence. As Hayward writes of her "critical enmeshment" with the object of her analysis, "The Cripple and the Starfish"

song by Antony and the Johnsons, "Language and music, then, enact a caressing, a sensuous immersing in the ardent materiality of worldhood" (33, 80). Katrina's music similarly "enacts a caressing, a sensuous immersing," shown through this evocation of sensory remembering and relating. The audience feels it, too, erupting into a sing-song applause that "felt like waves of daybreak" over Katrina, continuing "until the audience realized the music was coming from themselves, and it would be there tomorrow" (Aoki 36).

Katrina's realization that she is "already a girl" constitutes one step in her journey toward self-recognition in her gender identity; the next and final step is for her to recognize her talent as a violinist. At the close of her performance, Katrina believes she has been successful in playing Bartók due to the cursed bow. When she understands that Lan helped Shizuka replicate the cursed bow and hide the original, she realizes that "everything she played, every heartbeat she felt from the audience, every second of applause" was her – unaltered, unassisted Katrina. This moment is a climactic moment in Katrina's coming-into-identity experience: it represents the emergence of her own marked perspective. At the core of this emergence is her newfound sense of agency. In realizing that her body, her talent, and her perspective are enough – for Shizuka, for Shirley, for the audience, for herself – Katrina has achieved a sense of self-recognition made available only through her own situated, embodied, and multi-sensory experience.

I began this chapter with a critique of bio-essentialist views of gender that invoke mono-sensory visual modes of recognition and enable trans-exclusionary political ideologies to masquerade as common-sense articulations of scientific truths, like the "sex is real" refrain. As a thinker who is invested in humanistic knowledge, these TERF talking points

have always struck me as overly-simplistic, attending to one facet of lived experience – genitalia, chromosomes, reproductive organs – at the expense of much more complex ways of understanding our place in the world. Complexity challenges ego, requiring the individual who seeks better understanding of difference to hold their own experience as an example, a variation, a perspective, rather than a fact. In other words, it calls for an understanding of our perspectives as marked. Sensation – taste, touch, sound, smell, among others – can offer new ways of engaging across differences, opening up new methods of knowledge-making and exposing preconceptions that thrive when we adopt ocular centric modes of understanding. As Danny, Bea and Lou, and Katrina's respective coming-into-identity journeys reveal, there is great capacity for genuine connection, understanding, and recognition – of self and of others – through multi-sensory attunement and acknowledgment of our own perspective.

Chapter Four: Learning to Speak: Sensing Through Language in Latinx Lesbian Fiction

Each night, Marci Cruz prays to God for two things: to make her dad disappear, and to turn her into a boy. Each morning, she peers down the front of her pajama pants to see if her wish has been granted. Marci is the eleven-year-old Chicana protagonist of Carla Trujillo's 2003 novel *What Night Brings,* which narrates her coming-of-age journey as she struggles with her feelings of same-gender attraction while attempting to survive the abuse inflicted by her father. Trujillo's depictions of Marci raise questions about her gender identification, revealing her lack of access to the language and discourse surrounding queer identity. Despite her frequent prayers that reflect her desire to be a boy, Trujillo's narrative indicates that this desire does not stem from gender dysphoria or some internal sense of gender. Marci thinks, "it's not because I think I'm a boy, though sometimes it sure seems like I am. It's because I like girls. I don't know how or when it happened. Maybe I was born this way, but the second I saw chiches, I wanted them" (Trujillo 9). She follows this statement with "Now, I know you can't be with a girl if you are a girl. So that's why I have to change into a boy" (9). Marci's understanding of this heterosexist cultural rule — that girls cannot be with girls — shapes her gendered desires, and her gendered transgressions. This chapter traces Marci's navigation of her burgeoning queer identity through her speech acts: speaking back to her father, speaking up in the Catholic confessional, speaking to God through prayer. I analyze Marci's attempts to acquire a language of queerness to describe her identity, her efforts to affect change in her circumstances through speech, and her eventual embrace of the

transformative potential of embodied silence as she journeys toward a sense of queer self-recognition not bounded by heterosexist dictates.[32]

What Night Brings has received little scholarly attention since its publication in 2003, but those who have analyzed the novel offer rich discussions of Trujillo's depiction of gender, sexuality, race, and conformity within the Chicano family system. Marivel Danielson's 2008 article offers one of the first critical studies of Trujillo's novel, and describes Marci as trying "to conform to rigid paradigms of sexuality and gender," arguing that Marci initially accepts "a unitary version of sexuality wherein her desire for girls may be normalized only within a male body" (61). Danielson describes the novel as the story of Marci's "fight to challenge the violence, silences, and secrecy surrounding sexuality and difference" (59). My work suggests that the construction of the rigid "unitary version of

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[32] While not directly pertinent to the argument I am making in this article, I want to acknowledge that it is possible to read Marci's rationale for her desire to be transformed into a boy as one which participates in trans-exclusionary tropes. Trujillo's depiction of Marci as only wanting to be a boy because she cannot understand her sexuality outside of heterosexist norms is one of the many problematic rationales for trans-exclusionary thinking in lesbian-feminist contexts. As Jack Halberstam writes of the "border wars" between butch lesbians and FTM transgender people, "some butches consider FTMs to be butches who believe in anatomy" (144). This idea that transgender men simply "believe in anatomy," or in other words, believe in bio-determinism, might elucidate Marci's depiction; if she was able to liberate herself from the restraints of a binary gender system and accept her queer desires, she might not then seek out this transition. I believe this statement is true for Marci, and I do not read her as a transgender character; she even says that she does not desire this transition because she thinks she is a boy, but because she believes homosexuality is an impossible option (Trujillo 9). However, the depiction of a young person desiring a gender transition for what has been deemed false or wrong reasons clearly echoes trans-exclusionary and transphobic ideologies, especially those expressed by so-called "gender critical" thinkers. This context should not go unnoticed by readers of the novel, as the politics of gender identity within feminist discourse communities have caused real harm to transgender people within and outside the queer community across its varied cultural and geographical iterations. For additional context, see the Sociological Review's July 2020 issue, titled "TERF Wars: Feminism and the Fight for Transgender Futures."

sexuality" that binds Marci's thinking about identity and difference is enforced through systems of patriarchal patterns of speech and silence; her attempt to challenge these patterns is made successful only through embodied, sensory approaches to language, speech, and silence. Danielson's article utilizes Emma Pérez's *sitio y una lengua* framework to illustrate the importance of both space and language for the formation of Marci's queer community, but importantly, Danielson frames the importance of space and language as a matter of community, not identity: "Trujillo's protagonist is not searching for herself as much as she is searching for the language and community that will speak to her experience of sexual, gendered, and racialized difference" (60). As my focus on the import of queer self-recognition suggests, I echo Danielson's emphasis on Marci's language acquisition, but I do read Marci as "searching for herself" — and language and queer community are central parts of this pursuit. Marci's process of sensory language acquisition, as well as her burgeoning awareness of the power of agentive speech and embodied silence, are crucial parts of her journey toward a greater understanding of her own identity.

In order to best situate my analysis of Marci's navigation of queer identity through sensory speech and embodied forms of silence, I must first address my invocation of "queer" as a form of self-identification. "Queer" is polysemous, and deployed in distinct and often conflicting contexts. Some of these common contexts include the academic study of queer theory, or queer studies; the denotative context of queer as non-normative or strange; and social and interpersonal contexts where queer self-identification functions as a means of positioning or identifying oneself as non-heterosexual. Queer theory, as Damien Riggs and Gareth Treharne assert in their chapter on queer theory in relationship to social psychology,

"suggests that all bodies and psyches are offered intelligibility through their relationship to a particular set of norms, ones that privilege the idealised White, heterosexual, middle-class, young, normatively sized, and able body" (102). Riggs and Treharne note that queer theory is indebted to Judith Butler's concept of performativity, "the doing of identity that is embedded in daily life that maintains the fantasy of achieving the normative" (103). In this regard, invoking queer in a theoretical sense offers an orientation to the normative. The normative functions as a fictional and always unattainable sense of privilege, the pursuit of which is riddled with failure. Riggs and Treharne also assert the importance of acknowledging that "not all people who identify as 'queer' will do so through an orientation to a queer theoretical critique," and that while such an oppositional identification is possible for the individual queer person, "many people may use the identity category 'queer' as a shorthand for 'non-heterosexual' or as a more general critique of normative gender binaries" (105). These multi-modal definitions of queer as both orientation and identification underscore the complexities of the linguistic landscape in which young Marci finds herself immersed. As a scholar of queer narratives and queer lives, I employ the term with an understanding of its polysemous qualities, attending to Marci's navigation of the term queer as both self-identification and orientation toward normativity.[33] I map the ways that Marci comes to understand the word as

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[33] "Queer" has long functioned as a sort of umbrella term in the LGBTQ2IA+ community, signifying an identitarian label that is non-specific, and therefore less vulnerable to what Annamarie Jagose calls the "exclusionist tendencies of lesbian and gay as identity categories" (quoted in Danielson 59). Danielson also labels Marci as queer, arguing that "since Marci struggles with multiple intersections of gender and sexuality, [...]the broadness of the term queer speaks more adequately to her experience" (59). I offer this context as a way to assert the usefulness of queer as an identity label in light of its contested definitions and theoretical deployments.

a way of identifying her homosexual attractions, and the ways that queerness functions as a theoretical apparatus of the text, illustrating this protagonist's navigation of normative constructs such as patriarchy and the Chicano family system.

The Chicano family system constitutes a major point of analysis for Herrera, Cacho, and Álvarez, and for good reason: the role of the family system is paramount in shaping Marci's understanding of cultural rules around gender and desire. One way that Marci's narrative refutes normative constructs within the Chicano family system is through speech acts: using spoken language to interrogate a preconception or articulate a conflicting opinion — speaking back. Patricia Herrera, Caitlin Marshall, and Marci R. McMahon's work on Latinx theatre and sound studies offers an important way of situating such verbal acts. Referring to "sound acts" rather than speech acts, they write that "doing sound shifts the sonic away from the auditory to emphasize that all sounds issue from vibrating bodies," arguing that their "attention to how vibrating bodies perform interferes with the longstanding philosophical schisms between audio and visual, and between action and reception" (3). While Patricia Herrera, Marshall, and McMahon are focused on performance rather than written prose, I follow their lead by positioning Marci's speech acts as embodied and sensory, focusing on the reception of her speech only insofar as that reception affects her own embodied experience of her queer identity. I also take inspiration from their formulation of vibrating bodies as holding the power to disrupt the "schisms between audio and visual" and "action and reception" (3), and conceive of Marci's sensory speech as disrupting a dichotomous positioning of speech and silence.

As a way of navigating the complex linguistic landscape and social rules and constructs around queerness, Marci uses language and articulation as though it is a sixth sense: she feels around for the right words, tastes them in her mouth and spits them out, hears their cadence and measures their rippling effects, ultimately constructing her own language of identity that speaks to her culture, her queerness, and her material conditions as a child of an abusive patriarch. I use language like "sensory" and "embodied" as a way of describing Marci's orientation toward speech, language, and silence; it is not only that she uses sensory input like sight, sound, taste, and touch to decipher and construct her queer identity, but that she must rely on her own discernment to make sense of her circumstances. Language, speech acts, and silence become deeply embedded motifs in Trujillo's novel as Marci struggles to make sense of her queerness, her family system, and her relationship to religion. The resolution of *What Night Brings* suggests that when both speech and silence are practiced in an embodied, relational, and malleable way, they can each provide liberatory pathways for young characters, like Marci, who have been otherwise physically, socially, and emotionally immobilized by regressive understandings of sexual identity. As a coming-of-age narrative, a genre in part shaped by the German *Bildungsroman*, there is a clear pedagogic element to the text: Marci must learn how to deploy both agentive speech and silence in order to survive and achieve self-recognition as a queer child.

Patriarchal Figurations of Speech and Silence

Marci continually suffers the delegitimizing and isolating experience of silence in response to her speech acts in *What Night Brings*. Despite attempts to be heard through

speech, Marci comes to experience silence as yet another form of neglect — neglect from her parents and other adults who are supposed to hear and protect her, neglect from religious authorities that mandate female silence, and neglect from God, who fails to answer her prayers. Despite the potential silence carries for more complex non-verbal articulations of identity and connection (which I consider in the final section of this chapter), silence in response to speech initially acts as a barrier to Marci's self-understanding, and her physical safety. The lack of reciprocity Marci experiences when praying, the concealment she experiences in the Catholic confessional, and the paternal violence that she endures in response to both speech and silence impede her ability to achieve safety and self-recognition as a queer child. This form of silence is not embodied or a conduit of nonverbal communication; it is characterized by her anonymity and her disembodiment, acting as a reification of patriarchy meant to foreclose possibilities for self-recognition outside dominant standards of heterosexual Chicana girlhood.

The novel opens with the line, "Every single day of my life, I went to bed asking God to make my dad disappear" (Trujillo 1). The non-reciprocal act of prayer is the only circumstance where Marci can speak honestly about the abuse she and her sister suffer, and about her queerness, but it proves futile, leaving her feeling unheard by God. The requests Marci articulates to God each night — to make her dad go away, and to turn her into a boy — go unanswered; neither materialize as an act of divine intervention in the novel, and ultimately her escape from her abusive father is due to her own action, not the will of God, or even a protective adult. The recurring acts of articulation without response cause Marci to begin testing the impact of her voice: sometimes uttering lies or falsehoods, holding back

information or articulating too much of it, testing the power of her words and studying the action or inaction they produce. Marci first tests the relational effects of her speech at a protestant prayer gathering for children. Here, Marci (a devout Catholic) is pressured into accepting the protestant Christ via vocal declaration; if she does so, she is promised candy at the end of the meeting. Pages later, Marci reflects, "Just one day after I accepted Jesus, my dad hit me again" (56). Embedding this causal relationship into the line, Trujillo creates a relationship between Marci's insincere speech act in accepting the protestant Jesus and the dangerous predicament with her father. In Marci's mind, her false declaration is linked to the abuse she suffers at her father's hand, and neither the Catholic nor the Protestant God hears her pleas.

Marci's understanding of what it means to speak and be heard is shaped by her religious conditioning, and this conditioning becomes a vital part of her early relationship to speech. In her catechism classes, Marci pushes the boundaries of acceptable Catholic and Chicana womanhood by asking too many questions about dinosaurs and the history of the earth, until Mother Superior tells her that she is no longer allowed to ask questions "of any kind" in class (21). "If you truly believed in God, you wouldn't be asking these kinds of questions," Mother Superior tells her, insisting that she can only return to class if she promises to honor this "contract with God" — using religion and quasi-legal language to force Marci into silence (21). The nuns of Marci's church reaffirm this religious mandate for women's silence; she asks sister Elizabeth what she would do if she "lived in a house with a really awful and mean dad?" (121). The nun tells Marci, "If I lived with a mean dad, I guess I would pray a lot and ask God for help" (121). The nun's imperative to pray through all

challenges, including that of an "awful and mean dad," supports Alvarez's assertion that "Marci's faith and religious convictions become the refuge from her aggressive father and the violent environment of her home" (690). This refuge, as Marci quickly learns, is predicated on her subservience and disembodied silence. Frustrated with the nun's response, Marci says, "Well, what if you pray, I mean a lot, and nothing gets better. What if this father hits you, then what would you do?" (Trujillo 121) When Sister Elizabeth asks her if her dad is hitting her, Marci lies, thinking "But as much as I wanted to tell her yes, I knew I couldn't. I still remembered our little talk with the Mother Superior" (122). Mother Superior's assertion that a truly unwavering faith in God should negate the need for questions interferes with Marci's journey toward agentive speech. As a girl, as a queer Chicana child, she is to be silent, speaking only to a God who does not respond.

The only circumstance in which Marci's speech is welcomed is through the Catholic confessional, in which the confessor is hidden behind a curtain, disembodied. Notably, the confessional acts not as an invitation to speech, but a directive: when Marci is tasked with her first confession, her mother warns her, "*Make sure le dices todo al priest*" (73). In confession, when Father Chacón presses her to disclose the details of what Marci has called "bad thoughts," she blurts out: "Well, like wanting my dad to go away, wishing I didn't have Miss Boo-chaump for a catechism teacher, liking girls, and wanting to squeeze *chiches*. How's that?" (71). This speech act is a major disclosure for Marci; her desire for other girls is a secret she holds very close, uttering it only to God in her prayers to become a boy. Father Chacón gives a chuckle, and responds, "As for liking girls and wanting to squeeze *chiches*. I don't see a problem with this, except it seems you're still a little young to be squeezing

chiches," (72). Marci is relieved to have his blessing for a moment, until the anonymity of the confessional resurfaces in her mind: "He can't tell who I am. He thinks I'm a boy!" (72). It is later revealed that Father Chacón is engaged in a sexual relationship with Marci's uncle Tommy, so it is unlikely that he misunderstood her in confession; in fact, I read Father Chacón's response as an affirmation of Marci's burgeoning queer identity, a form of solidarity between them. Nonetheless, for Marci, her understanding of cultural rules around same-gender attraction leaves her unable to hold the priest's approval in any other light. As Danielson writes, "Marci's interpretation of the priest's comments reifies her belief that her body is the site that must be transformed, rather than her desires," further emphasizing the lack of embodied subjectivity as the root cause of the misunderstanding (78). What could have been a moment of meaningful vocal affirmation of Marci's queer identity is intercepted by the anonymity of the confessional: she is not embodied in this space, but a disembodied voice shrouded in darkness. Alvarez likens Trujillo's use of the confessional to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's closetedness; despite her speech act, which amounts to a sort of coming-out, Marci's queerness remains very much in the realm of the private and unspoken (Álvarez 692).

Marci's choice to speak her secret aloud to Father Chacón constitutes an important step toward self-recognition, but her inability to accept his validation affirms my argument about the importance of embodiment in speech acts. Judith Butler considers speech acts in the space of the confessional and in psychoanalytic contexts, refuting Foucault's figuration of the role of the psychoanalyst as inheritor of a sort of "pastoral power," a "form of power by which the administration of the soul takes place" (Butler, *Undoing Gender,* 161). Foucault

later retracts his assertion that those who receive confessions (psychoanalysts, therapists) are always imbued with this sense of pastoral power derived from religious hierarchy, and Butler affirms this retraction, describing Foucault's earlier claim as "off the mark" (Butler, *Undoing Gender,* 163). Butler instead asserts the power of the performative act of verbalization by the confessor: "The point is not to ferret out desires and expose their truth in public, but rather to constitute a truth of oneself through the act of verbalization itself. The first relies on a repressive hypothesis; the second emphasizes instead the performative force of spoken utterance" (Butler, *Undoing Gender,* 164). Butler's assertion that the "performative force" of the speech act is itself an assertion of one's truth is significant – but how does anonymity affect this performative force? For Marci, I argue that anonymity and disembodiment blunt the effect of this force. Because the space of the confessional is the only one where Marci is actively encouraged to speak, and to speak without restraint, it follows that her ability to confess her attraction to girls might be relegated to this anonymous, closeted space. Because she expects religious judgment in response to her confession, anticipating that the priest will assert the pastoral power Foucault references, she is unable to experience her act of articulation as one that has been truthfully received.

Crucially, Father Chacón does not invoke this sense of pastoral power in the way expected of him by the Catholic institution or in the way expected by Marci. Father Chacón's lack of negative judgment in response to Marci's confession serves as the starting point for her arc of development, moving toward — but not yet reaching — a place where her speech acts might "constitute a truth of oneself through the act of verbalization" (Butler, *Undoing Gender,* 164). Marci's reaction to the priest's lack of judgment is positive; she leaves the

confessional smiling, and reflects that she "told the truth" and "didn't have to lie," even though she "didn't know what he would have done if he knew" that she was a girl (Trujillo 73). But despite her relief at surviving her first confessional, she does not recognize this speech utterance as a creative act in the formation of her subjective self because anxiety around her perceived gender causes her to believe that Father Chacón's affirmation of her homosexuality is a misunderstanding – that the anonymity of the confessional has obscured her embodiment as a girl. Like the metaphorical closet, the confessional conceals the subject from perception. The expectation that the priest will invoke this sense of pastoral power curtails her ability to experience this speech act as a fully formed articulation of her identity; she does not really come out to Father Chacon because she cannot be sure he knows who he is speaking to. Marci's ability to recognize the power of her confession is curtailed by the disembodied nature of the confessional booth, rather than by any judgment passed on behalf of religious authority through Father Chacón, pointing toward the centrality of embodiment in achieving self-recognition through articulation.

It is expected that Marci would struggle to experience speech as agentive and empowering, given the negative reactions to her speech by her parents. The role of parental figures has been the topic of focused scholarly writing on Trujillo's novel, underscoring their influence and impact on Marci's narrative journey. Lisa Marie Cacho's 2011 article addresses racial masculinities in the novel to argue that "Trujillo's novel pathologizes the Chicano father figure and his need for remasculation in part to valorize Chicana female masculinity and its 'queer' kin, recalcitrant Chicana femininity" (72). Cacho considers the ways that economic oppression and the prison industrial complex has resulted in the criminalization of

racialized masculinities, and questions the ways that the cultural imperative to revalue "queer bodies and female desire rel[ies] on the criminalization of the Chicano patriarch" (72). Cacho uncovers the ways that Marci's queer Chicana identity is placed in opposition to her father Eddie's violent patriarchal authority over his wife and children, and rightfully questions whether such oppositional figuration is necessary in the effort to assert the validity of queer Chicana gender expression. Likewise, Christina Herrera's 2010 article focuses on the parental figure, but with an emphasis on the role of the Chicana mother. Herrera examines the role of Marci's mother as a force of patriarchal normativity, arguing that in Trujillo's novel, "it is the Chicana mother who socializes her daughters to conform to culturally "acceptable" modes of behavior, namely heterosexuality" (18). Herrera investigates the potential of the grandmother to act as a safe-haven for the non-conforming Chicana daughter, suggesting that Marci's grandmother Flor's "message of resistance" offers her an escape from the abuse of her father and a space in which she can exist outside of the normative mandates imposed by her mother (73). Both Herrera and Cacho's articles focus on the role of the parental figures in shaping young Marci's experience navigating queerness. In contrast, I center Marci's own sensory methodologies for traversing her experience as a queer Chicana child. I attend to the role of adults in shaping Marci's narrative – especially the interconnected roles of the violent father figure, the gay uncle who conceals his queerness, the feminist grandmother who provides a safe haven to Marci and her sister, and the paternalistic role of Father Chacón – but Marci's attempt to make sense of these role models through her navigation of language, speech, and silence is the cornerstone of my analysis.

As Cacho's work critiques, Eddie's physical and verbal violence are nothing short of pathological in *What Night Brings*. The severity of his abuse against Marci, Corin, and his wife Delia clearly position him as the main impetus for Marci's desire to escape her home life. Through her developing association between Eddie and the Catholic religion, Marci begins to form an understanding of religious patriarchy as a causal force in her own oppression. When Eddie tells Marci that he will "have to punish" her for eating a slice of cucumber off the table without asking, she thinks, "His voice sounded like God in the Moses movie when he was about to give out the Ten Commandments" (Trujillo 58). Later, her father, unhappy with the dinner Marci cooked, beats her and her younger sister Corin so badly that Marci begins to urinate blood. This particularly graphic depiction of child abuse is steeped in conflicting messages Marci receives about when and how she should speak. Her father yells, "Why do you cook this crap, huh?" to which Marci, terrified, remains silent. He continues, "You hear me? Answer me when I ask you a question!" Noting that her father was "close enough [..] to feel his breath on [her] hair," Marci finally responds to his demand for speech, saying "Mom told me to make spaghetti, and you don't have to eat it" (Trujillo 124). Trujillo writes that "it was as if a dam broke" as Eddie begins slapping, hitting, and kicking Marci (Trujillo 124-125). Neither Marci's silence nor her speech was sufficient to protect her from this outburst of violence – both articulation and silence leave her physically and emotionally assaulted by the family patriarch. Danielson writes that "Marci experiences this erasure as a sense of both invisibility and silence," underscoring the ways that Marci's silence is, at this point in her narrative, a result of patriarchal control (65).

The connection between the traditionally gendered act of preparing a meal and Eddie's violence is consequential. As Álvarez observes, "Physical violence becomes Eddie's way of rewriting Marci's body, and therefore her identity, not only as a homosexual child but also as a *'malinche'* who defies the heteropatriarchal Chicano system" (Álvarez 686). While the story of la malinche has a complex historical origin dating back to the Spanish conquest of Mexico in the sixteenth century, the term is used contemporarily to signify deceit or betrayal and is often leveraged against women who fail to conform to the expectations of their gender, thus challenging the stability of the family system. While the figure of La Malinche is a Chicano historical archetype, the impulse to label queers as traitorous to the family system is not specific to Chicano culture. As Sara Ahmed writes in her work on "Queer Feelings," "the family is idealisable through the narrative of threat and insecurity; the family is presented as vulnerable, and as needed to be defended against others who violate the conditions of its reproduction" (144). Marci's status as a queer child challenges her father's patriarchal control and the centrality of heteronormative ways of living, and Eddie responds to Marci's traitorous assertions with violence, reasserting his questioned power. This instance and severity of physical violence against Marci reifies the precarity of her identity as a queer child: if her very existence provokes a threat to the heteropatriarchal family system, neither speech nor silence can serve as an expression of agency within that system. She must learn to exercise these forms of linguistic agency outside this traditional family structure, one which is particularly dominated by men.

It is important to note that this image of the violent patriarch at the head of the Chicano family system has been reproduced ad nauseam in U.S. film and media, which

Chaco critiques in her article on *What Night Brings*. Chaco argues that because expressions of masculinity by men of color are disproportionately criminalized and incarcerated, working class men of color are prone to the "emasculation trap," in which their "violent remasculating practices often target multiply devalued and usually impoverished persons of color—namely, women, children, queers, and other disempowered men—whose overlapping and intersecting devaluations render them victims of violence but not victims of 'crimes'" (Chaco 73). Chaco asserts that Trujillo's narrative "pathologizes" the figure of the Chicano patriarch in order to revalue non-normative Chicana gender expressions. Chaco's observations are supported by the text: the targets of Eddie's violence are his wife, his children, and his queer brother, characters who embody the "overlapping and intersecting devaluations" of gender, sexuality, and age.

While I am not focused on Eddie's motivations or the social, political, and economic circumstances which may have contributed to his violent abuse of his wife and children, I take note of Chaco's assertion as a reminder of the deeply political and contested role of the family in Chicano/a culture. Richard Rodríguez's 2009 *Next of Kin: The Family in Chicano/a Cultural Politics* asserts that "if there is a single issue almost always at stake in Chicano/a cultural politics since the Chicano movement of the 1960s and 1970s, it is the family in some shape, form, or fashion" (Rodríguez 2). The family is central to Chicano/a politics and cultural production, cementing its role as an "organizing strategy for communitarian politics" in the mid-twentieth century to the present day (Rodríguez 15). Yet, these popular depictions of Chicano/a families rarely account for the ways that queer Chicano/as reformulate biological kinship systems to decenter or critique patriarchal authority. As Rodríguez asserts,

> ...given the fact that dominant masculinities have typically managed the way the family is constituted and enacted, if women and queers are to retain *la familia* and other kinship-based bonds as useful organizational categories, the normative codes with which communitarian politics are chiefly saturated demand critical scrutiny. (14)

Rodríguez aptly points to the radical potential of queer kinship structures to scrutinize – and, ideally, transform – the "normative codes" that enable patriarchal authority and abuse in the Chicano family system and in Chicano politics more broadly.[34] While Rodríguez focuses on the potential of Chicana feminist and queer kinship as a way of scrutinizing these regulatory norms in politics, I argue that Marci's position as a queer child of an abusive patriarch likewise necessitates a form of queer kinship that defies normative power structures in the family system. For Marci, and many queer Chicanos and Chicanas, as well as queer people of all cultural backgrounds, existing as a queer person in unsupportive family systems often necessitates the formation of alternative kinship systems — a term Kath Weston calls "chosen family." Rodríguez aptly suggests that queer Chicano/a formulations of chosen family will likely involve some lingering connections to families they are born into, and this rings true for Marci. After she and her sister Corin suffer a violent attack by Eddie, they immediately call their Uncle Tommy, a kind but repressed man with an obsessive drive to lift weights and grow his body into one which might allow him to continue concealing his homosexuality with an overt performance of heteronormative masculinity. He functions as

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[34] It is important to note here that such patriarchal authority and abuse is not relegated to the Chicano family system; as Rodríguez reminds us, "The connections between masculinity, nationalism, and the family are hardly exclusive to Chicanos and Chicanas. Indeed, their interlocking connections typify a broad range of historical moments, geographies, and cultural practices" (4).

both biological family and queer kinship, as Marci traces his covert affair with their pastor, Father Chacón.

Marci's maternal grandmother, Grandma Flor, plays a significant role in Marci's formulation of alternative kinship structures. One day, she shows up unannounced to the family home, attempting to convince Marci and Corin's mother Delia to leave Eddie and move with her to New Mexico. In a powerful display of feminist ethics, she tells Eddie, "your wife and kids are not your slaves. You married my daughter and you helped bring these kids to this earth, but I got news for you. You sure as hell don't own them" (Trujillo 95). Eddie, filled with rage at this defiance of his patriarchal ownership, attempts to choke his mother-in-law; in response, Grandma Flor flips a switch blade and places it at Eddie's ribs as a warning. When she leaves, she offers Marci her very own knife, gifting her the same weapon she just used to defy Eddie's authority (Trujillo 98). Despite Tommy and Grandma Flor's role within the family system, they also serve as a means of subverting its dominant power structures – they usurp Eddie's patriarchal ownership of his daughters in order to protect them from harm. In this way, Trujillo's novel offers a vision of queer Chicana kinship that is not necessarily a rejection or separation from biological ties, but a reformulation of dominant power structures to decenter masculine authority and control. As Rodríguez writes of Chicano/a and Latino/a communities, "the queer folk within these communities will undoubtedly continue to critically assess and negotiate their relationships with the families to whom they are born as well as to those with home they are joined by necessity" (176). As Marci begins to recast both speech and silence as pathways toward greater agency rather than weapons of institutional and patriarchal control, she must continue to assess and renegotiate

her relationship to her biological family, illustrating the importance of alternative kinship systems as she struggles to survive her circumstances.

Sensing the Self Through Speech

Marci's vocal questioning — of God, the church, her parents, her identity — fails to provide her with the information she needs to better understand herself as a young queer person. Rather than receiving information from a trusted adult, Marci must pay close attention to the effects of language in order to sense out the connotative meaning of the word "queer," which ultimately becomes an identity label that feels appropriate for her. It is particularly significant that Marci articulates her queer desires to Father Chacón in confession; not only does he represent the violent, silencing actions of the church (despite his seeming acceptance of Marci's desires), but it is through the priest's illicit sexual affair with her uncle Tommy that Marci is first exposed to the language of queer identity. First, Eddie refers to Father Chacón using a Spanish slur for homosexual, calling him "that little *jotito* [Tommy] likes" (Trujillo 83). Marci asks what the word means, and her mother responds quickly, "it's a dirty word. Your daddy shouldn't say it and I don't want to hear you say it either" (83), denying her access to its meaning. Then, after the instance of physical abuse that leaves Marci urinating blood, Marci and Corin flee to Uncle Tommy's for safety and refuge. The violence that then occurs between Eddie and Tommy further reifies the already growing relationship between sexual deviance, violence, and unsanctioned speech. Tommy attempts to protect the girls from their father who has arrived to take them home, insisting to Eddie that they stay with him overnight. When Tommy attempts to assert this protective control over the

movements of his daughters, whom Eddie views as property, he begins to use the word "queer" as an insult to Tommy, presumably to undermine his supposed masculine authority. "Now I sure as hell know that no queer can kick nobody's ass. Just because you got a few extra muscles don't mean shit. Because a queer with muscles – is still a queer" (131). Uncle Tommy then punches Eddie, knocking him out, and Marci reflects: "I didn't know what queer meant, but I could tell it was bad" (131). Notably, it is through this violent display of masculine anxieties that Marci first understands the meaning of the word queer as imbued with negative connotations.

Eddie invokes Tommy's muscles as a way of passing judgment on his gender expression; he may look like a man, but according to Eddie's homophobic and heteropatriarchal perspective, his sexual orientation undermines his masculinity. This conflation of gender and sexuality, and its combination with violence, offers important context for Marci's recurring prayer to God to "hurry up and change [her] into a boy" (30). Judith Butler discusses the constructed linkage between gender and sexual identity in their 1995 essay "Melancholy Gender – Refused Identification," where they investigate connections between disavowed homosexual identity and melancholia. Butler writes,

> If the assumption of femininity and the assumptions of masculinity proceed through the accomplishment of an always tenuous heterosexuality, we might understand the force of this accomplishment as the mandating of the abandonment of homosexual attachments or, perhaps more trenchantly, the preemption of the possibility of homosexual attachment, a certain foreclosure of possibility that produces a domain of homosexuality understood as unlivable passion and ungrievable loss. ("Melancholy

Gender," 168)

Butler's assertions offer clarity on Tommy's own complex relationship to masculinity, and his status as a closeted gay man. If we take Butler's figuration of either masculinity or femininity as culturally produced through the "accomplishment of an always tenuous heterosexuality," then Tommy's desire to conceal his sexual orientation coupled with his obsessive maintenance of a traditionally masculine physique illustrate his experience of his sexual orientation as "unlivable passion and ungrievable loss" (Butler, "Melancholy Gender," 168). In this unfortunate social fashioning of gender and sexuality as co-constructive and regulated by heteronormative ways of living, Tommy experiences his homosexuality as a betrayal of his masculinity, and his brother Eddie confirms this when he asserts that "a queer with muscles -- is still a queer" (Trujillo 131). Marci, still unsure of what queer means, only learns that it is an insult, a shameful label. When she considers her own homosexual attractions, especially to her neighbor Raquel, it becomes clear to her that she must become a boy: "Now, I know you can't be with a girl if you are a girl," she thinks (9). As Butler states, heteronormativity attempts to regulate gender so that (cisgender) masculinity and femininity mandate a refusal of homosexuality; Marci, unable or unwilling to abandon her homosexual attachments, seeks this gender transformation not as a way of recognizing an internal sense of gender identity, but as a way of making her desires legible and acceptable in a heteronormative context. This is an impulse that has been cultivated through language, like Eddie's homophobic attack on Tommy. She has learned that sexual deviance is equated with gender transgression, and both are met with violence.

This scene of physical and verbal aggression between Eddie and Tommy is one way that Marci's acquisition of the word "queer" mirrors sensory experience: she learns the cultural connotations of queerness via sensory input, by both viewing and feeling the physical impact of the violence the word occasions. She has no knowledge of the sexual or gendered implications of the term, but she can *feel* its impacts, and takes note of both her own sensory perceptions and that of others in response to Eddie's use of "queer": "I saw my dad knocked down," and "Auntie Arlene had a funny face now, like she was eating something awful" (131). Here, Marci's narration invokes sight as a method of knowing. She sees her father fall to the floor after Tommy strikes him in response to being called queer, and she sees Tommy's wife Arlene make a "funny face," which leads Marci to imagine a bad taste in her mouth as a result of the word being leveraged against her husband. It is through these sensory details, possible only through embodied processes of knowledge-making, that young Marci can grasp the connotation of "queer," learning that it is overwhelmingly negative.

The learned negative connotation of "queer" and its proximity to gender-based violence undergirds Marci's desire to be a boy. When Eddie taunts Marci with gender-based mocking, calling her "a big little man," "*un hombrecito*," and "*a macho también*" as she extends a switchblade toward him in self-defense, Marci grows to understand that gender deviance is associated with insults, verbal harassment, and physical assault (108). It is then no wonder that she wishes God would make her a boy; without an understanding of transgender identity and the various ways transgender people are subject to social, political, and physical violence, escaping her predicament of being a girl-attracted-girl is undoubtedly

appealing. And as Cristina Herrera puts it, Marci understands that "being a boy would give her the culturally sanctioned ability to exert physical domination via violence" (Cristina Herrera 26). This idea is supported early in the novel when Marci says to the reader, "Did I tell you that part of the reason I wanted to be a boy, besides loving girls, was so I could grow big muscles like the men in my Uncle Tommy's muscle magazines? Then, I'd be able to beat up my dad" (Trujillo 15). This rationale for Marci's desired gender transition makes clear that she has internalized two significant cultural constructions of the binary gender system. First, that cisgender heterosexual masculinity is associated with the ability to inflict violence; Second, that those who inhabit a space of gender deviance through homosexuality or women's unsanctioned speech are the recipients of that violence. Thus, her escape from this system of violence hinges on her ability to acquire masculine power. This rigid gender binary and her violent home life creates a deeply fraught linguistic landscape that complicates Marci's attempts to label her own gender and desire outside of systems of machismo violence. The binary that governs Marci's understanding of the world is not male/female, or gay/straight, but aggressor/victim. In Marci's world, speech, like physical violence, becomes an agentive act that is relegated to men.

Marci, being the inquisitive, determined, and reflective child she is, grows determined to move beyond her shallow understanding of the queer as negative and understand the label more personally. Marci's interest in the meaning of the word "queer" represents a turning point in the narrative; here, she begins to unlearn these cultural regulations around who has the right to language. After the altercation between Eddie and Tommy, Marci begins to investigate this new word, looking it up in the dictionary and drawing several inaccurate, and

at times comical, conclusions. This independent investigative process reveals the limits of language acquisition outside of relational learning; Marci has no one to respond to her questions and assumptions about the word "queer," so she must craft responses herself, feeling them out until one fits. She thinks about Uncle Tommy's behavior, and what might make it "different," borrowing the first definition of queer from the dictionary. After assessing his interest in weight lifting, swimming, and drinking wine, she concludes that the only thing "queer" or different about Uncle Tommy is how much time he spends at church. She muses, "Maybe the queer word and church go together, but I'm not sure how" (135). Then she remembers, "There was the time I saw Uncle Tommy in the same confessional booth with Father Chacón. That seemed kind of queer" (135). Without a trusted respondent, Marci is left to sense her way through the word, relying on what she has seen and how what she has seen *seemed* to construct her own understanding.

After concluding that "Uncle Tommy did something bad or too much with the church, and that's why he is queer," and studying the third dictionary definition of queer, labeled "slang: sexually deviate: homosexual" (Trujillo 134), she makes an important connection:

> So *if* being in the church makes you a homosexual queer, or a man loving man, or lady loving a lady makes you a homosexual queer, *then* this must be what I am. I'm a girl. I like Raquel. That makes me a girl liking a girl, which is a homosexual queer. And since I like God, Baby Jesus, and Mary, and they're the church, *then* I must be a double homosexual queer. [...] But then what happens if I want to be a boy. Does that make me a triple? (Trujillo 137; italics mine)

The structure of this excerpt reveals Marci's thought process as she attempts to understand the word "queer" without a respondent. She uses a conditional thought structure, also referred to as an "if…then" syntax pattern, as revealed in the italicized words above. Like her process of testing the impacts and limitations of her speech in varying contexts, she tests her own sense of the word's definitions through the conditional statement: if Eddie is queer, then that must mean that queers are in the church; if what Father Chacón and Eddie were doing in the confessional booth was queer, that must mean that homosexuality in linked to both same-gender attraction, and the church; if she is same-gender attracted and in the church, she must be a "double homosexual queer." Queer, a polysemous term that already resists definition, cannot be defined through conditional statements. Queer's lack of stable meaning is made evident in her final, confused question. But, the accuracy of Marci's constructed definition is less important than her process of sensing out and applying this word to her own life. Her investigation of the many valences of queer constitutes an early form of developing agency around speech, language, and identity; since she has no adult to provide her with a usable definition of the word, she will construct one herself.

There is an obvious religious complication in Marci's understanding of homosexual identity that is brought forth by a combination of her parent's resistance to the church, which makes her believe Tommy's devotion to it is abnormal or "queer," and Father Chacón and Tommy's actual queer relationship. What I want to draw attention to here is the way that Marci, on her way toward a more expansive definition of identity and belonging, had to first navigate the rigid, denotative definitions of the term queer (notably in a monolingual English dictionary). The rigidity and lack of context offered by the dictionary definition limits her

understanding, and causes confusion; it is only through reflecting on actual people — remembering seeing Father Chacón and Tommy together in the confessional — that she begins to understand the relationship between the word queer and her own desires. Through this representation and her manipulation of the word "queer," she comes to an understanding that is meaningful to her cultural and familial context, even if it falls outside popular understandings of the term.

Marci's journey toward greater self-recognition as a queer child is not just about learning to sense out the meaning behind unfamiliar terms; she must also learn to use sensory perception to determine when her voice will be heard, and how she can use it in service of her own liberation. Liberation, for Marci, ultimately comes through directive and agentive speech. When Eddie begins to violently assault Marci's mother, Marci attempts to intervene, but she is thrown across the room and into the coffee table by her father's hand. That is when she notices her younger sister Corin in the doorway, poised to shoot their father with his own rifle. Before she can intervene, Corin has pulled the trigger, and her father sustains a gunshot wound to the back. Immediately, Marci takes the gun and removes the bullets as she hears sirens approach. Delia cries over Eddie's bleeding body, and Marci, in the absence of her mother's leadership and with the sirens "getting louder and louder," tells Corin to pack her belongings (Trujillo 229). As they prepare an escape, Marci says to Corin, "get your coat, and I want you to pay attention to everything I say," demanding that her spoken directions be followed not by vocal response or by detached silence, but by action (Trujillo 230). Through Marci's careful directions to a panicked Corin, they escape out of the house, make it through several backyards and onto a back road to the train station, and in a day's time, they are

relocated to Grandma Flor's home in New Mexico, again cementing Grandma Flor's pivotal role as a part of Marci's queer reformulation of heteronormative kinship structures. It is through Marci's careful directions and her decision to act as an agentive leader in their escape that they are relocated to a safer home life. Rather than using her speech in prayer, and in defiance of Eddie whose response is only ever violence, she instead uses directive language to escape her circumstances and secure their safety. She has learned to sense her way through violent and traumatic situations, and through the linguistic challenges of articulating a queer Chicana girlhood, in order to liberate herself from the confines of the heteropatriarchal family system.

The Liberatory Potential of Embodied Silence

The imposed binary between speech and silence is so often figured in feminist thinking as the difference between empowerment and erasure. As rhetorician Cheryl Glenn writes, "silence has long been considered a lamentable essence of femininity, a trope for oppression, passivity, emptiness, stupidity, or obedience," and it is this formulation of silence that has provoked feminist interventions on the topic of speech as a significant path to power and agency. I do not refute the agentive potential of speech or the importance of women's voices. Rather, I follow in Glenn's thinking that an "interpretative framework of speech and silence" which exists in "a reciprocal rather than oppositional relationship" offers a more nuanced understanding of the role of silence in navigating oppression and identity development. In other words: speech can be agentive and liberatory, but so can embodied silence.

Contemporary feminist theorizing has likewise moved toward a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between speech and silence as forms of power, but must contend with the dichotomous thinking on the subject that has characterized second-wave feminist writings. Sheena Malhotra and Aimee Carrillo Rowe's 2013 collection *Silence, Feminism, Power: Reflections at the Edges of Sound* is one example of contemporary feminist rethinking of silence. Malhotra and Rowe offer an overview of the genealogy of feminist treatments of speech and silence, citing Adrienne Rich's 1979 book *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence* as an example of early second-wave feminist theorizing that positions silence as the struggle "to speak and be heard" (Malhotra and Rowe 11). Other prominent feminist theorists and thinkers, including women of color feminists like bell hooks, Audre Lorde, and Gloria Anzaldúa, have written about the relationship between speech/power and silence/ oppression. Malhotra and Rowe write that "Feminist writers of color have struggled to break the silences constituted by multiple and intersecting displacements: to speak to the shame of poverty, racism, homophobia, and gender subordination in their own lives and in the cultural landscapes in which they are embedded" (Malhotra and Rowe 13). Notably, one such displacement these women of color writers have historically spoken to is the displacement produced by white feminists, whose "efforts to speak for 'women' served to reinscribe the very silences that [they] sought to remedy" (12). These racial dynamics in second-wave feminist thinking illustrate that for many women and girls of color, like Marci, silence *has*

functioned as a form of oppression.[35] Marci experiences this struggle to break imposed silences, especially those forced upon her by the doctrine of the church and her abusive father. However, silence, for Marci and for many oppressed peoples, is not always simply or purely oppressive; as Malhotra and Rowe assert, silence can be "a form of resistance in and of itself" (11). The conclusion of Marci's narrative points to alternative possibilities for the role of silence in self-recognition and empowerment. As Malhotra and Rowe write of the practice and feminist potential of silence, "...we might dwell within the possibilities of silence; we might use our silences as a weapon; we might rest; we might meet one another; we might encounter our shadow and our light within its expansive embrace" (Malhotra and Rowe 16). Like Marci's navigation of language and speech, her embrace of silence in the final pages of the novel offers a rich engagement with sensory experience, positioning sensory knowledge as both a "possibilit[y] of silence" and a pathway toward greater queer self-recognition.

For Marci, there is no stable positive or negative correlation between agentive speech and empowerment, or silence and erasure; both speaking and remaining silent have resulted in trauma, suffering, and misunderstanding, often at the hands of her abusive father or self-

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[35] I position Marci here as a person of color with an understanding that whiteness and Latinidad are not mutually exclusive. In fact, the subject of race appears early in Trujillo's novel, during a conversion between Marci's mother and father. When Marci's father Eddie explains that she is "Mexican-American, which he said 'is half Indian and half Spanish," Marci's mother looks "at him like he'd just said she was part Martian" (Trujillo 32-33). Marci's mother asserts that she is "Spanish," dyes her hair red, and insists that her "nose comes from the conquistadores" (33) while her father jokes that "Miss Hispañola there hasn't figured out that her asshole is as black as mine" (33). Despite Marci's mother's allegiance to the idea of whiteness, the text asserts repeatedly that both of Marci's grandmothers are native people, "Comanche on [Eddie's] side, Navajo on [Marci's] mom's" (32).

silencing religious authority figures. As Martina Ferrari argues in her work on the decolonizing potential of silence, the feminist imperative to give voice to suffered injustices can, for colonized peoples, result in "objectifying or translating them into familiar schemas" (Ferrari 321). In the case of the Chicana lesbian coming-of-age narrative like *What Night Brings*, this might mean translating Marci's experience as a young queer Chicana into speech acts intelligible to heteronormative, white, and/or patriarchal cultures. Ferrari asserts the decolonizing potential of silence: "deep silences eventuate decolonizing avenues of feminist insubordination that at once question our inherited beliefs and struggle to find a new equilibrium without appealing to stable and counter-hegemonic narratives or tools" (Ferrari 334). For Marci, silence initially acted as a force of oppression, leaving her alone and unrecognized. As she develops the sensory capacities to navigate challenges regarding language, speech, and violence, she comes to recognize the potential of silence to, as Ferrari indicates, "find new equilibrium" amidst the forces of heteropatriarchal Chicano culture and the prescriptive ideologies that underpin popular understandings of queer identity.

Marci demonstrates her newfound willingness to entertain the potential of silence when, at the end of the novel, she decides to come out to her new friend Robbie. It is important to avoid positioning coming out as the necessary conclusion of Marci's queer storyline, or as an inevitable step in achieving some sort of stable identity or social recognition. In fact, for Marci, her act of coming out functions more as an act of self-articulation and relation than an attempt to achieve social legibility as a queer person. Her coming out also ultimately introduces her to the transformative value of embodied, connected silence. Upon articulating her queerness to Robbie, Marci is initially met with a terrifying

silence. Trujillo writes, “for the longest time, Robbie didn’t say anything. I started getting scared since I never told anyone before” (240). This fear around disclosing her attraction to girls is echoed in many narratives of queer identity, and is particularly relevant to the Chicana lesbian narrative due in part to cultural and religious mandates of female silence and to the role of lesbians in Chicano/a culture. As both Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa have written, the figure of the lesbian is often labeled as a vendida, or sell-out, to the Chicano family system, and associated with whiteness. And, as Glenn writes, “unexpected silences unsettle us, often making us anxious about the specific meaning [of the silence]” (Glenn 11). So, this momentary silence from Robbie is heart-wrenching, leaving Marci suspended in a moment of anticipation, wondering if her utterance will be met with an oppressive, prolonged silence like that which she experiences in prayer. Marci has continually endured silence and physical violence in response to her speech acts — whether those acts are utterances of queer desire, or subtle defenses of her and Corin’s right to exist in a home without fear of violence or death. When Robbie finally responds to say that she, too, likes girls, Marci is rendered speechless. Trujillo writes that Marci “could hardly talk,” managing to croak out a tentative “you do?” (241).

This moment of shared articulation of queer desire leads to a series of quiet moments between Marci and Robbie. Unlike the silence demanded of women in Marci’s church and in her home, this period of silence represents not the absence of speech but the presence of non-verbal, embodied connection outside of rigid language systems. As they hold hands, Marci experiences a sensation she describes as “really good, like an electric wire running from the tips of my fingers to the end of my spine” (241). The depiction of Marci’s sensation as

electric evokes Patricia Herrera et al's assertion that "sound acts," not dissimilar to speech acts, come from "vibrating bodies;" here, the speech act of verbally disclosing their queer desires enables the physical union of their vibrating bodies through clasped hands, now silent and electrifying. As Malhotra and Rowe write of silence's feminist potential, they "meet one another," and "dwell within the possibilities of silence" (Malhotra and Rowe 16). They sat underneath a tree "without saying anything and watched the sun go down," and before parting, "without a word," Robbie leans in to kiss Marci (Trujillo 242). The depiction of an electric wire again invokes sensation, illustrating the importance of sensory input to Marci's navigation of her own identity and experience. This sensation takes the place of speaking, liberating Marci from the need to articulate herself and her identity, instead allowing her to connect through touch, through a shared experience of watching the sunset, and through a kiss. Here, Marci does not have to explain herself — not to herself, or to anyone else. She is free to be embodied and connected, a vibrating body, secure in silence.

This positive resolution to Marci's traumatic narrative of survival further illustrates the importance of sensory-driven language acquisition, agentive articulation, and embodied silence in cultivating a sense of queer self-recognition. Marci must learn to use her voice in circumstances where it will be heard, but to fully embrace her developing identity and escape her abusive household, she needed to experience articulation and silence both as ways to relate, communicate, and avow her queer identity. As Anzaldúa writes in her introduction to *Making Face, Making Soul,* "Because our bodies have been stolen, brutalized, or numbed, it is difficult to speak from/through them [...] When she transforms silence into language, a woman transgresses" (132). Marci has transformed silence into language, even when that

language is the unspoken language of sensory, embodied connection. Silence then becomes something other than abandonment and lack of recognition, as Marci has hitherto experienced it. Both silence and speech become opportunities for relation, affirmation, and feeling.

Epilogue: Reading the Coming-into-Identity Narrative in the College Classroom

In "Coming-Into-Identity," there is more at stake than simply a reformulation and new nomenclature for multi-ethnic lesbian writings about identity; there is a pedagogical imperative to rethink how identity-based narratives are taught in the University classroom, and how the formation of the "American" cannon is complicit in a devaluation of lesbian identity in all its permutations. As with many questions of pedagogy, this is also a question of politics: what identities are represented when the Bildungsroman is presented as identity's preeminent literary form? What message does the centrality of the Bildungsroman convey to students of literature, especially for students whose identities do not conform to the traditional figure of the Bildungsroman protagonist? What opportunities for representation, reflection, and engagement might be created by teaching identity-based texts through a more capacious framework, such as the Coming-Into-Identity framework I offer here? This project has intervened in this discussion in several key ways: through genre expansion and experimentation, through a rejection of heteronormative and cissexist temporality, and through a focus on sensory aesthetics as a key tactic of self-recognition for multi-ethnic cisgender and transgender lesbian characters featured in these primary texts.

The Coming-Into-Identity framework is not meant to act as a genre category, or to replace existing genre classifications; rather, I call it a framework because it draws together important formal, thematic, and politic tropes in diverse lesbian writing that operate *across* genre, allowing for intra-genre literary analysis and a destabilization of rigid boundaries often constructed around genre. For example, in chapter two, I bring together Audre Lorde's pivotal biomythography *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (itself already an example of

genre experimentation and invention) and Mia Mckenzie's deeply emotional, evocative, and magic realist novel *The Summer We Got Free* to illustrate that even across genres and forms, across fiction, myth, and memoir, there are formal tactics that cohere these texts as prime examples of the Black lesbian Coming-Into-Identity narrative. These include sensory cues that drive intimacy and identity realization in the texts, and main characters whose process of realizing their lesbian identities occur later in life, past the period of adolescence that many Bildungsroman position as the key epoch of self-actualization. For queer and trans students and students who return to higher education at a later age, these narratives upend the idea that one should have recognized their identities at a certain time, allowing for a richer and more evolving understanding of identity development that takes place across a lifetime. In chapter three, I turn to transgender lesbian science fiction, illustrating that even in science-fictional worlds, gendered and racial identity remains a key focus of these texts. In fact, the science fiction novels by April Daniels, Ryka Aoki, and Tillie Walden illustrate the potential of science fiction as a genre to aid in a more capacious and diverse teaching of identity in the college classroom by rendering malleable many of the social and political constructs that limit full exploration of intersectional identities. In other words, teaching identity narratives through science fiction offers thinkers the opportunity to reimagine oppressive systems and ask, who would or could I be in this new environment?

Across genres and life epochs, the primary texts studied here cohere around an important epistemological orientation: sensation and embodiment. Across each narrative of lesbian identity development studied here, sensation, synesthesia, and even the sensory-laden pursuit of a queer vocabulary (central to chapter four, featuring Carla Trujillo's *What Night*

Brings) drive these narratives toward their resolutions of self-recognition. Self-recognition of one's identities does not require or create identity stability or even coherence, but is a sensory and embodied form of self-knowledge that allows one to move from a place of self-doubt to one of self-recognition. This self-recognition does not resolve interpersonal or political conflicts and challenges posed by white supremacy, cissexism, and heteronormativity; rather, it constitutes the character's ability to achieve a state of of rest, a form of liberation that at once performs the important of work self-actualization and enables resistance to these oppressive constructs from a place of self-acknowledgement, rather than resistance to or rejection of the (queer, trans, of color) self. My approach to sensory studies is indebted to its roots in affect theory, which Matthew Arnhold writes "is an analytic of power that takes capacities of affecting and being affected—and how such capacities are written into variously configured theoretical frameworks—as relentlessly political and informing constructions of race, sex, gender, ability, and debt." My work takes this framework of affect as an "analytic of power" and asks how sensory experiences – a central mechanism by which we experience the ability to be affected – can also be used in the service of "informing constructions of race, sex, [and] gender" in a less prescriptive and more liberatory way.

In mapping the contours of the Coming-Into-Identity narrative, I sought to show the political and sensory methodologies and literary forms that allow writers and readers to grapple with the immense complexity of identity in the political and social landscape of the United States. I do not intend to impose rules or to regulate these texts, but to create connections and illustrate the power of sensory epistemologies to navigate intra-communal differences. In his book *Queer Forms*, Ramzi Fawaz writes that the power of queer forms

> "lies in their incitement to produce multiple, competing interpretations of the same phenomena, thereby pooling perspectives on different aspects of gender and sexuality as lived experiences, categories of self, social relationships, or clusters of desire. The great gift of forms is their potential to teach us how to receive, negotiate, and meaningfully respond to, rather than control or finally resolve, the world's fundamental heterogeneity, *if only we would let them*" (339; italics in original)

I see the Coming-into-Identity framework as a part of this larger project to, as Fawaz puts it, pool perspectives and learn to "receive, negotiate, and meaningfully respond to" differences in experiences, especially as those differences attempt to coexist under the identity category "lesbian." If Fawaz's goal of a meaningful response to "the world's fundamental heterogeneity" is a valid one worthy of pursuit within literary studies (and I believe it is), then this must be evident in the archives we mine for teachable texts about identity. An over-reliance of the traditional Bildungsroman form amounts to a centering of whiteness, heterosexuality, cisgenderism, and Western ways of knowing. An understanding of identity as a process unfolding over multiple life-stages, across a variety of cultural, ethnic, and gendered groups, and through a variety of embodied experiences and sensations allows for a more capacious study of identity development. If we are to address the exclusionary politics that produce such fractured and divisive politics as trans-exclusionary radical feminism and white feminisms, we must account for the immense complexity of the coming-into-identity process in the humanities classroom.

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