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Envisioning Queer Racialized Self-Representations in the Americas

Corina Wieser-Cox, Oluwadunni O. Talabi, Rita Maricocchi, and Dorit Neumann (Guest Editors)

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Introduction

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The racialized queer body – especially when it is trans or gender nonconforming – is often the site of violence and misrepresentation. However, it is also a site of destabilization and decolonization when reimagined in literary forms by Black, Indigenous, and other racialized persons in the Americas. This special issue of *AmLit* explores how queer Black, Indigenous, and other racialized writers and artists represent the embodied reality of queer racialized existence in the Americas. In doing so, we ask: "What does a queer decolonization of our homelands, bodies, and psyches look like?" (Driskill et al. 219). This pertinent question, framed by Qwo-Li Driskill,[1] Chris Finley, Brian Joseph Gilley, and Scott Lauria Morgensen, explores the complex realities of Indigenous, Black, and other racialized queer individuals in the settler-colonial states of both Canada and the United States, as well as in the central and southern states of 'Latin' America. It is the starting point for this special issue because the various articles within it center the racialized queer voice in the Americas, specifically by questioning what a decolonial approach to analyzing the representation of the queer racialized body might look like.

Black, Indigenous, and variously racialized feminist cultural scholars and writers in the Americas and beyond have long engaged with the above question, foregrounding conceptualizations of queerness and queer identities at the intersection of settler-colonialism and gender/sexuality. Thus, a reflection on queer racialized self-representations in the Americas must begin with a recognition of settler-colonialism and the enduring legacies of instrumentalizing sexualities in the United States that exist until now. Scott Lauria Morgensen, utilizing

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Mary Louise Pratt's concept of the "contact zone," engages with the question of decoloniality and queer settler-colonialism by "highlighting the critical agency of Native peoples and contacts in which Natives influenced colonists while colonists relied on Natives for self-definition" (22). Morgensen further argues that "modern sexuality arises in white settler society as a 'contact zone,' defined by attempting to replace Native kinship, embodiment, and desire with the hegemony of 'settler sexuality,' or the heteropatriarchal sexual modernity exemplary of white settler civilization" (23). Thus, what is popularly understood to be the current conception of 'modern' sexuality in the United States could not exist without the contact between the Indigenous person and the settler. In this way, 'settler sexuality' can be seen as synonymous with 'modern sexuality,' which is precisely why decolonization is imperative within Two-Spirit and Indigenous queer critiques, as well as in Black and other variously racialized queer critiques in the United States.

To erase Indigenous sexualities and genders is to erase the Indigenous person from the settler state, committing not only genocide but also epistemicide (Santos) and gendercide (Miranda). This is why Morgensen asserts that "Native and queer studies must regard settler colonialism as a *key condition of modern sexuality on stolen land*, and use this analysis to explain the power of settler colonialism among Native and non-Native people" (21; emphasis added). Although Indigenous sexualities exist separate from settler/modern sexuality, the popular juxtaposition of the two (Native traditions vs. modern sexuality) showcases how the settler-colonial state, first, cannot exist without the erasure of Indigenous sexualities because it needs Indigenous peoples to die to lay true claim to the land. Second, the stability of the settler-colonial state is contingent on Indigenous peoples' internalization of its sexual values to produce a condition of "colonized sexuality," which as defined by Driskill is "one in which we have internalized the sexual values of dominant culture" (54). In order to decolonize modern sexuality as well as colonized sexualities, movement towards a sovereign erotic is imperative because "we must unmask the specters of conquistadors, priests, and politicians that have invaded our spirits and psyches, insist they vacate, and begin tending the open wounds colonization leaves in our flesh" (Driskill 54).

Driskill's notion of the "sovereign erotic" builds off Audre Lorde's use of the 'erotic' which is focused on "power, used and unused, acknowledged or otherwise. The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane" (Lorde 53). Thus, the erotic does not simply concern sex or desire, but the *power* that comes with sex and desire. When 'sovereignty' is added to Lorde's definition, it points to the *sovereign* choice of Indigenous, Black, and other variously racialized queer peoples in the Americas and how they dictate what constitutes sex, desire, intimacy, and love. By using the erotic, we can critique the oppression of sex, desire, and intimacy for colonized peoples, for queer peoples, for women, for gender diverse or gender non-conforming peoples, for trans peoples, and for peoples who have historically and who continue to be controlled by heteropatriarchal systems of oppression.

Relatedly, the act of existing authentically and outside of heteropatriarchal, settler-colonial conceptions of sexuality and gender can be understood as a "sovereign prac-

tice" (Burns 28), meaning that the act of existing can in and of itself be a sovereign process for Two-Spirit and Native queer and/or trans individuals. Daniel Heath Justice relatedly believes that, "[t]o ignore sex and embodied pleasure in the cause of Indigenous liberation is to ignore one of our greatest resources. It is to deny us one of our most precious gifts. Every orgasm can be an act of decolonization" (106). The sovereign erotic therefore highlights the joy, ecstasy, and bliss of pleasure that has been stolen from Two-Spirit and Indigenous peoples as well as other racialized individuals living with settler-colonial states who were targeted due to existing in a gender variant body or expressing diverse sexualities that did not adhere to Christian ideals within the Americas. This special issue similarly highlights how modern sexuality within the settler-colonial paradigm as a settler-sexuality can be decolonized and deconstructed by Indigenous, Black, and other racialized queer and/or trans peoples in the Americas. For example, not only do settlers enact a colonial mentality of sexuality, but oftentimes racialized and colonized queer and trans individuals living in the Americas enact this upon themselves because colonized sexualities are systemic, and they are taught through the colonial mentality that continues to exist within settler-colonialism.

Morgensen believes that Two-Spirit activism and its relating theoretical critique "models a decolonizing and transnational queer politics that can disrupt the settler colonial conditions of queer globalism, including by calling on non-Natives to challenge their locations within these power relations and to ally with Native queer and Two-Spirit people's work for decolonization" (193-194). The allyship and collaboration/cooperation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous queers within the settler-colonial state is necessary to contest the historical remnants of colonial language, epistemicide, and gendercide that endure. Concepts such as the sovereign erotic or colonized sexualities are integral aspects of Two-Spirit and Indigenous queer theories that continue to decolonize the settler-coloniality evident within modern/settler sexuality discourse. The settler-colonial state – which can be found throughout the Americas, whether that be through the advancement of Mestizaje in Latin America or through modern/settler sexuality hegemony – relies on the erasure and death of Indigenous peoples in order to exist. Racialized queer peoples that are not Indigenous within the Americas must grapple with this power structure differently, and recognize the imbalances of power that stem from the state that makes them 'racialized' in the first place.

Towards Envisioning Queer Racialized Self-Representations

The formative feminist anthology, *This Bridge Called my Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* is one powerful cultural material that attempts a balancing act between the aesthetics of self-representation and the intersecting structures of power that shape the lives of Black, Indigenous, Chicana, Asian American, and other racialized women. While all of the essays in the volume are generated out of the contributors' personal experiences of racism, anti-Blackness, sexism, misogynoir, homophobia, and classism, and reflect on issues of subjectivity and individuation, they move beyond mere autobiographical poetics to engage with broader social and political critique and envision a transnational and decolonial feminist coalition. For example, Cherríe Moraga, a Chicana lesbian feminist writer and also one of the

editors of the anthology, reflects on both the power and risk of "claim[ing] color" (28), noting that "for most of my life, by virtue of being white-looking, I identified with…privilege" (29). She uses this self-interrogation to model collective, transnational feminist solidarity.

This model of positionality-informed and transversal solidarity is echoed by African American author bell hooks's popular soundbite on the definition of queerness, also quoted in Oluwadunni O. Talabi's contribution: "Queer not as being about who you are having sex with, that can be a dimension of it, but queer as being about the self that is at odds with everything around it and that has to invent and create and find a place to speak and to thrive and to live" ("Are You Still a Slave?", 01:27:35-01:28:00). Two points are made clear in hooks' quote. First, being queer encompasses sexuality but also *exceeds* sexuality, functioning as a broader critique of dominant structures and identities. Second, being queer entails modes of self-representation that oppose dominant structures of consciousness. In one of her earliest essays, "Talking Back," hooks highlights the racial-gendered dynamics of speech, noting that Black girls are discouraged from using speech in the form of "speaking as an equal to an authority figure" (123). This structural silencing, hooks argues, follows Black and ethnic girls into adulthood where they choose to remain silent or alter the direction of their speech. Under white supremacist patriarchy, the act of speaking, writing, and publishing from a speaking subject positioning becomes an empowering genre "for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side, [...] that act of speech, of 'talking back' that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of moving from object to subject, that is the liberated voice" (128).

While this powerful move of "talking back" is embodied by literary and other aesthetic self-representations, Pakistan-born American scholar, Sara Suleri offers a critical interrogation of hooks' notion, spotlighting its limitations and underscoring the importance of not reducing self-representation to the genre of embodied narrative. Suleri argues that "the anecdotes of lived experience" or "the unmediated quality of local voice" should not be a replacement "for any theoretical agenda that can make more than a cursory connection between the condition of postcolonialism and the question of gendered race" (764). In simple terms, this means that "talking back" while empowering for the oppressed, must critically engage with the Eurocentric and patriarchal pattern of laws that interpellate us as subjects in relation to the state and to one another. While self-representation has its "contestatory" potentials, Suleri maintains that it can easily serve as a "fodder for the continuation of another's epistemology" with 'another' signifying both the realism of postcolonial, multicultural, and contradictory laws, as well as the symbolic assimilation into the predetermined "pigeonholes constructed for multiculturalism" (766).

Gayatri Spivak expresses similar critiques of uncritical representational discourse in her influential essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak critiques a conflated sense of 'representation' in French poststructuralist thought, particularly in Deleuze's and Guattari's theories of power and subjectivity, by questioning the assumption that the working class can fight their oppression and reclaim power simply by accessing their prediscursive desire and acting upon said desire. Spivak makes a distinction between two senses of 'representation'

i.e., "representation as 'speaking for,' as in politics, and representation as 're-presentation,' as in art or philosophy," and argues that the role of ideology in constructing the Western intellectual class as the master narrator of knowledge can allow for a linear relationship between the two senses, wherein the subaltern being represented (spoken for) leads to being re-presented (depicted) (*Can the Subaltern Speak?* 28). An attention to the structure of ideology or discourse and "[t]he critique of ideological subject-constitution within state formations and systems of political economy" as well as "the active theoretical practice of the 'transformation of consciousness'" can however permanently discontinue this relationship (28). In essence, representation, as Spivak argues, concerns not necessarily, "'Who should speak?'" but instead "'Who will listen?" (*Question of Multiculturalism* 59). With this reasoning, she moves to show that the power imbalances in representation are not solely about who and what is represented, but about the discursive practices and "representationalist realism" (*Can the Subaltern Speak?* 27) that foreground the phenomenological knowledge of the subaltern subject, who exists outside the intersecting networks of material and discursive power.

What this means for the representation of queerness and queer gender and sexuality is that it cannot solely focus on aesthetic expressions. It must remain attentive to the settler-colonial discourse that enlivens the space between the reality of colonized sexualities and queer representation. In engaging with the self-representations of queer racialized subjects, all of these feminist polemics frame the keywords of our special issue as we examine how queer Black, Indigenous, and other racialized creators and writers, given to existing at the most periphery of inter and intra discourse and imposed upon by the limits of Western gendered vocabulary in queer discourse, make visible the diverse and complex consciousness of queer racialized identities in the Americas. The following questions thus arise in our engagement with the nexus of queer racialized self-representations in the Americas: How are queer bodies dehumanized through both racialization and heteropatriarchy? Why are modes of self-representation important within the context of queer liberation/personhood in the Americas? What role does literature, an overarching structure of representation, play in the writing of queer and trans bodies in the context of settler-colonialism? How might literature serve as a catalyst for moving beyond a politics of visibility and representation toward modes of engagement grounded in revolution and liberation? This special issue of *AmLit* seeks to answer these questions. It is the second installment of publications that arose out of the 2023 Postgraduate Conference of the Association for Anglophone and Postcolonial Studies titled, "Queering Postcolonial Worlds." With an interest in how marginalized writers respond to the ongoing legacies of settler-colonialism in the Americas, this issue centers critical readings of marginalized literatures that subvert and disrupt dominant subjectivities. The contributions therefore span a diverse cultural range, engaging Chicanx, Black American, Vietnamese, and Cuban texts that center queer life, desire, love, and intimacy.

The first article of this special issue, titled "Queering the Macho: Sexuality and Hegemonic Masculinity in Queer Chicanx Poetry" by Tilo Böhme, explores the intersection between machismo and homosexuality in queer Chicanx poetry. Through the works of var-

ious queer Chicanx poets, Böhme examines how their voices reclaim and redefine machismo – a form of hegemonic masculinity that is predominant in Latinx cultures due to settler-colonial impositions of heteropatriarchy. He primarily argues that the poems "develop a gay macho persona" which then "breaks conceptions of homosexuality as the opposite of machismo" (14). Böhme contends that the hybridity of homosexuality and machismo within these texts allows the queer Chicanx writers and poets to reclaim their power because they work *with* hegemonic ideals of masculinity *alongside* their queerness, ultimately overturning these same power structures that control them within Chicanx culture. Böhme thus concludes that the image and conception of the "gay macho" transforms traditional conceptions of masculinity within Chicanx culture.

Following Böhme's article, Oluwadunni O. Talabi's contribution "Queer Black Feminist Self-Poetics in Toni Morrison's *Sula*" turns from a focus on queer masculinity to an investigation of queer Black feminist self-hood in Morrison's second novel *Sula* (1973). Talabi begins by identifying a lack of critical attention to Morrison's use of queer self-poetics in the novel, demonstrating the need to combine queer and Black feminist approaches in her reading of *Sula*. In her careful analysis, Talabi considers the novel's setting "the Bottom," its female characters as they exist in relation to Sula, and Sula herself. This analysis convincingly argues against a reading of Sula's life as unfulfilling (hooks 1995; Nigro 1999; Page 1999) and instead underscores the ways in which Sula disrupts the phallogocentrism of the Black community within the context of the multiple systemic oppressions she faces. Talabi's contribution ultimately takes seriously the need to queer established readings of canonical Black texts and attend to "the messy histories of the Black community" within queer feminist scholarship (46).

Maintaining a focus on queer Black feminist scholarship and Black American literature, Dorit Neumann's article "'You Cannot Escape Specters': The Hauntology of Blackness and Queer Performativities in Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half*" uses a hauntological lens to read queer Black women's trans and drag practices of passing, acting, and performing in *The Vanishing Half* (2020). Similar to *Sula*, Bennett's narrative is also predicated on the escape from and return to a small town, this time the Louisiana town of Mallard, founded on the ideal of lightness. Through a close reading attuned to the motif of haunting, performativity and (in)visibility, and oceanic kinship, Neumann illustrates how the numerous hauntings the characters experience and their differing responses are strategies of self-representation that alternatively yield "liberation and kinship" as well as "alienation and loneliness" (51). Reading Bennett's novel in a web of intertexts of 20th century American literature, including Kate Chopin's "Désirée's Baby," Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, and Sarah Wright's *This Child's Gonna Live*, Neumann's contribution offers synergies with Black American and Southern American literary canons that reveal an ongoing Black feminist literary engagement with the haunting intersections of patriarchy and white supremacy in the United States.

Also centering on the themes of (female and homosexual) visibility and invisibility, Lena Falk's article "(In)Visibilities of Female Same-Sex Desire in Marilyn Bobes' Short Story 'Somebody Has to Cry,'" considers queer (self-)representations in the context of post-Soviet

Cuba, interrogating persisting Spanish-Catholic colonial influences on the lived realities and representations of queer Cubans in the late twentieth century. After providing a valuable overview of the historical and political context shaping queerness and sexuality in Cuba, this article's analysis explores how the queer female protagonist in "Somebody Has to Cry" (originally "Alguien Tiene Que Llorar") is marginalized even after her death in a society shaped by machismo, marianismo, and ideals of heterosexuality and masculinity. Falk demonstrates how a fragmented narrative structure and narrative perspective are used to mirror the legal and cultural contexts that erase and disempower lesbian women in particular, as the short story (re)constructs its protagonist's life through silences, ambivalence, and the perceptions of other characters, while an account of herself remains absent. The article thus reflects both on the role of latent colonial legacies influencing homophobia as well as on formal and narratological ways of representing them in fiction.

The special issue concludes with Anne Stellberger's article titled, "Queer Orientation and Space in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*" which essentially returns to Gayatri Spivak's idea that one should not focus on 'who can speak' but instead, 'who will listen.' Stellberger argues that Vuong's novel raises this question by centering on the idea of whose stories are actually centered and *heard*. Her article examines how the novel engages with storytelling – and retelling – in order to destabilize U.S. American conceptions and narratives of war by offering diverse perspectives of Vietnamese immigrants through the characters of Little Dog, his mother, and grandmother. Stellberger analyzes the novel through Sara Ahmed's approach of "orientation as spatial," which she argues, "orients readers towards a different experience and story of space, namely the U.S. nation-state, realms of trauma and home, and the embodied resistance, agency, and self-representation of the protagonist" (92).

Ultimately, what all five contributions of this special issue work to deconstruct are the hegemonic power structures that continue to colonize and oppress queer and gender non-conforming racialized individuals within the Americas. The contributors do so not only by *listening*, as Spivak argues, but also by highlighting how the authors of these self-representational texts choose to curate different realities for themselves or for their characters beyond the heteropatriarchal power structures that continue to confine them.

Notes

[1] On October 25, 2023, the North Carolina based Tribal Alliance Against Frauds called for the removal of Qwo-Li Driskill from their position as professor of Gender and Sexual Studies & Queer Studies in OSU's College of Liberal Arts due to falsely claiming Cherokee and Lenape identity. Both nations have not claimed Driskill, even after the call for their removal from the university came about. The call also follows another complaint from "seven graduate students" who "submitted a nine-page letter to faculty leaders and Dr. Larry Rodgers, OSU's dean of liberal arts, accusing Driskill of 'biased and abusive behavior towards graduate students and graduate employees'" (Jaquiss). These accusations are important to acknowledge, especially within Indigenous North American studies, which is why we would like to highlight this case regarding Driskill and acknowledge the erasure and settler-colonial violence that occurs through falsely claiming Indigenous identity. The work done by Driskill regarding

Notes

the sovereign erotic and queer Indigenous studies has often been lauded as "groundbreaking," since it carved a pathway for other queer Indigenous theorists, writers, and creators in the Americas (and specifically in the North American context). Because of this, we hesitantly continue to cite and use Driskill's works (much of which are collaborative with Indigenous theorists and writers) because they are integral within the studies of settler-colonialism and Indigenous queer sexualities in North America.

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Biographies

Corina Wieser-Cox was born and raised on the Mexico-US border in Brownsville, Texas and is a Mestize* Mexican American. Their MA thesis titled "Brujeria in the Borderlands: Portrayals of Mexican American Witchcraft in Hollywood Horror Films" won the GAPS Graduate Award in May 2021 and the Bremer Studienpreis in March 2022. It is to be published as a monograph with Peter Lang Verlag in 2026. Cori is currently a PhD candidate and research assistant at U Bremen and their dissertation is titled "We're Trans, We're Queer, and We're Here: Decolonizing Mexican and Chicanx Queer Cinema." Cori is currently co-editor of COPAS (Current Objectives of Postgraduate American Studies), co-edited *The Routledge Handbook of Indigenous Cinema* in 2024 with Kerstin Knopf, WG Pearson and Ernie Blackmore, and is the executive director of INPUTs – Institute for Postcolonial and Transnational Studies at the University of Bremen.

Biographies

Oluwadunni O. Talabi is a postdoctoral researcher at the Chair of North American and Postcolonial Literary and Cultural Studies, and the Executive Director of the Bremen Institute of Canadian and Québec Studies at the University of Bremen, Germany. Her research and teaching focus on Black studies, queer theory, critical futures, and counter-discourses of the modern subject. She completed her PhD in 2023 at the University of Bremen and in 2022 was a visiting scholar at the African American and Black Diaspora Studies Department, Boston University, USA. Her first monograph *Woman, African, Other: Black Feminism and Intersectionality in the Contemporary Works of African Diasporic Women* was published by Transcript in 2025.

Rita Maricocchi is a researcher and lecturer for English, Postcolonial, and Media Studies at the University of Münster, Germany. She is currently completing a PhD thesis on representations and translations of German colonial memory in contemporary anglophone texts. Her work has been published in *Atlantic Studies: Global Currents, Kairos: A Journal of Critical Symposium*, and the edited collections *Ruptured Commons* (John Benjamins, 2024) and *Participation in Postcolonial Wor(l)ds: Literatures for, on, or against the Global Literary Market* (Routledge, forthcoming). She is co-editor of *Queering Postcolonial Worlds* (special issue of gender forum, 2024) with Dorit Neumann, Oluwadunni O. Talabi, and Corina Wieser-Cox and *Queer Graphic Diasporas* (In Focus dossier in Journal of Cinema and Media Studies, forthcoming) with yashka Chavan and Felipe Espinoza Garrido.

Dorit Neumann is a PhD candidate, lecturer, and Research Associate at the Chair of English, Postcolonial, and Media Studies at the University of Münster, Germany, where she is completing a PhD on "Black British Hauntologies: Hauntings of Empire in Black British Literature." Her work places in relation hauntological concepts, Black studies, cultural memory studies, and theories of the oceanic to inquire how their interplay enables new forms of remembrance of transatlantic slavery as well as liberating visions of the future in contemporary Black British writing. Together with Rita Maricocci, Oluwadunni O. Talabi, and Corina Wieser-Cox, she is co-editor of the special issues *Envisioning Queer Racialized Self-Representations in the Americas* (AmLit, 2026) and *Queering Postcolonial Worlds* (gender forum, 2025). She is also an advisory board member of the German Association of Anglophone Postcolonial Studies (GAPS).

Queering the Macho:
Sexuality and Hegemonic Masculinity in Queer Chicanx Poetry

Tilo Böhme
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Abstract

This paper looks at the intersection of *machismo* and homosexuality presented in queer Chicanx poetry. *Machismo* is the concept of a hegemonic masculinity that is usually associated with hypermasculine Latinos. In a reading of queer Chicanx poetry by Francisco X. Alarcón, Lorenzo Herrera y Lozano, Joseph Delgado, Pablo Miguel Martínez, and Eduardo C. Corral, I discuss how queer poetic voices reclaim and redefine *machismo* to empower themselves. Thereby, the poems develop a gay *macho* persona that breaks conceptions of homosexuality as the opposite of *machismo*. In Delgado's poetry, queer subjects use dominant sexual behavior and masculine-defined stylization of the body to pursue power over those who oppress them. Poets like Corral incorporate historical implications of an idealized '*Mestizo* masculinity' with comparisons to charros – Mexican horsemen – and allusions to Aztec warriors, thus playing with ideals that are deeply rooted in mythology and history. The gay *macho* symbolizes a queer Chicanx hope for an eventual reconciliation between traditional and queer features of masculinity. This hybrid of homosexuality and machismo allows queer individuals a strategy to regain power since they still fulfill other masculine ideals despite their stigmatized deviation from heterosexuality. However, it may enforce internalized homophobia or notions towards misogynist and patriarchal ideologies. This tension between a subversive act of queering traditional, constrictive masculine roles and navigating those same social norms is a crucial struggle of queer individuals having to exist in patriarchal structures. Ultimately, this paper concludes that traditional masculinities and their harmful, toxic practices are challenged through the emergence of the gay *macho* as a 'new masculinity' that diversifies performances of masculine dominance to reclaim power for queer individuals.

Keywords Chicanx; Gender; Masculinity; Mexican American; Poetry; Queer; Sexuality.

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Introduction

mi padre	my father
y yo nos	and I greet
saludamos	each other
cautelosos	cautiously
como si	as if
selláramos	sealing
una tregua	a truce
en un campo	on a
de batalla	battlefield
nos sentamos	we sit down
a comer como	to eat like
dos extraños	two strangers
yo sé que	yet I know
en el fondo	beneath it all
él también	he too
desecha	rejects
ese mal	that affliction
esa locura	that folly
esa pesadilla	that nightmare
llamada	called
hombre	man

(Alarcón, *Body in Flames* 34-35)

This poem by Francisco X. Alarcón conveys an oppressively tense mood that does not get lost in its English translation. A father and his child – possibly a son – are sitting down to share a meal and then the persona reflects that their father shares the same affliction toward "man" as they do. "Man" can be understood as either 'male' or 'human'. The poem has later reappeared in another collection, where the last word in both the translation and original is replaced by "macho" (Alarcón, *From the Other Side of Night* 35) thus removing the ambiguity while simultaneously shifting toward a more specific 'type' of man. The awkwardness of the situation, this cautious greeting, alludes to something deeper than just misanthropy. What is the "it" in "beneath it all" or the 'core' if we were to translate "el fondo" literally? It could be a mask or a shell, keeping in that aversion. Then again, a mask seems too stagnant. It is rather a performance. The performance of a man; of manhood. Masculinity.

Patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity are prevalent issues in the literature of Mexican Americans. Here, the *macho* is one of the most readily available tropes of Latino masculinity. Carlos Ulises Decena offers the following definition:

> *Machismo* refers to behaviors and attitudes of men whose masculinity is defined in and through the exercise of power over others. Manifestations of machismo [...] included hypermasculine styles of self-presentation, authoritarianism, possessiveness, aggressiveness, propensity to psychological or physical abuse, and so on. (181)

Male dominance is rooted in Mexican cultural constructions with both the Malinche and Virgen de Guadalupe narratives[1] which do not only present the picture of a woman who must submit to sexual repression in Malinche's case but also be servile and modest as the Virgen (Zavella 229). Nevertheless, according to Patricia Zavella, studies on Chicanx sexuality confirm the importance of Catholic repression but ignore the different regional variations of this cultural configuration, including the United States where many Chicano gay men and Chicana lesbians have openly contested such interpretations and gendered scripts in order to dismantle Mexican homophobia and heterosexism (229).[2]

Machismo, as Américo Paredes explains, is related to the Malinche story, as the origins of the Spanish conquest of Mexico caused the *mestizos* – sons of the Aztec women and Spanish conquistadors – to develop an anger towards their parents and to adopt traits such as "the outrageous boast, a distinct phallic symbolism, the identification of the man with the male animal, and the ambivalence toward women – varying from an abject and tearful posture to brutal disdain" (330). Mexican *machismo* is an ancient concept, and nowadays, it still finds strong expression in Mexican folklore and folk songs (Paredes 330).

Chicana women face the paternalistic and exclusionary consequences of the celebrated *machismo* and male heroic activity within their movement, which has resulted in the emergence of Chicana activism and literary production in response (Jacobs 2). Queer men, however, have both benefited from the privileges and suffered from the expectations that their 'male identity' holds. Yet, *machismo* is not a concept that easily applies to them, as becomes palpable through Alarcón's revised poem, where the *macho* is a nightmarish affliction (Alarcón, *From the Other Side of Night* 35).

This two-sidedness of benefits and precarity leads Aída Hurtado and Mrinal Sinha to argue, as the title of their publication alludes, for masculinities 'beyond *machismo*.' They recognize the persistent narrative of machismo and sexism as a defining aspect of Latino cultures. However, they insist that these notions of Latino *machismo* need to be challenged since "a combination of education, life experiences, and exposure to feminist ideas has contributed to changes in norms, values, and perceptions" (Hurtado and Sinha xi).

Then, if we consider the plurality of masculinities, the concept of *machismo*, which might be perceived as the hegemonic masculinity within Latinx masculinities, is only one of those gender constructions. Certainly, the *macho* is by default heterosexual. Still, if machismo is as persistent and influential as it is made out to be, then there must be non-het-

erosexual masculinities that possess *macho* features. Consequently, *machismo* potentially reaches a queer state in which homosexual men can reclaim a dominant space for themselves and eventually alter that space in the process.

This negotiation of masculinity in the Mexican American borderlands is found in Queer Chicanx poetry. This paper, therefore, analyzes the work of five different poets: Francisco X. Alarcón, Lorenzo Herrera y Lozano, Joseph Delgado, Pablo Miguel Martínez, and Eduardo C. Corral. The introductory poem gives an idea of how Alarcón's poetry evokes a lot of tension while, but not despite, using a simplicity in structure and language. His body of work is comparatively more subtle in its treatment of the topic of sexuality. Still, it deals with the conflict between queerness and ethnicity but more importantly with their suggested eventual reconciliation.

Herrera y Lozano's work explores the desires of queer Chicanos but also their place in the presence of homophobia and racism. Some of the most prevailing features of his poetry are the links to childhood experiences as well as Mexican and American pop culture. In *Amorcito Maricón*, Spanish often features in the titles of his poems or as identity markers of any sort, such as "jotos" (Herrera y Lozano 9), "aztlanteros" (57), and "tejano" (70), seemingly to reclaim space for ethnic and queer identities in a mostly anglophone poetry.

Delgado's collection of poems titled *Ditch Water* creates the space of a harsh desert with beating winds and heat, while its residents face daily struggles such as alcoholism, drug abuse, domestic violence, and poverty. The same male-identified persona seems to remain throughout the poems, creating a continuity. Most prevalent are the lyrical subject's unconcealed descriptions of sexual interactions with other men while using body parts as metaphors often engaging with the desert and dirt. Thus, the language is vulgar at times but continuously metaphorical while Delgado does not refrain from breaking up conventional structures. He leaves spaces in between the words and lines creating different senses from narrowness to disorder.

Among many other aspects, Martínez' poetry is concerned with the rights and protection of LGBTIQ+ and Latinx people and covers a wide range from somber scenes to uplifting calls for activism. In *Brazos, Carry Me*, different from most queer Chicanx writers featured in this paper, Martínez has included the perspective of female personas. His geographical mappings and creations of spaces that intertwine spiritual, historical, and contemporary aspects, as well as his queer twist on what often reminds of the style of sentimental poetry, make up an intriguing poetic voice.

In Corral's *Slow Lightning*, each poem takes a different form. Some drastically change their spacing to fill out an entire page with a few words, while others are almost crammed into a small rectangular shape. Brutal desert imagery, memories of family, and sexual acts are among many different aspects that all amount to a direct proclamation of ethnicity and sexuality. All the poems construct different representations of masculinity which depict various effects on men, ranging from privilege to precariousness. And here emerges, as I coin in this paper, the gay *macho*. I argue that the gay *macho* persona reclaims and redefines *machismo* to become a tool to empower oneself.

Masculinities and Poetry

Men have often been rendered invisible, and thus genderless, due to their privilege.[3] This occurs in a patriarchy, a society in which both men and women participate, and which promotes male privilege through male dominance. In patriarchal societies, masculinity is therefore 'othered' from femininity, and is defined as "strong, competent and in control" (Spieler 26), while the concept of the female subject is consequently "weak, emotional, incompetent, and helpless" (26). Despite historical configurations of masculinity, such as varying norms for dress and behavior, power has remained strongly tied to the masculine idea (24). This crucial correlation of power and masculinity is deeply embedded in hegemonic masculinity.

This concept of hegemonic masculinity describes the social ascendancy of certain males over other genders and subordinated masculinities, which are most frequently those who move away from a heterosexual norm (Connell, *Gender and Power* 186). In Michael Mangan's words:

> Hegemonic masculinity is that form or model of masculinity which a culture privileges above others, which implicitly defines what is 'normal' for males in that culture, and which is able to impose that definition of normality upon other kinds of masculinity. (13)

Further in his argumentation, Mangan notes that the nature of this most privileged masculinity is paradoxical as each historical era constructs a new version of it (13), which aligns with the abovementioned historical configurations of masculinity. Other masculinities that do not fit this culturally 'favored' model cannot fully access this privilege.

Masculinity as a gendered construct in general can be considered hegemonic (Reeser 19) and subsequently, all men benefit from the subordination of women, which does not mean that hegemony translates to acting particularly offensive to women (Connell, *Gender and Power* 187). As other forms of masculinity persist alongside hegemonic masculinity, the latter does not have to be the most common form in a society despite signaling the position of cultural authority and leadership (Connell, *Masculinities* 44). Due to its high public exposure in the media, hegemonic masculinity is constructed as the ideal form (Harris 17). This cultural ideal does not have to correspond entirely with actual people, which is why fictional figures – such as literary characters – are often created as models of masculinity (Connell, *Gender and Power* 184). In queer poetry, then, such models are experimented with and subverted.

In his oft-quoted "Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet," Michael Warner states that 'queer' can represent a "resistance to regimes of the normal" (16) and "confront the default heterosexuality of modern culture" (16). I argue that queer Chicanx poetry enacts such a resistance to the so-called regimes of the normal. Especially here, we encounter a considerable number of poems that directly reflect upon masculinity, as is the case in the introductory poem by Alarcón.

Literature and other media have often reinforced what Peter F. Murphy refers to as "[m]yths of masculinity" (1). By using male sexuality as a vantage point, he also provides a reason for why other images of men have not been as widespread. He even labels this as

"men's traditional silences about their sexuality" (Murphy 2). A revision of masculinity is only possible, he argues, if men interrogate their own sexuality. It has often been women who have radically analyzed male sexuality while men have focused more on discussing female sexuality (Murphy 1).

Considering that literary representations of masculinity have constantly been reiterated with these silences, they become arguably hegemonic but certainly normalized to a certain extent. By rendering sexuality silent, it becomes not only underrepresented but in consequence, less tolerable. Although poetry, as any form of textual representation, has participated in this reiteration of hegemonic masculinity, Ian Gregson reconsiders this role of poetry in his publication on representations of masculinity in postwar poetry:

> Poetry is especially effective in this context because its techniques effect a radical defamiliarising of its material. Because gender norms had established themselves so rigidly during the nineteenth century, their subversion requires especially subtle and complex aesthetic means, so that the grip of their familiarity can be broken. (3)

As poetry is so driven by its form and aesthetics, it is an ideal realm for breaking down familiar norms both in literary and social structures.

Gregson, who credits theorist Calvin Thomas as his inspiration, describes how in a poem, the male body becomes a material site of linguistic production (5). Akin to the social performance of gender, the constructed gender in the poem functions the same way through its linguistic performance. Eventually, as Gregson puts it, "[w]hat poetry does, through its habit of wrenching language into defamiliarising shapes, is to make masculinity aesthetically open to discussion" (10). This discussion, then, lets us move away from ideas of a singular masculinity and its dominant values (Gregson 10) to what can be described as various masculinities constructed in poetry.

In a similar notion, Jongwoo Jeremy Kim and Christopher Reed argue for the potential collapse of binaries through queer reading:

> Collapsing binaries commonly assigned to sexual identity – visible *versus* hidden, natural *versus* artificial – these authors queer other conventional oppositions – text *versus* image, past *versus* present – as they analyze and appreciate [...] various episodes from historical and contemporary archives of queerness, archives that are constituted through these acts of reading/looking queerly. (1)

Kim and Reed consider poetry the best genre to execute this process as they state that poems forsake "the well-worn conventions, practical efficiencies, and authoritative functions of prose" (7).

Queer borderland prose, according to Frederick Luis Aldama, can challenge expectations while reflecting critically and artistically on hegemonic patriarchal, heterosexist features, but only do so in the conventions of genre and storytelling styles (45). He consid-

ers this adapting to conventions the strength of those narratives, and rightfully so, as they invent possible worlds without cutting the story off from the actual world, therefore achieving social value through aesthetic function (Aldama 45). Yet, again, this idea of 'conforming to appeal' is unlikely to be a strategy chosen by a queer Chicanx poet to challenge norms. Queer transformation through poetry rather goes hand in hand with the breaking of stylistic conventions. Furthermore, it is important to note that this transformation is intentional, an activistic endeavor even.

A recent publication titled *Pivotal Voices, Era of Transition* by Rigoberto González highlights the activism of twenty-first-century Latinx and Chicanx poetry. From his perspective, the arts, and especially poetry, have been an important component of Chicanx culture. He describes language as a weapon wielded through chants, songs, theater, storytelling, and poems (González 19). This statement already presents his strong conviction of poetry being activistic, also rooted in the question he poses: "[...] who wants to read safe, polite poetry?" (González 18). González points to the fact that most Latinx poetry is written by men, calling this a difficult truth (7), while prose is predominantly produced by women (27). He states that gay poets manifest a shift away from homophobia and sexism, but remarks that there are other significant male voices who unpack masculinity to present more nuanced views of what a male identity can be, regardless of their sexuality (González 7).[4]

Jim Cocola enforces this idea of activism by describing the experimental qualities of Chicanx poetry as a 'scandal' less focused on the questions of aesthetics than on questions of cultural politics (141). What he means by that is not that Chicanx poetry is less concerned with aesthetics, but rather that the 'commotion' caused by Chicanx poetry stems much more from the fact that it is willing to engage in a political setting. This does not downplay the impact of experimental style, however, as this observation merely speaks to audience response. Nevertheless, Chicanx poetry is engaged with a political and activist environment, also considering the very movement or political identity that is associated with the Chicanx community.

The political environment in question here, as González suggests, is one in which American society strengthens certain images of the Mexican body as one who is undocumented, 'illegal,' foreign, or even invasive (González 185-86). A queer body of color and of Mexican descent seems doubly burdened, which is a perspective that González wants to readjust, as he sees this as a way of convincing the affected of their inferiority (186). In a context of masculinities, this would translate into enforcing constructions of queer and Chicanx masculinities whose vulnerability does not define them but rather grants them a space in which they are presented as strong. This does not mean that their precariousness should be concealed or even denied. González's aim in countering the narrative of the weak queer body of color is to show that they are represented in a larger community instead of being a solitary self (188).

In contemporary literature, queer texts are more likely to openly display an emotional male. However, emotional readiness does not mean that a text will necessarily be loaded with emotion. I argue that we must see this potential 'queer freedom' from social restric-

tions of emotions for men, and thus the willingness to give up masculine power through emotional vulnerability for acts of resistance, as a key factor in the opportunities that queer texts offer when they construct masculinities.

Sexuality and Masculinity in Queer Chicanx Poetry

jotos	build	movements	in each other's arms
	recite	manifestos	with barely a sound
	create	ceremony	on dancefloors
we are the	dead	angels	under each other's feet

(Herrera y Lozano 9)

The first stanza of Lorenzo Herrera y Lozano's "Jotos" puts the title word in a special position. It is distanced clearly from the other structural units of the poem. However, the first three lines all connect to that first word. Eventually, "we" joins this first column under "jotos" as if it is a first step into approaching that term while starting to identify with it. The second and fourth stanzas feature "jotos" in the top-left corner as well, however, by the fourth and last stanza there is no space underneath, which is a process already hinted at in the second stanza which only leaves one space open.[5] We find out what those "jotos" do and immediately learn that, by their ability to build movements, they are powerful. And while in the first and second stanzas, there are signs of precariousness such as "dead angels" or being "bruised after school bullies," the last stanza ultimately empowers these "jotos" by establishing the semantic field of 'light,' through words such as "sparkle," "dance under suns," and "bright." The poem ends by stating that they are "almost // free," adding an extra line to include this last word, to suggest that there is still a limit.

Especially in the last few years, the usage of the word *joto* as an identity marker has increased. Juan D. Ochoa states that "[j]otería, derived from the Spanish word 'joto,' a derogatory term meaning queer or faggot, has come to signify a collective queer Latino identity" (184) and goes on to compare this shift to the reclamation of *Chicano* in the 1960s. The term *queer* has undergone a similar change in its meaning. However, *joto* has not quite reached the state of being unattached from gender, as it mostly still connects to the idea of a homosexual Latino man.

Not every man who fits this label would necessarily identify as a *joto*, especially since it is still used as part of abusive language. Yet, the poem by Herrera y Lozano, constructs a politicized notion of this term, as they "build movements in each other's arms," implying the act of same-sex romantic and/or sexual interaction as a way of showing resistance. It comes as no surprise, then, that most male queer Chicanx writers sympathize with both political labels of *joto* and *Chicano* and employ them in their works.

Peter Nardi argues that one does not go beyond a monolithic concept of gender when assuming that all gay men either contest, modify, or challenge heterosexual masculinity or all act upon the same roles of masculinity (7). He bases this argument on the fact that "gay men carry out gender in multiple ways depending on differences related to social, psy-

chological characteristics, contexts, and eras" (7). In his essay on gay Latino masculinities, Lionel Cantú sees differences in the dimensions of homophobia, racism, and poverty (225), and even in cultural features such as language, religion, music, food, and so forth (227). In total, this leads up to the individual's personal history that can already drastically differ for queer Chicanx people if we consider that they might have entirely different experiences in California than in Texas, to name some examples.

An interesting thought provided by Jane Ward on queer men of color, however, can shine a light on a possible commonly shared 'struggle' of queer Chicanx men. She argues that men of color face a relative lack of power due to racism, but they try to 'achieve' hegemonic masculinity to retain power. Gay men, conversely, seem to reject expectations of masculinity as best as possible in the constraints of homophobia (Ward 154).[6] Trying to find that 'balance of masculinity' might be a particular challenge for a queer Chicanx male. If we return to Lorenzo y Herrera's poem, this conflict is the reason why the jotos, despite their empowerment, can only be 'almost' free. In poems, therefore, we can find those dimensions of masculinity communicated and explored in how the personas might act or feel due to their sexuality.

Focusing further on how the male body is constructed through the portrayal of sexual acts reveals two basic types of queer men in queer Chicanx poetry: a dominant one who gains power through sex, and a submissive or, in certain contexts, oppressed one who loses power.[7] Joseph Delgado's poetry constructs a male persona that fits into the first category. Queer sex serves as a way of empowering him, for instance, in the poem "arizona porn shop:"

> i push you down
> jab my tongue down in you
> stuff you with my fluids, my spit
> my cum swirling mad wild untamed in
> your darkness
>
> [...]
>
> and you bend under me
> bend in the heat of my sweat
> the heat of my body snapping
> you in half
> cutting the urge from under your skin.
> (Delgado 30-31)

The first and last stanzas presented here frame the poem by both showing the "you" in the lower position. This sexual partner is 'stuffed' by the persona with "fluids," "spit," and "cum," all appearing in a climactic order. Then, the omitted commas between the adjectives "mad wild untamed" reinforce the rapidity of the scene that those words already convey. Eventu-

ally, this violent sexual intercourse ends in the metaphor of "snapping you in half," portraying the image of total domination ending in destruction. This "you" remains unidentified and shows no action at all, other than the bending down in the last stanza. However, he is granted speech in the lines "*suck me* you say / *suck this*" (Delgado 30) and "*pull it* you say / *toque mi verga* you shout" (31). Not only does his speech rise to a shout but he also starts demanding – or begging, considering the speaker's dominance – in Spanish, marking him Latino or at least Hispanic. The title suggests that this intercourse could be a paid service, but even if that is the case, the first-person persona clearly constructs his power. I argue that the payment for the sex work could even enforce the construction of power, as it shows the persona's capability of financial gain through their sexuality.

Like most of the sexual acts portrayed in Delgado's poetry collection titled *Ditch Water*, it takes place at night. It is as if buildings such as the porn shop in this poem, a hotel, or an apartment turn into places of queer sex in the night. Darkness is a key aspect of this poem, too, as the two men find themselves "in the bland dark" and the darkness is attributed to the "you" in the first stanza. To me, the importance of this focus is in hiding something, possibly from the outside and the life that takes place in the daytime, or even hiding from each other, since the "you" seems to remain a "nameless man" (Delgado 30) to the persona. Queer sex in the 'protection' of the night, then, allows a feeling of empowerment through dominant actions that the day, which then is equal to the public sphere, cannot grant nor tolerate.

I want to expand on this last idea by moving to Delgado's "what the ditch water showed me." Here, again, we find two male bodies in sexual action, and although the persona is submissive in the act, his imagination makes him regain a sense of power: "[...] on the porch where i imagined your mother could see us / where she could watch from her sofa" (Delgado 23).[8] But this fantasy does not become real as the persona describes being pressed "into the shadows" (24), while "the night" also reappears in the poem. Here, the idea of darkness hiding queer sex and therefore queer empowerment becomes apparent again. The scene imagined by the persona could, thus, be a call for breaking out of this concealment, wishing for the reclamation of dominance to merge with the day through the drastic process of revealing this secret to the family space of the sexual partner. The poem ends with the return of this thought in a comparison between motherly nursing and queer sex, lifting the latter onto a status of vital necessity: "[...] a mother closing her eyes to her son, / lips stained with the milk of another" (24).

Other poems of *Ditch Water* show the persona constantly regaining a sense of power, even in situations where he submits to sexual acts. In "broken shack" the persona endures being called a "puto" (Delgado 34) and being bitten while he allows anal sex to happen, only to react to the words "*te quiero / i want your...your smell...*" (35) by pushing the tongue away, buttoning his jeans, and leaving his sexual partner "naked in the mojave night." A similar scenario plays out in the poem "never saw him again," where the persona leaves another man behind after sex while noting by the end "i remember [...] // how i left you asleep and / peeled open, how i never / told you my name" (Delgado 71). Both sexual encounters share a hint of an unpleasant experience for the persona as the first one contained verbal abuse and

injury, while the second one features descriptions of the partner grunting and spitting wildly. The power exercised through leaving, therefore, becomes a manner of maintaining sexual liberty and reclaiming integrity.

In stark contrast regarding the dominance in sexual activity, Pablo Miguel Martínez' *Brazos, Carry Me*, which features this topic to a much lesser extent, provides one example in particular that represents an entirely different construction of gay masculinity through sexual encounters. Martínez' "Silk" begins as follows:

> Flesh. Too much of it. More
> than I can nimbly hold in my
> fumbling eighteen-year-old
> hand. I have never been with a man
>
> his age, his size. That night I learn
> what is meant by heavy breathing.
> [...]
> (Martínez 29)

Already different to the unpleasant sexual encounters in *Ditch Water*, the persona has trouble actively engaging with the situation and is overwhelmed, as the elliptically constructed start pronounces. Note how the enjambed line between the two stanzas creates the ambiguity that the persona had never been with any man thus implying sexual inexperience. This puts the persona in a subordinate position by default. Furthermore, the language is less explicit about the interaction and remains that way later in the poem: "His arms wrap around me, disappearing / through seams, zippers, buttons" (29). The persona becomes even more passive to his older sexual partner. Eventually, his thoughts even distance themselves from the situation as they first compare Chinese worms to the way in which the arms of the man work on him and later give an explanation on practices of the silk industry marked in cursive font as speech from a Turkish rug merchant (Martínez 29-30).

The merchant speaks of the smuggling of silkworms and refers to it as "*stealing beauty they coveted*" (30) and a dyer later plucks the first rose to work it into the silk's border. These symbols both align with the idea of the 'pure,' sexually inexperienced body being tainted. However, the poem ends with the merchant stating that this is a mastered art that can be 'yours', addressing another person with the title "hakim" (30). This connects, then, to acquiring sexual experience, but in a way carries with it the ominous premonition of overwhelming the sexual partners who might not be fully ready to indulge in the act. The queer body of the persona becomes a site of precariousness as opposed to one of empowerment in Delgado's work.

Herrera y Lozano's poetry brings forth the idea of using romantic and sexual activity openly to create opposition to the structures that try to oppress queer feelings. Thinking back to his poems about *jotos*, he depicts non-heterosexual men as agents of resistance. Sex, in particular, becomes a powerful tool to the personas of his poetry in this endeavor.

In "Piedra del Camino," the persona states: "I loved out of place / betrayed colonial commandments. / Lusted over my neighbor's man. / Lusted, loved, and fucked him" (Herrera y Lozano 17). "Childhood Dreams" features lines such as "when I grow up / I wanna be queer / I wanna be so damn queer / that even the queer think I'm queer" (Herrera y Lozano in Anthony et al. 26) or "I wanna be so damn Xicano / that every time I fuck a man / he'll find Aztlán all over me". Herrera y Lozano constructs queer sex not only as a site of openly and radically living out one's sexual orientation but also as a transformative process of history by presenting resistance to colonialist ideas while also manifesting the concept of Aztlán[10] through it.[11] Taking into consideration that there is the need to be seen as a queer among the queers, this appears as a call to reformation within the LGBTIQ+ community.[12] On a larger scale, this is not only an empowerment of the self but also of the queer Chicanx community represented here.

Focusing on the gendered aspect of these sexual acts, this already connects to the idea of a *gay machismo*. The exercised dominant acts grant empowerment and the contemplations of one's own sexuality call for reformation. These personas as queer men claim a version of hegemonic masculinity for themselves.

The Gay *Macho* in Queer Chicanx Poetry

In Alarcón's "Mi padre/My Father" (*Body in Flames* 34-35), masculinity is presented as afflicting and nightmarish. Eating can be a social activity and in a repeated family setting it becomes something that creates a special relationship between the participants. However, father and son do not have this sense of familiarity anymore. These lines of the poem suggest that the two have either lost this special bond over time – after all, they just sealed a truce – or never had it to begin with. Nevertheless, the idea of power is not prevalent in Alarcón's poem despite the use of words from the semantic field of the military. Power is not sought out here. In fact, if masculinity means power, the latter is also rejected by both father and son.

Jaime García Iglesias discusses why masculinity becomes afflicting to the father-son duo in the first place in his article on gender constructions in three poems by Alarcón. He identifies the issue of 'toxic masculinity' that this poem wants to shed light on. He argues that the socially expected performance of masculinity can sometimes be toxic in the sense that it becomes too constricting for men, as it is connected to permanent anxiety of not living up to other men's expectations while similarly fearing to be overpowered by them (García Iglesias 166). "Toxic masculinity is, essentially, machismo" (166), he states. Thus, the struggle in the poem consists of the alienation between a father and a son because of the constraints imposed upon them by society to hide their emotions and project a performance of strength. However, the poem presents a hopeful stance, as García Iglesias suggests, since it shows optimism toward the power of generational changes (167). The persona actively realizes the condition they are in, while the father only shares the rejection of these constrictions "beneath it all" (Alarcón, *Body in Flames* 35). Although the concept sheds light on crucial aspects of Alarcón's poem, I want to problematize the notion that *machismo*

directly translates to toxic masculinity. However, it is this negative connotation of *machismo* that allows the reversal of the heterosexual norm in *gay machismo*.

In queer Chicanx poetry, there are ways to break out of the toxic side of this masculinity and use aspects of the *macho* performance for the empowerment of the self. This could already be seen in the discussion of the dominant and submissive *joto* above. A clear representation of what gay *machismo* looks like is found in Eduardo C. Corral's "Self-Portrait with Tumbling and Lasso." The poem paints a picture of a persona that may be identified as the poet himself through the title and works with anaphoric lines using striking symbolism and similes that sometimes appear contradicting. The last stanzas combine stereotypical masculine ideals with a twist at the end:

> [...]
> I'm a cowboy
>
> riding bareback.
> My soul is
> whirling
> above my head like a lasso.
> My right hand
> a pistol. My left
> automatic. I'm knocking
>
> on every door.
> I'm coming on strong,
> like a missionary.
> I'm kicking back
> my legs, like a mule. I'm kicking up
> my legs, like
> a showgirl.
> (Corral 22-23)

These lines almost precisely check off a list of the historical Mestizo's favored articles to symbolize masculinity as provided by Santiago Ramírez: the hat of the charro,[13] the pistol, the sombrero, and the horse or the car (Ramírez 63). We also find "the identification of the man with the male animal" (Paredes 329) in the comparison to a mule or earlier in the poem with the snarls of a wolf woven into the persona's hair (Corral 21). Then, there is also the identification to "a terra cotta soldier / waiting for / his emperor's return" (Corral 22) and even the pretentious remark "I know / what Eve / didn't know [...]," (22) which could be read as a paternalistic view of superiority over women. However, all this is disrupted by the very last simile to the showgirl, which is different from the concept of a traditional *macho* in terms of the movement and dress associated with a showgirl performer. The whole poem is thus put into a different perspective: It becomes a satirical caricature of the *macho* figure or a negotiation of one's own masculinity

strongly embedded in societal expectation but not entirely restricted to it. As the persona is "performing an autopsy on [his] shadow" (21), he closely investigates his gender performance which bears the potential of a future renegotiation of his gendered expression. Note how the poem is loaded with sexual metaphors: The "cowgirl" relates to a sexual position, thus, masculinizing a feminine role; "pistol and automatic" as a phallic symbol; "riding bareback" for deliberate foregoing of condom use, to name a few. Therefore, the *macho* figure is played out in a queer sexual act, enforcing the idea of the *gay macho*.

In a similar vein, in Herrera y Lozano's poem "You Bring Out The Joto In Me", "[t]he sexually confused macho" is brought out of the persona (23). As it is mentioned early in the poem, it receives the status of one of the most prominent issues that a gay Chicano man might need to face in their life: the dissonance between the cultural ideal of a strong man and their 'confusing' sexuality. The second line of the third to last stanza "Soy San Lorenzo quien quema los pies de noche"[14] (25) reveals the persona identifying with the poet's name. Thus, there is a significant negotiation of intersectional identities communicated through the realm of poetry. If we see Corral's take on the *macho* as a hope for an eventual reconciliation with both traditional and queer features of masculinity, and Herrera y Lozano's as an open communication of the 'confusion,' then there is a plea for reconsidering *macho* identity.

Herrera y Lozano's poem "El otro" is about a man whose lover is seeing another man besides him (32). Lines such as "The potrillo in my body / gallops hard when you ride" or "The soldadera roaring in me / highjacks the train of my feelings, / throwing out my inhibitions" connect to ideas of *machismo*, too. The galloping potrillo[15] is not only another identification with an animal but is also used as a metaphor for sex. The feminine symbol of the *soldadera*[16] takes up the traditionally 'masculine' space of the figure of the soldier, making her an inherently gender non-normative figure. It is she who is surprisingly the force that allows limitations of feelings to collapse, therefore breaking the emotional restrictiveness of the traditional *macho* construction. A similar break is in the first poem of the same poetry collection, which concludes with the declaration "You are my Ken doll, / I am your G.I. Joe" (Herrera y Lozano 4), hence putting two toys symbolizing 'iconic' ideals of manhood into a relationship. This poem called "Daddy's Boy" is influenced by metaphors concerning childhood. This play on the action figure, which is societally construed as something 'for boys' loaded with masculine ideals of strength and emotional hardness, and the doll that is Barbie's perfect boyfriend and thus embodies ideals of monogamous heterosexuality, alters the masculine dimension by queering it.

However, this alteration only reaches a certain level. Through mixing features of homosexuality and *machismo*, homosexual men gain a higher status within a hierarchy of masculinities. Their 'devalued' deviation from the heterosexual norm is lifted by incorporating normative masculine features into their gender expression. Nevertheless, this must be critically evaluated. This mixing potentially leads to further devaluation or vilification of femininity in gay men, since those men who move away from the feminine and aspire to the heterosexual, hegemonic masculine ideals receive social approval. Others who are unable

or unwilling to meet those standards are oppressed further and are exposed to doubts and judgments of their 'version' of male identity. Nevertheless, gay *machismo* unfolds its actual power by not only presenting the poet's experiences of these discourses but also allowing a space for discussion and communication of these issues. The final poem in this paper highlights this aspect.

In "Men's Movement" by Martínez, the persona calls out to a man, who acts according to the qualities of *machismo* as established above, to behave as he may but not to forget the promise that binds them together through their love. The persona starts by exclaiming: "Go ahead––howl at the moon, / Hug a tree, bang the drum, / Beat your chest. Be a man / Among men" (Martínez 71). The last three stanzas put that man in contrast with other men as he and the speaker share intimate romantic moments such as feeling the hastened beat of the persona's heart when he presses against him. Calling back to beating the chest in the first stanza, the chest is described as smooth and the fist that punches it as a "puño de canela",[17] before the poem ends with the powerfully exclaimed lines: "Prove your tenderness / To those men––prove it / With all your might" (71).

There is no further detail provided about the men alluded to in the penultimate line, however, from the context of the poem, in which the lover actively performs *machismo*, "those men" may refer to the entirety of males in society.[18] Considered alongside the title, the persona suggests the start of a movement of men willing to show a tender side of their masculinity despite traditionally associated behavior. While accepting a hegemonic notion of his lover's masculine behavior, he encourages him to show the 'softer' nature of his, one that he can already express in a private space of love, to the public realm. The last line conveys urgency and difficulty, as this must be done with all the might one can bring up. This call for action imagines that if "tenderness" is combined with power, a movement of men can bring forth a change that might lead to ridding oneself of the afflicting parts of masculinity – something the father and son in Alarcón's poem were unable to do.

Conclusion

Queer Chicanx poetry presents numerous strategies to construct different masculinities, all of them inviting a discussion about the validity and relevance of these constructions in a contemporary setting. By challenging traditional masculinity through blended constructions such as the gay *macho*, Queer Chicanx poets use hegemonic concepts of power to reimagine them, as in Joseph Delgado's *Ditch Water*. The occasional direct call for a reformation of 'masculine' conceptions or the pursuit of activist endeavors is a literary suggestion on what activism may aspire to do.

These newly formed masculinities emerge at the unique intersection of gender, ethnicity, sexuality, migration status, and class, among other positionalities. Experiences such as border-crossing or growing up in the second generation of immigrants alters the perception of their masculinity – whether that means compensating for lacking privileges or stepping over boundaries. The latter eventually empowers themselves in their own precarious situation. The gay *macho* breaks conceptions of homosexuality as the opposite of *machismo*.

Queer men reclaim power over oppressors through dominant sexual behavior and masculine-defined stylization of the body. Incorporated historical and mythological implications of an idealized '*Mestizo* masculinity'[19] give legitimacy to these masculinities while they in return break old traditions of patriarchal nature. Eventually, what the gay *macho* in poetry does is reconcile traditional and queer features of masculinity, allowing queer individuals a possibility to not only break away from hierarchical restrictions but also rediscover a feeling of peace and belonging in their own culture. Francisco X. Alarcón's point stands. There is something afflicting, foolish, and nightmarish about masculinity. Nonetheless, changing the concept, breaking its norms, or reclaiming its dominance for those in subordinate positions fights patriarchy with its own weapons.

Notes

[1] La Malinche was the translator of the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés. As she was associated as his lover, she was considered a traitor. However, recent feminist views combat this idea by pointing out the circumstances and emphasizing strategic survival (Zavella 229). La Virgen de Guadalupe refers to the Virgin Mary and is associated with a Marian apparition which serves as a popular sacred site in Mexico City.

[2] Since this paper focuses on the Mexican American spaces in the United States, I will refrain from elaborating on the history of homophobia and heterosexism in Mexico. However, its impact on Mexican social constructions, including those of the Mexican Americans, is relevant. I recommend consulting Héctor Domínguez-Ruvalcaba's *Modernity and Nation in Mexican Representations of Masculinity* (2007) and Robert McKee Irwin's *Mexican Masculinities* (2003). Both works provide historical explanations of homophobic and heterosexist development in Mexico while also analyzing its enforcement and resistance in cultural productions.

[3] This argument is based on a generalized concept of men as a vantage point to be analyzed further in the following paper. Note, however, that racialized men in a colonial gender system have not been rendered invisible.

[4] For a few pages, he supports this argument with some examples by male Chicano poets. This is one of the very few analyses of masculinities in male-authored Chicanx poetry that exists up to date. I recommend consulting González' ideas, however, I will refrain from elaboration here as his examples are situated outside of queer poetry.

[5] Another reason for the generous spacing in many of the poems by Queer Chicanx poets is what Rigoberto González calls "allowing the written word to claim white space" (González 26). This ambiguous use of the word 'white' refers to the color of the page as well as the ethnicity. Therefore, it is suggested that the spacing is used to claim space in a global literary landscape 'dominated' by a white authorship, or, in other words, the hierarchical canon.

[6] Ward does point to the important fact that there is also the notion of internalized homophobia or an internalization of symbols of hegemonic masculinities, both forcing gay men to either struggle to achieve hegemonic masculinity or additionally eroticize and/or glorify it (154).

[7] As some poems also portray sexual and romantic acts without a negotiation of power, the binary I suggest here merely serves as a vantage point to analyze these poems that do focus on the aspect of power.

Notes

[8] These lines, like the rest of the poem, appear in a form that presents the words with spacing in between them, spreading the phrases and single words all over the page in a shifting pattern. It reenacts the way in which somebody might pause to sort through thoughts and imaginations. Additionally, the reader has to turn the book, as the text is printed onto horizontal pages, possibly signifying a shift. This shift, I suggest, is the convergence of reality with imagination, as the other poems in *Ditch Water* are more inclined to present actions and observation rather than imagined thought.

[9] 'Te quiero' literally translates to 'I want you,' creating an interesting play of words with the following line with the 'want of the smell.' However, the expression usually means 'I love you.'

[10] The Chicanx conception of Aztlán, originally the mythical ancestral homeland of the Aztecs, means the territory that Mexico ceded to the USA in 1848. Now it is symbolically reclaimed by Chicanx people in an attempt to decolonize the land after the rediscovery of their imagined homeland that antedates Mexico, Spanish conquest, and even Tenochtitlan, the capital of the Aztec empire (Jacobs 20).

[11] This paper analyzes the strategic use of the concept of Aztlán as a spiritual guidance within the Chicanx movement and how it contributes to the queer representations in Chicanx poetry. However, it is imperative to problematize Aztlán-based Chicano nationalism and the appropriation of Mexican culture and history. To learn more about the terms *Aztlán* and *mestizaje*, how they emerged and functioned within the movement, and why it is necessary to move beyond them, I recommend reading Josefina Saldaña-Portillo's "Who's the Indian in Aztlán? Re-Writing Mestizaje, Indianism, and Chicanismo from the Lacandón" (2001) as a vantage point.

[12] I am referring to the aspect of internalized homophobia or even xenophobia here.

[13] Charros are traditional horsemen in Mexican culture. Superficially speaking, they are the Mexican equivalent to a cowboy.

[14] The line translates to 'I am San Lorenzo whom the feet of the night burn.' It is loaded with many meanings which can be linked to the poet's identity and history. The most obvious allusion is to the Christian martyr Saint Lawrence who was put on a gridiron with hot coals, something that Herrera y Lozano might have known due to his Catholic upbringing (Romano). In Aztec history, the emperor Cuauhtémoc was tortured by Cortés by slowly burning his feet over coals. Today, a Mexican city is named after the emperor in the state of Chihuahua, which is the county the poet grew up in. Furthermore, Saint Lawrence is also the patron saint of Ciudad Juárez situated in the same state and on the border to El Paso, Texas, close to the desert migrants need to cross at night to enter the US. Note that the next line of the poem reads "I am the excessive drinker" (Herrera y Lozano 25), which can be metaphorically connected to the feeling of burning feet as a possible symptom of chronic alcohol abuse.

[15] 'Potrillo' means 'pony' in English.

[16] *Soldaderas* or *adelitas* were military women. They participated in the Mexican Revolution.

[17] This translates to 'cinnamon fist'.

[18] It at least refers to the 'alluded entirety' of males, meaning the majority of men, so those who are average, normative, and/or hegemonically masculine.

[19] As mentioned in an earlier footnote, the poetry's allusions to *mestizaje* are to be problematized beside its strategic usage. Again, I recommend Josefina Saldaña-Portillo's "Who's the Indian in Aztlán? Re-Writing Mestizaje, Indianism, and Chicanismo from the Lacandón" (2001) for further contextualization.

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Biography

Tilo Böhme is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Rostock, where he also received his M.A. in British and American Transcultural Studies. His research interests include Gender Studies (especially Masculinities), Queer Studies, Latinx Studies, and the role of poetry and visual arts in activism.

Queer Black Feminist Self-Poetics in Toni Morrison's *Sula*

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Abstract

This paper integrates Black and queer feminist theories to investigate the poetics of self and subjectivity in Toni Morrison's *Sula* that, until now, has not been explored due to the absence of a theoretical approach that allows for the eponymous protagonist's liberatory self-fashioning to be accessed. Drawing on critical scholarship such as bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Sara Ahmed, Jack Halberstam, and Lee Edelman, I critique white supremacist, cis-heteronormative, and phallogocentric influences on identity, desire, pleasure, kinship, motherhood, and community and spotlight how Morrison uses the protagonist, Sula, as a queer Black feminist technology to rupture these influences. I highlight the relevance of integrating Black feminist and queer scholarship to imagine and actualize radical notions of subjectivity, sexuality, and erotic and intellectual pleasure beyond white and masculinist affective norms and obligations.

Keywords American Literature; Phallogocentrism; Queer Black Feminism; Sexuality; Toni Morrison.

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Introduction

As one would expect of a Black literary scholar who has won several awards and the prestigious Nobel and Pulitzer Prizes, Toni Morrison's novels have triggered seasoned critical analysis and theoretical scholarship. *Sula*, her second novel published in 1973, continues to be a subject of extensive critical analysis and academic discussions to this day. This, to quote Christopher N. Okonkwo, is a major compliment to both Morrison's storytelling genius and the text's "thematic and technical density and its ability to handle, without blinking or sweating, such polyvocal scholarship, all of which has, undeniably enriched our appreciation of Morrison's absorbing work" (651).

A survey of scholarship on *Sula* reveals that a significant portion has rightly examined the discourse of subjectivity and identity, but from the perspective of how the Black community, implicated in the systems of race, patriarchy, capitalism, and modernity, impedes the Black female protagonist's radical self-actualization (see Nigro; Bergenholtz; Page; Mancelos). Surprisingly, hardly any of the scholarship attempts to explore or reference the queer poetics of self that Morrison's novel chronicles to disrupt the phallogocentric spatial and social arrangement of the Black community. So, while the novel tells the story of two young Black women's racial-gendered becoming against the backdrop of a Black community, critical analysis of *Sula*'s thematic substance only goes in one direction—the becoming of a Black female subjectivity that is truncated by the racial-gendered arrangement of the Black community. This, I argue, is due to the absence of theories that can access *Sula*'s regenerative turn, underscoring the importance of overlapping queer scholarship with Black feminists' groundbreaking intersectional work. Given that the novel has been extensively researched in global literary studies, the next subchapter will provide a theoretical background to clarify my contribution to existing queer Black feminist scholarship on the novel.

Queer Black Feminist Approach to Reading *Sula*

A few critical essays that engage with the novel from a queer Black feminist lens are: Barbara Smith's "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" (1978), Christopher N. Okonkwo's "A Critical Divination: Reading *Sula* as Ogbanje-Abiku" (2004), Geta LeSeur's "Moving Beyond the Boundaries of Self, Community, and the Other in Toni Morrison's *Sula* and *Paradise*" (2002), and Ceron L. Bryant's "Seeking Peace: The Application of Third Space Theory in Toni Morrison's *Sula*" (2013). Smith, Okonkwo, and Bryant illuminate some of the novel's queer structuring and thematic ruminations outside the boundaries of the hegemony of white/Western supremacy and heteropatriarchy. Smith's article, one of the earliest to undertake an analysis of the novel, highlights how the overt female friendships, physical sexuality of the Black female characters, and Sula's non-conformity function to "expose the contradictions of supposedly normal life" (24), 'normal' being the "heterosexual institutions of male/female relationships, marriage, and the family" (23). Okonkwo on the other hand situates the novel's structure and theme within the alternative reality of African cosmologies, analyzing Sula's material and affective independence within the malevolent ogbanje's complex ontology.[2] LeSeur's and Bryant's essays remind us of how Eva Peace and Sula's re-creations of self and environ-

ment move them into the conceptualization of a third space "beyond the reach of any form of oppression" (Bryant 251) and "forces readers to evaluate the traditional classificatory systems, and in the process restructure long-held beliefs about the hierarchical orderings of Black and white, women and men" (LeSeur 19).

In *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992), bell hooks critiques contemporary Black feminist writers for perpetuating a narrow brand of oppressed subjectivity that leaves little room for narratives of conscious resistance. Her critique of these writings extends to Sula. While acknowledging that it is indeed difficult for "Black women to construct radical subjectivity within white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (*Black Looks* 46), hooks argues that Morrison's quintessential novel fails to develop the critical pedagogy needed to cultivate a Black feminist consciousness through which a Black female subject can successfully assert radical subjectivity. Instead, Sula's rebellion and struggle for selfhood is constructed within the "conventional Western notions of a unitary self" (hooks, *Black Looks* 51), which inevitably leads to her premature death, demonstrating that only by self-sacrificing can a Black woman hope to survive within the interlocking system. While this might be a fitting analysis for Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, which chronicles the Black female protagonist's descent into madness due to her internalization of white beauty standards, I argue that *Sula*'s analysis cannot be left at that totalizing end. Hooks's reading of Sula's exercise of autonomy outside the spheres of embedded relationality and her subsequent death as the disastrous end to her "privatized self-discovery" (*Black Looks* 50) underscores the absence of a nuanced exploration of sexual politics within hooks's feminist analysis of the novel. Nevertheless, hooks raises crucial insights into the construction of Black womanhood, which she expands upon in *Communion: The Female Search for Love* (2002), arguing that Black women's work of emotion, connection, and community must be redirected from caring for men and stabilizing male dominant ideologies, towards self-knowledge, self-liberation and relational practices that are essential for social justice and true liberation.

This brings to the fore the overlapping necessity of queer and Black feminist scholarship to engage with the queer poetics of self as represented in *Sula*. In mapping this radical teleology, I harken back to Black feminist writings that urge us towards a queer and queerer perspective on feminist subjectivity, sexuality, and resistance. Audre Lorde, in her collection of essays and speeches, urges women to acknowledge "the strength of the erotic into a true knowledge" (56) for the entire disruption of the "European-American male tradition" (59) that wants women to be powerless, deeply fragmented and only perceived as object of use. Similarly, Laura Alexandra Harris, referencing Black feminist writers such as Lorde, Smith, Jackie Goldsby, etc., who have integrated sexuality into their writings, argues that the multiple modifiers—queer black feminism—allow for boundaries between race, class, and sexual feminist politics to be bridged and many interstices sutured in ways that elide mainstream feminist discourse, including Black feminism. Harris contends that only by politicizing pleasure and desire beyond the scope of the personal, such as with race, class, and gender, can new feminist connections be made, and the parameters of radical subjectivity be redrawn to include Black, straight, and lesbian women, who understand emancipation as "the liberty to fuck" (29) and to

"define their own pleasure" (28). In both works, feeling, desire, and sexuality take center stage in their feminist resistance to white and male supremacist structures of power.

Recent scholarship has expanded the discourse on queer subjectivity and resistance, exploring new directions and perspectives. Sara Ahmed, using spatial concepts of line, turn, table, orientation, and direction, in her widely influential book *Queer Phenomenology* (2006), explores sexuality as a spatial formation that sexualizes bodies through their inhabitation of space. Ahmed's queer work refutes the arbitrariness of heterosexuality and argues that heterosexuality is an effect of the line of compulsory heterosexuality and histories of colonialism that naturalizes this line of desire towards the opposite sex. It is this orientation as an accumulation of values tied to straightness that allows for racial and sexual intimacy to be offered to some bodies while denying it to others. This straight line sets the limits of "who is and is not in a given collective" (Ahmed 119). The constant negotiation of contact between the body and space and the straightening line of demarcation, however, opens up the possibility of producing moments of disorientation and queer effects. Doing queer work thus entails rethinking and re-reading these moments of embodied disorientation to expose the straightness of the line, bring new objects into view, and make new spatial impressions that can reshape the body surface.

Likewise, Jack Halberstam and Lee Edelman in *In a Queer Time and Place* (2005) and *No Future* (2004), respectively, argue for a rethinking of queerness beyond sexual identity (i.e., being gay, lesbian, and transgender). This echoes bell hooks's popular soundbite derived from her 2017 conversation on liberating the Black female Body: "queer not as who you are having sex with, that can be a dimension of it; but queer as being about the self that is at odds with everything around it and has to invent and create and find a place to speak and to thrive and to live" (hooks, *Are you Still a Slave?*, 01:27:35-01:28:00). Both Halberstam and Edelman argue that while being queer does not intrinsically equate to rejecting conventional heteronormative narratives of family and reproductive futurism, the allure of queer discourse must nevertheless be rooted in its potential to rupture and counter this pervasive running commentary on the dominant logics of identity, self-actualization, and alliance in relation to time and space. Edelman further argues for a form of queerness that refuses to partake in mainstream culture's obsession with orienting political discourse around the "absolute value of reproductive futurism" (3). Instead, queerness must actively resist the literal and symbolic emphasis on the child[3] as the focal point for future visions and embrace its own oppositional and disruptive qualities.

Encouraged by these critical queer and queerer turns towards and away from structures of identity, I am motivated to propose a queer Black feminist reading of *Sula* that highlights how Sula's unceasing proclamation of radical selfhood serves as queer moments to rupture the phallogocentric and naturalized "organizing principle of communal relations" (Edelman 2). I examine the eponymous character's radical self-poetics, which turns away from white and male-centered affective structures, as a technology that allows for new ways of thinking about desire, kinship, and community to emerge. Following Ahmed's assertion on the straightening device of whiteness and compulsory heterosexuality and on stepping out

of line as crucial to the emergence of queerness, my analysis will begin with an examination of the characterizations of other female characters—Sula's grandmother (Eva), her mother (Hannah), her childhood friend (Nel) and Nel's mother (Helene Wright)—within the Bottom's phallogocentric collective line. This is because only through their juxtaposition with Sula can Sula's queerness be perceived.

The Bottom, Its Phalogocentric Geography, and Its Black Female Characters

Many critics share the perspective that *Sula* is a narrative concerned with the geography and ethos of a racialized community and self. This perspective emphasizes how both seek to achieve balance amid the wider historical forces of white supremacy, which orient the characters' bodies simultaneously toward the hegemonic white world and toward one another within their racialized community (Heinze; Nigro; LeSeur; Mancelos; Baillie; Bryant). Denise Heinze explores the historical epoch depicted in the novel, spanning 1919 to 1941, as integral to the critical reading of the novel and the configuration of the fictional community. Heinze describes the great waves of migration, directly after World War I, as a period that held great promise for change in the Black condition but soon petered out in an "ever increasing racist America" (115). Black people's response to this myth of liberation would be to redirect their efforts towards building their own distinctive communities as represented in *Sula*.

In the first chapter, Morrison's vivid description of the spatial, temporal, and social mapping of the Bottom, in Medallion Ohio, allows for the wider historical events that frame the community and its internal interactions to shine through. The opening paragraph thrusts us into the narrative of a community that has crumbled under the tides of gentrification and has been demolished to make room for the city's golf course. Once a Black neighborhood in the early 1900s standing in the hills above the town of Medallion, the folkloric tale of how the neighborhood came to acquire its name 'the Bottom' is immediately tied to the wider history of U.S. Jim Crow segregation and the devices used to prevent Black people from fully integrating into U.S. society despite the abolition of slavery. As payment for an enslaved person's work for his "good white farmer" master (Morrison 5), the enslaved Black ancestor is tricked into accepting the hilly backbreaking land instead of the rich valley land which was agreed upon in their contract. By being sequestered in an unvegetated land, the Black neighborhood is denied "comfort through space" and an intimacy that comes with belonging to a liberated white collective (Ahmed 136). The Black community's resilience, creativity, and humor shine through as they transform the affect of their barren landscape with hearty laughter, music, dance, shared understanding, and the lighthearted consolation that, at the very least, they could "literally look down on the white folks" (Morrison 5). For a community like this, formed in close proximity to whiteness, yet as a dialectical Other and a negation, there is something already extraordinary and might we say queer about its orientation, i.e., its many histories and directions that it passes through and accumulates in order to arrive as the Bottom literally and metaphorically.

It is this extraordinariness of a community, the detail of its internal relationality, disruptive contradictions, individual acts of subversion, and possibilities of self-actualization for individual Black women that Morrison attempts to put under narrative scrutiny. As Morrison

herself attests, making the community as strong as a character was an intentional choice to spotlight the "life-giving, very very strong sustenance that people got from the neighborhood" and the fundamental and unbreakable connection, care, and genuine interest the women showed towards one another, family, and children (Morrison and Stepto 474). For a reading steeped in a queer Black feminist approach, this immediately stimulates the fundamental question of why Sula would defy a community as strong, enduring and giving as the Bottom and what Sula's defiance reveals about her positionality vis-à-vis the community's social norms? It would appear that this is also what Morrison hopes her writing of Sula Peace does: "to spark outrage, total outrage" and provoke fresh waves of critical perspectives and penetrating analysis (Morrison and Stepto 487).

Morrison's portrayal of a diverse range of Black female characters are crucial in examining the intersectional issues often overlooked or oversimplified in race and gender discourses. Sula and Nel's grandmothers and mothers represent an older generation, whose lives have been shaped by slavery and segregation and whose primary concern is survival for their Black families and community in white and male privileged America. *Sula* thus joins a lineage of intellectual works by Black women aiming to explore the "private, hidden space of Black women's consciousness, the 'inside' ideas that allow Black women to cope with and, in many cases, transcend the confines of intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality" (Collins 98). Eva, Sula's grandmother, is portrayed as a matriarch left to shoulder the responsibilities of three children when her husband, BoyBoy, abruptly abandons her after "five years of a sad and disgruntled marriage" that involved infidelity, alcohol abuse and domestic violence (Morrison 32). Confronted with the imminent threat of starvation and seeing no alternative, she entrusts her children to a neighbor and reappears eighteen months later with "two crutches, a new black pocketbook, and one leg" (34). She collects her children, builds an enormous house with many rooms, committing herself to overseeing the wellbeing of her children and the community at large. Through her caring acts alongside her love for "maleness", she comes to command respect from everyone and special attention from the men of the community (41).

While Eva's positionality can be viewed as a "Third Space" identity contesting both patriarchal and conventional familial norms (Bryant 253), an intersectional analysis reveals that this is only partially accurate. Patricia Hill Collins's Black feminist work on the controlling stereotypical images of Black womanhood provides an apt perspective on how Eva's character typifies the stereotypical image of the matriarch. As Collins highlights, African American women have often been objectified through four prominent stereotypes—the mammy, the matriarch, the welfare mother and the jezebel/hoochie (72-84). The Black matriarch is a race- and gender-specific controlling image used to influence both white women and Black men's gendered identities. Stereotyped as aggressive, assertive, sexless, impoverished, and emasculating, the matriarch "serves as a powerful symbol for both Black and white women of what can go wrong if white patriarchal power is challenged", while simultaneously being cast as the "fundamental source of Black cultural deficiency" (Collins 77). A critical analysis, however, reveals that it is only but an attempt to regulate aspects of Black women's conduct

perceived as challenging the existing order, especially considering the emphasis on respect, self-reliance, courage, and personal empowerment within Black feminist thought (Collins 78). So, while Eva's gender performance can be analyzed as defying "patriarchal notions of womanhood and motherhood" (Bryant 254), she still feels at home within the Black community such as the one described in *Sula*. Despite her intense hatred for BoyBoy, her practice of identity, community, desire, and motherhood is still drawn along the line of phallogocentrism. She lavishes all her attention on men, including Plum, her only son, stokes their male ego, and criticizes young wives for not "getting their men's supper ready on time; about how to launder shirts, press them, etc." (Morrison 42). She accuses Sula Peace, her granddaughter, who refuses to fall in line, of being selfish for not wanting to be married, have a baby, and be settled within the community. When Sula points out the fact that both her and her mother also were able to live without attachments to men, her response "Not by choice" (93) is insightful about her conscious politics. Although her self-reliance clearly challenges prevailing white supremacist notions of femininity, her self-actualization does not indicate any feminist conscious politics that, as hooks argues, should also critique phallogocentric socialization in Black life and "patriarchal notions of motherhood" in the Black community (hooks et al. 95). In the end, her hatred for BoyBoy only pushes her into the stereotypical resourceful matriarchal role, which is, for her and many Black women, a customary role.

Hannah, Eva's daughter, also inherits the love of "maleness for its own sake" (Morrison 41). After the death of Sula's father, she chooses not to enter into a committed relationship with any man but instead to have sexual relationships with "a steady sequence of lovers, mostly the husbands of her friends and neighbors" (42). She treats men as though they were "complete and perfect" just as they were and the men in return love and protect her "against any vitriol that newcomers or their wives might spill" (45). Her behavior exasperates all the women of the Bottom but does not disrupt the masculinist values of the community. Even after she dies in a fire, the women of the Bottom lovingly wash her body in tears as though they "themselves had been her lovers" (77). This, I argue, is because Hannah's self-actualized character, while choosing to be "unfettered by matrimonial laws and expectations" (Bryant 258), nevertheless steadies the line of phallogocentrism and the "racialized, gendered symbol of deviant female sexuality", popularly known as the hoochie[4] (Collins 83).

In the other part of the Bottom where Nel Wright is raised, the reader also meets a phallogocentric structure that shapes identity, desire, and motherhood in the household of Helene Wright. Born in a brothel to a Creole sex worker, Helene Wright spends her life feeling flawed and compensating for her mother's lifestyle. To do this, she turns towards the conventional lifestyle, gets married to a respectable seaman, births Nel, and controls her own household with an "oppressive neatness" (Morrison 29) that leaves room for little to no subversion. Nel is groomed to become a wife and mother and whatever "sparkle" or "splutter" and creativity she exhibits is rubbed down to a "dull glow" (83). Nel's rebellious phase occurs when she befriends Sula, but this period is short-lived. Meeting for the first time in the playground of their primary school, an intense female friendship quickly forms due to their shared understanding of vivid sexual desires shaped within their distinct spatial experience, Sula's in her "household of

throbbing disorder" (52) and Nel in the "high silence of her mother's incredibly orderly house" (51). Described as the opposite of each other, they find contentment in mirroring each other's light and complementing each other's differences until their desires move them in opposite direction. Nel fulfills Helene's dream by marrying a twenty-year-old attractive Black man, Jude Green, while Sula aggravates Eva by going to college in the city. Nel's marriage to Jude, prompted only by a desire to "help, to soothe" Jude's pain, portends a surrender to the Bottom's dominant cis-heteronormative and phallogocentric orientation of desire and motherhood (83).

On the discourse of phallogocentrism and the Black community, bell hooks argues that the gendered politics of slavery and white supremacist capitalism, which denied Black men the freedom to fulfill traditional masculine and benevolent patriarchal roles, play a substantial role in shaping the gender roles maintained within the Black community (*The Crisis of African American Gender Relations* 93-98). Highlighting a distinction between patriarchy, which revolves around male dominance and power, and phallogocentrism, which centers on the symbolic significance and prestige attributed to the penis, hooks argues that Black men were compelled to adopt a "fierce phallocentrism" that prioritized power not merely in terms of provision but within the realm of sexual conquest (*Black Looks* 94). The implication for Black women seeking a semblance of male protection was that they had to embrace a contradictory gender ideology. They were expected to be working women while simultaneously accepting their perceived inferiority. This model of masculine privilege and domination is evident in the character of Jude Green, who marries Nel primarily because of the racial dynamics that thwart his dream of becoming a working man and contributing to the labor-intensive prosperity of the larger Medallion society. Following a stint as a waiter at the Hotel Medallion that leaves him dissatisfied, Jude attempts to secure a road-construction job at the city hall but faces rejection along with other young Black men. The only miscellaneous positions available were reserved for old and feeble Black men who were perceived as less threatening to the white supremacist climate. Morrison's entry into the socialization of Black masculinity as an institutionalized structure of domination is eloquently captured through Jude's bruised male ego:

> So it was rage, rage and a determination to take on a man's role anyhow that made him press Nel about settling down. He needed some of his appetites filled, some posture of adulthood recognized, but mostly he wanted someone to care about his hurt, to care very deeply. Deep enough to ask, 'How you feel? You all right? Want some coffee? And if he were to be a man, that someone could no longer be his mother. He chose the girl who had always been kind, who had never seemed hell-bent to marry, who made the whole venture seem like his idea, his conquest. The more he thought about marriage, the more attractive it became. Whatever his fortune, whatever the cut of his garment, there would always be the hem—the tuck and fold that hid his raveling edges; a someone sweet, industrious and loyal to shore him up. And in return he would shelter her, love her, grow old with her, without that someone he was a waiter hanging around a kitchen like a woman. With her he was the head of a household pinned to an unsatisfactory job out of necessity. The two of them together would make one Jude. (Morrison 83)

Within this phallogocentric framework of meaning, only the oppressed Black male is recognized as fully human. It does not matter that both Jude and Nel are oppressed under white supremacy, neither does it matter that Jude cannot provide like the stereotypical white male figure. Nel is expected to assimilate herself into Jude to fulfill his needs and give meaning to his racialized life while her own identity fades into obscurity. Jude's pain accordingly activates Nel's caregiving conditioning. Prior to recognizing his pain, she was merely flattered by his attention and indifferent to his hints of marriage. In the Bottom formed between and betwixt the ethics of domination, Jude's pain acts as a "homing device" (Ahmed 9) that helps Nel to find her way around the "politics of heterosexual love and romance" (hooks, *Communion* 39) and remain a productive part of the community. This narrative of Black male pain and Black female caregiving is similarly reflected in the sentiments expressed by another Black male character: "That 'all they want, man, is they own misery. Ax em to die for you and they yours for life" (Morrison 83). Nel eventually becomes entangled in the phallogocentric orientation of the Bottom. Much like BoyBoy, Jude abandons her, leaving her with the responsibility of caring for three children. Like Eva, Helene, and Hannah, she absorbs the affect of the Bottom, towing its phallogocentric line. It is no surprise that Sula, characterized by her eccentricity, rejects this affective line of the Bottom. This leads to my next subchapter, exploring how Morrison utilizes Sula Peace as a queer Black feminist technology.

Sula Peace as Queer Black Feminist Technology

In the second half of the novel, Sula returns to the Bottom after spending ten years away. This is also when we begin to clearly perceive her self-poetics and the community's perception of her as evil. To stave off her evil, the community "laid broomsticks across their doors at night and sprinkled salt on porch steps [...], watched her far more closely than they watched any other roach or bitch in the town, and their alertness was gratified. Things began to happen" (Morrison 113). Although Sula is the protagonist of the novel and the queer Black feminist technology necessary for rupturing the Bottom's phallogocentric order, critics have noted that she does not fully emerge until the second half of the text. Christopher N. Okonkwo argues that this delayed emergence reflects Morrison's interest in centering "community, elevating it over the individual" (658). I suggest an alternative viewpoint. I posit that centering the community spatially, temporally, and relationally serves the purpose of providing insight into the accumulation of community and gender values Sula will reject in her adulthood. While Sula's unconventional behavior is evident in the first part of the novel through volatile mood swings, acts of self-mutilation and blood spilling to repel bullies at school, the accidental drowning of Chicken Little etc., we fully encounter the extent of her self-expression a decade later, following her return to the Bottom.

Similar to Morrison's vivid description of the Bottom framed by folkloric tales in the first part, Sula's return after spending ten years away is framed by the superstitious belief of the Bottom, foreshadowing her disruption of the Bottom's phallogocentric line. Her return coincides with the resurgence of a plague of robins, a bird species viewed by the community as both vicious and disruptive, foreshadowing her disruptive potential. Within moments of Sula's reunion with Eva, tensions quickly escalate between them, particularly concerning the

topic of marriage, with Eva asking Sula; "When you gone to get married? You need to have some babies. It'll settle you" (Morrison 92). Sula vehemently rejects the idea of creating a family and insists on focusing solely on her own self-creation: "I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself" (92). This idea of non-phallogocentric self-creation is perceived as narcissism by Eva who believes that women have "no business floatin' around without no man" (93). Eva's continuous attempt to control Sula's self-poetics by invoking biblical values about "Hellfire" and honor for "thy father and thy mother that thy days may be long upon the land thy God giveth thee" (93) is met with radical self-poetics from Sula who responds, "Mamma must have skipped that part. Her days wasn't too long. [...] Whatever's burning in me is mine!" (93). The women's argument is key because "it codifies the extreme oddity the Bottom groups into evil and evil days" (Okonkwo 659) and also invokes Sula's queerness and her compulsion to exist outside of the expected heteronormative trajectory of birth, life, reproduction, and death, put together in such order and in relation to the phallic.

To read Sula as a queer Black feminist technology is to read her characterization in relation to the masculinist values to which she withdraws her allegiance and the "ascription of negativity" she embraces (Edelman 4). As Nel perfectly describes her: "Sula never competed, she simply helped others define themselves" (Morrison 95). If being raced, gendered, and sexualized is being consigned to a space of non-being and nothingness from which one will continually fail at attempting to reach subjectivity and selfhood, as Black scholars have argued, the burden of queer futurity, in light of this failure, according to Edelman, is to explore this charged realm of nothingness and "fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we're collectively terrorized [...]; fuck the whole network of Symbolic relations and the future that serves as its prop" (29). What this means is that queerness cannot be a destination, and neither can it be entreated in the pursuit of coherence and stability. Queer politics must continue to revel in the gap between two realities, prioritizing the construction and illumination of new entryways into either no or new futures.

Sula's return and her self-fashioning outside the boundaries of the Bottom's phallogocentrism leads to new entryways of meaning-making. She also spreads the affect to Nel, who has grown weary under the burden of caregiving. With Sula's return, Nel experiences a shift in her mood and starts appreciating the beauty in her environment, finding joy in past memories, and showing affection to her children. She connects all these transformations to Sula's return, likening it to "getting the use of an eye back, having a cataract removed" (Morrison 95). Nel's love life with Jude, which "over the years had spun a steady gray web around her heart" also gets a makeover and transforms into "a bright and easy affection, a playfulness that was reflected in their lovemaking" (95). Jude, accustomed to having his Black male experience take center stage, is likewise decentered as Sula introduces a new and intersectional perspective on the race and gender challenges faced by the residents of the Bottom:

> I mean, I don't know what the fuss is about. I mean, everything in the world loves you. White men love you. They spend so much time worrying about your penis they forget their own. The only thing they want to do is cut off a nigger's privates. And if that ain't

> love and respect I don't know what is. And white women? They chase you all to every corner of the earth, feel for you under every bed. I knew a white woman wouldn't leave the house after 6 o'clock for fear one of you would snatch her. Now ain't that love? They think rape soon's they see you, and if they don't get the rape they looking for, they scream it anyway just so the search won't be in vain. Colored women worry themselves into bad health just trying to hang on to your cuffs. Even little children—white and black, boys and girls—spend all their childhood eating their hearts out 'cause they think you don't love them. And if that ain't enough, you love yourselves. Nothing in the world loves a black man more than another black man. You hear of solitary white men, but niggers? Can't stay away from one another a whole day. It looks to me like you the envy of the world. (103-04)

Sula's commentary challenges the simplistic oppressed portrait of Black masculinity commonly portrayed in the Bottom and points out instead that Black men in the US white supremacist economy are "both idolized and punished, romanticized yet vilified" (hooks, *Black Looks* 97) and still benefit from the colonial gender system because of their refusal to withdraw their allegiance from the entire system of domination.

The community is also not left out of the rupture caused by Sula's queerness. While they find her guilty of things like sleeping with white men (a signifier of integration forbidden to Black women) and putting Eva into a nursing home (a signifier of white/Western capitalist ethos), Sula's queer negativity illuminates the tensions of the logic of heteronormative futurity that holds the Bottom women in check. Ironically, her queer negativity unites the people of the Bottom in solidarity, reshaping how they interact and engage in communal practices. Husbands and wives start expressing a reciprocal kind of love and parents start ensuring the wellbeing of their children and home. Morrison underscores Sula's presence as the catalyst for this renewed sense of solidarity: "Their conviction of Sula's evil changed them in accountable yet mysterious ways. […] They began to cherish their husbands and wives, protect their children, repair their homes and in general band together against the *devil* in their midst" (Morrison 117-18, emphasis mine). After Sula's demise and with no aberration to sustain their internal social order, the façade of perfection crumbles and the "self-constituting negation" (Edelman 5) of the social order is exposed. In the aftermath of her death, the dissatisfaction of the women with the social order resurfaces. They start beating their children out of frustration and exhaustion, "[uncoddle] their husbands", and express "a steeping resentment of the burdens of old people" and their constrained roles as mothers (Morrison 154). Sula's queer negativity in relation to the Bottom's self-forming negation exemplifies the arguments from Black and queer feminists about the costs often borne by marginalized individuals for the sake of progress within the framework of colonial temporality.

So, while Sula suffers noteworthy criticism as a self-destructive Black female character whose self-fashioning does not translate into tangible material power (hooks, *Black Looks* 50-51), her queer symbolic subjectivity serves as an entryway into engaging with new poetics of the self and having complex conversations about topics of race, gender, sexuality, morality, and structures of power and their intersections. As Toni Morrison herself confesses about the

difficulty of writing the eponymous character: "Sula was hard, for me; very difficult to make up that kind of character. Not difficult to think up, but difficult to describe a woman who could be used as a classic type of evil force" to complicate the binaries of good and evil (Morrison and Stepto 475). A woman who commits the cultural taboos of sleeping with her best friend's husband, placing her grandmother in a nursing home, having casual sexual relationships with men, attending church suppers without underwear, or showing no excitement for the community's rituals. How does this deeply flawed woman become an entryway into "alternative methods of alliance, forms of transgender embodiment, and those forms of representation dedicated to capturing these willfully eccentric modes of being" (Halberstam 1)?

As Chinua Achebe writes in *Named for Victoria, Queen of England* (2007), "distance becomes not a separation but a bringing together like the necessary backward step which a judicious viewer may take in order to see a canvas steadily and fully" (191). First, Sula's choice to travel out of the Bottom instead of marrying as is the gendered norm functions as a queer Black feminist entryway into viewing and appraising the broader system beyond the Bottom in order to access new structures of consciousness. Second, her choice to return instigates a collective introspection for both Sula and the community, urging them to reconsider their understanding and affect of community. This reflective process holds the potential for the emergence of new consciousness. Sula's unencumbered travel around the US from Ohio to "Nashville, Detroit, New Orleans, New York, Philadelphia, Macon, and San Diego" empowers her to see the myth of freedom espoused by racist, sexist, and capitalist America (Morrison 120). From the south to the north, the cities "held the same people, working the same mouths, sweating the same sweat", all weary in an increasingly industrialized America (120). Translating a "mechanized economy into a mechanized way of living and thinking" (Heinze 105), everyone soon began to speak the "same language of love, the same entertainments of love, the same cooling of love" (Morrison 120-121). Likewise, all the women look miserable from "[folding] themselves into starched coffins, their sides bursting with other people's skinned dreams and bony regrets" (Morrison 122). Sula comes to the realization that the only way to reach subjectivity and "be that version of herself which she sought to reach out to and touch with an ungloved hand" is to become intimate with herself, mood, and whim (121). In the face of this stark reality continually shrouded by "the structuring optimism" of American politics (Edelman 5), Sula would come to embrace her queer negativity, reveling in her own erotic and intellectual pleasure.

As Laura Alexandra Harris notes, bringing pleasure from the private into the public and intersecting it with race, class and gender allows for new feminist practices that call "into question naturalized identities and communities" (3). Sula's experiments with pleasure becomes "a site for enacting, exceeding, undoing, and remaking relations of power" (Hartman 61). In this private site, we find a complex awareness of self, life, and death like none other. She has sex with multiple men, regards sex as "wicked" as opposed to "healthy or beautiful" (Morrison 122) that tradition confines it to, embracing a more complex understanding of human desire and interaction. Through these non-conformist intimate encounters, she comes to the realization of her own autonomy and experiences the paradox of "lying under someone, in a position of surrender" (123) and yet being able to assert her own agency and power as a subject.

She transcends the limitations of the gender binary, recognizing that power is not determined by anatomical differences such as having a penis or assuming a dominant position during sex. Having sexual experiences outside of heteronormative and phallogocentric boundaries and obligations allows her to enter into an erotic and intellectual realm usually closed off to women. Sex, which begins as a fun activity, transforms into a space of empowerment as she begins to connect and surrender to her body in new ways and to draw from it "abiding strength and limitless power" (123). Within this erotic realm, she becomes intimate with time and loneliness as objects of her own desires, thus positioning herself as the subject of her own pleasure and dismantling the notion of power as strictly white and masculine constructs. She encounters herself repeatedly, is able to love herself completely, and embraces a more fluid understanding of power rooted in autonomy. This is in contrast to Eva, Hannah, Helene, Nel, and the Bottom women's experience of loneliness engendered by their men's abandonment and a valuation of time as linear geared towards constant productivity, consumption, and survival.

In an ironic turn of events shortly before her death, Sula also comes to know desire through the phallogocentric lens. This is Morrison's way of creating an affect of community, illustrating how being in close proximity to community can elicit conventional emotions and bind us to the community. Sula functioning as a queer Black technology affects not only the community but is equally affected by it. However, Sula's desire is directed towards a kindred soul in the form of a man, Ajax, whose use of time is also pleasure-centered and who neither cares to possess a woman through patriarchal caregiving nor be possessed. The intimacy they share includes mutual respect, with both inviting each other into their private thoughts, fulfilling Sula's longstanding desire. He leaves her soon after she tells him, "Come on. Lean on me" following his altercation with the police (Morrison 133), thus imparting a lesson about the challenges of maintaining the continuity of the queer self in proximity to a conventional community. Having encountered herself on a deeper realm outside of the phallogocentric structure, however, her queer self is not severely impacted by Ajax's leaving. She lets go of her possessiveness toward him and follows her liberating thoughts with a song from the past: "There aren't any more new songs and I have sung all the ones there are. I have sung them all. I have sung all the songs there are" (137). This melody functions as a metaphor, underscoring her self-poetics and her rejection of the phallogocentric future imposed on women. Moreover, having come full circle, she can now also speak on the reality of being Black and woman. As she tells Nel at the end on her sick bed, "You think I don't know what your life is like just because I ain't living it? I know what every colored woman in this country doing. […] Dying. Just like me. But the difference is they dying like a stump. Me, I'm going down like one of those redwoods. I sure did live in this world (143).

While Sula's premature death has been critiqued as signifying the end of an unfulfilling life (hooks; Nigro; Page), I argue that Sula's life was far from unfulfilling and reading this otherwise would be denying her the right to define herself as a queer Black woman on her own terms within the cesspool of racist and sexist America, a right Sula consistently exercised until her last breath. Sula rejects Nel's worldview and instead uses her final moments to emphasize her self-poetics: "Is that what I'm supposed to do? Spend my life keeping a man? […] They

ain't worth more than me. And besides, I never loved no man because he was worth it. Worth didn't have nothing to do with it. [...] My mind did. That's all" (Morrison 143-44). Sula's queer negativity vis-à-vis her refusal to embrace maternal and phallogocentric desire foisted upon Black women in the Black community initiates new and radical forms of sexuality, intimacy, pleasure, and kinship. Likewise, her contentment with her imminent death disrupts the teleology of Black female life as designed by the white and male supremacist system, which defines Black womanhood fundamentally by their maternal desire, sacrifice, labor to the racialized capitalist economy, and devotion to men. Sula's life and death thus serve as a percussor to an imminent and expansive queer Black feminist revolution. Her conversation with Nel in her final moments is very telling about Morrison's deployment of her as a queer Black feminist technology. When Nel interprets her dying alone as being lonely and reminds her if only she had chosen a heteronormative, reproductive future just like them, Sula's uncompromising response: "Yes. But my lonely is *mine*. Now your lonely is somebody else's. made by somebody else and handed to you. Ain't that something? A secondhand lonely" solidifies her queer Black feminist self-poetics (143).

Conclusion

While Morrison's *Sula* undoubtedly explores the Black community's resilience, it also underscores that communities, especially those forged amidst the monstrosity of slavery and oppression, can simultaneously serve as havens as well as conceal internal tensions. In writing the anatomy of the Bottom and Black female characters like Eva, Hannah, and Helene Wright, Morrison shows sharp sensitivity to the messy histories of the Black community. We find that Black womanhood is constructed outside of the boundaries of white and male supremacy yet informed by it. While these characters show tremendous strength under racial conditions and embody matriarchal roles and other sexually freeing identities unfettered by conventional matrimonial laws, their notions of identity, desire, and motherhood nevertheless steady the line of phallogocentrism. For this reason, they are considered admirable women and subjected to punishment, while also being revered, as exemplified in the experiences of characters such as Eva, Helene, Hannah, and Nel. Thus, it may be argued that their embodiments of Black womanhood do not seek to call into question their own allegiance and acceptance of naturalized and phallogocentric-informed identities, kinship, intimacy, maternal desire, and affiliation.

In light of this, Morrison uses Sula not as a means to undermine the racial-gendered values that have traditionally occupied a central position within the Black community and given it a distinctive quality of life. Instead, she uses her to examine the history of Black (female) bodies subjected to multiple forms of systemic oppression and to transform the cultural politics of sexuality, intimacy, desire, and motherhood. By writing a character who embraces and exceeds the space of negation, Morrison succeeds in calling our attention to queer spaces of intimacy, desire, and kinship marked by negation that hold potential for queer Black self-poetics. As we see in the end, after the death of Sula, the Bottom also disintegrates physically and socially—with plenty of the town people dying in a tunnel[5] and the rest trading their lives in the Bottom for the allure of industrialization in the valley. White people, craving the rich cul-

tural environment created by Black people, move in to gentrify the Bottom and Black people, craving assimilation and ascension into the white dominant socio-economic society, move out of the Bottom to the valley. The deceitful act of the white farmer during slavery, offering the Black enslaved ancestor less fertile hilly land instead of the promised rich valley land, and the subsequent coveting and gentrification of the same land by white people after slavery, offers a powerful commentary on the enduring power dynamics perpetuated by white supremacy. It serves as a lesson on the workings of the system and how aligning ourselves with it, whether fully or partially, will inevitably lead to our deterioration. Sula thus becomes a queer Black feminist technology used by Morrison to urge racialized communities to examine their own traditions and allegiance so as to avoid their own inevitable disintegration and death like the Bottom.

Notes

[1] I use technology as a nod to Isiah Lavender III's idea of freedom technology, which he defines in *Afrofuturism Rising: The Literary Prehistory of a Movement* (2019), as forms of practical knowledge that help Black people to control their history of enslavement.

[2] Ogbanje in African cosmology refers to spirit children with complex identity. They are born only to die and be born again and again. They are known to exhibit aberrant and non-conformist traits. By exploring Sula's subjectivity within this framework, Okonkwo makes visible multiple gender and sexual identities within the transatlantic African tradition.

[3] Edelman explains the symbolism of the child as a fantasmatic universalized subject, not to be confused with a real child, that serves to regulate political discourse and meaning making and terroristically holds everyone to a higher collective futuristic purpose. This symbolic child marks the fetishistic fixation of heteronormativity; and everything fought, won, and lost is always done in the service of this child and self-fashioning and alliances not invested psychically in preserving this absolute value of reproductive futurism are judged as narcissistic and deficient.

[4] Patricia Collins explains 'the hoochie' as the racialized deviant version of the passive, prim, and proper white woman within the overarching white supremacist system. The hoochie's image of womanhood is constructed around her insatiable sexual appetite, which helps define the boundaries of white heteronormativity.

[5] The tunnel built in the white part of town became the focal point of the Bottom people's intense emotions. In a collective frenzy, they march into it with the intention of destroying it, but the tunnel tragically collapses, trapping and killing the majority of the people. This tunnel serves as a metaphor for white dominant institutions always already rigged against Black people and Black people's continuous attempts to be integrated into it, which leads to colossal tragedy.

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Biography

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"You Cannot Escape Specters": The Hauntology of Blackness and Queer Performativities in Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half*

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Abstract

How can feminist and queer theory inform concepts of postcolonial and Black hauntology; or, how can we queer hauntology (further)? Brit Bennett's novel *The Vanishing Half* (2020) explores practices like passing, acting, and performing as its Black characters invent new life stories to pursue more self-determined lives. I argue that their performative imaginations of alternative pasts and futures can be read as forms of queer and racialized self-representation in a segregated, racist, and queerphobic US-American society. Reading the novel through a hauntological lens exposes this setting as haunted by the continuities of slavery and segregation. Supplementing hauntology with queer, feminist, and oceanic concepts of performativity, memory, and kinship highlights not only the centrality of actively responding to the something-to-be-done signaled by hauntings but offers performative strategies that make such wake work come to life. This paper examines the representation of racial gendered hauntings in *The Vanishing Half,* its narrativization of queer modes of performativity and oceanic relationality, as well as its politics of (in)visibility.

Keywords Blackness; Haunting; Hauntology; Oceanic; Performativity; Queer; Visibility.

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Introduction

"You can escape a town, but you cannot escape blood." This assertion represents a fundamental premise of Brit Bennett's novel *The Vanishing Half* (2020), being printed already on its cover and declared in a dual voice by both the narrator and the characters living in said Louisiana smalltown which serves as the starting and end point of the narrative (7). The novel explores practices like passing, acting, and performing, as its characters invent new life stories to pursue more self-determined lives, away from the race-obsessed town founded on the ideal of lightness. I argue that the 'blood' that seems to haunt Bennett's Black characters is symbolic of a hauntology of Blackness, making visible a colonial legacy of ongoing gendered and racialized oppression and dispossession. The characters' responses to this hauntology, their imaginations of alternative pasts and futures through queer performativities, can be read as forms of self-representation in a segregated, racist, and queerphobic US-American society. Sometimes these strategies successfully lead to a sense of liberation and kinship, other times to alienation and loneliness.

As Ohad Reznick observes, "Unlike most passing novels, [...] Bennet's [sic] novel engages with the dynamics of both racial and transgender passing" (271). It thus lends itself well to an exploration of this article's underlying question: How can feminist and queer theory inform concepts of postcolonial and Black hauntology; or, how can we queer hauntology (further)? What feminist and queer theory share with Black hauntological concepts is a critique of the construction of the gendered or racialized Other as well as the imagination of alternative subjectivities, histories, and futures. On the one hand, reading with hauntology helps understand the conditions under which Bennett's characters live in the late 1960s to late 1980s as haunted by the continuities of slavery and segregation. This framework also gives reasons for why particularly Stella's attempt to repress her past fails, why she cannot escape the 'blood,' while other characters find empowerment in remembrance and reimaginings of Blackness. On the other hand, concepts like queer performativity and the oceanic unmaking of Black subjectivity highlight the centrality of actively responding to the "something-to-be-done" (Gordon xvi) signaled by hauntings with embodied practices that make wake work come to life as consciousness and care. Reading with the notion of queer oceanic kinship, moreover, underlines the relevance of attending to hauntings collectively in the aftermath of chattel slavery and a hetero-patriarchal present.

In the following, I outline basic premises of hauntological thought, relevant additions from recent, decidedly Black concepts of hauntology, and their relations to feminist and queer theories of performativity and the everyday. Then, three sections will examine the poetics of gendered racial hauntings in *The Vanishing Half*, its narrativization of modes of performativity and its politics of (in)visibility, and lastly, the role of the oceanic as productive link between queer and hauntological imaginations.

The fundamental assumption of hauntology is that the past (or future) returns to the living present as a haunting reminder of unresolved injustices that still latently influence the present. Specters signal to a "something-to-be-done" by drawing attention to "what's been in your blind spot" (Gordon xvi) due to dominant narratives of progress and selective historiog-

raphies that silence voices of the oppressed and dispossessed (cf. Benjamin, Thesis VII). This way, hauntings can generate an understanding of the connectedness of past, present, and future, and of continuities between supposedly past events or periods and the lived present. In the specific case of ongoing structural racism and dispossessions in the aftermath – or afterlife – of transatlantic slavery, we might speak of these continuities as the "wake" that has to be consciously worked through. Christina Sharpe describes such wake work as an "analytic [...] to imagine new ways to live in the wake of slavery" (18). It fuses practices of care with the project of remembrance and historical consciousness in order to re-actualize Black aliveness in the face of anti-Black violence and death.

Troubling ontology, historiography, and the notion of linear time by introducing the present-absent figure of the specter, hauntings can enable the imagination of alternative futures, or revolution and redemption.[1] This relies on an understanding of present power structures as historically made, continuous, but also changeable. When the "true picture of the past *whizzes* by" (Benjamin, Thesis V; original emphasis) for a fleeting moment of historical insight, the haunted are asked to reevaluate the past and, accordingly, the present (or future possibilities; Fisher, *Ghosts* 19). Thus, the project of hauntology is not nostalgic but about taking action in the present to make possible an alternative future, thereby breaking with capitalist realism (Fisher) or "political paralysis" (Gordon 182). However, the precondition for hauntings to fulfill their transformative potential is the hospitality and openness of the haunted. Openness is necessary since specters challenge conventional ways of thinking and address troubling issues like unresolved collective trauma and injustices.

Building upon Jacques Derrida's original hauntology developed in *Specters of Marx* (1994) and Avery F. Gordon's discussion of hauntings in racial gendered capitalism in the United States (*Ghostly Matters* 1997), Kashif Jerome Powell develops a concept appropriate for analyzing the legacy of transatlantic slavery in the United States and its impact on Black Americans today. In *Specters and Spooks* (2014), Powell not only analyzes the impact of slavery's continuities on Black bodies but also explores different modes of performativity, namely theater performances and street protests, as ways of reimagining and performing self-determined meanings of Blackness in opposition to the dominant and dominating "ontological imaginings" of it (*Making #BlackLivesMatter* 254). Through chattel slavery, the perception as well as performances of Blackness have become "traced through both existence and nonexistence" (*Specters* 2), so that it appears as lacking subjectivity and intertwined with death. Understanding Blackness as being haunted by the sociocultural, political, and economic consequences of slavery is another perspective highlighting the continuity of systematic racial oppression and exploitation. Being haunted by what Powell calls "the spectral trace of slavery" means to live, as Black Americans, in "a forced relationship with a historized imagining of *blackness* as/in death" (17; original emphasis), which manifests both on a material and discursive level. Besides describing ongoing racial violence in the wake, Powell's hauntology attests that Black bodies have been rendered ghostly themselves, occupying a spectralized position between life and death. Thus, hauntings affect at least two dimensions as Black Americans are haunted by exterior specters and are spectralized themselves. This also relates to Gordon's

claim that hypervisibility can entail invisibility (*Ghostly Matters* 17), and it parallels the problem of national memory in the aftermath of slavery: While the material Blackness of the body has become hypervisible as a deviation from the norm and loaded with meaning, the history of institutionalized racial oppression and exploitation underlying this imagination of Blackness has been made invisible. Simultaneously, whiteness has also been made invisible by rendering it universal (Powell, *Specters* 27; Hartman, *Scenes* 154).

However, theater and street protests are locations where "fundamental conditions of possibility [appear] that haunt those performativities" (Powell, *Specters* 3) and that can affectively challenge dominant imaginations of Blackness. Those who actively remember can act as surrogates, giving "afterlives" (9) to the dead and enabling their spirits to reappear as specters. In that way, performances of remembrance can be not only a form of redemption for the past, but can "disrup[t] and reconfigur[e] the phenomenal existence of *blackness*" (15; original emphasis) in the present and for the future. Powell later expands on the idea that, like in theater performances, protesters at demonstrations act simultaneously as "the witness[es], [and] as the *revenant*[s]" (*Making #BlackLivesMatter* 40; original emphasis), thus being haunted and haunting at the same time. The transformative potential of hauntings sensed in such performativities can partly be attributed to the affective character of hauntings, as Gordon describes: "Being haunted draws us affectively [...] into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition" (8). Firstly, this points out how hauntings make accessible and relatable the insights they offer. Secondly, identifying the structure of feeling as "perhaps the most appropriate description of how hauntings are transmitted and received" (18) elevates the impact of hauntings from individual experience to the collective level. They are able to "mediat[e] between institution and person" (142). Therefore, hauntology allows for the examination of narrations that relate individual encounters with specters to collective memory and trauma, as well as for the identification of hauntings within memory politics and hegemonic discourses.

Like Gordon, Patricia Yaeger firmly emphasizes a dimension of hauntings that is already discernible in Powell's work: their situatedness in the everyday. Yaeger's notion of racial gendered hauntings brings in a feminist and queer theoretical perspective that productively informs postcolonial and Black hauntologies. Advocating for this focus on the everyday in *Dirt and Desire* (2000), Yaeger writes that the trivial should not be separated from the historical, thus echoing the core feminist premise that the personal is political. Her analyses underline that everyday practices are shaped by and shaping (memory) politics, so that, conversely, the everyday can be a "source of social change [...and] daily resistances" (154). As argued by Gordon, the accessibility of affective and mundane, and thus more tangible, experiences of haunting can increase their impact as it facilitates decoding their message. Centering the ordinary dimension of hauntings also underlines the fact that experiences of gendered and racialized oppression are not extraordinary but, on the contrary, systemic and made every day. The pervasiveness of oppressive power structures then becomes especially clear when narratives situate them in mundane settings or the supposedly safe space of the home.

Conceptualizing a hauntology for southern women's fiction simultaneously marks Yaeger's attempt to move away from an academic focus on Gothic texts. She criticizes directing academic attention predominantly at the southern Gothic and its portrayal of monstrous excesses for overshadowing "a repetitive structure in southern fiction that depends on the trace or remnant—on a scrap that, in its most raveled state, still conjures the unthought of history" (Yaeger, Ghosts 104-05). Pointing out mundane objects and ordinary language as mediums of racial haunting, Yaeger argues that specters materialize in the form of remnants, traces, scraps of fabric, hair, and overall small fragments. While the "mundane links black and white fiction" (98), the content of the hauntings differs significantly; they display "different hauntologies and [...] structures of feeling" (101). White southern women's fiction narrates "*the return of the oppressed*" (95; original emphasis), or how ghosts are repressed into disappearance again. In these texts, hauntings remain vague illusions and only hint at haunting "relations of dominance that will not disappear" (101). Those are, however, still disturbing to the white characters exactly because they remain latent. This form of haunting can be described as uncontrollable, "pure repetition" (Brogan 9), so that "even the ghost of an insight is not recognizable" (Yaeger, *Ghosts* 102) and the haunted subject cannot act upon it in the present.

By contrast, Black southern women's fiction depicts mundane objects, scraps, and remnants as means through which the dead and dispossessed can "return as a remnant or fragment that needs to be made into an integer" (Yaeger, Ghosts 102) in a haunting "*return of the dispossessed*" (95; original emphasis) initiated by the gathering of such remains. Besides making visible again the fragmentation through loss of kin, memory, and subjectivity in the wake, their reappearance imagines an alternative "world-that-would-be" (96). This powerful poetics of the everyday and its "obsession with scraps" (92) can also be attributed to the importance remnants held for the enslaved in the antebellum South when, for instance, the "lock of [a mother's] hair" (95) or a relative's name was the only (physical) connection to people lost to death or after being sold.

In line with Yaeger's advocacy for studying the ordinary and "quiet" (*Ghosts* 101) hauntings of race, Philomena Essed contends that "[e]veryday racism is not about extreme incidents" (204) but about the repetition of "routine" and "cumulative" (208) racist practices. Her elaborations on everyday racism support the emphasis that Black, feminist, and queer theories place on the mundane in order to balance out "'grand'" (204) narratives of institutionalized discrimination by adding and relating the micro to the macro perspective.[2] A recourse to feminist and queer concepts of performativity and kinship will allow us to further tease out the meaningfulness of mundane scraps in Bennett's story of gendered racial hauntings.

Traveling Specters, or a Not So Southern Hauntology of Blackness

Brit Bennett's novel *The Vanishing Half* (*VH*) tells the story of twin sisters whose lives split in adolescence, so that their families and daughters do not know about the other until much later. Stella and Desiree Vignes, born 1938, grow up in a Louisiana small town founded on the ideal of lightness. Despite their light complexion, the Vignes are a Black family and father Leon gets lynched, resulting in the young girls and their mother Adele having to work hard to make

a living. The twins leave Mallard at sixteen, but Desiree returns at thirty with daughter Jude while Stella leads a new life passing as a white woman in California with husband Blake and daughter Kennedy. Only through Jude's move to California and a chance encounter do the two family strands eventually reconnect. The narrative is structured into six parts, beginning in 1968 with Desiree's return and ending in 1986 with the reunion of the twins and Adele's death, thus spanning the (post-)civil rights decades. As Marcus notes, though, the "key events" (366) of that history remain in the background and seemingly do not influence the characters' hauntedness or their responses to it.

The story is narrated by a heterodiegetic third person narrator with, for the most part, variable internal focalization. The four primary focalizers are Desiree, Stella, Jude, and Kennedy. Occasionally, the perspectives of others, like Early or Adele, are told in shorter passages. Sometimes the focalization changes to zero when the narrative voice adds its own commentary or tells more than the characters could know. Chapters, moreover, jump back and forth in time and include flashforwards or -backwards that contextualize certain scenes or represent processes of remembrance.

Comparing the four characters, all of them are haunted by ghosts of Blackness and segregation but they respond markedly differently and represent distinct practices of remembrance and strategies to overcome the hauntings. While the narrative voice exerts relatively little control over speech presentation, Free Indirect Thought causes an "indeterminacy" regarding whose thoughts are presented so that "narratorial and character voices" (Simpson 21) seem to blend. This results in the characters' thoughts and feelings seeming validated and understandable. Considering the vast differences between the four protagonists' opinions and lifestyles, the narrator's apparent proximity to each of them allows for identification with all four and suggests that there is no clear right or wrong in their decisions, or at least, that they are all comprehensible.

Stella is haunted by the traumatic memory of her father's lynching and her own sexual abuse, as well as by the historically shaped meaning of Blackness as consequence of her experiences of racism. She chooses to repress and hide her family history and Blackness by passing as white but the hauntings still continue in various forms. By contrast, adult Desiree reclaims her identity as a Black woman, marrying "the darkest man she could find" (VH 5) and refusing to cover her dark-skinned daughter in neutral colors (43). Leon's death makes Desiree reject her hometown's and ancestors' ideal of lightness, perceiving it as a dangerous legacy "clawing at her throat" (14). At the same time, she confronts the past by moving back to her family home in Mallard. The intertext that Desiree's return recalls, canonical US-American author Kate Chopin's short story "Désirée's Baby" (1893), further underscores her re-imagination of Blackness: On a Louisiana plantation, white Désirée Aubigny discovers that her newborn baby is Black. Her husband Armand, a severe slave-owner, therefore rejects her, believing that she must be secretly Black. Désirée ultimately drowns herself and the baby in the nearby river instead of turning to her supportive mother. Armand later learns that not his wife but his own mother was Black. In *The Vanishing Half*, Desiree Vignes subverts this story about racial anxieties and miscegenation by sharing the protagonist's name but actively choosing to have

a child with a Black man, who indeed punishes her for her lightness. She then returns to her mother for safety, and Mallard's river serves as a guide toward home rather than a place of death (cf. *VH* 18; Yaeger, *Dirt* 43). This homecoming at the beginning of the novel thus already hints at the importance of oceanic kinship and mother-daughter relationships for resisting the hauntology of Blackness. While Bennett's novel breaks with its intertext regarding the two Desirees's contrary attitudes toward Blackness (one haunted by it, one reclaiming it) and by depicting Desiree Vignes as having the agency and power to leave her abusive husband, the two texts share the figure of a violent husband obsessed with race, as well as the image of "remnant[s]" (Chopin 244) triggering racial hauntings.

In the next generation, Desiree's daughter Jude is haunted by specters of Blackness, resulting in feelings of not belonging, emotional abuse by schoolmates, and attempts to lighten or cover up her dark skin. Despite growing up white, Stella's daughter Kennedy shares feelings of not belonging or not being loved and suffers nightmares about lynchings, which suggests that she inherited Stella's traumatic memories in the sense of a postmemory (Hirsch).[3] Thus, although Kennedy enjoys the privileges of being born white and wealthy, she too is unknowingly affected by racial hauntings. Simultaneously, however, she reproduces the racism she learns from Stella. When learning about her Black ancestors through Jude, she reflects upon her own identity and upbringing, trying to rearticulate what Blackness or whiteness mean and realizing the interwovenness of identity, performativity, and socialization.

Hauntings mostly center around the two overarching topics of (loss of) kinship, and Blackness in the novel. They manifest as nightmares and constant unease, or as resurfacing memories triggered by everyday objects. Stella and Kennedy experience nightmares resulting from the traumatic (post-)memory of Leon's lynching and feel like they do not belong to their family and community in Palace Estates, Los Angeles. While Stella's anxiety is grounded in her fear of revealing that she grew up Black and poor and thus being rejected by her family, Kennedy's self-consciousness stems from Stella being distanced and secretive toward her. These haunting memories of familial loss and danger, which can be traced back to the legacy of slavery in Mallard, resurface because of their racist white neighbors in California. Likewise, for Desiree living in the family home, everyday objects once used by Stella, like a doll or chair, conjure ghostly images of young Stella appearing around the house or on the way to school. For both twins, scraps and remains enable a return of father Leon and memories of his funeral. Having been dispossessed of his life, memories of Leon come up "in flashes," being recalled by his "denim shirt" (37) or woodwork. Making her remember sensations and tastes from the day of Leon's funeral, a black lacey fabric and a photograph taken at the service affectively haunt Stella decades later, not so much as a welcome return but as an otherwise repressed memory of loss. As this loss stretches beyond the lifespan of her father whose "lineage [was already] hollowed by loss" (35), the narrative exposes the ongoing structural violence in the aftermath of slavery.

Specters of Blackness as conceptualized by Powell manifest when Stella is haunted by Blackness as a shameful secret that she desperately tries to conceal and repress, as well as when she experiences oppressive performances of whiteness – most drastically in the

forms of Leon's lynching and sexual abuse by former boss Mr. Dupont. Through passing and moving to California, she attempts to avoid this hauntology that forces her into an abusive workplace, hinders the pursuit of higher education, and makes her rely on the "Negro Day" (155) to visit a museum. But her repression is unsuccessful: Beginning with the Walkers' (a Black family) move to Palace Estates, she feels "bad luck" (165) enters the neighborhood and her anxiety increases. Later, upon meeting Jude, the picture of "that dark girl" (273) repeatedly haunts her imagination. Moreover, Stella's memories of racial and sexual violence are triggered by Blake's and Kennedy's whiteness, which again shows the disturbing effect of resurfacing traumatic memories that are repressed instead of worked through. In a seemingly contradictory but ultimately consistent process, Stella performs the white supremacist actions that made her seek out a life without racial violence in the first place. For instance, she repeats to Kennedy what she herself, as a child, heard a white mother say – "'we don't play with niggers'" (173; 211) – out of fear of exposing herself as not belonging in the white neighborhood.

Linguistically, these hauntings manifest through contrasts of Blackness and whiteness, spatio-temporal deixis, and modality. The flashing up of memory is narrated using terms connoting hauntings either in a positive or negative sense, like "conjured" (80), "invisible remnants" (96), "ghost[s]" (226, 262), or "appearing" (223, 325). Oftentimes, the haunted characters feel disturbed, "choked" (275), or "spooked" (296) by memories. Ultimately, however, they all begin to imagine different lives as the hauntings disrupt their perceptions of reality. One scene that vividly captures the capability of disruption possessed by a haunting "scrap of paper" (296) narrates how Jude hands Kennedy a photograph of their mothers and shared grandmother. Markers of perception modality describe the affective impact on focalizer Kennedy and her creation of a countermemory (cf. Simpson 46). Simultaneously, Kennedy realizes there is something to be done: confronting Stella about not telling her the truth about her life story. The narrative voice affirms memory's multidirectionality in this scene, describing how it points "forward and backward at the same time" (*VH* 307). The photograph mirrors this ambivalence as it first feels like "a razor, digging into [Kennedy's] side" (297), until it changes into a source of stability that she needs "to tether her in place" (311). Thus, after the initial disturbance, this scrap provides a countermemory for Kennedy that, although challenging to her identity, is experienced as liberating because it connects her to a family history and sense of belonging hitherto unknown.

Blackness and whiteness are constantly contrasted through repeated connections drawn between Blackness and notions of danger, arrogance, and beasts, and between lightness and freedom and success. Thereby, the persistent hauntology of Blackness, experienced and reproduced by the focalizers and their communities, is emphasized throughout the novel. Particularly Jude's dark skin is highlighted and insulted by Mallard's inhabitants, calling her "blueblack" (63), "tar baby" (88), or "vulgar" (43). In Mallard and L.A. alike, Blackness is regarded as bringing "trouble" (63), being "ugly" and "queer" (202), even possibly "[d]angerous" (172), "alarming" (173), or connected to "[s]omething wild and feral" (205). Moreover, ecologies of death surrounding Blackness are linguistically invoked by linking Black-

ness to violent death, for example with expressions like "lynched" (35), "assassination," "victims" (188), or "gutted" (202). When Black characters like Desiree, the Walkers, and Frantz do not conform to this episteme that confines them to a subservient, precarious, or segregated position, they are judged as "crazy" (63) and, above all, as "[f]lashy" (172) and "uppity" (23). By contrast, lightness is mostly viewed as desirable by Black characters, judged to be "more perfect" (6), granting "good fortune" (318) and the repeatedly mentioned privilege of being "free" (64, 341, 22). Only Stella and the omniscient narrative voice associate lightness also with loneliness, a feeling most sharply conveyed through the use of deixis.

Markers of spatial and temporal deixis, i.e. of the perceived proximity or distance, serve to express the characters' feelings of alienation from other characters, places, or life stages. Apart from indicating distance between two points in time or space, deictic verbs and locative expressions combined with metaphors also articulate the liminal positions created in slavery and reverberating through hauntings: not belonging, living between whiteness and Blackness, or between life and death, love and mistrust. For instance, the distance felt by Stella toward her past is expressed through thoughts like "that was a lifetime ago" (162), or her perception of the past as "another life" closed off behind a "door" (266). Simultaneously, since Stella lies to Kennedy and recognizes the difference between her daughter's 'real' whiteness and her own performed one, their relationship is described in similarly distant terms: her daughter appears as "a stranger" (245, 275). Besides this felt distance, there is also a physical distance that Stella maintains. When Jude intentionally meets her and "reache[s] toward Stella," her aunt "push[es] her away" (267). The pushing and pulling illustrate clearly Jude and Stella's opposing desires of contact versus avoidance. Similarly, Stella's fear of exposure as a Black woman makes her (initially) keep as much physical and emotional distance to the Walkers as possible, watching them only "[t]hrough her blinds, […] as if their lives were another program on her television set," from "across the street" (173). Generally, descriptions of characters watching others through objects like mirrors, cameras, or blinds are a recurrent motif illustrating the disjunction between appearance and identity. All these scenes narrate how the 'true' self cannot be seen even by loved ones when the other one masks it. This motif will be further explored in relation to queer(ing) practices and performativities later.

Furthermore, spatial deixis expresses Stella's ghostliness which results from the repeated dehumanization and dispossession of her and her Black family, and is then intensified through her passing and separation from Desiree. Her uprootedness is indicated by Blake referring to her as someone "who came from nowhere and had nobody" (201). Jude's imagination also locates her "everywhere, always, and nowhere at the same time" (224), "slipping in and out of doors," and "drift[ing] through her dreams" (222). It is an unstable, hard-to-grasp image illustrating Stella's presence-absence, which matches Stella's own perception. The liminal position Stella occupies through repressing her past and having to constantly perform being white is further underlined by Kennedy's reverse alienation from Black persons, and Stella's struggle to adapt to another, wealthy white habitus. Both aspects are illustrated by distal deixis and references to unfamiliarity. Being raised white in a segregated neighborhood, Kennedy grows up with a distanced relationship particularly to "black boys

she'd admired from afar," from a "[s]afe" distance (289, emphasis mine). Therefore, when she later learns about the Black side of her family, she searches for connectedness but feels none, instead feeling only "alienated" (292). Stella's secret passing and hauntedness thus result in a sense of spectralization of herself as well as of Kennedy. Her daughter becomes a "lonely girl [...] surrounded only by ghosts" (262) and struggles to pinpoint her identity following Jude's revelation. Kennedy resorts to jobs that involve acting and pretending as a strategy to avoid resolving the seemingly unresolvable gap between growing up white and knowing her mother is Black.

Considering the strategies characters employ to deal with the various hauntings, it can be observed that the hauntings either encourage remembrance and engagement with the specters or their repression. The characters' choices are framed primarily through their desire for closeness or distance to family and other Black characters. Desiree and, to some degree, Kennedy seek close relationships with Black characters like their respective partners Sam, Early, and Frantz, or childhood friend Cindy. Whereas Desiree and Jude are determined to find Stella and reunite the family, Stella avoids contact with Black characters out of fear of being recognized for who she really is. For instance, Stella prefers to hire a Mexican housekeeper over a Black person and avoids eye contact with Black people in public.

However, Stella's relationship to neighbor Loretta is more complex, displaying both attempts of repression and a desire for an alternative life. As their relationship moves from initial aloofness to friendship and imagined kinship to separation and grief on the part of Stella, its development demonstrates simultaneously a return of the repressed and of the dispossessed. The middle stage is defined by frequent meetings and Stella's wish to reveal her secret, which she imagines might lead to Loretta recognizing her as kin, so that Stella could finally experience a sense of belonging again and relieve her guilt. A return of the dispossessed takes place when the image of Desiree is conjured by the likeness of Loretta's gestures to hers, as well as through the space for reflection and remembrance that Loretta empathically creates. In an instance of linguistic slippage, Stella expresses her affection to Loretta by calling her "'baby'" (187), thus extending Yaeger's concept of linguistic ghosts to include the resurfacing of repressed Black kinship. The sentence ending this scene, "[t]hen she [Stella] was kneeling on the tile, cleaning up the mess she'd made" (187), shows Stella's guilt toward Loretta in a seemingly documentary style. But as it was Loretta who let a glass fall and shatter, the literal mess was made by her not Stella, who nevertheless cleans it up. This "mess" recalls Stella's involvement in the neighborhood's racism against the Walkers, which was the previous conversation topic, and thus complicates her spontaneous affectionate gesture.

Indeed, notwithstanding Stella's fondness of Loretta, their relationship is framed by a return of the repressed in the form of racist statements. Stated initially by Stella, the phrase "we don't play with niggers" (173) returns when Kennedy utters it to Loretta's daughter in childish rage. The racism inherent in Stella's performance of whiteness, repressed when together with Loretta, thus resurfaces to haunt Stella as a reminder of her complicity in reproducing an anti-Black climate. Eventually, her allegation that Reg Walker looked at her inappropriately – a claim the narrator exposes as a lie – makes neighbors threaten the Black

family with attacks on their house, so that they move out. Their move hinders Stella from repressing her abuse of white power and generates another haunting of the repressed when she imagines finally explaining herself to Loretta. However, this fantasy is not relieving as Loretta's anger and misery haunt it, reminding Stella to take responsibility for her actions.

Clearly, the success of characters' revisions of their racialized and gendered self-representations prompted by hauntings neither corresponds to a North/South divide nor is it guaranteed by mobility. While mobility shapes several characters' lives as they move across the country to escape specters or build new lives for themselves, settling elsewhere or moving north does not necessarily resolve their hauntedness. As underscored by spatial deixis, Stella encounters racist violence and segregation in her suburban California neighborhood just as she did in rural Louisiana, while Desiree moves back to Mallard from Washington, D.C., to escape her abusive husband and finds belonging and kinship there. For Jude and partner Reese, by contrast, moving to L.A. from Louisiana and Arkansas, respectively, enables them to find liberating self-representations and to build queer Black community. What seems to be most conducive to them creating freer and safer lives is thus not the ability to move but rather forms of wake work that include re-embracing and re-imagining Blackness as well as queer practices of kinship.

"I Want to See You": Politics of (In)Visibility and Queer Performativities

Strategic pretending, acting, or passing make up another prominent theme and response to being haunted by specters in *The Vanishing Half*. Desiree has acted in school, and for Early, Kennedy, and Reg acting is (part of) their job. Stella and Reese both perform different identities to the ones they grew up with in order to lead new lives as a white woman and transman, respectively, and several of Reese's friends, including Barry, perform in drag shows.[4] While the frequent narration of pretending demonstrates the characters' sense of ghostliness, instability, and fear of exposure, they also experience these performances as liberating. Kennedy's convincing acting, for instance, is described as a process of "disappear[ing] inside herself" (319) or "into somebody else" (283). In a dual voice, the narrator and Kennedy reflect on how "[a]cting is not about being seen […] True acting mean[s] becoming invisible" (283). Assuming invisibility by choice thus becomes an act of reclaiming control over one's performances of identity in a situation marked by presence-absence. Indeed, acting (on stage or in front of a camera) is simultaneously a hypervisible practice as the actors' voice, gestures, or facial expressions are emphasized through the use of lights, microphones, or close shots. Kennedy, however, foregrounds the disappearance of the own personality through acting.

Likewise, "Voudon inflected performances" (*Specters* 111) at "racial phantasmagoria" (112) shows of seemingly race-shifting mulattas in mid-nineteenth-century Louisiana, Powell argues, gave the performers "autonomy by using the simultaneous legibility and illegibility of [their] body to create a space of possibility" (111-12). Since Kennedy's sense of identity is troubled she appreciates the control provided by the fact that "'acting is different […] You only show people what you want to'" (*VH* 257). Despite her growing up white, Kennedy shows a form of postmemory as she, too, experiences unease at being recognized unwillingly and

off-stage for the role she plays as an actress. Clearly, she reproduces the paranoid behavior that Stella has adopted since passing. For Kennedy, acting therefore is a strategy of regaining self-determination and a welcome escape from other people's categorizing gaze, a gaze that produces hyper- and invisibility at the same time.

Unlike Kennedy, Stella and Reese perform their new identities permanently, which requires a higher degree of control and secrecy and heightens their fear of exposure. Still, they also experience agency through performance, perceiving it as a controllable act of self-invention. However, the self-empowering quality of passing and transitioning is contrasted with the frequently mentioned danger of being unmasked. Their desire for control and considering what is at stake socially and economically makes the thought of someone learning about their old lives unsettling. A sense of danger is evoked by expressions such as "get caught" (13) or "dangerous" (74), and by Stella almost injuring herself severely when remembering her first successful passing. This is additionally emphasized by the repeated accounts of Stella hiding in her house and Reese in darkness or behind his camera, and particularly by both of them shielding their bodies from views that might reveal their secrets. As Stella and Reese adopt markedly similar strategies against the unwanted exposure of their bodies and past identities, the text narrates how both Stella as a Black woman and Reese as a Black transman are haunted by the forms of violence and rejection they have encountered in a white supremacist, patriarchal society. It illustrates how racialized and gendered oppression overlap or combine as part of colonialism's structural legacy (cf. Powell, *Specters* 27; Ibrahim 174).

Still, the novel does not suggest that similar anxieties surrounding visibility automatically lead to mutual understanding when focusing only on either race or gender. On the same day within the narrative, Jude is uneasy about her dark skin being (hyper-)visible in the sunshine at Venice Beach, but asks Reese to stop obscuring his not yet surgically transformed body in darkness at home. Jude's "'I want to see you'" is rejected by Reese's "'I don't want you to'" (132); and this brief dialog reflects the general conflict over the power to see and thus identify, classify, and potentially dominate that is presented in the novel. These politics of (in)visibility are relevant not only because they enable or undermine self-determined performances of identity, but because having control over the perception of others encompasses the power to decide who is human and whose lives are expendable in racial gendered capitalism. Repeated descriptions of light and dark spaces that expose or conceal skin tones and queer practices or gender identities on the one hand signal to the characters' shared desire to control their visibility. On the other hand, the emphasis on light and darkness highlights the obsession with Blackness and whiteness shaping the society portrayed by Bennett.

Apart from the narrativization of practices of concealing and masking, characters watch (or are watched by) others through mirrors, which reflects on the mediation of gender and race, the role of the audience, as well as on the troubling effects that passing can have in contrast to acting. Two scenes in which the reader 'watches' Barry (Jude's and Reese's friend and a Black drag queen) and Stella, respectively, through mirrors and thus only indirectly through a mediating object, convey the gaps between their self-understanding and the roles they perform in front of others. It becomes clear that their audiences – Barry's audience at

drag shows and Stella's family – can only ever see them from a certain distance controlled by the performers. In Barry's case, the transformation of gender overlaps with a transformation of race when he performs "as Bianca at a club in West Hollywood [tellingly] called Mirage. […] 'It's not enough to be a woman,' Reese had joked during the show. 'He's gotta be a white woman too'" (114-15). Temporarily and playfully, Barry thus mocks and escapes from the patriarchal white gaze scrutinizing him as a gay Black man in his daily life.

The mediated nature of his performance is further underlined by descriptions of his preparations for the show: Jude watches him get ready through a mirror and sees that "[o]ne cheek was covered in full makeup, the other half of his face still clean" (119). Then, "right before a performance […] a veil seemed to drop before his face. One moment he was Barry, the next, Bianca" (231; my emphasis). While the makeup is part of the transformation, his acting provides the veil that changes how others perceive Barry. The attention drawn to characters' physical appearances altered through makeup, the surfaces mediating them, and performance emphasizes that a supposedly stable identity and norms, what Judith Butler refers to as "'the internal' is a surface signification" actively upheld by the "*stylized repetition of acts*" (179; emphasis in original). Barry's transformation thus destabilizes the "mediating boundary [distinguishing the hegemonic and the Other, and the body's internal and external] that strives for stability" (170), blurring the boundaries between both gender and racial identities on stage. Narrating how character physically, medially, and performatively alter (the perception of) their bodies, the novel breaks with the hegemonic "construction of stable bodily contours" (169) and the notion of coherence between body, identity, and performance. Lastly, not only does Barry's half-painted face illustrate the fact that race and gender are continuously constructed, it also picks up the motif of the doubled or split body, which I will return to with regard to Stella.

The crucial difference between her and Barry, though, is that Stella is passing continuously in order to survive while Barry is acting for entertainment purposes on "two Saturdays a month in a tiny dark club off Sunset. [And thus, again, a character acts in the safety of the dark.] Otherwise, he was a tall, bald man who looked nothing like a woman, which was part of the delight […]. *It was fun because everyone knew that it was not real*" (115; my emphasis). By contrast, when Stella "glance[s] at him [Blake] through the mirror, Blake watching her with those soft, worried eyes," she thinks "She'd created a new life with a man *who could never know her*" (208; my emphasis). Barry and Stella thus represent the difference between acting and passing, which can be drawn out further with the help of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's notion of queer performativity and the peri-performative, or context of performativity. At heart lies a question about their audiences' knowledge: "does the audience know that it is an audience?" (Edwards 88); and further: how does the audience respond to the performance? Clearly, Barry's/Bianca's audience at the drag show is fully aware of watching an artistic performance. Stella's family and neighbors, however, must not know since her passing is a secret whose exposure might lead to the loss of her family, socio-economic status, and safety. In fact, her white and clearly racist neighbors do show "an interest in sanctioning against" (89) the Blackness she tries to conceal. While her audi-

ence is unknowing, it is thus still a vital part to her performance because "[s]he had become white only because everyone thought she was" (VH 198). Regardless of whether a performance is temporary, like drag shows, or potentially permanent, like passing, performativity involves an opposite who accepts the performance as believable (cf. also Butler 180).

Still, regarding Stella's audience, the risk of exposure and subsequent punishment leads to frequent expressions of anxiety such as "[s]he couldn't let herself slip up like that again. She'd have to focus. Stay alert" (VH 273), underlining the risk Stella knowingly takes to evade racist violence and dispossession. Indeed, Black characters who are economically successful or behave as entitled as whites do are repeatedly labeled as "uppity" (23) and are punished for allegedly appropriating something they are not allowed to have. The Walkers, for instance, are able to buy themselves into Brentwood's wealthy white neighborhood but are violently driven out again for their Blackness. Importantly, alternative performances that go "undetected" (Edwards 79) do not automatically challenge societal conventions. Therefore, the kind of performance and its context decide whether it can become subversive (Butler 177). However, the function and effect of "self-styled" performances is never entirely self-determined as "styles have a history, and those histories condition and limit the possibilities" (177). In other words, the potentials of Stella's passing are shaped by the historical material conditions of late 1960s United States, so that her performance remains an exclusively personal and confined attempt at overcoming anti-Black violence. Still, the narrative problematizes her strategy by showing how it encompasses her own reproduction of racist acts.

Despite similar means of narrating Stella's passing, Reese's gender transformation, and Barry's drag performance, only Stella experiences spectralization and continues to be haunted by specters of Blackness despite passing successfully – and arguably even more because of it. The troubling consequence of her decision to pass is that she feels split in half. Like Stella, Barry also thinks of his drag persona as a part of him, but he manages to feel in control of his separate roles:

> Barry prided himself on his ability to keep his lives separate. […] He was Bianca on two Saturday nights a month, and otherwise, he pushed her out of sight, even though he thought about her […] Bianca always lingering on the edge of his mind. […] You could live a life this way, *split*. *As long as you knew who was in charge*. (VH 135; my emphasis)[5]

But unlike Stella, Barry does not pretend to be someone else out of a haunting trauma. Stella's problem is losing the desired control over her life because she cannot escape the specters of Blackness and is haunted by returns of the repressed: For her, "pretending became reality. […] She'd lived a life split between two women—each real, each a lie" (278). Passing is thus presented as a deeply ambiguous, as well as dangerous performance. While Stella chooses to pass as white in order to escape the ecologies of death, the act of passing is portrayed as splitting her in half and associated with death: "Maybe Miss Vignes was already a part of her, as if she had been split in half" (199). The motif of the split, moreover, is both

common in southern fictions of the grotesque and in narratives of transatlantic slavery and its afterlife, thus encompassing the individual dimension of split personalities or bodies as well as the collective dimension of family trees, communities, and collective memories being torn apart by the slave trade and ongoing anti-Black violence. The fact that characters cannot outrun the(ir) past is not so much proof of the existence of any 'original' identity derived from a stable body but rather demonstrates the limitations that historical material conditions place on attempts to rethink identity through a "perpetual displacement" and "fluidity" in performance that "denaturalize[s]" (Butler 176) any stable notions. Especially Barry's and Stella's sense of always being and shifting between two racial and gender identities exemplifies Butler's argument that identity performances are always imitations without an original.

These splitting conditions are mirrored in the narrative structure and by the embodiment of splits in characters' bodies, minds, and families as they feel spectralized, torn between identities, or separated from kin. Yaeger identifies the split as typical of southern hauntological and Gothic writing, in which bodies are oftentimes "twinned" and "divided in half: split between white and black [...,] incorporating the line of segregation itself" (Dirt 31). In later fictions, "hybridized bodies often separate into two distinct but interconnected characters" (32), as is the case with Desiree and Stella. The metaphor TWIN SISTERS ARE TWO PARTS OF A WHOLE is frequently evoked with the effect of highlighting spectrality and loss as characteristic of Blackness in the wake. Desiree and Stella are viewed as "one person split into two bodies" (VH 37) and always as a "pair" (39), so that their separation appears particularly drastic. Stella even doubly embodies this split through her passing as white, feeling torn in half. This fissure is moreover reflected on the novel's cover,[6] which shows two faces – one light, one dark – that overlap but face different directions, signaling to their simultaneous connectedness and separation.

From a Black hauntological perspective, Stella's embodiment of presence-absence represented by her sense of being unreal, invisibly split in two, or lacking is testament to the spectralization of Black bodies and subjectivity in the wake (cf. Coly 115; Sharpe 28-29). As Powell argues, in "the institution of slavery [...] blackness signified a body politically and socially devoid of lineage, and lacking the ontological capacity for life" (Specters 7). As Stella tries to flee this legacy, she actually denounces her family and feels stuck in a liminal position between a past she cannot repress and an alternative future she cannot fully embrace. Indeed, passing not only confirms Stella's notion of being split, but it is presented in relation to death: "the *passe blanc* were a mystery. You could never meet one who'd passed over undetected, the same way you'd never know someone who successfully faked her own death" (VH 74). Therefore, passing is not presented as a successful strategy for escaping the hauntology of Blackness. Repressing her past and abandoning her Black family constrains Stella to a "cemented" (242) liminality rather than allowing her to move on. When Jude finds and confronts her, saying "'My mama kept looking for you,' [...] Stella's mouth curved, like she was going to smile or cry, her face, somehow, caught in between. Like a sun shower" (266). Even her appearance, then, mirrors the spectralized and torn position Stella finds herself in.

Another strategy paralleling the performance of alternative identities is Mallard's re-narrativization of the role of Black people in the South. Being a "third place" (*VH* 6), its in-betweenness is a strategy employed by the town's founder, a former slave, to achieve self-determination and belonging. However, while the town is characterized as "more idea than place" (5) and thus moldable, defying stable notions of history or identity, it is still haunted by the colonial past (54). Mallard's townspeople participate in a form of "postcolonial conscription" (Coly 28) of the Black American body: They follow the ideal of lightness, "nobody marrie[s] dark" (*VH* 5), and adhere to segregationist rules like separate days for museum visits. Lingering traces of slavery haunt, for example, the description of Jude's date with white classmate Lonnie: "the night hung heavy and damp like soaked cotton. She tasted the sugar off his lips" (114). The scenery is illustrated with references to two crops typical of southern plantations, cotton and sugar cane, thus hinting at the continuities of racial oppression that determine Jude's relationship with Lonnie. Moreover, the fact that Mallard is an "unmapped place" (85), invisible and unthinkable to other Americans and particularly to white people (6), highlights the invisibility of Black subjectivity that renders Mallard a rarity.

Lastly, in the repeated recall of the twin girls in their funeral dresses in passages about Mallard, Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977) manifests as an intertext underlining the ongoing racial violence that does not halt before little Black girls. "[T]he twins were reminders of this, tiny girls in funeral dresses" (38) representing the ecologies of death that haunt Mallard, a supposedly safe place. Similar to a black lacey fabric reminding Stella of this fact decades later, floating "little scraps of Sunday dresses" (Morrison 173) hauntingly remind Morrison's protagonist of the 1963 Alabama church bombings, and of the deaths of children in another supposedly safe place in this intertext (cf. Yaeger, *Ghosts* 89). These instances of a southern hauntology, again mediated by fabric scraps, problematize Mallard's strategy of re-narrativization through postcolonial conscription that remains within the logic of colorism and segregation, a strategy Stella takes to extremes, thus corresponding to Ayo A. Coly's criticism of this strategy in *Postcolonial Hauntologies*.

Fluid Reimaginations: Oceanic Practices of Memory, Identity, and Kinship

Fogging up vision, making bodies float, and whirling up identity categories, water features as a forceful element capable of disrupting stable ontologies of race and gender, as well as encouraging remembrance and kinship in *The Vanishing Half*. Understanding the novel's repeated use of watery imagery as meaningful to its reflection on racial hauntings and queer performances brings me to establish a dialogue between the narrative, the hauntological and queer theoretical questions engaged in this essay, and oceanic concepts of memory and relationality like Christina Sharpe's wake, Habiba Ibrahim's Black age, and Fackler's and Schultermandl's oceanic kinship. Oceanic imagery bridges hauntological and queer perspectives within the narrative, but also elucidates tangible, liberating practices in the characters' responses to spectralization, loss, and identity conflicts.

Aligning with an oceanic understanding of historical consciousness and remembrance as situated in and shaped by the ocean, as articulated by Sharpe's concept of wake work, ref-

erences to water introduce a sense of connection to family (history) in Bennett's narrative. As rain, fog, river, or simply tap water, it evokes loving or haunting memories of (missing) kin. For example, listening to a "spring storm" (*VH* 42), Desiree vividly remembers shared experiences with Stella in New Orleans. The passage continues with aquatic references as partner Early emerges out of the rain on Desiree's porch, making her remember their first meeting as teenagers. Likewise, in the novel's final passage, Mallard's river becomes a body that "like all rivers, remember[s] its course" (366), marking it as a place of memory flowing through Louisiana and possibly holding both memories of family and collective memories of Southern US history. Jude and Reese's desire "to forget" (366), arising while floating in the water, is balanced with the narrator's confident, categorical assertion that the water retains a fluid historical consciousness connecting its source and mouth, past and future.

Water therefore has multiple and ambivalent meanings for the characters. Besides sparking the remembrance of kin, water conjures specters of Blackness that haunt Jude, reminding her of the racism experienced in Mallard and making her conceal her skin at Venice Beach (132). Simultaneously, oceanic imaginations of a "mythical island" and freely "floating" (140) triggers memories of colonial history and provokes the imagination of alternative narratives of Black history, freedom, and protection. At the end of the novel, water is imagined as a disruptive element that exposes the arbitrariness of segregation, jumbling the separation between Black and white when an imaginary hurricane unearths and mixes the remains at Mallard's segregated cemetery (365-66). Once again, this passage recalls intertexts, Sarah Wright's *This Child's Gonna Live* (1969) and Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, which both imagine water making resurface remains of the dispossessed dead through flooding (cf. Yaeger, *Ghosts* 97-98, 101). The scene thereby establishes connections to other Black American women's hauntological narratives that underscore the relevance of the oceanic for visions of justice, because these mixed-up, floating remnants simultaneously uncover historical injustice and signal to a shared humanity.

What Ibrahim and Sharpe call oceanic unmaking (specifically, of age and gender) in the wake forms perhaps one of the strongest bridges between hauntological and queer theoretical approaches to dehumanization and disruptions of identity. Especially the narration of other characters' perception of Jude and Early's unageing through material dispossession illustrate these processes. Traveling from Mallard to L.A., Jude is described as "[a] girl from nowhere and nothing, and if you'd asked any of the other passengers, they would have noticed nothing interesting about her except that she was so, well, black" (*VH* 85). Also echoing Blake's impression of Stella ("the pretty secretary who came from nowhere and had nobody" 201), this judgment reveals the repeated association of uprootedness, lack, and insignificance with Blackness. The passengers' and bus driver's gazes represent this unmaking of subjectivity, which manifests as a simultaneous hypervisibility of Jude's Blackness and an invisibility of her other characteristics. Although Jude travels by choice and for a scholarship by bus over land, the description of how others see her conjures linguistic ghosts of slavery by relating Jude's uprootedness and hypervisible Blackness to the context of a passage. These instances of repeated "stutterance or slippage" (Yaeger *Ghosts* 88), or in

Sharpe's words this "orthography of the wake" (20-21), reveal such repressed continuities of supposedly ended injustice, making legible the hauntology of Blackness in contemporary texts. Despite the narrator labeling Jude as a seventeen-year-old girl, a sense of age, gender, and humanity being unmade dominates when the driver primarily notices her Blackness, perceives her figure as "boyish," and exoticizingly compares her to a "cheetah" (*VH* 85).

Desiree's partner Early exemplifies Ibrahim's concept of Black age, having been a Black boy dispossessed of his childhood due to his parents' poverty. As "a technology of dehumanization" (Ibrahim 14) introduced in the oceanic context of Middle Passage, the category of age works to position Black people outside of normative time, thus depriving them of self-determination and safety by rendering Black children "unchildlike" (2) and Black adults childish (cf. also Reznick 277). Early had lost his family and had to work in "sharecropping" (*VH* 21) from a young age, feeling "like a man since the night his parents left him" (71). Even more than Jude, Early is characterized as "rooted nowhere" (29) and linguistic ghosts appear in the description of his job which disturb linear time by echoing slavers hunting fugitive slaves: "Early stuck to hunting criminals: it was never personal between the criminal and the bondsman, only a simple disagreement over dollars and cents" (54). Although he thinks of himself as indifferent to "the white man's justice" (30) and only concerned with money, him preferring to think of the fugitives as criminals not persons is reminiscent of colonial law that rendered the enslaved property and rejected their personhood. Similarly to Stella, he thus repeats, to a degree, the dehumanization he had experienced himself.

Finally, Fackler's and Schultermandl's notion of queer oceanic kinship speaks to the significance of alternative community-building practices in the aftermath of slavery and segregation, highlighting the caring facet of wake work that *The Vanishing Half* emphasizes as crucial for countering loss. Oceanic kinship is essentially queer and non-anthropocentric as it encompasses forms of "kinship with the ocean and kinship shaped by the ocean [...] beyond the nuclear family" (3). It means nurturing practices that build "commonality and solidarity" (3) in contexts defined by entanglements with the ocean or waterways such as maritime labor and transatlantic slavery. The "shared kinlessness" (4) produced by the slave trade and continued through, for instance, mass incarceration or the disproportionate killing of Black people by police, can mobilize into new kinship formations. The community that Jude creates with Reese, Barry, and their queer friend group in L.A. illustrates that such oceanic kinship practices prompted by kinlessness also offer care for people who, like Reese, deliberately abandon their biological kin because of their transphobic behavior.

The group's kinship and mutual support encourages them to embrace both their queerness and, in Jude's case, her Blackness: "The girls took Jude in until she felt, almost, like one of them. She'd never belonged to a group of friends before" (115). In a passage describing a blackout in L.A., the narrator's gaze sweeping over the city to highlight its inhabitants' diverse acts of kinship and love in the dark, Jude and Reese's relationship is linked to Black oceanic kinship as them walking "home" and "kissing" happens parallel to "the ocean rolling in black" (127). Interestingly, an unnamed "dark-haired woman" resembling Stella lights a candle against the darkness in this same passage. And indeed, she, by

contrast, is unable to build kinship with Loretta and her group of Black friends because Stella cannot share her actual kinlessness and its roots in racial violence with them. Practicing oceanic kinship is thus not divorced from practicing remembrance and a shared historical consciousness – elements that Christina Sharpe's notion of wake work already unites when it speaks of caring for one another, keeping watch with the dead, and creating consciousness as essential for Black aliveness in the wake. Bennett's novel underlines these interconnections of kinship, memory, and identity formation not only on the level of plot, but repeatedly through aquatic imagery. Ultimately, the fluidity of evoked images and narrated practices offer a counterweight to the normative stabilizing tendencies of the segregated, hetero-patriarchal society the characters struggle against.

Conclusion

Imagining the legacy of segregation as a hauntology of Blackness, *The Vanishing Half* narrates its characters' differing responses to hauntings through a contrasting of light and dark, the construction of spatial relations, namely distance or proximity between characters and between them and the past, and through the repeated emphasis on mundane items or scraps that conjure specters and trigger memories. Reading Bennett's novel through a hauntological lens and in dialogue with earlier intertexts highlights how the narrative frames the influence of segregation and gendered racial capitalism on performances of Blackness as an ongoing oppressive structure.

A central theme illustrating the afterlife of segregation is the split, which is mirrored by a nonlinear, fragmented narrative structure and the embodiment of splits in characters' bodies, minds, and families, as they feel spectralized, torn between identities, or separated from kin. Further, hauntings mostly manifest in the form of nightmares, visions, uneasiness and a sense of not belonging. Even hospitable responses to specters cannot fully restore the characters' incomplete knowledge about their family history. This corresponds to Benjamin's idea that pictures of the past only flash up but cannot be reconstructed fully. However, hauntings do prove to be powerful in encouraging changes in most characters' practices of remembrance and kinship as well as in their attitudes toward Blackness, which helps to critically reflect and counter the splitting conditions they experience. These transformative practices are moreover presented as notably queer and oceanic.

Revisiting my question of how feminist and queer thought can inform Black hauntologies, the notions of queer performativities and identity as constant performance that implicates both self and audience help illuminate the centrality of the body and its representations when considering effects of the hauntology of Blackness. The repeated narration of characters avoiding or seeking visibility, read from a queer hauntological perspective, not only demonstrates how hyper- and invisibility constitute modes of spectralization in the wake but also points to potentials of self-determined queer performances that disrupt stable identity categories and extend what are thinkable ways of being. In this vein, Bennett's narrative clearly underscores that liberating performances rely on historical consciousness as offered by specters as well as on collectivity, by evaluating different performative prac-

tices like acting, drag, or passing as more or less beneficial for its characters. While performances motivated by repression and an abjection of Blackness, like Stella's, remain isolating and cannot challenge the injustices of white-supremacist patriarchal capitalism or colonial legacies, the open and collective practice of queer Black kinship and a confrontation with personal and historical trauma are shown to be healing in Sharpe's sense of wake work. As Jude, Reese, and Barry build community, Desiree breaks with transgenerational loss and trauma, and Jude and Kennedy begin to mend the split between their family lines.

As extension of the novel's queer representations, oceanic ways of thinking shape its imaginations of self-reinvention and relationality. Frequently describing moments of remembrance in an aquatic register, the text signals both to the haunting legacy of transatlantic slavery as oceanic context where Black subjectivity was unmade, and to empowering potentials of oceanic approaches to rethinking and practicing memory, kinship, and humanity. Indeed, several of the intertexts discussed in this essay share fantasies about water swirling up and disrupting neatly separated identity categories, thereby making space for Black history and establishing shared humanity, while still acknowledging the ecologies of death in the wake.

Lastly, intertextual echoes of Black American and southern women's writing reflect an ongoing literary engagement with hauntings and the entanglement of race, gender, and class, with Bennett further "intersectionalizing" (Mikić and Maus 291) such explorations by imagining forms of queer community-building. Besides representing a kind of formal haunting, its intertextuality situates the novel within the American literary canon in line with authors like Kate Chopin, Toni Morrison, and Sarah E. Wright, as well as Nella Larsen and Jean Toomer whose influence could not be discussed here. While *The Vanishing Half* and its intertexts draw on elements of the southern Gothic, they remain grounded in the mundane, emphasizing the everyday-ness of gendered racial hauntings that defines their power, as well as the possibilities for resistance and reimaginations that can be enacted every day.

Notes

[1] Derrida's original hauntology as well as following hauntological concepts are fundamentally shaped by (and partly refer explicitly to) Walter Benjamin's philosophy of history (cf. Derrida 227-28; Gordon 65; Powell *Making #BlackLivesMatter* 256; Ibrahim 20, 161). As Benjamin's thinking is influenced both by Jewish theology and Marxist theory, he marries the ideas of redemption and revolution.

[2] Thank you to Oluwadunni Talabi for pointing me into this direction.

[3] Postmemory refers to a form of transgenerational memory that does not rely on one's own experiences but on the transmission of (traumatic) memories from one generation to the next, usually within a family, via "stories, images, and behaviors" (Hirsch 106) that allow for an affective remembrance of experiences that are one generation removed. The notion of a "troubling continuity" (106) of the past in the present is shared with hauntology. Hirsch also recognizes gender, particularly femininity, as constitutive of remembrance in postmemorial contexts shaped by "detachment and forgetting" (124), thus forging another productive link between hauntological and feminist thought.

Notes

[4] The crucial difference between Stella and Reese is, of course, that Stella only pretends to be white but identifies as Black, whereas Reese identifies as male.

[5] The narrative thus manages to show the complexity of drag regarding questions of identity and its performativity: Drag is depicted as not being a "'mere' cross-dressing, as if its practice was mainly to do with something that could be put on and taken off as easily as costume" (Edwards 87).

[6] The split is especially clear in the version designed by Nico and Jo Taylor and published by Dialogue Books, but another cover design of the edition published by Riverhead Books (Penguin) displays a similar motif.

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Biography

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(In)Visibilities of Female Same-Sex Desire in Marilyn Bobes' Short Story "Somebody Has to Cry"

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Abstract

Marilyn Bobes' short story "Somebody Has to Cry," originally published in Spanish under the title "Alguien Tiene Que Ilorar" in 1995, constructs the queer woman at its centre through the empty space left behind after her self-inflicted death. Her representation is fragmented and heavily filtered through the narrative voices' heteropatriarchal lens, constructing an image of her as much as of the attitudes towards women and queerness that formed her social-cultural context. This paper examines the legal and cultural contexts that have impacted women and queer people in Cuba under Spanish-Catholic colonialism, during the Revolutionary Era, which privileged the heterosexual nuclear family and masculinity in men as a Revolutionary ideal, and during the severe economic crisis known as the Special Period in Post-Soviet Cuba. By contrasting and exploring the different narrative voices that form the story, this paper examines how these influences become visible in the characters' representations of the protagonist, and how the visibility and invisibility of the protagonist constructs an image of machismo and marianismo culture and queerness in the context of Cuba in the late twentieth century.

Keywords Caribbean; Cuba; Lesbian Visibility; Marianismo; Marilyn Bobes; Queer; Postcolonial.

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Introduction

> You see us but do not recognize us. You do not see, or choose not to see, those of us who really enjoy winding on and dancing with each other, those of us who have 'roommates' and 'best friends' (*buenas amigas*) for ten, twenty years. Yes, you love us, as long as we don't use the word *lesbian*, and as long as we don't link it to the word - the identity - Caribbean. Then, all too often, we are on our own. (King, "More" 194)

The ambivalence of visibility and invisibility is an issue that pertains to female same-sex desire in a peculiar way: while men who have queer desires – especially if they transgress normative gender presentation – are quickly made the object of homophobic scrutiny, women who share lives and beds with each other pass more easily under the radar as friends, cousins, or sisters. As Rosamund King writes above, it is not only a matter of not seeing, but of choosing not to see lesbian desire. What's more, female same-sex desire may be permissible as a temporary practice – for the length of a dance, for example – but not as an identity-forming characteristic or a permanent state, especially, King writes, in the context of Caribbean identities: "*Caribbean lesbians do not exist*: so it is implied by historians, sociologists, and other scholars, and by our singers and writers […]" (191). The lack of representation King laments in the above quote from 2008 is present not only in media consumed for their entertainment-value but can also be traced in scholarship, although recent years have seen an increase both in novels and research on female same-sex desire in the Caribbean. An earlier example of lesbian representation can be found in Marilyn Bobes' short story "Somebody Has to Cry." The story was originally published in Spanish under the title "Alguien Tiene Que llorar"[1] in a short story collection of the same title in 1995, thirteen years prior to King's essay quoted above. The story centres around Maritza, a queer woman who has chosen to end her life and now becomes visible, posthumously, through the very space she has left empty. Maritza is constructed within and through this empty space through the voices of four people involved in her life who, while remembering and mourning her, convey an image of their upbringing and their attitudes towards gender roles and queerness. Although the trope of a tragic end for queer protagonists is all too familiar – often imposed as a measure to not normalise or idealise queerness, an effect, for example, of the American Hays Code – Bobes uses Maritza's absence to paint a vivid portrait of the attitudes and prejudices of the community she lived in and their part in her decision to end her life.

In order to provide a cultural framework, this paper examines the legal and cultural contexts that have impacted queer people in Cuba during the Prerevolutionary Era under Spanish-Catholic colonialism, during the Revolutionary Era, which privileged the heterosexual nuclear family and masculinity in men as a Revolutionary ideal, and during the severe economic crisis known as the Special Period in Post-Soviet Cuba, during which the story was published and is set. I will also examine attitudes towards female same-sex desire in and around Cuba, focusing mainly on the view of queerness as an identity versus an act, and on the issue of terminology. Through a close reading of the story, I will then trace the influences

of these contexts on the characters' representations of Maritza, particularly of machismo and marianismo culture and of the privileging of heteronormative family structures during the Revolutionary Era, and how the lesbian main character of this story is represented and constructed with and through her absence.

Legislative and Cultural Context: Being Queer/Female in Cuba Before and During the Special Period

The socio-cultural landscape of Cuba has been and continues to be heavily influenced by its history as a nation colonised by Catholic Spain, its Revolutionary Era under a socialist government and its geographical proximity and ties to the United States. Texts that discuss gender equality and queerness in Cuba generally devote limited attention to Prerevolutionary Cuba. While some sources discuss queerness in Cuba from an intersectional viewpoint (e.g. Eastwood; Stout), citing most prominently the intersection of racist and homophobic attitudes queer Cubans of colour must contend with, the texts consulted for this paper make no mention of pre-colonial Cuban understandings of queerness and gender. However, the influence of Spanish-Catholic ideas regarding a binary understanding of gender, patriarchal hierarchies and heteronormativity are evident in colonial and post-colonial Cuba (see Báez and Soto-Lafontaine; Stout 15-16). The combination of machismo and marianismo culture, a specific form of patriarchal structure distinct to the Latin American cultural sphere, and the egalitarian and anti-class government of the Revolutionary Era make for contradictory attitudes between legislative and social conditions regarding gender equality and queerness until today (see Wilk). This section will focus on the standing of women and of queer people in Cuba at and around the time the short story is set, focusing mainly on the impact of machismo and marianismo culture as well as the legislative situation of queer people in Cuba. These legal and cultural contexts will offer valuable insight into the attitudes and anxieties presented by the story's narrative voices.

Patriarchal and authoritarian family structures dominated Prerevolutionary Cuba as a cultural legacy of Spanish colonisation, encouraging men to fulfil the macho role while women were, in those families who could afford it, restricted to the domestic sphere (Kaufman Purcell 260-61). Equality for women was one of the declared goals of the Cuban Revolution: they were to receive access to the job market through the implementation of child-care facilities, allowing them to leave the domestic sphere they were ideologically bound to (Kaufman Purcell 258). Although the number of employed women increased, efforts to disentangle women from the domestic sphere were met with resistance from the communities, and the image of women as the main caregivers and homemakers continued to be perpetuated socially and culturally (Kaufman Purcell 267-68). Regarding the role of women in post-colonial Caribbean states, Yasmin Tambiah notes that

> [...] anticolonial, nationalist movements have charged women with 'bearing' the nation, physically and symbolically. Central to this mandate are women's conformity to particular constructions of the family and their compliance with prescriptions that

> reify female sexual containment through virginity, compulsory heterosexuality, marriage, and motherhood. (144)

In defying the heteronormative role of mother and wife that women are still often expected to fulfil, lesbians and women who desire women defy what is perceived to be a natural order of things, and thus, they are often perceived to defy Caribbean values (see King, "More" 191). While the government of the Revolutionary Era strived towards gender equality, it "idealized the heterosexual, nuclear family as the backbone of revolutionary society" (Stout 38) and as the prerequisite for a more equal division of domestic obligations. Positing the heterosexual nuclear family as a Revolutionary ideal in consequence made "public displays of homosexuality and prostitution [...] a threat to the order of the family" (Stout 38). Hence, gender equality in Revolutionary Cuba was to come at the price of having to adhere to heteronormative and conservative ideas around families and relationships.

This can be traced back to the underlying patriarchal attitudes that are inherent to machismo and marianismo culture. Machismo culture, like other cultural frameworks that abide by a patriarchal logic, strengthens the rigidity of hierarchical divisions of space and obligations by tying the binary opposition of men and women to a supposedly naturally inherent order, and to behavioural norms tied to these. Social pressure demands that individuals behave according to these gendered norms, which in turn serve as proof of the supposedly natural order of things, forming a self-perpetuating system. As such, machismo culture postulates that men exert aggression and intransigence vis-à-vis other men while women are met with arrogance and sexual aggression (Stevens 90). Within this logic, men view other men as rivals, while women are viewed as inferior and as sexual prey, a sentiment that can be traced within Bobes' short story as well. The female counterpart to this is marianismo, as coined by Evelyn P. Stevens in her 1973 essay "Marianismo: The Other Face of Machismo in Latin America." Stevens defines marianismo as "the cult of feminine spiritual superiority, which teaches that women are semi-divine, morally superior and spiritually stronger than men" (91).[2] What may first sound like a privileging of women over men in reality serves to perpetuate the image of women as virtuous (loyal and submissive to their husbands), as mothers, and as keepers of the household (bound to the domestic sphere). Stevens also writes that the ideal presented within "the stereotype prescribed by marianismo" (96) is contrasted by the *bad woman*: women who do not abide by the feminine ideal, perform stereotypically masculine traits or behaviour and are therefore not considered "real women" (96). In terms of sexuality, Stevens asserts, marianismo prescribes that women are not only meant to be chaste before marriage, but also frigid after, performing sex out of marital duty rather than enjoyment (96-97). Not so men, who are expected to have extra-marital affairs (Stevens 98). The restrictive behavioural ideals postulated by marianismo are regulated by both men and women, a matter that can, like the misogynistic attitude mentioned above, also be observed in "Somebody Has to Cry".

Rigid gender roles are closely linked to homophobic attitudes, with same-sex relations being viewed as transgressive deviations from the feminine and masculine roles ascribed to women and men respectively. Arguelles and Rich describe Prerevolutionary Cuba as homopho-

bic both in rural and in urban communities and as deeply sexist. They write that in Prerevolutionary Cuba, "discrete lesbian or gay male identities in the modern sense - identities that are based on self-definition and involve emotional as well as physical aspects of same sex relations were rare" (688), and that same-sex relationships closely resembled the dynamics of heterosexual marital roles in terms of hierarchy and "erotic loyalty" (688). While bourgeois same-sex relationships after this model existed in private spaces, homosexuality was also commodified in Havana in the context of sex-work. Economic sectors with growth and employment opportunities at the time were comprised of "tourism, drug distribution, gambling and prostitution," areas that were "mostly controlled by American organised crime" (Arguelles and Rich 677) as well as members of the Cuban bourgeoisie connected to Batista's government. Gay men and women proceeded to be hired into the tourism sector to offer "homoerotic experiences" (Arguelles and Rich 687) to both American visitors and members of the Cuban bourgeoisie. Although covert homosexuality and prostitution were tolerated in certain circles because of their capacity to generate capital, this did not entail tolerance towards or acceptance of homosexuality in Cuba's wider society (Arguelles and Rich 678).

In the course of the Cuban Revolution, the regime began to reject issues associated with "American imperialism and organized crime" (Hamilton 38). Due to prejudices that drew a connection between prostitution, drugs, criminality and homosexuality, gay men were especially targeted and often accused of being counterrevolutionary, with artists and intellectuals especially prone to being accused of homosexuality (Hamilton 39). Between 1965 and 1967, people accused of being counterrevolutionary were interned in UMAP Camps to be reformed (Hamilton 40-41), which included the instillation of masculinity as a Revolutionary ideal (Stout 37). Although less women were held in UMAP camps than men, lesbians and female sex-workers were also imprisoned (Stout 37), indicating that queer women were not entirely invisible. Homosexuality was decriminalised in Cuba in 1979 under the New Criminal Code, which no longer declared homosexual acts a social threat. However, public displays of homosexuality remained criminalised until 1987, as was soliciting others with homosexual requests, which was amended in 1997 to requests of a sexual nature (ILGA World Database). In 1980, during the Mariel exodus, approximately 125,000 Cubans emigrated to Florida, a significant number of whom were homosexual and forced into exile by Cuban authorities (Hamilton 128, see Stout 40). Hamilton writes that this mass-emigration, which was accompanied by the "blatant homophobia of the anti-Mariel demonstrations inside Cuba" (44), along with the UMAP camps of the mid-70s, are "the most commonly cited evidence of Cuban revolutionary homophobia and continues to leave a scar on the collective memory of the Revolution" (44). After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Cuba fell into a severe economic crisis referred to as the Special Period in Times of Peace, during which "Somebody Has to Cry" is set. This period brought with it both the return of prostitution and foreign sex tourism, which had been formally eradicated during the Revolutionary Era (Stout 3), and "the return of older forms of homophobic discourse" which viewed homosexuality as a threat to "public morality" (Hamilton 49).[3]

As mentioned earlier, machismo and marianismo culture demand not only heterosexual desire on the part of men, but a lack of sexual desire on the part of women. This supposed

lack of sexual desire logically contributes to the invisibility of female same-sex desire. Arguelles and Rich write that during the Prerevolutionary Era, homosexual and gender non-conforming people were generally subjected to shame and violence, while "Tortilleras (or dykes) – considerably less visible owing to the overall repression of female sexuality – were either ignored or made objects of ridicule" (687). Female same-sex couples can – willingly or unwillingly – be categorised as friends or relatives, constituting an ambiguous dynamic of visibility and invisibility by being visible as, for example, two women living together, but invisible as a romantic couple.

Differing stances towards sexuality as an act or as indicative of an identity can further complicate matters regarding the visibility of queer women. Keja L. Valens argues against the use of identity politics when discussing female same sex-desire in the context of Caribbean literatures. Valens writes that "knowledge about any woman's desire for any other woman does not carry any special truth about her" (6) and rejects the homo-hetero structure as grounds for understanding desire between women in the Caribbean. Carrie Hamilton makes a similar argument, but adds that Cuba "demonstrates the coexistence of different models and language of sexual preference and identity" (11). While some individuals identify with labels such as homosexual, gay and lesbian, others do not apply such terms, or do not link their identity with their non-heterosexual desire. Scholarship and literature on female same-sex desire in the Caribbean shows that there is a wide variety of terminology and different understandings connected to the matter. Varying terminology and nuance point to equally varying understandings of queer desire and its significance in relation to individual identity across the Caribbean. While the term macocotte, for example, refers to very close friendships between adolescent girls that can involve physical intimacy but are not deemed indicative of same-sex desire (see Mac-Donald-Smythe), related terms such as *zami* carry different meanings in different regions. On Kwéyól-speaking islands such as Guadeloupe and Haiti, zami means close friend, while *making zami* signifies lesbian activities, and on islands such as Trinidad and Grenada, zami has lost this nuance and is synonymous with lesbian (MacDonald-Smythe 228). Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley cites a number of terms relating to same-sex relationships between working-class women of different Caribbean regions, such as "*mati* in Suriname, *zanmi* in Grenada, *kambrada* in Curaçao," (465) and she explains that "these words refer without distinction to female friends and lovers. Mi *mati* is like *my girl* in African American English, maybe *my friend* or maybe *my lover*." (165). While female same-sex intimacy is acknowledged and denoted, its significance varies from being indicative of queer desire or identity, to an act or a preference rather than a personal identity, to being a form of early practice for subsequent heterosexual relationships.

In the context of Cuba, anglophone literature on the understanding of female same-sex desire as a practice versus an identity and related terminology is comparatively sparse. Noelle Stout's interviews in *After Love*, which were conducted between 2001 and 2007, suggest that queerness was and is handled from a more identity-based viewpoint, although queer sexuality does not preclude heterosexual marriage. For example, one of Stout's collaborators is a gay man who spends his younger years in Havana, moving within queer spaces, though

later settling down in a heterosexual marriage while continuing to have same-sex affairs in secret (31-32). Texts that discuss female same-sex desire in Cuba often use the terms lesbian, gay women and homosexual, similarly indicating an identity-led approach. This is also the case in the interviews and portraits presented by Stout, whose interviewees use gay to refer to both men and women and lesbiana to refer to women, as well as bisexual and *travesti*[4] (18, 25). Bobes' short story constructs Maritza's sexuality through insinuations and comments but doesn't use a specific term to denote her desire. I will therefore work, as I have done up until this point, with the terms lesbian (as the English translation of *lesbiana*), female same-sex desire and queer. Queer serves my purpose in multiple ways: rather than forming a certain, distinctive identity category and the ideas and connotations connected to it, such as lesbian, it indicates that which is counter to the perceived norm. This can relate both to desire and sexuality and to gender performance, one of the main aspects I will consider in my reading of "Somebody Has to Cry". Queer can be used as an identity, but it can also be understood as a practice and as an idea: that there is a norm to be disrupted, and, in practice, to disrupt this norm.

Constructing a Queer Protagonist Through the Eyes of Machismo/Marianismo Heteronormativity

"Somebody Has to Cry" revolves around Maritza, a woman who has ended her life after her relationship with another woman has fallen apart. The story is told from the perspectives of four people who were involved in Maritza's life: Alina, Daniel, Cary and Lázara. They portray her from a range of angles and with different attitudes, ranging from sexualisation and crude misogyny to admiration and friendship. The story frequently switches between their perspectives, with brief headlines indicating the narrator of each short section. This results in a patchwork of different perspectives that come together to form a picture of the deceased and her life. In the story, Maritza herself does not have a voice: her representation is filtered through others and their perceptions of her. Notably, the four figures who do have a voice within the story all have a certain degree of estrangement from Maritza. Many of the observations made by the characters are tinged with homophobia and the denial of Maritza's desire for women, although they all present some degree of awareness of her queerness. Even though the story at first seems to reflect a pattern observed in many texts with queer representation, wherein queer lives are tinged with tragedy and end in death, a method of punishing the sexual transgression within the text, I argue here that Maritza's portrayal as a tragic figure does not function as a moral message advocating for heteronormativity, but as an accusation towards Maritza's community and their homophobic attitudes. Moreover, I argue that Maritza is made visible through the empty space she has left behind, and that the story contains more indications of queerness than are immediately visible. Maritza is portrayed as a well-rounded, likable and admirable character, and the reason for her demise can be traced in the faults of the community rather than placing blame on her or her queerness (see Chancy 61).

The information the reader gains about Maritza is second, sometimes third-hand knowledge, and it is heavily filtered through the speakers' different attitudes towards Maritza.

As Persivini-Gebert observes,

> [...] a frustrated housewife consumed by jealousy, the friend who would have wanted to become her lover, the former classmate who could never match Maritza's independence of spirit, and others - build a framework of intolerance and resentment that by implication seems responsible for Maritza's suicide. (447)

Daniel, whose comments frame the story, grants an outsider's perspective to the group of Maritza's supposed friends of which he is not a central part. His remarks reveal a strong misogynistic attitude that is representative of his machismo socialisation. He views the women he describes as commodities, commenting first and foremost on their appearances and their sexual value to him. Alina, the "frustrated housewife", has the largest quantity of text and provides the reader with the most information about Maritza. She has a misogynistic attitude of a different kind: her degrading observations about Maritza indicate that her negative feelings stem from jealousy, and her homophobic remarks seem to be, first and foremost, a vehicle to express her hatred against her former classmate. Her misogynistic comments do not sexualise her friends as Daniel's do, but reproduce patriarchal views of the female gender role as mother and wife, thereby reinforcing the marianismo ideal. Lázara, who is herself a victim of patriarchal gender roles and appears as a kind-hearted, yet naïve and undereducated person through both her own comments and comments by others, reveals a homophobic attitude that is not directly tied to misogyny but reflects the possible outcome of lesbian invisibility and a lack of tolerance in her upbringing. Lastly, Cary, who has the warmest attitude towards Maritza and does not directly comment on her sexual identity, indicates a second layer of lesbian invisibility: remarks by her and others indicate a romantic, yet unfulfilled connection between her and Maritza. I must note here that I first read the above quote – particularly the section on "the friend who would have wanted to become her lover" – to refer to Cary, but realized only upon re-reading it that it refers to Daniel. In my reading, however, Daniel wants to be not so much her lover as receive sexual gratification from her, while Cary is indicated to have had a romantic connection to Maritza, but is ultimately restrained by her heteronormative upbringing and homophobic community.

The perpetuation of archaic gender roles and misogynistic attitudes is a central factor in the homophobia that lesbians and women who desire women are faced with. An important contributor to the upholding of gender roles is the performance of gender in a manner that conforms to and reaffirms gender stereotypes, and Maritza's disruption of classic gender performance is one of the central reasons for her ostracisation. Throughout "Somebody Has to Cry", both Daniel and Alina make several harsh, misogynistic comments that reflect their homophobia. As mentioned before, Daniel views women as sexual commodities and frequently rates them by their physical appearance and their sexual appeal to him. In the first segment of the story, he describes a picture of the women taken when they were fifteen years old. He sexualises and objectifies the teenaged Alina who, he describes, "[...] has got enormous breasts. She's the *criollita*, the curvaceous prize [...]" (Bobes 57), only to follow up by asserting

that "twenty-four years later all that will remain of the imposing Alina is a woman who is fat, flabby, and sad" (57). For Daniel, Alina's value, or lack thereof, lies in her appearance and her appeal to him, and his description of Alina focuses solely on her outer appearance and his opinion regarding it. Similarly, he describes Lázara by commenting on her "thin thighs, graceless figure, mousy face" (57) and her "flat and innocuous" (57) chest. Again, only her appearance and her (lack of) appeal to him are of importance. Later in the story, when describing how he came to date Lázara, he comments: "I knew from the way she looked at me that she'd put out easily and that later it would be easy to get rid of her as well" (61). He cites her low self-esteem as a reason for her acceptance of the fact that women who have liaisons with men will be in "volatile, ephemeral [situations], and without roots," (61), suggesting that women are entirely dependent upon men for stability. He states that his interest in her stemmed from the fact that she had resigned to "the fleeting nature of any bond she might make" (61) and been limited to a sexual nature. Daniel's comments are full of disdain for the women he describes and reflect a machismo attitude that reduces women to commodities to be consumed by men. This becomes abundantly clear when Daniel appraises Cary's body, and by extension, Cary, as "something meticulously crafted by a goldsmith: for love, to be kissed, touched, and sipped inch by inch" (62).

In contrast, Daniel describes Maritza's "powerful frame, rising above the group" as "an aggressive presence in the portrait" (57), and as "beautiful, although in a different way. Her face was perfect and mysterious, like no other in the photo" (58). I propose that Daniel's description of Maritza differs so strikingly because she is unavailable to him as a sexual commodity, an idea that is supported by Cary's description of Maritza's physical appearance. Cary observes that even as a teenager, Maritza "cultivated her body for its use-value" (58) rather than in order to appeal to potential husbands as her friends did, who were always "preparing for future auction" (58). A note added to the translation of the story points out that within Marxist economics, use-value is used in opposition to exchange-value: while the former denotes worth in terms of utility, the latter relates to worth in terms of "the price at which it can be bought or sold" (69n1). While the other women participated from a young age in the heterosexual economy of exchange that comes with machismo/marianismo culture, Maritza has extracted herself from this logic by prioritising the cultivation of her body for its function, emphasising traditionally masculine features like strength over femininity. Conveying the differences between the women's attitudes towards their bodies within economic systems of exchange emphasises the commodification of women's bodies beyond the frame of sex-work.

Cary's description of how the other women scolded Maritza for her laxness and her lack of feminine modesty show how the marianismo ideal is upheld and self-regulated among women as much as by men. Cary also notes, however, that Maritza seems happier than the others – although Maritza does not fit into the female role dictated by machismo/marianismo culture, her self-extraction serves her personal happiness. Later, Lázara remarks that "it's true that [Maritza] did a lot of men's things, but to jump from that to saying that she liked women, that's a long stretch" (66). Lázara's comment, although she negotiates the thought and discards it as untrue, reveals the notion that stereotypically masculine gender performance in

women suggests same-sex desire. It also suggests that refusing to be subordinate to men in daily life – by doing "a lot of men's things", for example – is equal to not being sexually available to or interested in them. Interestingly, Noelle Stout recounts in *After Love* that among the Cuban lesbians she interviewed for her volume on queer intimacy in Cuba, she detected negative attitudes towards masculine lesbians (as well as women of colour) within lesbian spaces as well (63). Stout notes that while the transgression of gender norms and racial boundaries was acceptable for men, "women who too radically transgressed gendered norms were considered failed 'men' or *machos*. Hence, women were often confined to gendered norms and racialized notions of attractiveness even among other lesbians" (67). The women interviewed by Stout simultaneously rejected the gender hierarchy present within machismo culture while also reinforcing gender norms by policing the gender presentation of other lesbians. This regulation of gender norms between lesbians, Stout notes referencing Hamilton, was more visible in women who had access to "transnational models of feminism and lesbianism" (63; Hamilton 189). Considering Arguelles and Rich's findings regarding the emulation of heteropatriarchal hierarchies in same-sex relationships in Prerevolutionary Cuba, this indicates that the import of gender-egalitarian feminism also brought with it an increased scepticism of gender roles in same-sex relationships between women. Because Maritza is described only through a heteropatriarchal lens, it is unclear whether Maritza was penalised for her masculinity both inside and outside of queer spaces.

Centrally, using Daniel for the physical descriptions of the women also has the effect of showing women's worth within a machismo society, although his perception of Maritza is counter-intuitive in this regard. Ironically, Maritza's lack of availability for Daniel coupled with her non-feminine appearance seem to result not in disdain but in something akin to respect from the others, but especially from Daniel. He sets Maritza apart from the rest of the group, her difference being that in the patriarchal hierarchy that Daniel abides by, she is not as subjugated as the others: she is outside the realm of Daniel's commodification of women. Daniel's admiration for her may well stem from the fact that she has never shown any interest in attracting his advances, and he notes that although she is "the most beautiful, [...] she didn't know it then. She didn't even dare imagine it" (57). To say that he respects her as his equal, however, would oversimplify the matter. Especially when compared to Daniel's disdainful stance towards Lázara, Daniel's admiration of her supposedly singular non-conceited self-perception is further proof of his misogyny by making Maritza deserving of some measure of respect specifically because she is not like other women.

Alina, who always carried with her a "shoulder bag full of perfume, tissues, lipsticks, eyeliners, and all the other makeup imaginable," (59) performs femininity in a 'traditional' sense. Through spiteful comments, Alina shows bitterness and jealousy towards Maritza and reveals a considerable amount of internalised misogyny. Her understanding of gender roles is heavily shaped by machismo/marianismo culture and covers the disappointments that have come with her situation in life by positioning her fulfilment of the woman's role as wife and mother as morally superior. In Alina's worldview, women must have children and families in order to achieve happiness and completion, reflecting the idea of women 'bearing the nation'

and being naturally inclined towards domestic duties. She asserts that men's infidelity, an unfulfilled sex-life and disappointment are commonplace in marriages and a fair price to pay for the title of wife (60). Again, this closely reflects machismo and marianismo culture: men are expected to have extramarital affairs, while women are expected to engage in sex with their husbands out of marital obligation, not enjoyment. Alina similarly shames Lázara, who also defies her ideal of chastity and heteronormative nuclear families by being a single mother. When describing the picture in the beginning of the story, Daniel recounts "the tragedy" (57) that has ruined Lázara's life: impregnated and abandoned by a forty-year-old man when she was only fifteen, Lázara was forced to drop out of school and consequently denied opportunities the others had. However, none of the characters blame 'The Old Man' for this, let alone accuse him of predatory behaviour towards a teenager. Instead, both Daniel and Alina blame Lázara for her situation, ignoring entirely the societal constraints that have contributed to her situation.

The archaic and misogynistic attitudes reflected in the comments made by Daniel and Alina are indicative of a larger issue of societal disadvantages women face. In reference to the men in Cary's life, she remembers Maritza telling her that "women by nature are the ones who lose. We've been brought up, she told me once, to facilitate the triumph of men" (63). The statement is proof of Maritza's awareness of the patriarchal restrictions put on women while also revealing a heavy dose of cynicism on her part. Moreover, Alina remembers Maritza complaining of men not listening to her, feigning interest in her work when really, they want her for sexual gratification (63). Besides being reflective of heteronormativity in assuming that Maritza would be interested in the first place, this also again reflects a machismo society in which women are viewed as sexual commodities rather than equals, even in a professional setting. Maritza proves her heightened awareness for these grievances in several instances, such as when she points out that Alina's husband introduces her merely as his wife instead of by name, reducing her from a person to his asset. Being a woman who does not desire men, Maritza is exposed to misogyny on different levels than the other characters, and her heightened awareness of these matters is consequential. Ultimately, she is ostracised and deprived of social support for not fulfilling the roles a misogynistic environment demands of her.

Homophobia within the short story takes on two central forms: the reproduction of lesbian stereotypes and the consequential othering of women who desire women. The character who most prominently displays homophobia is Alina, but Lázara, too, expresses homophobic views. However, the two differ: while Alina is blatantly and unapologetically homophobic, Lázara represents a more subtle and normalised form of homophobia that she cannot merge with her high opinion of Maritza. Interestingly, both women do not use identifying terms or phrases when speaking about Maritza's sexuality; they do, however, find creative ways of discerning and describing Maritza's otherness, and both reproduce an array of stereotypes and prejudices.

Alina repeatedly alludes to her presentiment of Maritza's sexual orientation, which she frames as predatory when she muses that she should have warned Cary about Maritza, adding: "I don't know why we didn't discover it in time. We were *normal*, *we dressed well*, *we thought*

the way women think." (59; emphasis added). Her heteronormative attitude is centrally tied to gender performance both in feminine appearance and in the notion that there is a correct way to think as a woman. To her, Maritza and other women who desire women are marked by their discernible otherness not centrally because of their queer desires, but because they collectively perform their gender incorrectly in other ways. She presumes that they all dress a certain, incorrect way and that they do not *think* like real women, and therefore, *are* not real women. This incorrectly performed, or non-conforming, thinking may refer to their desire for the same sex, i.e., thinking of other women with desire, but it may as well be tied to their presumed withdrawal from patriarchal power structures and lives as subservient wives and mothers. Alina assumes that the reason Maritza did not want to get married is her desire for women (59), which demonstrates her assertion that marriage is reserved for heteronormative couples, and that lesbians are not interested in the stability marriage is presumed to offer. However, the reader learns that Maritza was in a long-term relationship with a woman who had a child, both of whom she lived with. Although Maritza was part of a nuclear family unit, the queerness of this family and the legal exclusion from marriage prevent Alina from seeing that Maritza was part of a family, and may have wanted to marry if the option of same-sex marriage had been available. Alina's assumptions of what indicates a lesbian border on the ridiculous when she asserts that Maritza "didn't seem like what she was. You would have had to be very suspicious to notice those few details. For instance, I never liked her manner of dragging out her *s*'s – the way they do." (64). It is entirely possible that this is a linguistic distinction that has been lost in translation, but going by the translated version of the text, this reads as a demonstration of the arbitrary details used in order to other queer sexualities – such as the supposition of a common speech variance among lesbians. Later, Alina asserts: "a woman like Maritza, with no children, no man, and her pathology, what does she have to live for?" (64). Not only does she pathologise homosexuality, she again reduces women's lives to their roles as mothers and wives, suggesting that the lives of women who do not conform to the female gender role are worthless.

Lázara's form of homophobia is subtler and delivered with more restraint, but she is homophobic, nonetheless. In grieving for Maritza, she declares her belief that Maritza did not "like women that way" (64); that if she did, it would have been her private matter and that she did not harm anyone. These statements in themselves seem harmless enough. However, her declaration that she never saw Maritza "look at us with any improper intentions or anything like that" (65) alludes to the homophobic prejudice of predatory lesbians and discloses her own belief that they present a threat; similarly, Alina cites Maritza's "nerviness about going around naked" (59) as indicative of her desire for women. Toward the end of the story, while grieving Maritza's death, Lázara decides that "somebody has to show that [Maritza] wasn't this *pervert* they're saying she was, and so I am going to cry [...] and I'm going to tell the world that she was my friend" (68; emphasis added). This quote, which supplies the title of the short story, speaks to the question of the intersection of grievability and subjecthood posed by Judith Butler. Within a misogynistic framework, Maritza is already at a disadvantage in relation to men because of her sex – but in her sexual deviance of not being available as a commodity to

men, Maritza has defied the objective that would have given her worth within a heterosexist framework. As a 'sexual deviant,' Maritza's life is not grievable – but by Lázara's reasoning, if she grieves for her, it shows that Maritza's life is grievable, and therefore, she must have been sexually normative. Lázara repeatedly emphasises Maritza's good character and her admirable traits, and she cannot conjoin this positive picture with the prejudices she holds against lesbians. Rather than adjust her picture of lesbians, though, she insists that the person she so admires must be heterosexual, and that Maritza's long-term ex-partner must have been merely a friend. Lázara constitutes an ambiguous combination of reproducing homophobic prejudice and proving an understanding of discrimination and social injustice directed towards people who do not conform to the norm, even though she herself is unable to overcome these notions.

The (In)Visibility of Queer Desires and Death as Catalyst

In *Island Bodies*, Rosamund King examines the near-invisibility of Caribbean women who desire women. She explains that "Caribbean law and custom have [...] established that women who desire other women are (or should be) outside of the public sphere and are definitely outside of respectability" (102). She also notes, however, that women who desire women are not entirely invisible because, in order to be erased, their existence must first be acknowledged. King writes that the structures and circumstances that make women who desire women invisible and allow for them to be ignored by broader societies and cultures include "the heteropatriarchal assumption that all women's sexuality, if it exists at all, is 'a nothingness, a lack, an absence,' and the commonplace reality of women-headed households in the region," (99) and she further explains that "these social structures and anxieties work from one angle to create the supposed invisibility of Caribbean women who desire women and simultaneously work from another angle to punish them for the existence of that desire." (100). This coincides with the marianismo ideal that women have no sexual desire of their own but participate in sexual relations only in their obligation as wives in heterosexual marriages. Same-sex desire between women thwarts this two-fold: by having desire, and by experiencing it not (exclusively) with men but (also) with women. The attempted erasure of same-sex desire does not have the desired effect: women who desire women continue to exist, despite a lack of representation and in spite of the threat of physical harm and social ostracisation (King *Island* 108). Regarding the near-invisibility of women who desire women in "Somebody Has to Cry", King writes that

> On the surface it would seem that protagonist Maritza is, in fact, invisible because she has committed suicide. And yet near-invisibility applies here as well because she is very present in the thoughts and words of the friends and acquaintances who have gathered for her wake. Each person reveals how their interactions with or observations of the dead woman affected their lives. (*Island* 109)

The invisibility of women who desire women becomes apparent on several levels within "Somebody Has to Cry". Not only do none of the characters who speak of Maritza and her

sexual orientation use any identifying terms, even though Alina and Daniel clearly see her sexuality as an identity-forming factor. Maritza herself, the protagonist of the story, does not speak at all: after her self-inflicted death, she is unable to tell her own story or decide the level of disclosure she deems appropriate. The choice to not transmit Maritza's voice through letters, flashbacks or through an omniscient narrator also means that every piece of knowledge gained is filtered through the other characters' perception. This indirect and filtered representation frames Maritza's queerness within the heteropatriarchal environment she lived and died in. It also shows in how far Maritza's queerness penetrated the heteronormative veil by depicting which aspects of her queerness registered, or didn't register, with the people surrounding her. The reader is presented with an image of Maritza that is fragmented, missing, for example, her self-identification, common tropes of queer storytelling such as first queer experiences, or the nature of her and her partner's life and breakup. The opinions the reader does receive through the perceptions of Daniel, Alina, Cary and Lázara put together an image of Maritza that imperfectly fills the void of the character that is at the centre of this story, heavily tainted by their prejudices. It certainly shows that although Maritza is absent from the story as an agent, she has left a resounding presence in the form of memories of her.

When speaking about Maritza's relationship, Lázara is convinced that Maritza's partner must have been merely a friend and completely dismisses the idea of a lesbian relationship (66). Similarly, Alina declares that when the two began to live together, "everybody thought it was a relative or a very close friend" (64). This exemplifies King's assertion that the commonplace reality of female-headed households contributes to the invisibility of lesbian partnerships. Similar to her awareness of misogynistic social structures, Maritza also reveals an awareness of the lack of diverse representation, which she ties semi-metaphorically to non-diverse cityscapes. Alina, recalling a conversation that took place during a party, recounts: "Something Maritza said seemed to [Lázara] like the height of genius: that getting up every morning and looking at identical buildings makes people intolerant, predisposes them against differences." (60). Lázara also recalls this conversation later and remarks that being in her home in Old Havana and seeing different buildings enables her to see "that people are very different too" (65). Maritza's effort to integrate diverse architecture into the public sphere of Cuba through her profession as an architect reveals an underlying wish to simultaneously gain more visibility, and thus more acceptance, for human diversity.

Reading the subtext of the story closely, it becomes apparent that Cary, too, does not entirely conform to the heteronormative standard of her community. In her essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence", Adrienne Rich writes that the "erasure of lesbian existence (except as exotic and perverse) in art, literature, film, [and the] idealization of heterosexual romance and marriage" (133) are obvious forms of heterosexual compulsion. In the two previous sections, Alina's idealisation of heterosexual romance and marriage has become clear, as has the characters' heteronormative view of sexuality and relationships. Rich explains that "the lesbian trapped in the 'closet' [and] the woman imprisoned in prescriptive ideas of the 'normal' share the pain of blocked options, broken connections, lost access to self-definition freely and powerfully assumed" (140). As I have illustrated in the previous sec-

tion, these imprisonments and blocked options can be observed in both Maritza and in Lázara, who are marginalised for different reasons. With Cary, the story provides an example of a character who, imprisoned in the idea of 'normal' and perhaps cautious of the consequences of transgressing normativity, experiences same-sex desire, but does not act upon it and possibly suppresses it to the extent that she will not even acknowledge it to herself.

Throughout the majority of the story, the relationship between Cary and Maritza can be read as a very intimate friendship, and the romantic or sexual component to it is merely hinted at in comments made by Daniel. However, reading the story closely reveals more clues that point towards a romantic connection between Cary and Maritza. Cary closely scrutinises and appraises Maritza's body as she undresses in the locker room during their years in school: "Her legs and torso, their muscles strong and well-knit, whirled compulsively before our eyes [...] completely nude, [she would] disappear into the showers with the stride that was so much her own: long, confident, slow." (58). Her close observation and appraisal of Maritza's body are not only entirely contrary to the other characters' comments regarding bodies. While Alina and Lázara mainly comment on Maritza's lack of femininity as a shortcoming, Cary seems to admire Maritza's strength and poise. In contrast to Daniel, who generally sexualises women and reduces them to their value to him as sexual commodities (though not so in the case of Maritza, as I have illustrated in the previous section), Cary adopts a female gaze that seems to admire Maritza in more than her corporeal form. More than this, her narration speaks to a certain fascination with Maritza's nude body. Regarding their interpersonal relationship, Cary speaks of "a sincerity I never felt with the others" (62) between Maritza and herself, an observation she repeats again only some lines later, setting their relationship apart from their other friendships. Cary remembers showing Maritza her diary and expresses surprise at this disclosure of private thoughts: "until then I'd considered my diary sacred and inviolable" (63); she explains that Maritza understood her. This speaks to a closeness between the two that exceeds the friendship with the others; a level of intimacy that may, but does not have to, exceed platonic friendship. Perhaps their relationship can, at this point, be framed in the context of female intimacy from other parts of the Caribbean I illustrated at the beginning of this text: their closeness includes intimacy and desire but does not exceed friendship to the point that Cary would classify it as a queer relationship. She also, however, mentions that Maritza was critical of her relationships with men and "had a hard time accepting that [Alina] could convert [her] relationship with Alejandro into something central and decisive" (63). This could be due to jealousy, or it could indicate that Maritza classifies desire in the binary of hetero- and homosexuality and believes Cary to be a closeted lesbian. It could also, however, speak to a certain degree of scepticism regarding men on Maritza's part, or be evidence of her cynical stance towards love and co-dependent relationships. The reason for her cynicism may well lie in her futile situation: with her sexuality erased by the heteronormativity and homophobia around her, she herself cannot live out the fulfilled relationship she may have wished for without subjecting herself and her partner to increased precarity and ostracisation.

Cary recalls Maritza, who did not usually disclose personal matters, telling her that she was attracted to a person who loved another, explaining that "she didn't see any way that

a relationship was possible, because, even if her feelings were noticed, Maritza was prepared to sacrifice herself. She wasn't going to make herself into a problem for someone she regarded so highly" (66), which again points to the argument made previously: that a fulfilled queer relationship seems out of reach under the given circumstances. Maritza explains that she believes in pleasure, not love, because love as it is understood by most is "something complex, responsible, and in a certain sense representative: a social commitment" (66). State-sanctioned homophobia and a lack of legal and social recognition of same-sex relationships render Maritza unable to live out same-sex relationships openly or to access the benefits of social commitment. Thus, instead of compromising her ideals or subjecting her potential partner to social scrutiny, she decides in this case to not pursue her attraction, and to reject the idea of love altogether. While it is not entirely clear whether Maritza's secret affections are directed at Cary, their nonverbal communication indicates that this is likely the case. When Cary falls silent and nervously begins gathering their things from the beach, she looks up again to find that Maritza's eyes "had a devastating expression. They reflected a bitterness so great that I felt sorry for her" (66). She explains that while she wanted to help Maritza, she experiences helplessness herself, unable to fully understand what is happening and overwhelmed by the situation. Due to their close friendship, it is improbable that Cary is unaware that Maritza is attracted to women. Although Cary does not mention Maritza's sexuality directly, it is probable that she knows of it and does not deem it an identity-defining factor. In the second to last segment of the story, Lázara remembers Cary telling her "something [Lázara] didn't understand about [Maritza's] need to fulfill herself" (68), indicating Cary's awareness regarding lesbian invisibility and homophobia and the emotional toll these issues took on Maritza, and possibly on herself. During their conversation on the beach, Maritza explains that "pleasure is loaded with guilt," (67) which may point, in addition to the issues regarding publicly lived same-sex relationships mentioned earlier, to some measure of internalised homophobia.[5]

The strongest indicators for Cary and Maritza's relationship, however, can be found towards the end of the story, in Cary's strong reaction to Maritza's death and Daniel's closing comments. During Maritza's funeral, Cary is catatonic with grief, and Alina observes that "she seemed like a zombie, completely transformed. I have never seen her like that, not even over men, which is the problem that destabilises her most." (64). Alina voices her fear that Cary's physically discernible grief would give "people grounds to think badly of her. And by association, of us." (64). She is afraid that people will interpret Cary's immense grief as a sign that she is mourning a lover, rather than a friend, and given her pronounced homophobia, Alina's fear of being associated with the issue is a further indicator that she is referring to female same-sex desire rather than anything else. Here, Alina contradicts the notion that intimacy in female friendships is permissible; instead, she fears that even the public display of grief may indicate queer desire, and implicate her by association. Notably, this is the only instance in which Alina indicates any notion of Cary's possible queerness; because she does not conform to the stereotypes connected to queer women, Cary's queerness is largely invisible to Alina and Lázara.

The last segment of the story, which is told by Daniel, contains the most straightforward indicators of the relationship between Cary and Maritza. He asserts that "Cary always

had someone, one of those men who made her feel like everybody else. And Maritza... who knows? Both of them lived in worlds quite different from this one, even if they seemed to inhabit ours." (69). His comment suggests that Cary maintained heterosexual relationships in order to fit into the heteronormative and patriarchal context, a circle Maritza was excluded from. Whether this was done knowingly or out of compulsive heterosexuality is unclear, presumably both to the reader and to the characters. His assertion that Cary and Maritza were part of different worlds, since the most prominent difference about Maritza is her sexuality, seems indicative of Cary also not conforming to heteronormative standards. Daniel observes that Cary's eyes have "lost their shine" (69), and he muses that "Cary's thoughts were headed elsewhere, to some uncertain time, perhaps, some private time – someplace where I too, together with Maritza and together with her, would have liked to be" (69). This last remark seems to allude to a past intimate relationship between Maritza and Cary, and it can be read in two ways. It can be read as Daniel, in keeping with his attitude towards women, sexualising women who desire women, and framing them as consumer goods for the male gaze. Or it can be understood as Daniel acknowledging the strains and restrictions put on queer women, and as his wish to live in a society with less restrictive attitudes concerning sexual variety – a reading that is supported by his more measured comments about Maritza in comparison to his otherwise disdainful remarks about women. Probably, both readings of Daniel's comments apply to some degree; as this paper has shown, the misogyny, restrictive gender roles and heteronormativity intersect and overlap to negatively impact queer lives. The silence and erasure that surround female same-sex desire stem from homophobia; it is a mixture of not wanting to show or see what should not exist, and not wanting to be seen for fear of repercussions. Although Cary and Maritza's feelings for each other are subtly indicated throughout the story, they are never fully acknowledged, and their possible shared history is merely hinted at. Ultimately, the two women were too inhibited by their homophobic surrounding to address their connection, and it appears that Cary continues to live a closeted life.

Conclusion

Machismo/marianismo culture was introduced to Cuba through Catholic-Spanish colonisation, and its legacy persists into Post-Soviet Cuba. Efforts by the Revolutionary government to install gender equality were overshadowed by heterosexist ideals tied to machismo/marianismo culture as well as the government's denouncing of homosexuality as counterrevolutionary. Queer women in marianismo culture occupy a space that is ambiguous due to the supposed lack of female sexuality on the one hand and the idea of women as the sexual objects of men on the other. In Marilyn Bobes' short story, the reader is presented with a queer protagonist whose sexuality is largely conveyed through speculation, accusations and denial, but nonetheless conveyed in a manner that makes her same-sex desire clear despite never being denoted in terms of identifying labels. Although "Somebody Has to Cry" is set after the formal decriminalisation of homosexuality in Cuba, the attitudes and prejudices presented in the story show the constraints put upon queer people even within close social circles. Bobes' story illustrates the ambivalence of lesbian visibility and invisibility: the absence of the protagonist

from the story means that readers are introduced to her through the perspectives of those around her, gaining insight into the life of Maritza through the fragments contributed and filtered by others. These fragments reveal as much about Maritza as they do about the community she was surrounded by and about the legacy of homophobic attitudes and legislation in Cuba. The construction of a queer main character through her absence shows how much a community's handling of its marginalised individuals says about the community itself, how ingrained and multifaceted homophobia can be, and how the gender binary, especially in its most hierarchical forms, influences and reproduces heterosexism and homophobia.

Notes

[1] This paper works with an English translation of the original Spanish text, edited by Dick Cluster in 1998 and published in the 2008 volume *Our Caribbean: A Gathering of Lesbian and Gay Writing in the Antilles*, edited by Thomas Glave. As Naomi Lindstrom observes, "Bobes's writing [...] often depends on precise imitations of the speech of recognizable types of Spanish speakers" (352), intricacies that may be lost in the English translation and consequently may not be adequately represented here.

[2] Stevens, who herself worked within a North American context and specialised in Latin American Studies, also claims that although machismo and marianismo culture have their roots in Southern Europe, specifically Italy and Spain, they have manifested as a "fully developed syndrome [...] only in Latin America" (91), an assertion that carries in its phrasing the questionable notion that patriarchal power structures are a truly serious problem only elsewhere. Concluding her article, Stevens classifies machismo and marianismo culture as a "reciprocal arrangement" (99) that may disadvantage some individuals but benefits many; a sentiment I do not agree with.

[3] The Cuban government has taken some significant steps towards the recognition of same-sex desire. Cuba's National Center for Sex Education, founded 1988, combats inequalities based on sexual orientation and gender identity, but also religion, disability and skin colour (Cubadebate, Reed 9). In September of 2022, same-sex marriage was put to a vote in Cuba as part of a referendum of the Cuban Family Code and passed into law with 66,87 percent of voters for and 33,13 percent against ("Código"). Notably, participation in the vote was at a historic low ("Código"), and there has been some criticism for putting equal rights to a popularity vote at all (Pappier and Cabrera).

[4] Unlike the English term transgender, *travesti* does not indicate a transition from one binary gender to another and is used as a self-identificatory term specifically to differentiate oneself from transfeminine women who have had genital surgery (Stout 26). Regarding the term bisexual, Stout notes that it was likely not yet used in Cuba in the early 90s and was stigmatised later due to perceived ties to sex-work (66-67).

[5] Maritza ends the conversation by insisting that Cary has to write, telling her that "writing would free me from the need to cling to some man who would represent me" – an appeal reminiscent of Virginia Woolf's seminal essay "A Room of One's Own."

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Biography

Lena Falk holds a B.A. and M.A. in English Literatures and Cultures from the University of Bonn, where she is enrolled as a PhD candidate. In 2022, she received the Queen's Prize, awarded by the British Council, for her master's thesis titled "Queering the Binary: Genderqueer Representation in Selected Contemporary Speculative Fiction." She was a co-organiser of the 2022 Postcolonial Narrations Forum titled "Postcolonial Matters of Life and Death." Her research interests include Queer and Gender Studies, Postcolonial Studies, Posthumanism and Speculative Fiction. Her PhD project examines queer embodiment in contemporary speculative fiction and explores the promises of reading genderqueerness through a posthumanist lens. Lena Falk is employed as a research assistant and lecturer at the University of Hannover.

Queer Orientation and Space in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

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Abstract Ocean Vuong raises the question of whose stories are heard in his novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*: Vuong premises the story with a never-to-be-read letter to the narrator's mother – Little Dog is a writer while his mother is illiterate. The protagonist, a queer Vietnamese immigrant navigating post-Vietnam War US society, struggles to be seen and acknowledged within his relationships and society at large. By retelling stories of his mother and grandmother, he destabilizes prevailing US-societal narratives of the war, offering an alternative perspective. Within Little Dog's transformative queer sexual and romantic encounter with Trevor, he experiences visibility and beauty for the first time, enabling him to develop an oriented sense of self rooted in self-recognition. The intersection of this queer experience, his racial-ethnic identity, and his upbringing cultivates a sense of belonging within the queer Asian American community. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's notion of orientation as spatial, the following essay argues that writing from this perspective orients readers towards a different experience and story of space, namely the U.S. nation-state, realms of trauma and home, and the embodied resistance, agency, and self-representation of the protagonist.

Keywords Gaze; (In)Visibility; Orientation; Queerness; Space; Vietnamese American.

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Introduction: Queering Space and Orientation in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

Whose stories are heard and read? Ocean Vuong indirectly poses this question in his novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* by making a never-to-be-read letter to the narrator's mother the premise of his story – Little Dog is a writer while his mother is illiterate. As a queer Vietnamese immigrant who was born in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, being heard and seen not only by his mother but by US society becomes an overarching theme of the novel. In re-telling his mothers' and grandmothers' stories, he shifts the American perspective on and destabilizes the common US societal narrative of the Vietnam War, tracing, as Jennifer Cho observes "how dominant narratives of ethnic and queer assimilation in the United States both inform and restrict the narrator's progression toward self-actualization" (Cho 130). Upon meeting Trevor, with whom he shares his first romantic and sexual experiences, Little Dog feels seen and beautiful for the first time. Through this queer experience he then learns to see and recognize himself. At the intersection of his queerness and racial-ethnic background and upbringing, this development enables his identity to evolve from a disoriented to an oriented understanding of self that is based on a sense of belonging to the queer Asian American community. By writing down his own story he eventually engages in self-representation. This intersection is narrated through a (visual) focus on different (relational) spaces throughout the story: the home-space, the US nation, and the queer relational space with Trevor.

Sexual orientation is related to space and spatiality (Ahmed 543). Sara Ahmed's phenomenological theorization of sexual orientation connects spatiality, power, sexuality, and gaze. Further relating her argument to the home-space, she states: "If orientation is a matter of how we reside in space, then sexual orientation might also be a matter of residence, of how we inhabit spaces, and who or what we inhabit spaces with" (Ahmed 543). Queer scholars develop a notion of space that is based on geographical definitions thereof but include sexual orientation as an aspect of analysis. Geography and philosophy scholars like Henry Lefebvre, Edward Soja, Doreen Massey, Michel Foucault, and bell hooks build the foundation for their argument. While queer scholars agree with them that space is a dynamic, fluid, and continuously reproduced social construct embedded in power structures (Lefebvre; Soja; Massey; Foucault; hooks), they argue that space is sexualized, and sexuality is spatial in a way that is oriented towards the heterosexual subject and privileges heteronormative ways of being (Bell and Valentine; Bell and Binnie; Ahmed). This, in turn, can be disrupted by a change of directionality. In his acclaimed book *In a Queer Time and Place*, Jack Halberstam claims that an interrogation of the relations between sexuality, time and space reveals the works of power structures. He defines queer space as referring to queer place-making practices that produce altered understandings of space and even queer counterpublics (Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*). Queer people and communities thus use space and time in ways that challenge conventional logics of development, adulthood, and responsibility. Applying a queer intersectional lens to Doreen Massey's definition of space as a conglomerate of "stories-so-far" (Massey 9) means that writing from the queer Asian American positionality occupied by Vuong's narrator orients the reader towards a different experience and narrative of space and history.

Even though queerness, bottomhood, gender, and queer aesthetics have been considered in scholarly discussions of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, (queer) space and (sexual) orientation have not been a focus in research articles (Slopek; Shia; Cho; Lippert; Soler i Arjona). Articles on queer aesthetics have mostly explored form and temporality in the novel. Only Joshua Parker and Jian Zhu have touched more explicitly on space and orientation in their analyses, however Parker focuses on rural space and sexuality specifically, whereas Zhu mostly discusses imagism and orientation in the novel. While also considering aspects of refugeehood, language, and memory in the novel (discussed more thoroughly by Pham; Kocić Stanković, Vân Anh; Neumann; Furlanetto; D'urso; Ha, Tompkins), this article primarily examines spatiotemporal dimensions of abuse Little Dog experiences at home, outside of it, and within his queer relationship – aspects of the novel that have not been thoroughly discussed, although they are constitutive of Little Dog's queer Asian American identity development. In reading the text through a spatial lens, another layer and aspect of queer agency and desire is revealed: the protagonist's gaze. Queer aspects of looking and being looked at tie in with Little Dog's Vietnamese American experience of invisibility. Thus, an intersectional approach to the novel is imperative. In order to contribute to the scholarship on Vuong's novel by highlighting the importance of queer space, the article will subsequently discuss the spaces of home, the US, and the relationship between Trevor and Little Dog.

Precarious Positionality within the Home and the US

Little Dog's family's constitution challenges a traditional, heteronormative, and *white* imagination of home as a comfortable space of the nuclear family. Little Dog grows up in the United States with his grandmother Lan and mother Rose; his father is almost fully absent from the novel. We only learn that he was abusive towards his wife during the time they were together. Both his parental figures suffer mental health issues as a consequence of the Vietnam War, from which they fled together. Growing up in a home with two refugee women traumatized by war, struggling with mental health, shapes Little Dog's identity. He lacks a place for recovery as he is subjected to physical violence at the hand of his mother inside of his home, and racialized and homophobic discrimination outside of it. In the first part out of three, the narrator orients himself and the reader towards the home-space, the relational space and the memories of his relatives, the space of the US, and the space of the protagonist's racialized, violated, and resistant body.

According to Ahmed "[t]he starting point for orientation is the point from which the world unfolds" (545). When Little Dog starts his letter with the sentence "Let me begin again" (Vuong 3), the starting point of the novel marks his and his story's orientation towards his mother, who occupies the position of the addressee. Little Dog exposes his vulnerability in this first sentence, having had to start over writing the letter multiple times, perhaps searching for the right words. By using the word 'again', he opens multiple spatiotemporal levels (see also Neumann 278). Furthermore, he locates himself at a temporal distance towards the content of his letter, thus telling his and his family's story in retrospect. When and where exactly he writes the letter is not clear. Little Dog's writing thus grapples with memory, proposing an

alternative overlooked history of two women who survived the aftermath of the Vietnam War and sought refuge in the United States – ironically in the country significantly escalating the war (see also Ha and Tompkins 201). By asking: "When does war end?" (Vuong 12), Little Dog points to the continuity of violence and the inheritance of trauma by connecting his mothers' and grandmothers' trauma caused by the war and its aftermath to his own upbringing. Little Dog therefore hints at the lasting impact that the US intervention and participation in the Vietnam War had and has, even generations later. Now arriving in a country that was and is convinced of its own superiority shapes his and his family's life and drives them towards submission. In positioning himself and his family as postcolonial subjects by linking US imperialism to the Vietnam War and his family's story, the narrative unfolds as a complex assemblage interweaving two spatiotemporal realms – Little Dog's childhood in an immigrant household marked by abuse and the journey of his mother and grandmother.[1]

This non-linear structure aligns with a queer mode of storytelling since queer temporality bends the norms of linear temporality and development (see e.g., Halberstam, Muñoz, Freeman). Halberstam's claim that the capitalist US-society is organized around the future is queered by Little Dog through mainly focusing on the past and narrating his and his family's stories in a disorganized manner. The narrator's vulnerability continues to increase when Little Dog articulates the intention of his writing: "I am writing to reach you – even if each word I put down is one word further from where you are" (Vuong 3). The state of ambivalence (towards his mother) and his writing endeavor is expressed spatially. The story is not told, to use Ahmed's words again, to straighten any oblique, queer lines (566), instead it accommodates vulnerability, ambiguity, and the prospect of failure (Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*), which further speaks to a queer storytelling. However probable the failure, Little Dog still attempts to reach his mother. This shows a sense of hope for a better future, which José Esteban Muñoz ascribes to queer utopian thinking.[2] According to Muñoz, this hope entails a "rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility of another world" (1). Little Dog wants to change the present relationship between him and his mother to bring them closer.

Yet, attempting this, he has to initially recall the ambiguous relationship between them that is marked by conflict and violence. Little Dog recounts several instances of abuse endured during his childhood at the hands of his mother in the beginning of the novel. Each paragraph commences with the temporal marker "The time" followed by a spatial reference of his mother's acts of aggression or the object she used to attack him (Vuong 4-13). This anaphoric construction and enumeration signify a continuity of abuse, even when in some descriptions physical violence remains implicit. Further, these examples show that time and space are narrated as inextricably linked. The violence he endures is told as a spatial manifestation of positionality. When her son tries to explain to her how to read, Little Dog's mother gets angry: "But that act (a son teaching his mother) reversed our hierarchies and with it our identities, which, in this country, were already tenuous and tethered" (Vuong 5). When the suggested continuity of abuse is interrupted with instances of tenderness and support from her, the ambivalence of his relationship towards his mother is revealed. For example, when

Little Dog has a panic attack, his mother soothes him by singing to him (10). Still, the paragraph starts with "The time", playing with and subverting the reader's expectation of the continuous report of instances of abuse. Little Dog realizes then that his mother is a survivor as well as a perpetrator and describes this ambivalence spatially: "To be a monster is to be a hybrid signal, a lighthouse: both shelter and warning at once" (13). Language, identity, and race intersect in the relational space towards his mother.

The continuity of his mother's ambivalence and unpredictability leads to a feeling of unsafety within the home-space, which becomes mundane and quotidian to Little Dog. For example, Little Dog recalls a time he wet his bed and was locked in the basement as a punishment: "His snot-plastered nose, its salt on his lips, his tongue, he's at home" (98). This enumeration as well as finishing it with his location "at home", places the home space as a mundane syntactical consequence of his emotional state. This expresses the banality of feeling unsafe at home. For Little Dog, crying, sadness, and being punished then equates with being at home. Again, this memory is told in relation to space: "He stands with one foot on the other, as if touching less of the basement meant he was less inside it" (98). Consequently, as the home-space is associated with discomfort, Little Dog tries to feel less inside of it.

Trying to escape the embodied experience of violence within his dysfunctional home, Little Dog finds solace in his imagination and stories. One day, he tries to run away from home and only takes two books with him because "he knew how far a story could take him, and holding these books meant there were at least two more worlds he could eventually step into" (121). Writing down his own story, then, means turning towards his own memory-world and a world of potential readers; he later reflects: "It could be, in writing you here, I am writing to everyone – for how can there be a private space if there is no safe space, if a boy's name can both shield him and turn him into an animal all at once" (33). His name, the very term for one's personality and identity, reflects the ambivalence that is emphasized by Little Dog continuously: He is called an animal, which dehumanizes him, yet it was given to him to protect him from ghosts following a Vietnamese tradition (18).[3] His thought further indicates that his writing is not solely directed at his mother but at a broader readership, particularly Americans unfamiliar with the Vietnamese American perspective he represents by telling his story. In the absence of a safe space, the letter he writes to his mother cannot be kept private. For Little Dog, home was a space of mental health crises, physical abuse, and a non-normative family with traumatic pasts. His statement then suggests that he views the private home-space and his personal story as political, destabilizing the private/public binary. One way to use his imagination to escape the violence and trauma he endured, is to make his story public.

His grandmother and mother also tell him stories about Vietnam, which he re-narrates alternating with his own memories. Vietnam is mostly talked about in relation to war, in which "[i]t is a beautiful country depending on where you look" (35), and later: "It's a beautiful country, she's been told, depending on who you are" (36). Here, the orientation of the gaze and space are connected to identity. In re-telling his mother's and grandmother's stories, he connects them to a different time and space – his own current life in the US. When Little Dog plucks out his grandmother's grey hair one night, she tells him a story: "As I plucked, the blank

walls around us did not so much fill with fantastical landscapes as open into them, the plaster disintegrating to reveal the past behind it" (22). These memories then create spaces within his home-space through Little Dog's imagination. Notably, these stories are told to Little Dog often while caring for his mother or grandmother: plucking out grey hair or massaging his mother's back to relax her from a long day at work in the nail salon.[4] Through a lens of queer decolonial diasporic practice, Sandeep Bakshi adds that the language of touch is a way for the protagonist to access the past and intergenerational memories (Bakshi 546-547). At home, then, the family practices their own cultural traditions (of care) (e.g., Vuong 33).

The outside world and society build a stark contrast to that, which points to the dichotomy between the periphery and centre established in diasporic contexts. For Little Dog's mother, this is represented by and experienced in the nail salon where she is employed. The nail salon is a racialized and stereotypical place for Vietnamese refugees and migrants to work at. Within it, a hierarchy between *white* American clients and mostly Asian American staff is established and reproduced.[5] Little Dog describes how in this context, the word 'sorry' becomes a currency to generate more tips thereby transforming its meaning. There it means "I'm here, right here, beneath you. It is the lowering of oneself so that the client feels right, superior, and charitable" (Vuong 91). Often, Asian American immigrants do not have a choice but to adhere to the spaces they are directed to and kept in through societal structures in order to make a living (see also Cho). Power and minority positionality are again imagined spatially. Little Dog internalizes this apologetic lowering of oneself that is built upon and enforces racial hierarchies.

He further experiences racial hierarchies within public spaces himself. The precariousness of his positionality within "this country" (Vuong 5), in which his and his family's identities are vulnerable subjects, is exemplified when the protagonist recalls a memory of a bus ride. Little Dog sits on the bus by himself, when he is suddenly pushed into the window by a *white* boy, who tells him to speak English. He reflects on this event in his letter saying that the boy "was only nine but had already mastered the dialect of damaged American fathers" (24). This racialized and gendered violence makes the public space of the bus unsafe to him. When he comes home crying, his mother blames him because he did not act like a 'real boy' by asking: "What kind of boy would let them do that?" (26). By invalidating his experiences and critiquing his behavior based on gender, she enhances Little Dog's feeling of invisibility. Queer scholars have pointed out that for queer subjects especially, home is not necessarily a safe space as queer identities might not be performed freely (see e.g. Berry; Blunt and Dowling; Bryant; Leung). This is clearly detectable in his relationship with his mother. Thus, this interplay of gender norms from two different cultures and the inexistence of a safe space where he can perform his masculinity non-normatively, as well as be shielded from (racial) violence, add to Little Dog's insecurity and suffering.

Without a safe space, Little Dog finds his own forms of agency and resistance in space through the (re)orientation of his gaze. As has been established, in the first part of the novel the narrator is oriented towards his mother, which he makes explicit at the end of the first chapter connecting it to space, orientation, and gaze: "You're a mother, Ma. You're also a mon-

ster. But so am I – which is why I can't turn away from you. Which is why I have taken god's loneliest creation and put you inside it. Look" (14). The reason for turning towards her is their sameness as 'monsters' – he was taught to associate his queerness with it, and she is a monster for hurting him. In order to explore himself, he thus has to turn to his mother, including especially the 'monstrous' parts of his childhood. By actively looking at and orienting himself towards his mother, her complex trauma, and his own childhood trauma, he reclaims parts of his story, identity, and power that was lost to her aggressions. Here, in reference to what his mother told him one day, the eye is called 'god's loneliest creation' since "so much of the world passes through the pupil and still it holds nothing" (12). On the contrary, Little Dog attempts to capture what he has seen and experienced in his writing by recalling his past. The gaze is thus an important aspect of the analysis of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* as it is related to memory, orientation, space, and agency.

Little Dog's resistance and positionality is then entangled with the spatial practices of orientation and looking that Ahmed identifies. We can trace this expression of power and agency in several instances. When Little Dog sits on the bus that day, he complies with the bullies and says what they want to hear. Yet, he resists by closing his eyes instead of looking at the bully as he had told him to: "'Look at me when I'm talking to you.' [...] When I did nothing but close my eyes, the boy slapped me" (Vuong 24). With his face pressed against the window he was looking out of one moment ago, Little Dog has the "urge to break through the pane and leap out the window" (24), but he cannot escape so he turns inward by closing his eyes and keeping them shut while saying the bully's name as asked to. In another instance, when he is locked in the basement, he also closes his eyes: "This is my superpower, he thinks: to make a dark even darker than what's around me" (98). Here, he additionally distances himself from remembering the traumatic event using 'he' and 'the boy' instead of writing in the first-person perspective (see also Slopek 754). As in the situation on the bus, he uses his gaze to protect himself and make the situation within a certain space more bearable and still feel like he holds power.

He utilizes his gaze in another way, the first time he dares to tell his mother to stop hitting him: "'Stop, Ma. Quit it. Please.' I looked at you hard, the way I had learned, by then, to look into the eyes of my bullies" (Vuong 11). The way Little Dog looks at his mother while standing up for himself accompanies the words he says to stop her from hitting him. The entanglement of verbalization and his gaze directed at her are effective, as even while he is in the situation, he knows that this would be the last time his mother would hit him (12). His mother turns away from him, which means she looks away too – how she moves in space changes immediately. The convergence of language and the directionality of his look show his resistance and agency. Returning to Sara Ahmed, she states that the conventional home "requires following a certain line, the family line that directs our gaze" (560). Little Dog queers the home-space by leaving this expected line through directing his gaze resistantly at his mother. The act of looking or not looking therefore assumes a critical and spatial role in Little Dog's (and his mother's) capacity to perceive, endure, and resist the world around him and in queering the home.

Creating a Queer Postcolonial Space and Identity

In the second part of the novel, Little Dog inhabits spacetime with Trevor, the boy with whom he shares his first sexual and romantic experiences. In contrast to the first part's focus on the home-space and the nation, here, space is narrated differently. Their encounters are often set outside on a tobacco farm or in the barn next to it, where Little Dog first meets Trevor while working together.[6] Additionally, Little Dog visits Trevor at home – he lives in a trailer park with his alcoholic dad. Space as well as the relationship between the two boys is articulated more intimately and personally. However, abuse persists in a twofold manner: Firstly, the relationship with Trevor perpetuates patterns of physical and verbal abuse, through homophobic slurs and statements. Secondly, the chapter narrating their initial sexual exploration is interrupted by flashbacks to instances of abuse inflicted upon Little Dog by his mother. Thereby, the narrator once again intertwines two spatiotemporal realms, this time alternating his first queer sexual experience and his own childhood memories. Now, he is retelling his own stories and memories instead of his relatives', more closely approaching his own identity.

Little Dog positions himself beneath Trevor, the way he had learnt from observing and living with his mother. When they first meet, Little Dog instinctively says 'sorry' to Trevor: "Because I am your son, my apology had become, by then, an extension of myself. It was my Hello" (Vuong 94). As his mother had in the nail salon, Little Dog apologizes and therefore assumes a submissive role immediately in line with the expectations US American society has of him based on his racial positionality (see also Cho 143). This spatial hierarchy intertwines aspects of postcoloniality and sexuality and their underlying power structures. Trevor embodies a stereotypical *white* American man who 'naturally' assumes the dominant counterpart.[7] Trevor witnesses behaviors of hypermasculinity, violence, and substance abuse by his father and his (sexual) identity issues are induced by the circumstances he grows up in. The protagonist senses Trevor's anger towards his alcoholic father and his own sexuality. He describes him and their ambiguous relationship with spatial imagery: "He came from a place on fire, a place he could never return to [...] And what do you do to a boy like that but turn yourself into a doorway, a place he can go through again and again [...]?" (Vuong 111). In this submissive role, he finds a unique form of agency, which distinguishes it from his role as a son: "Because submission, I soon learned, was also a kind of power. To be inside pleasure, Trevor needed me [and] depends on my willingness to make room for him, for you cannot rise without having something to rise over. Submission does not require elevation in order to control. I lower myself" (118). Little Dog employs similar spatial imagery as he did when describing his relationship to his mother – positionality is important here as well. This form of agency rejects stereotypes and the binaries of bottom/top equated with active/passive, powerful/powerless, and masculine/effeminate (see also Lippert). As it is Little Dog's own choice to be "fucked up" now, he does not feel powerless anymore (Vuong 119). This stands in contrast to both his mother's abuse and more generally the struggles he faces within Post-Vietnam War US society. Here, too, the gaze emerges as a critical component of agency. This is exemplified when he describes how he lets Trevor look into his eyes during sex: "I put him in my mouth, to the

base, and peer up at him, my eyes a place he might flourish" (118). As the subaltern racialized subject in this sexual encounter, Little Dog utilizes his look to feel like an agent.

Opposed to the emphasis some research articles put on this form of agency, it does not diminish the abuse present within their relationship. For example, while recognizing these abusive elements, Slopek concludes that "bottomhood" and embracing the simultaneity of pleasure and pain empowers Little Dog (752). However, as abuse entails complex power structures which have been and will be further explored in this chapter, not viewing the violence and unwanted transgression of boundaries that Little Dog endures in his relationship with Trevor as harmful, is to dismiss the racial and postcolonial power imbalance between them. Leopold Lippert (among others) notes that the racial hierarchy between the two is established from the beginning, as Little Dog is assumed to take the bottom position by Trevor, once again entangling racial and sexual dimensions of their relationship and identities spatially. This reinforces stereotypes towards Asian Americans as being effeminate, weak, and passive (Lippert 44). A passage in the novel that has been widely ignored by secondary literature which examines the agency Little Dog finds in submission is when Trevor and Little Dog have penetrative anal sex for the first time (Vuong 199-203). During this act, Little Dog describes being in a lot of pain and asking Trevor to hold still, but Trevor keeps moving because he says he does not want to stop (202), which makes the following sexual act non-consensual. Later in the same scene, Trevor practices care and gentleness for Little Dog, underscoring the ambiguity of their connection. Little Dog does eventually find pleasure in the pain, which underscores my argument here: Both exist simultaneously – pleasure and pain, agency and violence.[8] This simultaneity of Little Dog's and Trevor's pleasure and pain within their relationship reveals the complexity and intersectionality of race, sexuality, and gender and destabilizes common binaries that enforce these very power dynamics. It further shows the lasting impact of Little Dog's childhood and intergenerational trauma. Having been exposed to violence all his life, Trevor's violent behavior does not seem out of the ordinary for Little Dog: "By then, violence was already mundane to me, was what I knew, ultimately, of love" (119). Rather, it continues the vicious cycle of violence that in turn reinforces (inherited) trauma, racialized positionalities, and hegemonic masculinity.

Trevor's identity struggles continue to disturb their relationship and sex life, even taking the form of overt homophobia. For example, Trevor does not want to take the bottom position and be penetrated by Little Dog because he does not want to "feel like a girl" (120). This displays his binary understanding of gender as well as his desire to cling to the dominant position associated with *white* (hetero)masculinity. The narrator had assumed that "sex was to breach new ground, despite terror, that as long as the world did not see us, its rules did not apply. But I was wrong. The rules, they were already inside us" (112). Here, Little Dog associates not being seen by the world with being protected from it and its norms. Yet, his hopes are disappointed as Trevor reproduces patterns of heteronormativity and gender norms.[9] Little Dog's hopefulness is also expressed in his description of Trevor's ambivalent traits that show him as vulnerable, compassionate, and empathetic towards animals and himself, and an admirer of nature's beauty, while an epitome of *white* American masculinity (153-155, see

also Slopek 748). This chapter is narrated in fragments, which visualizes Trevor's diremption, as well as the distance between the two boys. Trevor's violence, homophobia, use of guns, emotional unavailability, and silence express his fear to appear vulnerable or un-masculine. Trevor's identity crisis, which is triggered by desiring another boy, radically calls into question his hegemonic masculinity. In Ahmed's words, for Trevor the felt disalignment of his gender and sexuality leads to his disorientation.

This power discrepancy between them is further related to Trevor's whiteness, which Little Dog acknowledges is what provides a space for them: "He was white, I never forgot this. He was always white. And I knew this was why there was a space for us: a farm, a field, a barn, a house, an hour, two" (Vuong 111). Trevor's privilege, the denial of his queerness, and the insistence on his cis-heterosexual masculinity create the necessary conditions for their relationship (see also Slopek 747). As long as they are not perceived by the world as queer, they can explore their feelings towards each other. This is accentuated when Trevor's father barely notices Little Dog's presence at their trailer, at least, he does not see him: "That China boy with you, huh? I know it. I hear him. He don't talk but I hear him" (Vuong 142). This statement infused with racism highlights the struggle of Little Dog to be recognized and seen instead of reduced to an Asian American stereotype in a predominantly *white* US America. Trevor's father goes on to tell a gruesome story about Trevor's uncle, who was a soldier in the Vietnam War and praises him for killing Vietnamese people: "He whooped them in that jungle. He did good for us. He burned them up" (142). In dehumanizing 'them', Trevor's father shows no regard for Little Dog's feelings while reproducing the very *white* colonial narrative the protagonist writes against.[10] Both Trevor and Little Dog represent the second generation after those immediately impacted by the Vietnam War. Their relationship is then complicated further by the racist and violent kindred and colonial mindset Trevor was and is surrounded by. In this context, Cho points out the connectedness of the home-space and the nation. As the US privileges narratives focusing on whiteness and heteronormativity, families can be understood "as a site where transmission of nationalist ideals occurs intergenerationally, thus contributing to enduring legacies of American exceptionalism and imperialism, especially as they have been militaristically enacted abroad in Asian countries" (Cho 133), including Vietnam. Thus, as Little Dog did from his mother and grandmother, Trevor inherits various stories of violence, *white* US American supremacy, and heteronormativity from his father. Therefore, their relationship becomes a queer postcolonial space, as it simultaneously renegotiates, reinforces, and disrupts colonial and heteronormative power structures.

In contrast to Trevor, Little Dog did not grow up in the presence of the patriarchal US-American father (see also Vuong 24). He does not comply with the heteronormative system in the same manner as Trevor, having been raised in a different cultural environment by two immigrant women.[11] This upbringing inherently contrasts the norms and expectations ingrained within hegemonic US American society, culture, and language. As a writer, Little Dog continuously reflects on his own use of language, particularly when he comes out to his mother.[12] Rather than employing the Vietnamese term for gay, which would equate to calling himself a pedophile, he states that he does not like girls. The narrator then highlights that

the rigid sexual and gender norms which persist in the Vietnamese language are of colonial origin: "Before the French occupation, our Vietnamese did not have a name for queer bodies – because they were seen, like all bodies, fleshed and of one source" (130). Little Dog's mother's poor reaction to his disclosure enforces these very norms and demonstrates her difficulty to comprehend his identity.[13] He had hoped for a different reaction that they "would see each other, you and I, with relief, a familiar face made more luminous than we had remembered" (129). This hope is rooted in the belief that his queerness would create more sameness than difference between them. When he asks his mother in his letter: "Did you ever feel colored-in when a boy found you with his mouth?" (106), he asks her if she has ever felt what he felt with Trevor. Instead of being able to share memories of experiences, Little Dog's hope for recognition, to be seen and accepted by his mother, and to reduce distance between them by realizing their commonality, remains unfulfilled. Notably, his coming out takes place at a Dunkin' Donuts, an emblem of US American culture, instead of at home, where most scenes between mother and son take place. Further, home is traditionally more associated with private and personal conversations. This firstly underlines his former statement on the absence of a private and safe space for him due to his positionality and secondly his unsafety at home due to his mother's violence and his own queerness.

It is in the relational space with Trevor that Little Dog first feels seen. In their initial convergence, the gaze functions as an expression of queer desire.[14] In this scene, an erotic atmosphere and a queer space are created through looks:

> What I felt then, however, was not desire, but the coiled charge of its possibility, a feeling that emitted, it seemed, its own gravity, holding me in place. The way he watched me back there in the field, when we worked briefly, side by side, our arms brushing against each other [...], his eyes lingering, then flitting away when I caught them. (96)

The two boys look at each other secretly and look away until finally "[o]ur eyes met" (99). Here, the narrator evokes a popular motive of movies usually associated with heterosexual characters who do not know of each other's desire, while the audience is already aware of it upon seeing their secret looks. This well-known cinematic moment is queered by the narrator, in a way that, when the two finally touch and kiss, it is not a surprise. The eyes, the looks they give each other, their gazes express queer desire and thereby queer a common narrative. Notably, then, Little Dog does not come out to the reader. The reader knows that he is queer before he verbalizes his sexual orientation. This is achieved by the way the narrator orients himself and his gaze in space.

However, this evolving relation is disrupted by Trevor's internalized homophobia. Little Dog describes enjoying looking at Trevor repeatedly: "I studied him like a word [...] It was dark enough for my eyes to swallow all of him without ever seeing him clearly" (103). Yet, when Trevor catches him looking, he tells him not to be "weird" (103), signifying his discomfort with Little Dog's overt desire. These instances show both the pleasure of looking as well as Trevor's homophobia and shame. Even though he tries to hide his own desire, Little Dog still feels

looked at and seen by him: "I was seen – I who had seldom been seen by anyone. I who was taught, by you, to be invisible in order to be safe" (96). The 'you', here, addresses his mother again, revealing that (in)visibility is located at the intersection of Little Dog's postcolonial and queer subjectivity. Little Dog goes on to recall a traumatic experience of his elementary school teacher forgetting him in the corner of the classroom after he had been punished to stand there, rendering him invisible (96). Christopher Shia approaches the text through stereotypes assigned to Asian Americans, one of them being Asian invisibility: "Asian Americans have historically been sidelined, being rare in politics, and seldom represented in the media" (Shia 67). Cho adds that it is expected from Asian refugees to participate in assimilating to the US in a way that renders them obedient, silent, and invisible (136).[15] In becoming visible with and through Trevor, Little Dog defies this (hetero)norm and racist narrative.

With Trevor, he does not only feel seen for the first time, but even beautiful. One day after finishing work, the two boys talk about their families and interests. Trevor philosophizes that Cleopatra and everyone who has ever lived must have seen the same sun and sunset (Vuong 99). Little Dog replies that it "must suck to be the sun, though" (99), because the sun does not know what it looks like, and therefore does not know who it is. Thus, to Little Dog, identity and seeing oneself are related. When Little Dog looks into the mirror after having known Trevor for a while, he feels beautiful:

> It was an accident, my beauty revealed to me [...T]he boy before the mirror stunned me. Who was he? [...] It was everything I hid from, everything that made me want to be the sun, the only thing I knew that had no shadow. And yet, I stayed. I let the mirror hold those flaws – because for once, drying, they were not wrong to me but something that was wanted, that was sought and found among a landscape as enormous as the one I had been lost in all this time. (107)

Little Dog feels beautiful because he is desired by Trevor, yet also because he sees himself. He feels a sense of belonging, orientation, and directionality, which is why he is able to look at himself without spite in this moment. This moment captures a shift within Little Dog – he actively decides to stay and look at himself instead of giving in to the urge to hide and not be looked at. Again, there is agency in looking, making himself vulnerable by letting himself feel wanted and seen, and accepting himself as an embodied flawed and beautiful being. In this second part of the novel, experiencing feeling desire and being desired for the first time, he re-orients himself towards himself by shifting his gaze to his own reflection in the mirror instead of his mother.

In doing so, Little Dog, along with the reader, increasingly learns to comprehend and see who he is.[16] This evolution is reflected in how he narrates space. Throughout the novel we gradually get a better sense of the spaces and places that situate Little Dog in the world, and therefore, his identity. When he first meets Trevor, he wants "for his gaze to fix me to the world I felt only halfway inside of" (96). Later, he writes about his own observations of the world, relying on his own gaze now. Little Dog describes the town of Hartford in more detail

than he did in the first part of the novel, making it easier to imagine the place he lives in. As he and Trevor ride their bikes along the streets one night, he says: "I saw all the blocks [...] Things even Trevor, having lived all his life on this side of the river, the white side, the one I was now riding on, never saw" (145). This points to a selective perception of the geography of the city in connection to race. His subjective gaze, which is oriented by his postcolonial and racialized positionality, is even beneficial in this instance: He can see more than Trevor is able to. His transformative encounter with Trevor and the discovery of his own beauty further allows him to establish a connection between his queerness and the broader world. When he recollects the attack on a gay club in Orlando, Florida in 2016, which references the instance outside the fictional world (Encyclopedia Britannica), he links the event to his own sexual and racial identity: "[A]nd the boys, because that's who they were – sons, teenagers – looked like me: a colored thing born of one mother, rummaging the dark, each other, for happiness" (Vuong 137). He thereby highlights the evolving sense of belonging to this community and the world, even reaching across the boundaries of fiction, tying his story to the present United States even more closely. Nira Yuval-Davis states that the feeling of belonging can be equated with feeling at home (4). Thus, through his growing sensation of belonging, Little Dog continuously feels more at home in the world.

Throughout the narrative, Little Dog orients himself, his story, and his gaze towards his mother, Trevor, and finally himself. Thereby, he creates a queer postcolonial space. The farther the story progresses, the more all aspects mentioned are entangled. Simultaneously, his queer identity becomes clearer to the narrator by recalling his family's history and intergenerational trauma, and his first romantic experience and sexual identity through spatiotemporal dimensions (see also Ha and Tompkins 206, and Gibbons 101). In addressing his complex and intersectional story and self, he can eventually position himself as a queer gay Vietnamese American (Vuong 199). In another step, he writes his story down to be read, potentially by his mother, thus not only becoming but representing himself to the outside world.

This development manifests in a shift of narrative perspective: Little Dog starts speaking of himself as "you", instead of just addressing his mother as you.[17] This occurs, for example, when he addresses the fleetingness of beauty that reflects the title: "If, relative to the history of our planet, an individual life is so short, a blink of an eye, as they say, then to be gorgeous, even from the day you're born to the day you die, is to be gorgeous only briefly" (238). This change conveys a departure from a sense of solitude in the world, as his experiences cease to be singular and instead, he becomes part of the communal and plural 'you' of the human experience. This is enhanced by relating himself to the history of the planet and living beings before and after his existence. Timothy K. August argues in his article analyzing character and beauty in the novel, that the relentless thematization of beauty disrupts expectations of the refugee narrative (687). Beauty is usually not a priority therein. By insisting on both beauty and pleasure as aspects of life worth pursuing, Little Dog queers and reorients the refugee narrative. In August's words: "Little Dog looks at discordant events with sensitive and determined eyes. That is, he tracks, measures, and bears witness to traumatic events but reroutes their effects and narrative direction. In this way, refugee beauty is useful for those who want

to acknowledge the plight(s) of their forebears without having their own stories or writerly outputs reduced to an echo of these events" (688). Little Dog thus not only reorients his gaze from his mother towards himself, but from the past to the present, from trauma to hope.[18] Yet to be visible and gorgeous comes at a risk: "To be gorgeous, you must first be seen, but to be seen allows you to be hunted" (238). To make oneself seen, as both a queer racialized individual and as part of marginalized communities thus is to be vulnerable. Little Dog takes this risk by writing a letter to his mother, fully exposing his vulnerable self and risking potentially being seen by her and more generally the reader, the world. Then, to make oneself seen is both a pursuit of beauty and a form of agency as it is the opposite of hiding, of making oneself small, taking up as little space as possible, remaining invisible.

Little Dog reflects on the meaning of beauty, which he argues wants to be reproduced, and connects it to his identity and his sexual orientation: "We reproduce it in order to keep it, extend it through space and time. To gaze at what pleases [...] is in itself, replication – the image prolonged in the eye, making more of it, making it last. Staring into the mirror, I replicate myself into a future where I might not exist [...] I want to insist that our being alive is beautiful enough to be worthy of replication" (138-139). By pleasurably gazing at himself, Little Dog reproduces himself – possibly into someone else's memory. Further, this notion of existing in order to create and replicate beauty, to feel seen and make others feel seen, queers the notion of reproductive futurism in line with Muñoz's idea of hope and queer utopia. Adding to Cho's critical examination of reproductive futurism that is defied by the protagonist, Little Dog not only negotiates "conditional and absent futures" (Cho 138) but strives to create a new future that moves beyond these narratives by creating his own self-representing narrative (see also Cho 146). Thus, Little Dog's writing and his self-replication and -representation is an expression of a particularly queer agency – leaving the straight lines that were laid out for him – as well as of sincere hope for a better (queerer) future and a world where no one goes unnoticed and in which to be alive is enough.

Though he occupies a subaltern position within the relationship with Trevor, and looks rather than speaks to escape this position, Little Dog eventually leaves this place by writing down his own story. He represents himself in a vulnerable, submissive yet resistant and evolving way, showing both the violence and the measures he takes against it – looking and writing. Little Dog changes the space of his relationships, the US, and his home-space through his imagination. Writing about his experience then creates a new self-representational space that makes visible an alternative, oblique, queerly oriented, and gazed at experience of the world and identity.

Conclusion: Queering Space, Gaze, and Storytelling

In *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* Ocean Vuong subverts dominant colonial and heteronormative narratives, thereby offering an alternative perspective on the Vietnam War and the Vietnamese American immigrant experience. This is accomplished within the narrative world by Little Dog's insistence on hopefulness, intertwined with the awareness of its potential disappointment. Further, the upheld ambiguity of the characters and their relationships contrib-

utes to the queerness of the narrative. This subversion, however, is not only thematic but is moreover embedded in the novel's narrative structure and storytelling approach. The non-linear narrative, the shifts in perspective, and the fragmented writing style constitute a distinctly queer mode of storytelling. This structure then reflects the fluidity of queer experiences and the intricacy of queer identity formation and resists normative notions of gender and space-time. The exploration of space and orientation on both levels – the form and the plot – reveals a continuous queerness in the narrative, extending beyond explicit discussions of sexuality.

Queer spatiality and orientation in the novel can be traced within the physical space of the home and the larger society, as well as in (hierarchical) relationships, memories, imagination, and in the directionality of Little Dog's gaze as another important aspect of queer agency and desire. Within the home-space, Little Dog utilizes his gaze as a tool of resistance and protection. Abuse persists in his relationship with Trevor, underscoring the inheritance and continuity of violence along with the internalization of heteronormativity and racial hierarchies. Here, the gaze helps Little Dog to maintain a sense of agency in an abusive situation, as well. Moreover, it emerges as an embodiment of queer desire, which, accompanied by his reflective writing, eventually enables him to orient himself towards his own identity, beauty, and community. Thus, by writing a letter to his mother about himself, he finds the voice and courage to represent himself vulnerably, and therefore, to be seen by the reader fully.

Notes

[1] In this article I refer to the term postcolonial in a broader sense. I use Deborah Madsen's definition of the use of the term to "encompass the whole complex of historical and cultural processes" (Madsen 2), in the context of Vietnam this means more specifically the colonization by France and the Vietnam War, which was majorly driven by US imperialism (Daum). The term postcolonial, here, implies this complex history that impacts the characters in the novel.

[2] Birgit Neumann also notices the expression of hope for change and its likely failure in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* without explicitly linking it to queer studies (Neumann 278). However, in this context it is crucial to acknowledge the relation between queer studies and Little Dog's writing as the character himself is queer. I argue that queerness can be detected not only on a plot-level, but in his way of storytelling, too. Further, Neumann's argument of changing dominant linguistic orders and remaking master-codes (278) in Little Dog's case, can be read as a particularly queer practice. The text's resistance to fitting into one genre easily (279) can be related to queer identity formation and Vuong's attempt to portray non-normative masculinities that do not fit into the binary understandings of gender easily. Other scholars have argued similarly, for example, Sophie D'Urso who explores the connection between queerness, masculinity and language more closely. See also Jian Zhu for a discussion of queer aesthetics in the novel.

[3] See also Neumann 279.

[4] Qhan Manh Ha and Mia Tompkins, as well as D'Urso, identify touch as a means of communication and expression of love within the family. Touch becomes a third language (Ha and Tompkins 209), that, D'Urso adds, employs a non-binary position expressing the ambiguity of his relationship to his family (D'Urso 9).

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[5] See Jennifer Cho for a detailed analysis of the subversion of the model minority narrative in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* and the internalization of expectations that are put on (especially Asian) refugees and immigrants (134-136).

[6] Joshua Parker explores these rural spaces and their eroticization in more detail in his article. He argues that the shift from the domestic to the rural outside place of work as well as Little Dog's bike rides there and back mark "the transition from an immigrant childhood to queer adulthood" (131) adding that this is "in part a registration that queer sex is often excluded from the domestic sphere, relegated to the outdoors" (131).

[7] Christopher Shia identifies a common stereotype between gay white and Asian Americans that the Asian American assumes the bottom position as they are rendered more 'feminine', which is mirrored in the relationship between Trevor and Little Dog (Shia 67).

[8] See Elena Furlanetto for a more formal and language-focused exploration of ambiguity in the novel. Kocić Stanković and Vân Anh even classify contradiction and uncertainty as the narrative style of the novel (111).

[9] Christina Slopek shows that Little Dog himself is not free of heterosexist notions regarding sex: Little Dog only thinks of them engaging in 'real' sex when it is penetrative (749).

[10] Ha and Tompkins discuss the narrative that the US has chosen to reproduce in education and media, which disregards any Vietnamese experience and "relegates the Vietnamese people to invisibility" (201), while denying any responsibility and portraying Americans as the rescuer of Vietnamese refugees after the war (203). *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* counters this narrative (203).

[11] Shia assigns power to femininity in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, as the female characters "exhibit strength and resilience unlike what traditional femininity expects of them" (69). While I agree with this notion, his argument is still based on a binary understanding of gender and thus stays on a surface level of analysis.

[12] Neumann shows how appropriating the English language and translation (from Vietnamese to English) in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is a particularly postcolonial practice (287).

[13] For a more detailed analysis of the coming-out-scene, see Slopek, who points out that once again sexuality and gender are conflated by his mother, when she warns him of violent reactions to wearing a dress as a boy.

[14] While Jian Zhu also works with Ahmed's Queer Phenomenology and mentions space and gaze, his conclusions are more directed towards exploring imagism and aesthetics in the novel. This section's focus is more on the characters embodied experience of spatial orientation and gaze.

[15] Bakshi reveals colonial epistemological hegemonies to be another aspect of rendering postcolonial queer subjects, knowledge, and history invisible, which is countered by queer and trans diasporic artists dealing with (colonial) history and memories (542).

[16] Of course, this is not to say that identity can be 'fixed', ever completely understood, or found. However, the scatteredness of Little Dog's self seems to gain more orientation upon experiencing and verbalizing his sexual orientation. See Neumann (294) for the ways Vuong shows this in his use and reflection of language and grammar. August also emphasizes that the novel decidedly moves away from reproducing a homogenous Asian American identity and refugee narrative that is based on capitalistic and patriarchal understandings of progress and success by focusing on character and beauty rather than identity and plot (681). While I agree with his interpretation, I still use the term identity in an anti-essentialist understanding. Kocić Stanković and Vân Anh add that the novel does not aim to be representative of a Vietnamese American experience but works to tell Little Dog's unique story of becoming: "Simultaneously

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with his desire to give his trauma a voice that speaks to the world, Vuong remains committed to preserving the intactness of his vulnerable traumatic immigration experiences" (117).

[17] Slopek also addresses this change in the use of 'you', however observing it only on page 202 in the novel, when Little Dog and Trevor have penetrative sex for the first time (Slopek 751). In fact, this 'you' is already used by Little Dog earlier, first when he meets Trevor (e.g. Vuong 97, 111). That is why I argue here that his queerness and the evolution of his sense of self are closely connected. This change in his usage of the pronoun 'you' to refer to himself is accompanied by changing the narrative perspective when recalling abuse he endured from his mother, using 'he' and 'the boy'. This creates more distance to his trauma, while bringing him closer to himself in and through his queer relationship (see also Slopek 754).

[18] Jeffrey Gibbons analyzes a scene where gaze is important to this development of identity, and understanding of self and others: When Little Dog describes looking into his mother's eyes at the end, he also sees in them Trevor and his grandmother (Vuong 216). Therefore, as Gibbons argues, Little Dog blends past and present and converges the eyes in a way that lead away from isolation (Gibbons 100-101).

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Biography

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