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### The Way We Dream Now: History, Theory, and LGBTQ Memoir in America

Megan Paslawski

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THE WAY WE DREAM NOW:  
HISTORY, THEORY, AND CONTEMPORARY LGBTQ MEMOIR  
IN AMERICA

by

MEGAN PASLAWSKI

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,

The City University of New York

2018

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This manuscript has been read and accepted by the Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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## ABSTRACT

### THE WAY WE DREAM NOW: HISTORY, THEORY, AND CONTEMPORARY LGBTQ MEMOIR IN AMERICA

by  
Megan Paslawski

Advisor: Ammiel Alcalay

This dissertation examines American memoirs written after 2000 by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer authors with an eye to how the recent institutionalization of queer theory and the open production of LGBTQ histories affect these writers' conceptions of their lives, aspirations, and cultures. I argue that these memoirs, sometimes consciously, find themselves struggling with what are also competing ideas within queer theory about the queerness of futurity even as they turn to the past of queer/trans literature and history to bolster their senses of possible identities and communities. This often has the effect of positioning contemporary LGBTQ writers as wistful children, caught between what they expect and believe of their communal "elders" despite frequent rejection by and of their actual parents; the genre demands of memoir contribute to this process. As yet mostly unstudied, these memoirs in their self-conscious belonging to a "next generation" – and their authors' commitments to queer/trans activism and/or archiving – allow me to read them as sites where recently "established" LGBTQ ideas about utopia, intergenerational continuance, and agency are tested, causing both anguish and inspiration.

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## Introduction

*Finally she died and went to heaven. Everyone was nice. The King of Heaven was kindly and patriarchal, even grandfatherly. He seemed to like her. Whenever she caught his eye, he always smiled. It was made very plain that there was a place for her there. If she wished to fit in, she could quite easily. She in her turn was pleasant enough, never rude; but she took to seeking out isolated corners, and going off by herself, and in general, avoiding society. One day, when the King of Heaven was passing through a great hall, he found her there, staring out of a window. He put his arms around her shoulders. "What's the matter," he said, "Don't you feel at home? Why are you unhappy?" She wanted to cry and be a little girl again and say she was sorry, but all she said was, "It's very like home. That's what bothers me."*

--Suniti Namjoshi, *Feminist Fables* (1981)

The original inspiration for this dissertation came from the time I spent with Ammiel Alcalay in co-editing a memoir by the writer Michael Rumaker, who after graduating from Black Mountain College came to San Francisco in the late 1950s. *Robert Duncan in San Francisco* is Rumaker's attempt to understand his sexuality and the city through the lens of Duncan's life and poetry, both providing an illuminating glimpse of queerness functioning in a world that Rumaker, traumatized by police suppression of cruising and a general sense of unwantedness, sometimes found nonfunctional for his purposes. The yearning imagination with which Rumaker drew Duncan into his private lexicon of life was striking, as it pointed to an intergenerational process by which literature and "private" fantasy commingled in the fashioning of habitable queer ways of living.



I wondered how true this insight would remain in the current American era of what sometimes feels like queer and trans hypervisibility. Rumaker's San Francisco, as often oppressive as it may have been, had the merit of non-standardization that the rainbow-strewn technocracy it became does not. I suspected that lesbian and gay stories in particular had so proliferated that the conscious seeking and hoarding of a few influential narratives was less necessary to imagine one's sexuality as possible. In particular, I thought that the coming out story, identified by Bertram J. Cohler as a "master narrative" in his 2005 study of sixty years of gay autobiography, was now so ubiquitous that it did not require the consumption of books or movies to know intimately. However, Cohler's observation, born of a synthesis of Ken Plummer's work on the socially shared meanings of telling sexual stories with Nancy K. Miller's analysis of how generation links writers and readers, that gay "life stories [...] have been written in the context of the life stories previously written by other men harboring desire for sex with men" continues to resonate (11). LGBTQ storytelling remains stubbornly invested in its roots even as much of the LGBTQ historical record remains a piecemeal, lovingly assembled effort by people seeking self-understanding. As Martin Duberman saw it in 1991, "gay history helps constitute the gay community, giving it a tradition" even as he also underscored the gaps in understanding and research resultant from a single-minded approach (464).

It also seemed likely that the acceptance of queer theory/LGBTQ studies as an academic discipline would have, in a period of historically high college attendance in the US, a marked effect on how following generations thought and wrote about themselves. We probably are not yet at enough distance to fully understand the effects of that, but

some of the memoirs discussed in this dissertation are self-consciously a next generation inspired by academics such as bell hooks and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.

The very act of taking inspiration from a previous generation -- in popular discourse classed as “the ancestors” or “the elders” in a sometimes campy, sometimes sincere conferral of dignity that may be unexpected or even unwanted to those living -- suggests that younger generations have chosen, sometimes unconsciously, to embody the symbolic child of futurism whose repressive ubiquity encouraged Lee Edelman to suggest that queers embrace the jouissance of having “no future,” the phrase that titled his 2004 book about queer theory and the death drive. In Edelman’s analysis, that child is always heterosexual and always precious, always in danger of molestation or abortion by deviants who must be suppressed in order to ensure “our future” in a strictly limited understanding of “our.” As Edelman wrote in “The Future is Kid Stuff,”

there are no *queers* in that future as there can be no future for queers. The future itself is kid stuff, reborn each day to postpone the encounter with the gap, the void, the emptiness, that gapes like a grave from within the lifeless mechanism of the signifier that animates the subject by spinning the gossamer web of the social reality within which that subject lives. [...] [T]he only oppositional status to which our queerness can properly lead us depends on our our taking seriously the place of the death drive as which we figure and insisting, against the cult of the child and the political culture it supports, [...] that we do not intend a new politics, a better society, a brighter future, since all of these fantasies reproduce the past, through displacement, in the form of the future by construing futurity itself

as merely a form of reproduction. Instead we choose not to choose the child, as image of the imaginary past or as identificatory link to the symbolic future; we would bury the subject in the tomb that waits in the hollow of the signifier and pronounce at last the words we are condemned from the outset for having said anyway: that *we* are the advocates of abortion; that the child as figure of futurity must die; that we have seen the future and it's every bit as lethal as the past; and thus what is queerest about us, queerest within us, and queerest despite us, is our willingness to insist intransitively: to insist that the future stops here (29-30).

Edelman's generation may not have chosen the child but, as played out in the majority of texts under discussion in this dissertation, the LGBTQ child persists in choosing them. In attempts to "know themselves," often presumed to be the task of memoirists, the authors push the queer/trans histories and academic work of previous generations into a meaningful narrative that could give birth to the next generation, thus implying that the abortifacients of queerness were only partially successful in destroying futuristic fantasies that centered the child and the necessity of struggle for a better tomorrow for its sake. Most clearly apparent in chapter 4, which discusses the memoirs of two transgender teenagers, at some point in the recent past many LGBTQ adults transferred their understanding of the symbolic child as a heterosexual menace to a baby queer/trans barometer of the country's commitment to LGBTQ rights and wellbeing. I suspect none of this shift is what Edelman intended, and that he might see little of his italicized *queers* in these efforts even as "queer" persists in our terminology for them.

This question of inheritance masquerading as a question of terminology -- are these politically queer texts or do they just happen to be gay? -- functions similarly to how my catchall use of memoir here obscures how these texts borrow conventions from other forms of life writing that reveal the remembered and symbolic child as well as an underlying, sometimes unconscious faith in the future. According to Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, whose *Reading Autobiography* remains the comprehensive standard of the field, memoirs tend to position the author as an observer-participant in a social environment (198). This is an angle on one's life currently near-mandatory for a LGBTQ person writing today, considering the beleaguerment-born impulse towards community as well as the demands of a publishing industry intent on explaining difference into profitable relatability. However, perhaps due to the influence of the coming out story even on works that deliberately eschew it, elements of the bildungsroman also become obvious in these texts. As per Smith and Watson, the bildungsroman "unfolds as a narrative of education through encounters with mentors, apprenticeship, renunciation of youthful folly, and eventual integration into society" (70). This definition needs some specific translation in order to be queerly and contemporarily legible, but its core elements remain. The "youthful folly" that needs renunciation is usually the pretense of heterosexuality or gender normativity, and the integration into society is usually an integration into LGBTQ society, which some may say is no integration at all. Yet, these texts demonstrate that rich and imaginative queer/trans worlds, often composed of fragments of lived experience combined with read experience, can offer enough structure to support emerging identities and life plans. Showing this emergence into queer/trans society necessitates the invocation of the child that once was, and for memoirs that end

before maturity is achieved (an increasingly postponed prospect in the late capitalist US due to the cultural coupling of financial solvency with adulthood), that child remains posed on the brink of the queer/trans future in perpetuity. This positioning becomes clearer when considering Jack Halberstam's argument in *In a Queer Time and Place* that there is "a stretched-out adolescence" to queerness that in his reading maintains a non-(re)productiveness (153). That is often the case in these memoirs, but in their postponement of recognized adulthood, the authors also project the assumption that they have their whole lives ahead of them. They expect a future even as they remind us of the "ghostly gay child," the term that Kathryn Bond Stockton uses to identify the "sideways growth" that marks the strangeness of how the gay child traditionally only exists in retrospect, after the gay adult decodes a childhood of not-knowing (13).

This indeliberate thwarting of Edelman suggests that LGBTQ memoir as a genre is more closely aligned with José Esteban Muñoz's theoretical approach in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. For Muñoz, despite the recognition he feels towards Edelman's instinct to reject the reproductive norm, the future itself does not need to be understood as kid stuff and that, in fact, "queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing" (1). He finds the blueprint for that missing piece in the aesthetic, particularly the queer aesthetic realm, where queerness and utopianism unite in "a longing that propels us onward" (1). That longing looks forward because it can also look back. In his reading of gay theorist Douglas Crimp's recounting of the glories of public sex spaces before the identification of AIDS, Muñoz recognizes something very significant to an intergenerational understanding of queerness and its aesthetics when he writes, "[a]lthough the moment

that Crimp describes is a moment that is behind us, its memory, its ghosts, and the ritualized performances of transmitting its vision of utopia across generational divides still fuels and propels our political and erotic lives: it still nourishes the possibility of our current, actually existing gay lifeworld” (34). I argue that it also nourishes our current, literarily existing queer/transworld.

Muñoz’s conception of the gay lifeworld, which he adapts from Edmund Husserl, is instructive. For Husserl, “the life-world, for those of us who wakingly live in it, is always already there, existing in advance, the ‘ground’ of all praxis whether theoretical or extratheoretical” (142). His sense of the lifeworld as “the ground” necessarily gives rise to his idea that the horizon is also in sight for those aware of their existence in the lifeworld, and Muñoz capitalizes on this image of the horizon to expand on his image of queer lifeworlds as engaged in the utopian seeking of what is just visible ahead. For both Muñoz and Husserl, the lifeworld seems to depend on a sense of community, and possibly one intrinsically tied to physicality as in Crimp. These queer/trans memoirs also invoke communities that exist in what some internet theorists call meatspace, but there is an element of imagined interaction that goes beyond online lurking -- something also described by some of these authors -- into a kind of fantasized community that includes historical figures as well as literary characters.

In Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*, he outlines the ways in which print capitalism drives nationalism, which he explores as the product of an ahistorical comradeship that is necessarily imagined as most members of a nation never meet. For Anderson,

[t]his new synchronic novelty could arise historically only when substantial groups of people were in a position to think of themselves as living lives parallel to those of other substantial groups of people - if never meeting, yet certainly proceeding along the same trajectory. Between 1500 and 1800 an accumulation of technological innovations in the fields of shipbuilding, navigation, horology and cartography, mediated through print-capitalism, was making this type of imagining possible. It became conceivable to dwell on the Peruvian altiplano, on the pampas of Argentina, or by the harbours of New England, and yet feel connected to certain regions or communities, thousands of miles away, in England or the Iberian peninsula. One could be fully aware of sharing a language and a religious faith (to varying degrees), customs and traditions, without any great expectation of ever meeting one's partners (188).

The rise of the global internet and the historically recent phenomenon of openly published and marketed LGBTQ literature bear some resemblance to this moment of new technology combining with a new print culture that Anderson describes as crucial in the development of an imagined community. There is also some precedent in the conception of queerness as an imagined nation, sometimes an alternative nation as Lauren Berlant and Elizabeth Freeman explicated in their 1992 discussion of the activist group Queer Nation. More recently, Jasbir Puar's 2007 book *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* demarcated the "imaginative geographies" that enlist homonormative gay men and lesbians into the production of a fantasy West whose supposed diversity and multiculturalism can stand in contrast to Orientalist ideas of the

terrorist (38). The majority of these memoirs do not interrogate their imaginations of queer/trans community to this extent, but they persistently invoke a LGBTQ worldview as a place where they “reside” even in cases when they might feel they had learned better, and when they are conscious that their ideas of queerness and transness are anglophone North American. Less an uninformed misapprehension than an apparently psychologically necessary concept, the belief that one can belong to a community writ large haunts these texts.

For Halberstam, “queer time and space are useful frameworks for assessing political and cultural change in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (both what has changed and what must change)” (4), and I have approached these memoirs in a similar spirit of analysis even when their authors are less invested in the postmodern practices of space-making and counterpublics that invigorate Halberstam’s theorizations. The texts I examine range from the critically acclaimed, such as Maggie Nelson’s *The Argonauts*, to ghostwritten mass market books such as Katie Rain Hill and Arin Andrews’ Young Adult memoirs, *Rethinking Normal* and *Some Assembly Required*. All have in common a certain yearning to know or establish spheres in which they are in communion with a queer/trans past as well as their conceptions of the future. This process is necessarily performative in a Butlerian sense. Each time an author asserts a queer/trans community exists, they seem to “do things with words” as in J.L. Austin; insisting that they and other living people, historical figures, and literary characters compose a community has the effect of creating that community from previously unaligned pieces. Perhaps more significantly, these authors cannot write their queer/trans



identifications outside of rules similar to those that Butler identified as those of gender realness in *Bodies That Matter*.

In the drag ball productions of realness, we witness and produce the phantasmatic constitution of a subject, a subject who repeats and mimes the legitimating norms by which it itself has been degraded, a subject founded in the project of mastery that compels and disrupts its own repetitions. This is not a subject who stands back from its identifications and decides instrumentally how or whether to work each of them today; on the contrary, the subject is the incoherent and mobilized imbrication of identifications; it is constituted in and through the iterability of its performance, a repetition which works at once to legitimate and delegitimize the realness norms by which it is produced (89-90).

The impossibility of achieving that distance or an understanding outside of Butler's "incoherent and mobilized imbrication of identifications" prevents memoirs from functioning as the truth-telling operations, triumphant self-expressions, or consistently revolutionary projects that they can be credited as being when they give voice to demographics previously not openly welcomed in publishing. Theorists of autobiography often return to Butler in an attempt to describe how, as Jennifer Frangos does in discussing Anne Lister's lesbian diaries, "we -- the readers, including the diarist -- see the narrative 'I' coming into being through the relation of a series of acts (as opposed to seeing it as something that already exists and is revealed bit by bit)" (44). This is true, and it also demonstrates how the misinterpretations can creep in that so tormented Butler after the publication of *Gender Trouble* that she had to recover the ground as above in

*Bodies That Matter*. It is not a long step from reading Frangos' application in isolation to assuming that one has the power to create the "I" by consciously acting, which is explicitly not part of Butler's understanding of how realness functions (or what Frangos said). Because I am not the writer experiencing misinterpretation, I am free to feel a real affection for these misreadings because of their optimism and can-do spirit. I suspect that these memoirs, despite the fact that some of the authors clearly have read and reckoned with Butler, also yearn for the possibility of doing things with words to extent of self and world transformation, complete with the potential of controlling how one is read and how one projects oneself. Caught in this dilemma, they become a testing ground for the last few decades of queer theory and LGBTQ writing in general; how do queer/trans subjects know themselves in relationship to their conjectural projections? It appears that they often come to understand themselves as unloved, unloveable children always searching for the queer/trans utopia they were "promised" by their elders. They are sometimes unruly and resentful and yet remain heartbreakingly eager to conform to the expectations, not usually of their original parents, but of the queer/trans theorists and activists who become their literary and sometimes actual mentors. The persistence of the parental problem in the imaginations of these authors is truly overwhelming, ranging from Maggie Nelson's struggle to find motherhood queerly relatable to Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha's depiction of her mother as an incestuous abuser. Family history is an expected inclusion in memoirs, but these texts' relentless mining of the pain, suffering, and general distaste caused by (heterosexual and cisgender) parents indicates that the question of intergenerational influence is not just academic, but born of a deep need that one is not easily "educated out of" into the acknowledgment that a queer/trans

community complete with new and kinder mentors is imaginary, a construct to make library categorization and political mobilization easier that can obscure and reify oppression even as we desperately want it to exist.

This dissertation cannot offer an exhaustive account of contemporary LGBTQ memoir, but it attempts to engage with prominent themes in work published after 2000. Its goal is less autobiographical taxonomy than consideration of these texts as new communications, as yet mostly unstudied, about queer/trans lives and desires, read with reference to the influence of a newly established canon of LGBTQ theory and history on contemporary writers' attempts to communicate their existence and their hopes for that existence. It also contributes to research on life writing by its insistence on a mutual queer/trans discourse that mostly has been studied individually. Bertram Cohler's *Writing Desire: Sixty Years of Gay Autobiography* (2007) and Jay Prosser's *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (1998) demonstrate the usefulness of limiting the focus to a particular identity category, but the absence of a comprehensive text focused solely on lesbian memoirs is instructive, as they have been subsumed into criticism of women's life writing as with Smith and Watson's collection *Women, Autobiography, Theory* (1998) and Leigh Gilmore's *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Autobiography* (1994). Just as women's writing regardless of sexuality informs each other, so too do the writing and lives of those covered by queer and trans umbrellas, something frequently demonstrated in these texts. The fact that they do so seems partly historic obviousness and partly a function of the creation and acknowledgment of these umbrellas. The ubiquity of "LGBTQ" as the descriptor of a community, a ubiquity that came of age along with many of the authors discussed here, invites the presumption of a

sameness that is sometimes beneficial, sometimes reductive, and sometimes obscures material reality, but regardless persists and influences the detailing of these memoirs' imagined communities. For similar reasons, I have not separated texts by people of color into a separate chapter even as I have tried to acknowledge that they often specially inform each other, and that there is little evidence in some of the memoirs that the white author has meaningful engagement with the writings and lives of anyone but white people. Yet sometimes a writer such as Janet Mock, discussed in chapter 3, attracts attention from large numbers of white people who may incorporate her perspective into their LGBTQ worldview. Also -- and I have been waiting a long time to hear or say this - - I regret that limited space compelled me to disproportionately focus on women and femmes.

The first chapter discusses Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (2007), which tells the story of a lesbian cartoonist considering her closeted gay father's life and death, with Alysia Abbott's *Fairyland: A Memoir of My Father* (2013), which relates the life of a heterosexual girl raised by a openly gay dad, the language poet Steve Abbott. *Fun Home* is at this juncture an unstoppable cultural juggernaut with its own touring Broadway show, and I found contrasting it against the lesser read *Fairyland* interesting in how its mainstreaming illuminates a fascination with the mysterious, closeted gay past that Steve Abbott's forthright liberationist activism cannot match in intrigue. Both texts are deeply dedicated to exploring a "lost" gay history that they, variously citing HIV/AIDS and the closet, can only approach through the speculative and the personal even as they desire the wider record to acknowledge the terms of the lives their fathers lived. Attempting to describe those lives reveals a lacuna of cultural

representation that leads Abbott and Bechdel to draw on the imaginary, the literary, and the fantastic to convey the worlds of their childhoods, just as their fathers used these elements to make sense of their identities and their possible relationships to people like them. In Bruce Bechdel's case, this included his daughter. This chapter is indebted in particular to Michael Benton's conception of biomythographies and Gordon Brent Ingram's ideas about queerscapes, but it uses Abbott and Bechdel's depictions of mythic fathers in mythic spaces to consider how their generation's search for LGBTQ history often begins and ends here, in a rickety place built of literary allusions, a sense of conflicting generational politics and desires, and the knowledge that much will never be known. It is no accident that it is the gay fatherland that prompts such soul-searching from its now-exiled female emigrants, as the land of white and cisgender gay men is the most filled-in on the queer/trans map, where it does unsatisfactory duty as an origin for everyone who desires LGBTQ community. This happens even though what we know of this history remains incomplete and manipulated, pushed into service as something shared, or at least similar.

The authors of the texts examined in the second chapter are deeply uninterested in the restorative examinations that Bechdel and Abbott make of their fathers. Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore's *The End of San Francisco* (2013) and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha's *Dirty River: A Queer Femme of Color Dreaming Her Way Home* (2015) both contend with the legacy of incestuous families of origin as they try to establish queer activist space, community, and family throughout their twenties and onward. This proves a project haunted by failure, both of their activist forebears and their peers, to achieve anything that resembles the queer utopia supposedly on the horizon. Drawing on texts by

Sarah Schulman about familial homophobia as well as safety seen in terms of conflict and abuse, this chapter considers how the language of incest compares to traditional coming out stories. It also finds points of identification that stories of parental sexual violence might hold for queer readers who may not have experienced childhood sexual abuse but are very familiar with parental attempts to exercise control over their sexuality. This pervasive sense of wounded childhood also illuminates the determination with which Sycamore and Piepzna-Samarasinha cling to their belief in queer family and queer communities as places that could be “safe” for them to become the people and activists they are determined to be, a discussion that engages with some aspects of current debates about safe spaces and their presumed relationships to queerness and transness. Because of the frequent failures of these safe and/or activist spaces, Piepzna-Samarasinha and Sycamore’s memoirs often call attention to the disappointments caused by deep belief in radical queer politics even as they persist in their sense that these politics must exist.

Chapter 3 also notes some generational discontent in Janet Mock’s *Redefining Realness: My Path to Womanhood, Identity, Love, and So Much More* (2014) and Maggie Nelson’s *The Argonauts* (2015), but Mock and Nelson are invested in academically and culturally resolving that conflict in ways that Sycamore and Piepzna-Samarasinha are not. Other than *Fun Home*, these books are easily the best known of those discussed here, and their renown points to a certain desire to be “educated” among the book-reading public. Nelson is a professor at the California Institute of the Arts, and Mock is a journalist known for her trans advocacy and sociopolitically motivated pop culture commentary. However, neither text is a straightforward attempt at public enlightenment. Nelson entwines a memoir of her romantic relationship and the birth of her child with her

intellectual engagement in queer theory, art, and women's writing; supported by her reading, she finds motherhood and marriage culturally unpalatable even as she engages in them. Much of the text struggles to reconcile what she evidently wants, judging by her life, with what she thinks she should politically and queerly desire. Lee Edelman's image of the child and Susan Fraiman's conceptualization of sodomitical maternity are her memoir's touchstones as she attempts to navigate the significance and symbolism of motherhood, which gives me the chance to consider the relationship of philosophical accomplishment to queer desire. Meanwhile Mock, whose own mother was neglectful, records how she moved from horror and non-identification with media representations of trans women to discovering ways to use media and literature, pop cultural figures such as Beyoncé, and academics such as bell hooks to raise herself from an isolated girl to a woman with trans sisters and female mentors. I use the opportunity of Mock's redefinition of realness to think through some of the legacy of Judith Butler, often assigned credit for academic discourse on realness and conspicuously a figure absent from Mock's book. This chapter traces an anxiety of influence from Nelson and a fear of history's punishing lessons from Mock that must be recognized and resignified before either author can move forward with her life.

The final chapter moves from the images of symbolic and past children to the books of teenagers, Katie Rain Hill's *Rethinking Normal: A Memoir in Transition* (2014) and Arin Andrews' *Some Assembly Required: The Not-So-Secret Life of a Transgender Teen* (2014). The books are both ghostwritten, an obvious departure from the other memoirs discussed here, and that becomes one point of inquiry into the distance between the conjectured child of theory and how LGBTQ youth would represent themselves. This

chapter considers Hill and Andrews' social media virality, in which the romantic relationship between two conventionally attractive trans teenagers was seen as a heartwarming story of how "normal" they could seem, against the backdrop of Kathryn Bond Stockton's work on the queer child as well as the It Gets Better™ project. It also contextualizes the therapeutic model these memoirs project, in which LGBTQ youth groups inspire teenagers to become LGBTQ advocates who pay it forward for the next generation just as the queer/trans adults in that youth group's sphere did for them, by consideration of sociological studies of the "emotional mobilization" of peer support groups. With this in mind, this chapter pays close attention to the emotional needs expressed in the triangle of relationships between the teenaged authors, their mothers, and the LGBTQ adults in their lives and their audiences. I suggest that some of the intergenerational anger and sadness seen in previous chapters works itself out through dedicated activism for the sake of future generations, some representatives of which are offered the love and support they themselves wished for as children. Regardless of its sincerity, sometimes that support is overwhelming for the younger recipients, who may desire lives different from the ones that their mentors find progressive or fulfilling. Ultimately, the mass market flavor of these books, with their attention to "how it feels" as opposed to "what this signifies" offers the clearest example of how Edelman's plea to his italicized *queers* has gone ignored in favor of literal kid stuff: the future we can all enjoy by, in Sedgwick's term, reparatively reading these memoirs of trans teens saved from suicide, set on paths to happiness, and tasked with changing the world.

All of these memoirs point to yearnings that seem difficult to express, particularly in a period with a pervasive sense that the problems of being gay, though not always



being trans, have been solved -- bar some straggling bigots such as U.S. Vice President Pence -- with the passage of same-sex marriage laws and the popularity of *RuPaul's Drag Race*. At the same time, the institutionalization of anti-normative-prizing queer theory sets a standard that, while in direct opposition to a mantra of neoliberal progress as just outlined, is rather difficult to meet while living under those conditions. Compounded by a history of LGBTQ marginalization whose trauma persists, the search for community and the desire to "do good" in whatever way that translates to the authors leads to a number of contradictory dreams and resentments. At some points, the authors take on the mantle of ungrateful children. At others, they seek out connections -- sometimes by literary proxy -- with older generations in the hopes of finding workable solutions to their distress, but also to further their as-yet-realized dreams. The dynamic this sets up ties into debates within queer theory itself that pit the queer potential of futurity against the queer *jouissance* of not having a future. The overall effect is to produce a great wistfulness in these authors, born of a sense that their actual life stories, as they see them, do not correspond with what they have been asked to be, or to expect. This wistfulness is compounded by the sense, made explicit in Sycamore and Abbott's texts, that HIV/AIDS stole (and continues to steal) a generation of mentors and history that stands between these writers and the queer/trans past. This perceived gap -- in potential knowledge and fellowship as well as experiences -- goes some way towards explaining why Lee Edelman, whose academic coming of age coincided with the early AIDS epidemic in the US, is such a difficult figure for Maggie Nelson, born in 1973, to contend with as she contemplates queerness and children.

This dissertation gathers these threads and recognizes their origins, with reference to academic and community history and philosophy, in order to understand what they can tell us about the way we as queer/trans people live and dream now. My goal is not criticism of these impulses or a reading that shows us how to emerge from their conflict into utopia, but rather the exploration of the contemporary LGBTQ memoir as a genre where writers come to work out their ideas about the past and present, the future and failure, by expounding on the truly personal relationships they develop with their ideas about the communities they claim and plan. Wanted or not, they intend to be your family and sometimes your children.

*The Requisite Note on Terminology*

Betraying my own investment in the promise of the anti-normative, shaped by reading many of the theorists under discussion at an impressionable age, I feel some wistfulness of my own at the growing sense that “queer” does not offer community to everyone it was once thought by some to welcome, yet I recognize the need for some trans people in particular to separate sexuality and gender in the public’s mind and the myriad ways in which that promise of community is and was a failure. I use “queer/trans” and “LGBTQ” instead where applicable, but continue to use “queer” to cover gender nonconformism when it is the author’s preferred term. I also know that “queer/trans” and “LGBTQ” are not in their political connotations entirely interchangeable terms, so I ask your forgiveness of inexactness in the name of communication, here always sincere if always imperfect. The same goes for all my failures.

## Chapter 1: *Fun Home*, *Fairyland*, and Locating the Gay Fatherland

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the increased cultural visibility of queer people also transported the once-coterie writings of Alison Bechdel, author/artist of the comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For*, to the bestsellers list in 2006 with the publication of a graphic memoir about her closeted gay father. In *Fun Home*, Bechdel recreates the Gothic home her father lovingly restored and the titular funeral home where he worked as if the reconstruction of these two places also could make visible the “true” meaning of her father’s life, a meaning that she -- always thwarted -- still longs to discover. The resonance of Bechdel’s metaphorization of male gayness as occupied space becomes more apparent in comparison to *Fairyland*, Alysia Abbott’s 2013 account of growing up with her father Steve Abbott, the language poet, in San Francisco during the gay liberation era. The richness of Bruce Bechdel and Steve Abbott’s literary imaginations and gay yearning, when recounted by the next generation, make these works read as fantasies of sexual identity as well as gay history. In both accounts, these men’s gayness led them to construct dreamworlds where they could be intelligible to themselves and where their daughters must negotiate citizenship on their own terms. This leaves the daughters looking for defining images to convey their sense that they spent their childhoods “elsewhere,” apart from the normal or average locations where their imagined readers might expect to find children.

In his last book *Cruising Utopia*, José Esteban Muñoz argues for the urgency of seeing queerness as a utopian project with the horizon always before it. His claim that “[u]topia lets us imagine a space outside of heteronormativity” is compelling (35), but I shy away from following his Husserlian usage of “lifeworld” to describe Bruce and

Steve's locations because the milieus described in *Fun Home* and *Fairyland* so often focus on an individual in solitary instead of individuals in communities. If, as Muñoz writes, "our remembrances and their ritualized tellings [...] hav[e] world making potentialities" (35), then the focus on Bruce and Steve's lives predates this kind of communal world-building and instead concerns itself with a more domestic sphere: the bits of myth and stories and perceptions that people use to make a contested identity coherent to themselves and then their intimates that, in the jumble of their assembly, take on a reality strong enough to be a dreamworld, a fun home, a fairyland. When Abbott and Bechdel build worlds as authors, they use these memoirs to show us the gay fatherland. According to these texts, it is a space dependent on imagination, much as in Muñoz's utopian lifeworlds, but its aims are often less about a queer future and more about day-to-day survival through conceptions of themselves and/or their families with which they could live. Their dreamworlds impact those of their daughters and the community of readers who consider these narratives part of an amorphous queer history, and it is in this aspect of these memoirs that Muñoz's formulation of world-making potential really blooms.

To put it baldly, *Fun Home* tells the story of a funeral director named Bruce<sup>1</sup> who loved literature, men, boys, and renovating houses with period exactness. He married a woman, had children with her, and more or less hid his sexual desires behind his other loves. One of those children grew up to ask questions about her father's motives in marrying, parenting, and dying. These are ultimately unanswerable, though the author has shrewd guesses and an archive of material from her life to support them. To put it less

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<sup>1</sup> For clarity's sake, I will refer to the authors of *Fun Home* and *Fairyland* as Bechdel and Abbott while using first names for their literary representations and their fathers.

baldly, *Fun Home* is a queer woman's attempt to know her queer father, to understand his past as part of her story. She comes from a literary family, the Alison of the text explains, and her own identity is intrinsically wrapped up in storytelling; she comes to recognize her lesbianism through reading and grows confident in it by recourse to the queer literary canon. Her sexuality has transformative powers; *James and the Giant Peach* becomes juicily yonic in her mind, just as Christopher Robin grows from an idealized boy to a symbol of male imperialism. This immersion in queer literature leads Alison to write her own, a coming out letter to her parents. Four months later, her father committed suicide (or accidentally stepped before a truck). As evidence of her suicide theory, Alison points to how her father's grand pretense had finally ended. His wife had asked for a divorce and his daughter, newly acquainted with the fact of what her mother had called his "affairs with other men" (124), by her openly lesbian presence demanded honesty, a public recognition of the facts, from a man whose life could not continue as before under that pressure. Alison depicts herself at the funeral, burning to say "the obvious" even though she will later acknowledge that nothing about her father was obvious: "[t]here's no mystery! He **killed himself** because he was a manic-depressive, closeted **fag** and he couldn't face living in this small-minded small town one more **second**" (125). For Alison, newly out of her hometown and into another woman's sheets, it is easy at this moment to feel that she holds the key to her father's life and death. He is like her, only thwarted in ways she will never be. It is only later that she admits that she perhaps clings to her suicide theory because she wants to believe that her coming out story had such an effect on him.

As Bechdel demonstrates with her depiction of Bruce's obituary, in which the name of Beech Creek, PA, appears seven times, his life played out in a narrow sphere. "A circle a mile and a half in diameter circumscribes: (A) Dad's grave, (B) the spot on route 150 where he died, near an old farmhouse he was restoring, (C) the house where he and my mother raised our family, and (D) the farm where he was born" (30). It is a suffocatingly small circle for a man with such a worldly air, and it almost seems appropriate to agree with the conclusion of Alison's college years, that Beech Creek poisoned the gay life in him because it is a place more suited to the rest of the extended Bechdel clan who bred new generations only to find them living in their backyard for all eternity. Alison names it the deal she made with her parents, that she will leave home and be the artist with the kind of life that her parents denied themselves. Beech Creek, with its polluted yet crystallic rivers, is toxic. It seems Bruce missed a memo that queer space needs to be built somewhere else than home, a message that Alison learned young and an entire generation would later codify through the celebrity anti-bullying project *It Gets Better*, which critics such as Jen Gilbert have noted actually seems to only promise that *It Gets Better When You Move to a Big City*.

Seemingly without any gay friends or an anonymous nearby place where he could remain closeted and hook up with other men instead of boys hot for their English teacher, Bruce Bechdel's house is his "passion in every sense of the word. Libidinal. Manic. Martyred" (7). The text shows him shirtless, in cut-off shorts higher than the current era deems appropriate for fathers, as he sweats over paving stones, the application of gold leaf, and the rest of the "legerdemain" that transforms a rotting house and the wife and children he appears to resent into an "air of authenticity [...] leant to his exhibit. A sort of

still life with children” (5, 13). This is a dubious magic and one directly related to his sexuality. As the captioned narration explains, “[h]e used his skillful artifice not to make things, but to make things appear to be what they were not. That is to say, impeccable. He appeared to be an ideal husband and father, for example. But would an ideal husband and father have sex with teenage boys? (16-17).

The question is blunt, dispelling any romanticization of a man who himself championed romance, at least in poetry and decor. And yet, even as Alison presents herself as her father’s successor, with the contemporary queer politics one might expect to eschew man-boy love, the narration slips into the same lush excess that Bruce liked so well in F. Scott Fitzgerald. “Libidinal” and “manic” are adjectives one might expect applied to a memorable party, and even martyrdom has some dramatic appeal. Evidence of Bruce’s cruelties grows, but the illustrations of his confounding mirrors, his sherry decanters, his walls of books, and his flocked wallpaper remain compelling. Bruce inhabits a world so unreal that Alison when young could not understand just how the Addams Family was unusual. She depicts Bruce’s gilt and velvet library as a space that he, through the sheer power of affectation, gentrified in the most old fashioned sense. As she asks,

if my father liked to imagine himself as a nineteenth-century aristocrat overseeing his estate from behind the leather-topped mahogany and brass second-empire desk... did that require such a leap of the imagination? Perhaps affectation can be so thoroughgoing, so authentic in its details, that it stops being pretense and... and becomes, for all practical purposes, real. The library was a fantasy, but a fully operational one (60).



It is not a coincidence that Bruce offers Roy, his babysitter conquest, a glass of sherry from one of the showy decanters that Alison so loathed cleaning and even broke in an earlier panel. The sherry, and the books this English teacher lends this promising pupil, are so clearly the tools of recruitment appropriate to someone in a fantasy world: an uncommon potion, a trading of stories. Bruce here is the most hateful nightmare the “family values” Christian right could summon, but the very persistence of this fear indicates how seductive the predatory teacher can be to some people. As Alison rebuilds the past, despite her self-designation as Spartan to her father’s Athenian, she too is seduced by the decanter she once hated: seeing it in detail is necessary to her reconstruction work, just as her father needed it to prop up his revival of the Gothic revival.

In the best Wildean tradition of what Sean O’Toole calls “the interweaving of a love of beautiful things with same-sex love” (34), for Bruce his sexuality is linked intrinsically to the decorative. Alison, who buys the “Spartan” model Swiss Army knife to celebrate coming out, knows that her father is her opposite, built up where she is stripped down. As her series of comparisons illustrate -- “Butch to his nelly. Utilitarian to his aesthete” (15) -- Alison’s identity depends on her father’s. While this might not be the “legacy of mystery” expected by those who believe memoir can show us someone’s secret life and thus who they really are, it makes that -- what a blurb writer might see as the overwhelming obsession of the text -- seem almost secondary in favor of a question particularly poignant to queer people. Where do we fit in historical schemes so relentlessly predicated on the birth and death of generations? How, in a genre such as memoir that is likewise ruled, can we understand ourselves? In the endless cycle of

archival re-creation in *Fun Home*, it is perhaps here we find a queer legacy: non-productive because it ignores the present and the future to instead lavish love upon what is past and necessarily by the world's long familiarity with its details, unprovocative, maybe even sterile. Still, there is a conundrum in finding queerness non-reproductive, however, at least as it appears in a memoir. Alison brings her father back to life in her book, even as she expresses her fears that her own confession of her lesbianism killed him. She is the gay supplanter, making her father obsolete, echoing *Fun Home*'s final suggesting that she is Daedalus and he Icarus even though the book also argues for the more expected assignation. While not precisely a refutation of Leo Bersani and Lee Edelman's theories about the death drive being integral to queerness, *Fun Home* does assert a future for Bruce in the legacy of his persistent influence on Bechdel's own conception and practice of homosexuality. In the text's logic, their genetic connection seems less significant than their "unnatural" closeness (225).

If memoir is concerned with family, as the very existence of the collection *Family Trouble: Memoirists on the Hazards and Rewards of Revealing Family* seems to indicate, then in an act of queer transubstantiation *Fun Home* turns literary characters into Alison and Bruce's flesh and blood. The Bechdel family, instead of practicing familial togetherness, is creative. Alison discusses creativity, at least in her family, as needing solitude. Bruce's life in particular requires him to constantly isolate himself from the demands of his family, likely the reason why Alison paid so much attention to the potential worlds she could imagine into existence with him. Perhaps her sadness actually comes from the fact that they cannot build a lasting fun home, finally detached from its funeral origins, a community of two queer adults instead of two loners. Alison and Bruce

tentatively discuss queer books, again finding the life materials they need to live their lives in fiction, but the growth of any lasting queer rapport is crushed by the immediacy of her father's death after they make this hesitant attempt. And so she admits that “it's childish, perhaps, to grudge [her parents] the sustenance of their creative solitude” (13, 3), but she nonetheless does because “it was all that sustained them, and was thus all consuming” (134). At what point do people who live alone in creative worlds become citizens of created worlds instead of a shared reality? Alison suggests that their home was more of a colony of separate artists rather than a familial space of reciprocated relationships, and furthermore, that this was a compulsive retreat. After all, she indicates that it became necessary because it was all that sustained her parents. It's difficult not to imagine that people sustained solely by the created become created themselves, something Yael Schlick considers a fundamental principle at work in *Fun Home*:

[i]f, as is likely, all autobiographies can be read as containing (implicitly or explicitly) a theory of autobiography, we might well read Alison Bechdel's comic autobiography *Fun Home* as locating itself at the constructivist end of the spectrum, along a continuum extending from autobiography as a referential practice to autobiography as a practice through which the self is textually constructed, ultimately fictional (26).

We're informed early on that Bruce's passion for the family home could have been “a romantic story” if he had been a bit more like Jimmy Stewart in *It's a Wonderful Life* (10). Instead, in reference to a different family classic, Bruce is Daedulus, “indifferent to the human cost of his projects” and ultimately the one who gave his son the means to destroy himself. The text notes that “he hid the minotaur in the labyrinth -- a

maze of passages and rooms opening endlessly into one another... ..and from which, as stray youths and maidens discovered to their peril... ..escape was impossible” (12). The chapter is entitled “Old Father, Old Artificer,” and one cannot meet an artificer on “real” ground or understand him in a straightforward fashion. So instead Bruce is Daedalus. He is also potentially the hero of Camus's *A Happy Death* who “discovered the cruel paradox by which we always deceive ourselves twice about the people we love – first to their advantage, then to their disadvantage” (28), Sisyphus “shouldering his boulder with detached joy” (49), various Fitzgerald characters culminating in Jay Gatsby, the hero of *The Taming of the Shrew*, Gilbert Osmond from *The Portrait of a Lady*, the narrator of *The Remembrance of Things Past*, Algernon from *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Mr. Antolini from *The Catcher in the Rye*, Darl Bundred from *As I Lay Dying*, Leopold and Rudolph Bloom from *Ulysses*, and finally Icarus in a direct reversal of Alison’s initial understanding of him. This is an overwhelming assemblage, and because Alison admits that she never totally understood her father – never got to the core of him – he appears to be magically assembled of parts, a paperdoll made of leaves torn from the pages of books, an image all the more compelling because a graphic novel must by nature present characters as two-dimensional. He is so composed of fictional characters that he himself appears to be unreal long before he became a character in *Fun Home*. As Alison points out, Bruce is similar to Jay Gatsby in his “preference of a fiction to a reality” and she wonders if “Fitzgerald's own life hadn't turned from fairy tale to tragedy, would his stories of disenchantment have resonated so deeply with my father?” (85).

The implications as to why Bruce would relate to a “fairy” tale and tragedy are fairly obvious, and yet it is worth reiterating that fairy tales and tragedy are Alison's

birthright, as the daughter of a furtively queer man. David M. Ball argues that “Bechdel’s myriad literary allusions perform a degree of the same self-censorship encountered in earlier twentieth-century queer forms of cultural and artistic expression” (3), but the very uncertainty of who is the “actual” censor -- Bruce in the past or Alison now? -- underscores how deeply Bruce’s “unreal” world needs other actors to populate it and say their agreed-upon lines. Alison suggests that “you could say that my father’s end was my beginning. Or more precisely, that the end of his lie coincided with the beginning of my truth” (117). Just as her father covers his gay-coded hobbies by presenting himself as a heterosexually married man with a Liberal Arts education that would “naturally” incline him towards décor and queerish books in a region not reputed to prize intellectualism, Alison disguises the pleasure she takes in butchness as early as the age of four. While this appears at first as linear generational development, that progression was only possible for Alison after she and her father quietly, unconsciously conspired to build fantasies of themselves together as she picks his suits and he criticizes her dress sense. His death, shortly after his familial unmasking and Alison’s decision to come out, insures that the fantasy cannot continue in any form. The Fun Home, where things are not as they appear, is metaphorically shuttered after one last macabre joke about who undertakes the undertaker. Bruce’s liminal queer world was dependant on a closet that could not confine Alison’s generationally apropos forthrightness.

In 2013’s *Fairyland*, Alysia Abbott uses a spatial approach similar to Bechdel’s to understand her father’s legacy. The memoir opens with Alysia’s birth and her description of the family tragedy. Alysia’s version has the benefit of simplicity and a clear plotline:

[m]y photogenic mother, who graduated valedictorian from her high school in Kewanee, Illinois, who graduated with honors from Smith College, who loved dogs and lost causes and made a great chicken cacciatore, was only twenty-seven when she died. My father had been desperately in love with her and was so distraught over her sudden death that he turned gay and moved us to San Francisco. From then on he exclusively dated men, making the possibility of remarriage and siblings impossible. All of my hardships as a girl and teenager, from my difficulty fitting in, to my enduring loneliness, to my propensity for keeping secrets, could be traced back to that night in the car. (xvii)

It is only as an adult that Alysia realizes that her origin story has been heavily edited. Steve, who was bisexual, and Barbara, who was laissez-faire, met as graduate students, fell in love, and accidentally conceived a baby for whom Steve quickly had to muster enthusiasm after Barbara decided against an abortion. Their open relationship and ramshackle bohemian life, once a source of pleasure, became stressful and ultimately drove them apart. Barbara started taking drugs with a boyfriend who was also her suicidal therapeutic patient, and the two of them died in an accident during an ill advised road trip. Steve's boyfriend left him when confronted with the prospect of a single dad as a lover. Steve moved to San Francisco for a fresh start somewhere not amid the ruins of his once utopian homelife.

It is not unusual for parents to give children a censored version of their own history. Steve is possibly unique, however, in his choice to explain a mother's death through reference to *Babar*. After recreating the car crash with toy cars, he read Alysia

the story in which Babar lost his mother: “Babar's mother was killed by a mean hunter. Babar cried” (qtd. in 21). These lines needed repetition days later before Alysia, not quite three years old, understood their import. Most attempts to explain the unexplainable to children fall painfully short, and it is not surprising that Alysia remembers finding little comfort in this. The choice is significant because it is the first real clue that Steve and Alysia will find their signposts in literature, where they also develop their sense of significance and the “magic” that keeps their fairy world spinning.

First, there is the fairyland that her father consciously created for her. Alysia examines Steve's childhood in Nebraska through a series of photographs in which she finds evidence that he aged “backwards;” the three year old is more apprehensive and fearful than the adult he became in San Francisco. This is a common trope of (white male) queerness, the most mainstream example of which might be Edmund White’s *City Boy*. Unexpectedly, though, Alysia does not interpret this trope in a linear fashion to argue that Steve grew up to be free and happy. Rather, he finally experienced the “stupid hope” that Alysia's grandmother claims distinguishes her own wedding picture, a portrait of a youth who “doesn't know what she's in for” (28). Steve does not demonstrate that radiance until after his marriage is ended and the photographs change to show a man with

his arms slung around the neck of a young boyfriend or pulling me onto his lap [...] he looks relaxed, almost giddy. Posed among a group of illustrious writers in the basement of City Lights bookstore, he appears content and proud. Standing on Haight Street in his beard, fedora, and 1940s topcoat, he looks in his element, like a king surveying his lands, unaware of the invaders at the gate. (28)

These emotions are wildly different from those Steve must have experienced as a child in a family where, Alysia noted, no one hugged each other. She notes that his past colored his childrearing decisions. “Because he hadn’t felt free to be his true self growing up in Lincoln, in our fairyland he raised me with fluid boundaries” (29).

Perhaps because it was at City Lights, on Haight Street, and with other queer men that Steve finally felt the emotions most associated with a happy childhood, these landmarks of adult interests are what he offers to Alysia as “our fairyland.” Alysia notes that “[m]y father took me everywhere, introduced me to everyone, and worked hard to treat me as an equal. And since I was a precocious child and Dad was a childish adult, in some ways we were equals” (95). Still, the namedropping, the famous bookshops, a now-gone vision of San Francisco as a city of love and free sexuality are just one element of the fairyland Steve tried to give Alysia, despite how they may be the most immediately recognizable to envious readers. Beneath it is Steve’s careful construction work.

While all identities are obviously constructions, queer identities are particularly obviously so, at least in how they differ from identities deemed “natural.” Steve first publicly came out in a campus newspaper and in the illustrated comics he drew for that paper he sifted through the cultural detritus of the time to shape himself, to make himself visible in his associations as well as in the lines he drew. He speaks of his gay brothers and sisters and in choosing this family narrative to make his points clear he foreshadows how meaningful this sense of community will be in his decisions after the death of his wife. He could have been a man with a guilty secret, to suggest another convention of gay stories encapsulated by Bruce Bechdel’s plotline. Instead he interpellates brothers and sisters from people others might have called strangers. This optimism is how his world is



populated and the events in it shaped. Alysia points to his transfiguration of the incident in which his car was robbed into a victory, since they only lost a broken radio, and then into a poem, when the broken window made the car moldy. Alysia's name is writ in rainwater in this excerpt:

“It's a strange day,” Alysia says, “A green  
bug in my room & now this mushroom growing in the car.”  
She's right. Under damp newspapers & cigarette  
butts, from the floor, protrudes a slimy brown thing.

Maybe I should get a new car or at least clean it up, fix the windows like the kids say.  
But how can I do this & still talk to angels? (69)

Who would deem “a slimy brown thing” of any importance when angelic conversation is the alternative? The poem itself becomes Steve’s refuge as it exists outside the mundane bits of life, the work of its construction no different from the creation of a sense of self as a liberationist poet with a daughter whose life would be magical in the profoundness of its difference to those in the straight world. As Steve tells Alysia in a letter written during her rebellious teenage years, “[t]he parent is the author of the child. [...] Take a story, or a poem -- I write it, have to decide what changes to make etc. But the story or poem also has somewhat an energy or life of its own too” (179-180). Why wouldn't a queer poet believe words are performative: opening portals to new lands or creating an adult from a child? Once you say the magic words of coming out, your entire reality changes. In the gayborhood, one also accesses a gayborhood of the mind. The attempt to extend entree to another is the noteworthy aspect, an account unusual enough to merit a publishing deal.

When Steve enrolls Alysia at their local French American school, she struggles with French so badly and is so unhappy there that even in her memoir, it is more than she can say. Instead she gestures at moments where she lies about her father's gayness, attempts to fade away into her friends' families, and feels poor, not magical, in comparison to her well-laundered and well-heeled classmates. It is not until she is older and fighting with her father in the manner of most teenagers that she rebels by escaping into bohemia: a location where her father had placed her all along. She is dependent on the lesson she learned as a weeping schoolgirl, terrified at facing another day at school. Alysia reports that “one day, I abruptly stopped, sucked in my breath, and wiped my face dry with my sleeve” (68). When her father asks why, she tells him that she “changed the channels of [her] emotion” (68). This is a groundbreaking moment for Alysia, the moment where she finally made sense of the rules of Fairyland: “I felt something like the power of language. [...] I liked the way Dad looked at me when I said it, I liked the feeling it gave me, and I wanted to feel it again” (68). This is interesting on two accounts; firstly the focus on her dad as someone who can extend and rescind his approval of her language use, and secondly the firm establishment of language as a transformative force in their lives. Kids desiring their fathers' approval is nothing new, but the manner in which Alysia tries is interesting: she joins him in constructing the world around them in “a new channel” even when it terrifies or dismays her.

Less immediately explicable is Alysia's understanding of Fairyland as a palpable concept. For a good portion of this memoir, her own fantasy appears to be a tidy house with a mother and father. Children supposedly have strong imaginations, and the influence of parental worldviews is strong, but the majority of children do not describe

their childhood as living in the land of make-believe. Of course, the majority of children are also raised by heterosexuals and as Alysia points out, her childhood significantly predated the airing of familial sitcoms with gay parents. For the majority, only the details and not the underlying pattern of their parents' lives must change when they contemplate their futures, whereas gay people very self-consciously have rolled up their sleeves and mapped out sites where they physically and mentally can build lives. (Obviously, this has changed and will change more as queer people become less Other.) The abiding reference point of this memoir is that it comes from someone who, as a heterosexual, is not expected to understand life through a gay lens or see a community where straighter people would see individuals. This becomes very clear in Alysia's epilogue, where she says, "I started to feel as if the life we'd shared existed only in my head and in the pages of Dad's out-of-print books, his journals, and the letters" (316). It is only through writing the memoir that she is able to claim its reality, the concreteness of Fairyland. She insists in the last paragraph of her book that their fairyland "wasn't make-believe but a real place with real people, and I was there. And though I haven't lived in San Francisco since 1994, and though the life I live is very different from the life we shared [...] I am very much a product of his world. I still feel a part of this queer community. This queer history is my queer history. This queer history is our queer history" (317). With the addition of this memoir to the literature that grounds the construction of Fairylands, Steve's happiness in San Francisco is part of the heritage any queer person who wants it can claim and make part of their identity as the history it records shapes their understanding of what it means to be queer. This process of identity building, at least as it works for people anxiously reading and writing memoirs in search of cues, is close to what Judith Butler considers

“bad readings” of her theory of gender performativity, of which she claimed many readers thought one could “stylize” their gender as they would their wardrobe instead of comprehending the deep and often unwilling cultural imbrications that compose our understandings of gender and sexuality (Kotz). The very popularity of this misreading indicates our yearning to do exactly that and illuminates Steve Abbott’s desire to make Fairyland “real” for him and Alysia. He often succeeded, judging by Alysia’s memory of afternoons with her father soon after they arrived in San Francisco.

“When I was a little girl, the sun was always shining in Golden Gate Park. Entering the park seemed otherworldly.” Obvious sentimentality aside, the “otherworldliness” of the park is directly attributable to the presence of her father and his boyfriend Eddy Body, as Alysia remembers their relationship as a truly happy time for her, a point when she could imagine a lady of the lake who lurked nearby and a cave the home of a “wayward dragon” (36). Part of the charm is their introduction into a more “adult” world, one where “music was always playing; there was a drum circle, maracas, and someone dancing, limbs flailing loose and free [where] Dad, Eddy, and I would like on the grass among the clusters of wanderers” (36-37). When surrounded by people on philosophical quests, the dragon becomes more plausible, particularly so in a world where Alysia discovers the magic of drag, her Butler-defying realization that “you can be a boy or a girl, you can be whatever you want to be” (41). By disrupting expectations for a father and widowed husband, Steve ushered Alysia into a world with new rules that seemingly transcended reality. As an adult, Alysia recognized the literary scripts on which their lives ran. Sometimes she would pretend to be a mother to her father and his friends, calling this her attempt to be “a Wendy to Dad’s lost boys” (41). With layer upon

layer of imagination, she calls Wendy “just pretend” but affirms “we were like Huck and Jim, beyond law, beyond rules, eating with our hands. We were unkempt but happy, with Dad affectionately calling me his 'Wild Child.' Other times we were like Tatum and Ryan O'Neal in *Paper Moon*, a traveling father-daughter act pulling schemes, subsisting on our charm, and always sticking together” (41).

Some psychologists identify abused children as likely possessors of “fantasy-prone personalities” (Lynn), and while that is a rather clinical and over-exaggerated term for an imaginative man who found literature enthralling, Alysia echoes some of that insight in her persistent identification of her father and his friends as boys, somehow arrested. Part of this no doubt is the persistent heterosexism of cultural understandings of adulthood, an observation explicated in Jack Halberstam’s *In a Queer Time and Place*: adults get married, buy houses, and rear children in a series of orderly stages instead of getting unmarried, renting a series of artistically derelict apartments and treating children as potential equals. However, her insight extends to cover the damage caused by homophobic families, coming to a conclusion not dissimilar from Sarah Schulman’s analysis of the life destabilizing consequences of familial homophobia in *Ties that Bind*. As Alysia has it, “our life was populated by so many needy wanderers like [my father], young people escaping bad homes and bad marriages, all searching for their true selves and open to anything that might further that quest: Hollywood, bisexuality, cross-dressing, meditation, Quaaludes, biorhythm charts, bathhouses, Sufi dancing” (40). Joseph Campbell never anticipated this crew, but they came looking for fantastic boons despite him.

What, ultimately, distinguishes a Fairyland from the real world? A name, a set of expectations different from the ordinary, the invention of characters? Does the much mythologized San Francisco in 1976, the year Steve called his “bisextennial year” and Harvey Milk became the first openly gay commissioner in America (47), count? Alysia calls their apartment magic and describes rundown Victorians as romantic, “like the ruins of a lost kingdom” (47). Fairyland could be found in the home Steve and Alysia called Cloud House, where Steve shook off “the order-loving conformity of his upbringing where no child spoke unless spoken to and no glass went without a coaster. In this space he was trying to create, mushrooms were magical, fantastic, the stuff of lyric” (71).

The otherness of Steve and Alysia’s world is most obvious in visits to Alysia’s maternal grandparents, where she could buy new clothes at JC Penney’s and watch TV as she wished, while pictures of her cousins and their parents beamed from walls. “What the pictures on display and those hidden made plain was a certain truth: my parents never occupied the same space as the rest of the family” (77). Abbott’s metaphors are spatial and geographic, desperately trying to make sense of a difference between queer and straight that is often ignored, exaggerated, or willed out of existence. Ultimately, it becomes necessary to talk about this difference in terms of the place it occupies. The differences between individuals are just anecdotes, and trying to describe loose, intergenerational communities is too tenuous. This is a dilemma that *Fairyland* shares with *Fun Home*.

As Gordon Brent Ingram argues in his analysis of what makes a space queer, [q]ueerscapes are derived from highly individualized experiences. What we know and how we feel about where we are has tremendous

implications for how we interact with other people and what is perceived as community. [...] While ideologies have impact on cultural imagination in ways that influence individual development and perspectives, the experience of place is largely individual and subjective. A queerscape is essentially a sum total of subjectivities, some more closely linked, for a time, than others. There are the biophysical environment, social relations, and culture, and desire that create their own geographies and actual places.

(43)

These queer memoirs focused on fatherhood map a stranger queerscape than one might expect. In Ingam's estimation, queerscapes are created through "erotic motivations to gaze and make contact" (43), which is a reading so integral to queer theory that gay male cruising grounds, as John Rechy fervently argued in *The Sexual Outlaw* and with whom so many have concurred, are the exemplar of queer space. The absence of other kinds of queers from the public scene means that they have not yet taken over space they should have. Among other meanings, this indicates that in the public imagination, women either occupy straight space or a no man's land, which seems particularly unappealing in comparison to the orgy apparently occurring in gay man's land. When their fathers' subjectivities collided with their own, Alison Bechdel and Alysia Abbott were girls and then women in partial occupation of lands usually entailed on the male line and rarely reached without erotic intention. It is not surprising that both authors needed the breadth of memoirs to make sense of these settings. In Bechdel's case, she returns to the *Fun Home* and her father's tiny town to make it what Alexander Doty would call "perfectly queer"; among other purposes, the memoir reconstructs her childhood memories of her

father in order to see the queerness hidden from her the first time around. Her tentative attempts to solidify a shared queerscape between her, an out lesbian, and her father, a man who hid his relationships with younger men, remain shaky precisely because their subjectivities do not collide so much as they whoosh past each other. There are few culturally widespread scripts for a father and daughter who once attempted to visit a gay bar together and, with an awkwardness that Bechdel poignantly records, were turned away. Much of *Fun Home* depends on how little Alison actually knows about her father's inner world, and so her attempts to chart it make her seem like a spy in closetland. Alison close-reads *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* even as we close-read *Fun Home* in our search for Bruce. The results are mysterious; the master of legerdemain somehow ensured that even his death is, ultimately, unknowable: did he jump in front of a Sunbeam bread truck or was it an accident? Access to Bruce's world is withheld, just as an accurate and complete understanding of gay history can never quite come to be. Young Alison so worried about the power of words that she obsessively scribbled "I think" over each would-be-declarative sentiment expressed in her diary; the adult Bechdel ultimately cannot command a total understanding of Bruce despite all the words and illustrations she lavishes upon him.

Abbott's memoir, on the other hand, presents her as The Sexual Inlaw. Her father, delighted by the freedom and acceptance he found in San Francisco, takes her everywhere with him and censored little. She recounts seeing Eddy Body, her father's then-lover whom she disguised with a fitting pseudonym, naked in the bath, an opportunity for her to add testicles to her understanding of the world. She memorably tells her father, when he explains Eddy's departure by stating that Eddy no longer wanted



to sleep with him, that she would. Childlike understanding of “sleep” aside, while the connection between Alysia and Steve may not be erotic, Steve's connection to gayness clearly is. Drawing on the journals he left behind, Alysia relates how Steve made himself at home in San Francisco and became a fixture in such public spaces as poets' coffeehouses and gay bars as well as on the streets. He understands San Francisco as the “queer homeland” as described by cultural anthropologists such as Cymene Howe. For Alysia, who is heterosexual and possibly ensconced in the bourgeoisie that Steve so disliked, she must figure out her connection to a scene that seems designed to be unwelcoming to everything she is: first a child and then a straight, somewhat yuppie woman. That a connection exists is a point of obviousness to her; she identifies herself as a “queerspawn,” a term invented by gay activist Michael Lynch's son Stefan (Garner 11), who needed a term to describe finding oneself culturally queer while perhaps not being queer. It is perhaps a sense of Abbott's own tenuous belonging that pushes her to present herself as the ultimate insider; first, in offering the uninitiated an intimate view of the queerscape that she calls Fairyland, and in how she recounts all of Steve's brushes with more famous poets. This is not just namedropping, however; it is more an acknowledgment of how much of Steve's world consisted of people more than usually attuned to their own subjectivities and who deliberately build a scene around imaginative invention. As Alysia relates, Steve's life was so shaped by this space that as he lay dying of AIDS-related causes, he fretted about the poet Ed Dorn's notoriously tacky decision to award what he called “The AIDS AWARD OF POETRY” to Steve and a few others such as Allen Ginsberg, thus deeming their writing part of the “current EPIDEMIC OF IDIOCY on the poetry scene” (qtd. in 189). While AIDS was hurting him in insistently

non-metaphorical ways, its intrusion as a symbolic hostility towards his life of the imagination was where he expressed the greatest pain. For Steve, the two were linked intrinsically. He knew “full well that anti-gay humor leads to anti-gay violence” (189), and this belief perhaps was the painful root of his faith in the perceptible world built by language.

Derived from work done in environmentalism studies, Ingram offers the possibilities of cognitive mapping as a way to understand queer claims on space in a non-totalizing, non-colonialist way that circumscribes impulses to, for example, see San Francisco only through the eyes of tech bros instead of also recognizing less prominent narratives. As he says,

whether written, spoken, or expressed in various media, maps of experience radicalize shared subjective experience and build alliances leading to effective activism, ranging in scale from a street or neighbourhood park to the entire globe. Each person's 'map' is usually part autobiography, part mythology, and part the embodiment of tensions concerning forms of marginality, such as sexual politics, gender, race, ethnicity, or culture. But rather than representing a fairly complete gestalt, each map constitutes a page in the ongoing atlas of individual life and communal history. It contains emotional, political, and economic dimensions and involves both individuals and groups. (56)

It may seem counterintuitive to return to this model to understand Bruce Bechdel and Steve Abbott, since the closeted small town gay man and the queer poet who moves to San Francisco remain two of the most widely available and disseminated images of

queer life possibilities. However, it allows for the recognition of Steve's fairyland and Bruce's fun home as discrete places to be mapped even as their mappers see these locations differently. These memoirs become ongoing participants in the attempt to understand queer history, and they offer particular insight into the feeling of separation in that history between the current day and a time before the recognition of HIV/AIDS.

During his career as an activist and an artist, Douglas Crimp repeatedly has returned to Freudian conceptions of mourning and melancholia to understand collective gay response to HIV/AIDS in the US. In *Melancholia and Moralism*, he suggested that gay men had developed a melancholic attachment to homophobic understandings of their sexuality at the expense of activist self conceptions that he read in the 1970s-derived liberationist impulses of AIDS activism in the 1980s. The terms of his critique suggest a certain melancholic clinging in his own work, one that understands the 1980s as a struggle to maintain the sex-positive atmosphere of an idyllic time before AIDS in the face of phobic constructions of gay sex as diseased. This attitude, particularly in its idealization of the gay liberation era as more progressive than subsequent years' political focus on the normality of LGBTQ people, is a prominent example of the nostalgia with which "before" is often imbued. Both Bechdel and Abbott's work participate in mapping that divide, and the very fact of its melancholic existence suggests a reason why they would understand their fathers' lives as occurring "someplace else." Bechdel focuses on a family trip to the Village in 1976 during Fleet Week, noting that Randy Shilts chose that very time and setting to open *And the Band Played On*, the earliest long form account of HIV in the US. Even as she describes her nascent queer awareness of Christopher Street as a sexual place and reveals that her father spent the evenings cruising, she couples that

childhood moment with the recognition that had her father not died when he did, she might have lost him during the early AIDS crisis. Alison narrates, “Perhaps I’m being histrionic, trying to displace my actual grief with this imaginary trauma. [...] Or maybe I’m trying to render my senseless personal loss meaningful by linking it, however posthumously, to a more coherent narrative” (195-196). Bechdel may be attempting all of those things, but the one indisputable element of the connection between her father and the AIDS crisis is how neatly the two followed the same timeline, isolating the time before Bruce’s death as a time before the death of the entire culture of Christopher Street, at least in the form that so appealed to him and Alison. This connection makes an account of Bruce’s life seem more significant in its anthropological charting of a supposedly forgotten way of life, even as it awakes wistfulness in the queer readers who miss (or desire to experience) what Stephen Knadler, in his takedown of Leo Bersani’s *Homos* as a white masculinist fantasy, described as a seemingly sexy, anti-assimilationist world that positioned the 70s gay clone as the uber-identity, nostalgically more desirable because he lived in a time that now seems free and undiseased in contrast (169-170).

For Abbott, whose father died of AIDS related complications, the divide is even clearer. She relates that she cannot remember when or how her father told her he had tested positive, but that she clearly remembers the plea she left at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem: “Please don’t let my father get AIDS” (192). Steve had known his serostatus for a year before she did this, and it is possible that Alysia had been told and blocked out the knowledge. Her ability to “change the currents of her emotion” did not extend to certain aspects of reality, and in fact did little to alleviate her fear. Meanwhile, her neighborhood had become unrecognizable. In her analysis, “[s]ome transformations

between 1987 and 1992 might have been the effects of the economic recession, but much was a result of the AIDS crisis, as members of the city's gay population went into retreat, either dying or caring for those dying, or else living in a perpetual state of shock about the deaths taking place behind so many closed doors" (215). The loss of familiar faces combined with the appearance of homeless punk teenagers and drug-related crime to banish the friendly, homely atmosphere Alysia always had attributed to the Castro and the Haight. When after her father's death she reports "the lights in fairyland went dark" (315), it is a foregone conclusion, along with her experience of "this persistent sense of dislocation" when with her young and straight friends who were the first to participate in "a cultural amnesia" as the "heavy warlike losses of the AIDS years were relegated to queer studies classrooms, taught as gay history and not American history" (315). She relates feelings of grief and responsibility for this forgotten history even as she recognizes how irrevocably her life and contemporary queer life has changed from her experience, a realization highlighted by the lost world of "[a]ll of these Peter Pans, young men frozen in their eighties haircuts and sweaters, never to realize the potential of that first book of poetry, that well-received play or generous heart" (316-317). Despite her earlier refusal of the role, Alysia casts herself as Wendy at the end of her narrative simply because she grew up but still remembers a place describable as Nevermoreland.

*Fairyland* and *Fun Home* also reveal the depths to which we understand gay fatherhood as fantastical. I suspect these memoirs in some way function as the real world's equivalent of portal narratives, as described by Fatima Mendelsohn in *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, in which a narrator moves from "normal" to "fantastic" landscapes. Once clued-in by her mother's revelation of the real nature of the relationship between Bruce

and Roy, Alison sees her youth “transformed.” Her childish insistence that her family was no different from any other family -- that her home is “just a house” (5) -- was always an unreality. Judging by the number of studies dedicated to the experiences of children adopted by lesbian and gay couples, Americans do see queer parenthood as fundamentally different from what is expected or even normal. Our continually patriarchal understanding of adult familial responsibility means that while lesbian mothers might seem somewhat natural to all but dedicated homophobes, a gay father remains a conundrum regardless of the popularity of Neil Patrick Harris’s Instagram. As Aaron Goodfellow noted in his book on gay men and paternity, in two years of fieldwork during which he was frequently asked if he was gay and/or a father, no one ever asked if he had a gay father (54). Even when the possibility should be obvious, it remains unimagined.

So these memoirs, regardless of their authors’ intentions, wind up functioning as the portal itself to non-“different” readers that allows them to see into a fun home or fairyland. Bechdel and Abbott become quest-guides. They may be taking this journey for reasons of their own -- it is particularly hard to imagine Bechdel, with her history of work such as *Dykes to Watch Out For* that centralizes queer intracommunication, envisioning *Fun Home* as a guided tour to Queer World -- but reviews indicate that getting to see a presumed-unique fatherland is nearly as arousing as seducing the male babysitter. *The New York Times* review of the recently produced musical *Fun Home* begins by assuming that it is “unlikely” the audience grew up similarly to Alison and reassures that the plot is not that of a “pulpy Lifetime movie, or a choked-up closure-seeking best seller” (Brantley). Alison’s quest to know her father enables readers not to join her, precisely,

since for a good portion of the audience the story's allure is the impossibility of it occurring in their own lives, but to hitch a sightseeing ride. The same is true of Alysia Abbott's readers, with the added frisson of a heterosexual queerspawn's anxiety about where she belongs.

It would seem surprising that a discussion of why children of queer parents see their childhood as spent in a different world actually illuminates how queerness requires the building of a lifeworld that straight people might understand as a portal fantasy. However, in the obviousness with which queer family life is described as a world of its own making, we realize that heterosexual family life is likely the same, only it is dependent on narratives about family so accepted as truths and inevitabilities that Alysia Abbott's upbringing, which ultimately is about what one would expect to result with a single father poet, needs a book and not an essay to become comprehensible to readers.

Ultimately, *Fun Home* and *Fairyland* engage in complex attempts to write stories that do justice to the specificity of their fathers' lives while locating them in larger narratives. As Ann Cvetkovich comments about Bechdel in an analysis that also sheds some light on Abbott's queerspawn motives, "she reminds us of other temporalities and histories that pervade the national public even as they remain largely invisible within it: her father's queerness and her own incipient lesbianism. In asking about the relation between two generations of queerness, her own and that of her father, Bechdel also raises larger questions about histories of sexuality and their relation to national histories" (122-123). Perhaps the largest question raised by *Fun Home* (and, to a smaller audience, *Fairyland*) is why does this story resonate just now to the tune of a Broadway show, critical acclaim, and best seller status? Considering these works as potential

biomythographies can account for some of their readership as well as their interventions in history and persistent recourse to the fantastic as metaphor. As Michael Benton explains, the category of biomythography “acknowledges ‘our unconscious hunger for explanatory myths’” even as it utilizes “a process of gathering and organising the scattered fragments of the past to meet the needs of the present” (64, 65). It rejects hagiography and the clamoring for “definitive” approaches even as it considers their allure. *Fun Home* and *Fairyland* appeared during a period of unprecedented conviction that LGBTQ people were crossing some kind of shadowy divider onto the “right side” of American history, a place where one’s rights as a human being might not always be upheld but where it would at least be a social faux pas in many circles to loudly hate most minority groups. In their temperature check of LGBTQ acceptance in 2016, Janae Teal and Meredith Conover-Williams refer to this state as “homophobia without homophobes,” an acknowledgment of a public feeling that hatred of gay people is bad despite a failure to dismantle systemic oppression that nonetheless may feel quite progressive in comparison to the discourse of previous eras. Feeling “how far we’ve come” requires an understanding of the past, a task historians note is often surpassingly difficult considering the supposed and imposed unspeakability of queerness during large periods of history. Accounts of dead fathers offer histories that are appealingly “verifiable” even as they fit neatly into our proverbial expectations about the difficulty of knowing one’s own father. As Benton comments, “[d]eath defines the ‘Life’ with its mythic shadow as well as its chronological full stop” (65). These deaths also assure us now, despite our knowledge otherwise, that the closet and the AIDS epidemic are also dead signifiers in gay American life. Most importantly, the category biomythography



acknowledges the mythmaking that was so integral to Bruce and Steve's lives -- deprived of recognizable 'gay father' touchstones in mainstream culture, they drew on a literary and imaginative stockpile to weave their own narratives and provide their dreamworlds with some foundational myths. Benton's example of Lord Byron, noted self-romancer, as someone about whom biomythography flourishes underscores the potential for participation from the subject in the construction of his own. In the end, *Fun Home* and *Fairyland* deconstruct these fatherly myths even as they assiduously map their locations for readers who, like Bruce and Steve's daughters, yearn to understand "what happened then."

## Chapter 2: All the Sad Rad Queers

*I hear the gays go to San Francisco / That's so far away from here*

--Pansy Division, "Deep Water" (1994)

As indicated by their titles, *Dirty River: A Queer Femme of Color Dreaming Her Way Home* by Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (2015) and *The End of San Francisco* (2013) by Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore share with the texts of the previous chapter a foundational interest in queer space. However, these memoirs differ in their expectations of this space; instead of constructing dreamworlds, Piepzna-Samarasinha and Sycamore view themselves as entrants to utopian-minded communities that already exist and often disappoint. While these memoirs occasionally witness and always seek queer utopia, their narrators spend more time processing nightmares, and *The End of San Francisco* goes so far as to suggest that the era of utopian expectations is dead, replaced by a hunger for normality that pretends to solve but will never succor the violence of growing up in a profoundly homophobic world. While the conclusion of a more optimistic text, the "home" offered as the result of queer dreams in *Dirty River* is a personal one instead of community-wide. Still, despite these differences, *Dirty River* and *The End of San Francisco* follow a remarkably similar pattern as they record, in often frenetic and fractured prose, Sycamore and Piepzna-Samarasinha's attempts to change the world or, at the very least, figure out how to live with integrity and happiness in it. Both turn to community activism and travel. Both become frustrated with the cities they try to call theirs even as their recovered memories of parental incestuous abuse prevent them from ever considering their childhood residences and families of origin as home. While

relating these similar narratives, it becomes clear that both texts engage in a struggle between radical queer ideals and the creeping depression caused by experiencing failed radical spaces and projects.

*Dirty River* opens with a piece called “The Recipe” by LeRoi Newbold that begins with a list of spices and ends with three capitalized words: “LOVE. COMMUNITY. FAMILY” (6). The middle includes such touchstones as “The Movement” along with “#BlackLivesMatter” and “LGBT2QQI” (5). These are also Piepzna-Samarasinha’s reference points and their ecstatic culmination in capitals provides an indication of where the journey she records in this memoir will end if she is triumphant. The journey metaphor is literalized by the book’s following dedication to “all the adult runaways” as well as chapter titles such as “Running Away Root” (10).

“Adult runaways” aptly describes the queer/person of color community Piepzna-Samarasinha gathers around her, a group of people who keenly feel their disenfranchisement and pour their anger, sense of loss, and hope into shows, zines, backyard gardens, and anywhere else they can enact change. They teeter between the joy brought by their sense of possibility and the despair of building with the broken materials of homophobic families of origin and colonial histories. Calling the survival of familial abuse a Choose-Your-Own-Adventure novel, Piepzna-Samarasinha opens her book with a disclaimer:

[t]his book is not *The Courage to Heal* and it’s not *Push*. It’s not *When You’re Ready* or *No: A Woman’s Word* [sic] or any of the other brutal, pastel-covered incest books of the lesbian, feminist ’70s and ’80s. It’s not

an incest horror story book, and it's not palatable, either. In the end, I don't get normal. I get something else. (15)

The means by which Piepzna-Samarasinha's distances the not normal -- the queer -- from lesbian feminism would likely dispirit lesbian scholar Bidy Martin, considering that as early as 1994 she deplored the tendency of "the popular gay press" to make "comparisons between the dull, literal-minded, uptight seventies and the sexually ambiguous, fun, performative nineties" (104), the latter of course being the era in which Piepzna-Samarasinha came of age. Piepzna-Samarasinha does Martin's fears one better when she removes even the arguably dull ability to comfort from lesbian-feminists while proclaiming a non-palatability that remains less brutal than the washed-out command to *heal*. At the same time, just as the dichotomy between the 90s and 70s has been exaggerated, *The Courage to Heal* was an influence on Piepzna-Samarasinha. She describes it as part of the New York she desperately needed to leave, recalling the way she read it standing-up in the aisle at Shakespeare & Co so she wouldn't publically associate the text with herself even as she internalized the message that "[y]ou may have repressed vast chunks of your childhood" (qtd. in 50). For Piepzna-Samarasinha, identifying her mother as a sexual abuser during her childhood is a long process that necessitates moving out of the country, identifying as a person of color despite her white mother's wishes, and imagining alternatives to traditional family structure.

As Ann Cvetkovich writes in *An Archive of Feelings*, her examination of the connections between lesbianism and trauma, there is a "relationship between coming out as a 'lesbian' and coming out as an 'incest survivor,' especially since the latter is formulated as a category of (sexual) identity, and since both kinds of coming out can be

so devastating to families (both in theory and practice)” (89). Piepzna-Samarasinha, who presents her queerness as bedrock as opposed to an area of inquiry in this memoir, thus mirrors an aspect of the self-help books on trauma that Cvetkovich unpacks: lesbianism / female queerness is an unremarkable backdrop, less obscured than it is a non-pressing issue, in many of the texts in this genre. Instead, the pressure of coming out is displaced onto public identification as an incest survivor, even as that very structure is influenced by a queer formulation of the closet. Piepzna-Samarasinha goes so far as to physically recreate a closet-like space in which she can recover memories and work on recovery. Inside her falling-down, cheaply rented house in Toronto, she keeps what she describes as “a room like an altar [...]. Amethyst, like the color of the womb I would've grown inside if I had a colored mother (117). Inside this room, she nurtures herself as if she were her own child and she the caring mother she finally had gained. It is a place where she “can dream for hours” (117); ultimately, its safety and its non-whiteness are her dream, non-affordable in New York but barely possible now that she has left her country and mother behind. Part of its dreaminess is its ability to confirm her biggest nightmare:

The night before I put the twenty-two-page [accusation of abuse] manila envelope in the mail to my mother I had this dream:

I was floating in the sky. Way up in the inky black. I could feel all the ancestors around me, hovering.

I asked them, 'Is what I think about my parents, about everything, true?' I didn't hear, but felt, the word YES slamming into my body.

Echoing from everywhere around me. (118)

The first reference Piepzna-Samarasinha makes upon waking is to the stabbing vaginal pains she has felt from childhood and the disassociated eyes she attributes to her three year old self. The “YES” she hears should be exuberant, judging by the capital letters employed and our usual expectations of scenes in which wisdom passes from the ancestors to the questioner, but if it is, its exuberance slams into her body like a second violation. Caught between the yearning for family and her fears that her mother molested her, her ancestors’ confirmation that she was right is painful even as it highlights a familial fantasy that gives her strength: the image of the Sri Lankan relatives who, unlike her father, she can know as something other than gone. Meanwhile, the whiteness of her mother compounds the violence in her touch.

The trend in public and professional reactions is now hesitant about accepting all recovered memories of childhood sexual abuse as unqualifiedly factual. Undoubtedly some of this reluctance is due to the historical and current tendency for psychological theorizing to discount what women, children, and LGBTQ people affirm as true. Janice Haaken, writing about the difficulty of balancing a feminist mandate to believe survivors with acknowledgment of instances of undue therapeutic pressure to recover memories of abuse, commented in 1996 that

[g]iven [a] context of historical constraints and emerging feminine resistances, incest allegations may metaphorically express other female boundary violations within the family, including but not limited to sexual abuse, and provide a socially sanctioned means of breaking free from familial entrapments. Because child sexual abuse mobilizes public horror

and outrage, as well as denial, incest allegations may provide a morally decisive bridge out of the world of the father.

The project of emancipation from familial constraints is even more ambivalent for many women of color who experience in daily life the illusory aspects of female ‘autonomy.’ So too, confronting the powerful fathers may be more problematic when father and daughter share a common history of oppression, including racist stereotypes of "oversexed" dark-skinned people. Sexual violations may be difficult to disentangle from the larger web of social forces that crush the spirits of parents and children. (1072)

Haaken’s reference points here paint the perpetrator of incestuous abuse as male and the parents to women of color as non-white, which sheds some light on the difficulty Piepzna-Samarasinha faced in accusing her white mother, who has the benefit of every historical and literary trope that insists on her purity. However, Haaken’s point about the exorcism of other, unnamed hurts that accompany a familial breakup in the wake of incest accusations seems particularly useful when contemplating the kind of unexpressed damage that accompanies the upbringing of queer children in homophobic or “simply” heterosexist families. Sarah Schulman observes in *Ties That Bind: Familial Homophobia and Its Consequences* that when gay people are scapegoated by their families, “[n]o one from the outside will intervene because of the perception that family matters are private and untouchable” (12). Incestuous abusers of children likewise profit from a cultural reluctance to interfere in family circles, but once the veil of secrecy is rent, the American legal system theoretically, if not always in practice, insists on intervention in ways it does

not in most states when parents inflict anti-gay “therapies” on underaged children. This can make the moral clarity of an accusation of incest and its presumed but often withheld aftermath, in which truth is spoken and an abuser is punished, seem very appealing to readers still subconsciously disturbed by their treatment when younger. One of the reasons Piepzna-Samarasinha and Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore could expect that their memoirs’ accounts of childhood incest would be better received by their supposed queer readers, despite mainstream devaluation of recovered memories, is that a shameful, hurtful relationship masquerading as “love” between parent and child is so recognizable to so many queer children of heterosexual parents. For those in Piepzna-Samarasinha’s position, the unspeakability of the racism and eurocentrism that can prevent white parents from effectively nurturing their children of color makes this narrative similarly recognizable.

I am uninterested in questioning the validity of Piepzna-Samarasinha’s or Sycamore’s allegations of abuse, and attempts to do so miss the point of survivor-first community politics, which of course are not always perfectly practiced but remain an important tool in the absence of a less abusive world order. It also misses the point of memoirs, where “truth” usually is not parsed with exactness. The incest in these texts is not presented as metaphorical, and it would be a disservice to frame it that way. My interest is in the deep plausibility of incest to queer readers of these memoirs. Parent/child incest is the exercise of parental power over a child’s sexuality, the horrific shadow of the often comedically celebrated convention of parents’ supposed right to approve, disapprove, or otherwise have opinions on their children’s’ partners and/or sexual orientation. For queer people who are treated like a family’s dirty secret, who are



told they are loved by their family even as they are silenced for “their own good,” what Maureen Quilligan calls “the language of incest” is the language that also describes their childhood (224).

When considering the possibility that she is wrong in concluding that her mother sexually assaulted her as a very young child, Piepzna-Samarasinha writes, “[w]hat if, as my mom had said, some kids are just born this way, born oversensitive, crazy, full of storm-cloud child rages and open treetop, head-ripped lightning? Just born this way, and I was making this up as a convenient excuse for all my weaknesses” (51). This is the sad-trombone echo of one of the most enduring pleas for gay acceptance; please stop hating me, I was just born this way. However, this plea does not give any illumination to parent or child as to why, or make that child’s difference any easier for the parent to love even if it stops active attempts to change them. Storm clouds are “natural” but also naturally disliked. In the absence of a worldwide recognition that heterosexist parenting is damaging instead of expected behavior, reading Piepzna-Samarasinha’s struggle to understand why she felt angry and alone and betrayed can serve as a way to work out similar feelings of despair and anger at the demands of family about love and sex upon children who are ill-equipped to defend themselves, even while acknowledging the greater horror that is sexual abuse. As Piepzna-Samarasinha concludes her description of her longing for certainty coupled with her recognition that abuse depends on burning out the victim’s recognition that she is suffering, she asserts a sense of being haunted that will also affect her later “queer family”: “But even if you were crazy little when whatever went down did, it’s everywhere, in the breath of air behind the windows in your house that your mama won’t let you open” (51).

When writing *Dirty River*, Piepzna-Samarasinha was twenty years away from the girl who boarded a bus in the hopes that the boy she loved and the queerer, browner scene in multicultural Toronto would heal her from years of hurt. She was motivated by the desire that has haunted queer bildungsromans since queens were proclaiming “*she’s family!*” in obscured mafia-owned bars. Piepzna-Samarasinha claimed to move to Canada because in the pages of a Toronto-published book, *Miscegenation Blues: Voices of Mixed Race Women*, she had found evidence that a tightknit community of queer women of colo(u)r existed. Chapter 6 is her love letter to that community, an assertion that it had the power to wipe out her damaging upbringing and instead substitute “this Black, Indigenous, and women-of-color solidarity, that said we were on stolen, unceded land lifted up by Black and immigrant women’s un- and under-paid and deported labor, that our work was about all the ways we could decolonize our minds, our hair, our hearts, together [...] My mama didn’t raise me right, but I tried to raise myself that way. And I didn’t raise myself alone. You raised me” (57). It is a statement that promises that book-inspired dreams can materialize in reality to transform a life and sometimes a community, a longing that haunts both of these texts.

*Dirty River* and *The End of San Francisco* both see-saw through extremes of excoriating the damaging family of origin and lauding the family of choice. The latter sometimes seems like the just reward of the former, and the narratives often seem tempted to end triumphantly when their narrator reaches their home at the end of the world, to reference the title of a novel by Michael Cunningham about this phenomenon that was popular as Piepzna-Samarasinha and Sycamore came of age. However, even when described by people who badly want it to exist, the queer family refuses to remain

in an affirming stasis. Piepzna-Samarasinha finds some of what she needs to survive in Toronto, but she also loses Rafael, her boyfriend and initial anchor in a new city. Their relationship, initially described as a punk rock incendiary idyll with enough public sex to make Samuel Delany seem unambitious, ends when Rafael abuses Piepzna-Samarasinha and leaves her dealing with the unstoppable intrusion of misogynist violence into their seemingly safe haven.

Recognizing that Rafael was both a psych survivor and a man of color, Piepzna-Samarasinha depended on the tactics of decolonization and restorative justice to keep her safe from his rages instead of turning him over to a racist, sexist police force likely to re-victimize her and practice violence on him. As she writes in *The Revolution Starts at Home: Confronting Intimate Violence within Activist Communities*, an anthology she co-edited, they were aware of how the state perpetuates cycles of violence, but figuring out what to do outside of that system was harder. After Piepzna-Samarasinha tries to leave and Rafael prevents her, she runs through the ritual of what she was “supposed to do,” the decolonizing tactics that she’d learned from her new family and the radical literature that sustained it. Recognizing that her liberated knowledge that she had expected to heal the abuses of childhood did not work to keep her safe in her adulthood, she felt “this little heart-break silent squash every time [...] I’d think, *Remember, remember the safety plan we made? From the Men Who Hurt The Women Who Love Them*<sup>2</sup> *workbook we special-ordered from the Women’s Bookstore?*”(103).

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<sup>2</sup> This book is either a zine so obscure that it is mentioned nowhere on the internet, which seems unlikely considering the activist mania for self-archiving, or actually Susan Forward’s *Men Who Hate Women and The Women Who Love Them*, a title whose invitation to identify with it seems so unpleasant that Piepzna-Samarasinha’s re-rendering

Exacerbating the heartbreak Piepzna-Samarasinha feels is her sense of betrayal because this violence was practiced by someone who chose to be part of her community, who acknowledged his queerness and his marginalized ethnicity and his commitment to revolutionary politics as integral to the person he meant to be. The arrival of his mother Paula to check on the situation underscores the loss Piepzna-Samarasinha experienced; Paula is the mother of color whom Piepzna-Samarasinha always longed for and had believed would transform a life of hurt and confusion into something beautifully nourishing. Instead Paula, a woman who at eighteen had “already known how to field strip an M16, back when she was pregnant with Rafael in the first year of the revolution in Chile” (119), confounds Piepzna-Samarasinha’s expectations of a woman who seemed to be everything she wanted in a role model. While the two women stand in a kiddie wading pool in the park, Paula’s arm through Piepzna-Samarasinha’s in a miserable parody of mother-and-child, Paula tells Piepzna-Samarasinha that three months of physical abuse is nothing because Rafael’s father had been hitting her for twenty years. It is disillusioning information on multiple levels: Paula’s rebelliousness and paramilitary training cannot protect her from abuse, Paula brushes off her son’s abusive behavior, and they are ultimately unable to be a pair of women survivors united against misogynist violence who understand each other through shared experiences. Paula then compounds Piepzna-Samarasinha’s feelings of disillusionment by telling her that mother-daughter sexual abuse is “unheard of” (121). She leaves Piepzna-Samarasinha feeling as though “[s]he just looked at me like I was crazy and like that explained everything even more.

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of it is understandable, indicating her ongoing disidentification with narratives of abuse that she nonetheless searches for answers.

Her son had chosen a really confused, fucked-up girl who already had violence smeared on her body like shit. Like shit you saw on Oprah” (121).

Women like Paula were supposed to heal Piepzna-Samarasinha of those feelings - - hadn't she moved to Toronto to escape this understanding of herself in the company of other women of color? -- but instead she experiences depression and chronic fatigue after this confrontation with Paula and the end of her relationship with Rafael. Piepzna-Samarasinha describes the following months as ones of disjunction between her dreams and hope and the reality of the body and space where she lived. As she described it, “I was supposed to be famous at twenty-three and fucking and fixed, but I wasn't. I was doing this instead. Lying down. Being sick. Remembering. Being crazy” (146). It takes her a painful amount of time to awake to the potential of what she does have and understand it as part of her most utopian desires:

a shitty, perfect apartment all my own. Dandelions turning into medicine in a jar. One pair of pants. Unanswered letters in a box. An old computer with some poems on it. A plum-colored futon that I slept on for seventeen hours a day. Some solo, silent hoodie walks when I could get off it.

When I was a kid, I remember thinking: If you're this fucked up, either you fix it early, or it just gets papered over. (146)

In defiance of the timeline she set as a child, Piepzna-Samarasinha asserts finally that she “healed true” (146), attributing it to the power of Toronto's psychiatric survivor movement. Her description of its promise was distilled from the books and zines she carefully accumulated before moving to Toronto, and that meant that her city was simultaneously paper and increasingly real when she arrived. The activists were there, but

the close network she imagined between them when their essays sat side by side in an anthology is less cohesive than expected. Piepzna-Samarasinha acknowledges the difficulty of maintaining that family feeling in her description of a time she and her friends deliberately excluded “the most fucking annoying white girl in the scene” from their *Prison News Service* collective on the grounds that membership should belong to people who were of color, poor, psych survivors, and/or Native (60). Years later, Piepzna-Samarasinha discovers that annoying Jordan had “grown up poor and been institutionalized as a kid, and she was really motherfucking pissed off at the fact that we stopped calling her for the meetings. We just didn’t know” (61). This is of course the obvious downside of depending on a family of choice; sometimes, as Paula did to Piepzna-Samarasinha, the family you choose will not choose you back. This phenomenon is a little examined footnote to the much-vaunted ways in which “the scene” offers a sustaining generosity and support to the people it selects as belonging. As Piepzna-Samarasinha admitted and experienced herself, sometimes traumatic secrets cannot be told until a person learns from others how to tell them, and they cut Jordan off from one source of learning.

The difference between book-nourished fantasy and reality is likely what gives *Dirty River* its see-saw atmosphere, as Piepzna-Samarasinha alternately describes her hopes and then what happened to them. This is not a linear story of disillusionment, since Piepzna-Samarasinha never, in the manner of many a former Red in a McCarthyite world, renounces radical politics. Instead, she continues to feel sustained by a utopian vision of a decolonized, non-abusive world even as the people she wishes to build it with sometimes disappoint her or fall prey to the mainstream currents they were meant to

organize against. Through the deliberately disorganized telling, Piepzna-Samarasinha can both have her epiphany, as when roughly a third into the book she announces that her mother “is not a monster. She is your mother. The mother who abused you. The mother who loved you,” and then spends a few more chapters in rage at what had happened to her. In a chapter called “Mama, Three Ways,” Piepzna-Samarasinha acknowledges her mother as multifaceted but, as she continues to stress, her feelings about her mother as also complex. Her mother was alternately the woman who scrounged to send her to poetry camp and told her she was beautiful; the person Piepzna-Samarasinha escaped from; and a histrionic woman who clings inappropriately close and deliberately isolates herself and her daughter from anyone who might consider their relationship unhealthy. Instead of reconciling any of these views, she rejects the idea that her mother is a monster she must fight and says, “I changed this, for us, Mama. / Rest” (220). It is a touching, hopeful conclusion to a problem that seems unsolvable: how can you feel love and hate and fear of the same person and make that a coherent part of your story of yourself? Piepzna-Samarasinha’s solution is a dream one: to reach back through writing, as magical as a time machine that kills Hitler without the world ending, and gently lay the old horrors to sleep. It should feel impossible -- how can anyone fix what is past? -- and yet Piepzna-Samarasinha, with her workbooks and her protest marches and her radical committees, has worked so hard for change that it feels believable that she could nudge her mother towards goodness.

In their 2008 study of grounded utopian movements, defined as empowered by “visions of alternative ‘ideal places’” that cause their members to attempt living in more just ways (127), Charles Price, Donald Nonini and Erich Fox Tree describe the global

social justice movement as a collection of these always mutating, sometimes dormant but always re-emerging visions and suggest recognizing its significance to twenty-first century modes of activist organizing. Piepzna-Samarasinha's involvement in local Toronto groups focused on anti-colonial and queer activism is part of this model. Its utopian aspect follows the popular street protest chant "we are unstoppable! Another world is possible." The very action of chanting in unison with likeminded people, gathered together because of their hope that this demonstration will be meaningful, creates a fragment of an "another world" that could someday expand into significance. As Fredric Jameson recognizes in *Valences of the Dialectic*, Utopia has become the political slogan of anti-capitalist organizers such as Piepzna-Samarasinha for whom it is "the unifying rallying cry or 'empty signifier' of all those varied new political forces which are trying to imagine how another world might be possible" (412). The emptiness of the signifier, which Jameson argues is significant to the operation of Utopia through its very failure to conceive a plan for it, demonstrates how Piepzna-Samarasinha's moments of despair throughout *Dirty River* -- an "impotent lucidity" in Jameson's words (413) -- remain a vital part of her utopian project.

Jill Dolan, in her influential look at performance and utopia, argues for the significance of spontaneous *communitas* in developing utopian moments, and the *communitas* of activism, where everyone is an "actor" who works in expectation of change, seems to have a strong claim to the liminality experienced together by equals that defines the concept. Piepzna-Samarasinha acknowledges that in-between stage as a key part of her personal transformation when she writes "I tell [my younger self]: this is waiting, waiting. It doesn't get better (but it did), it just changes. I pray to her, promise



her, say, ‘Stay alive. This is what’s waiting for you. You will make it come to be’” (228). Her promise to herself as a young activist functions similarly to the claim she makes to her mother, a reaching back in time to soothe the hurts that she had grown enough to fix. It is simultaneously fantastical and possible; after all, the forces of time, denial, and healing can massage our memories -- our pasts -- into something better than they were.

Piepzna-Samarasinha concludes her story with a chapter called “Redemption Song” in which she acknowledges that her book may well function as the same kind of survival guide that she found in others’ writing. She deliberately refuses to chaperone those readers to a predetermined ending even though the books she read often did:

So, if this isn’t a typical abuse story, can we not have a typical abuse story ending?

You will study this for clues and use it as a roadmap, an atlas, a Googlemap with the “Avoid highways” option clicked. Know that there are so many worthy stories, so many tiny points on my life, that did not get translated into words. At the age of thirty-seven, I have stable housing, paychecks, money in the bank, renters’ insurance, a lover, friends, acclaim, a cool twenty-two year old, hundred dollar car, brown skin, and an amazing and mundane life. (229)

With some notable exceptions -- her mother cried the first time that Piepzna-Samarasinha referred to herself as a woman of color -- this list is more or less the middle class dream her mother wanted for Piepzna-Samarasinha. Its value comes from the years when she did not have any of this, when she felt as though she could not have what her mother wanted for her and also acknowledge the abuses of her childhood. We have seen Piepzna-

Samarasinha lose and regain many of these things, particularly friends and lovers, throughout the narrative and the sense of permanent happiness these words might imply is therefore less steady, but the possibility of having them at all is what matters instead of the permanent loss she felt earlier when it came to family. It is a happy ending, but if the utopian impulse is a collective one as Jameson claims, it is a surprisingly individualistic one for a writer so dedicated to revolution through community. While I certainly would not describe Piepzna-Samarasinha's journey as a radical queer "failure," the forces she battles are so overwhelming that her politics can only provide inadequate shelter even as they allow her to understand the power of racist patriarchal homophobic capitalism that devalues her life and that of her friends to the point where shelter and love are triumphs. Jameson might blame it on the "sheer power of excess money accumulated since the last great world war" even as he recognizes the utopian impulse in ending the narrative with a rooted place where friendships and love are possible (413).

More cynical about the ultimate worth of her commitment to radical queerness, Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore opens *The End of San Francisco* in the suburb where she lived as a child. Sycamore has come to her father's deathbed in hopes that he will acknowledge at last that he sexually abused her when she was younger. The rest of Sycamore's family, already gathered, do their best to prevent this moment from occurring. Unable to face her childhood bedroom, and prevented by her father's illness and silence from achieving any resolution, she leaves, but not before commenting on the number of dead deer littering the subdivision's roads. The similar violence caused by suburban aspirations to Sycamore goes unnoticed by her family, but her narrative parallels Piepzna-Samarasinha's in how her father's childhood incestuous abuse reads as

symptomatic of the less obviously shocking harm of familial homophobia. Instead of the racial separation between Piepzna-Samarasinha and her white mother, however, the Bernstein-Sycamore family is divided by their insistence on the existence of a should-be-content, Ivy League son despite the presence in their house of a genderqueer dropout activist. Sycamore's flight to San Francisco should mirror Piepzna-Samarasinha's running away to Toronto, but Piepzna-Samarasinha at least finds there the tools to create her desired browner and queerer life while Bernstein-Sycamore instead discovers rot in the heart of San Francisco, long a fabled haven for queer runaways and what Alyssa Cymene Howe calls a queer homeland and "a symbolic refuge for believers who make the pilgrimage" (36). The traditional San Francisco gay narrative is perhaps exemplified by Randy Shilts' mythologizing book *The Mayor of Castro Street* (1982), in which Harvey Milk leaves his conservative, closeted Wall Streeter past behind to come truly alive in San Francisco, where he can transform himself as he transforms the world. Similar journeys dot the writings of gay people -- mostly white men -- from Michel Foucault to Armistead Maupin (Halperin). It might then seem a potential home for Sycamore, except that the Castro is so far out of reach financially for newcomer young queers it seems ludicrous to even mention it. A significant amount of Sycamore's activism has centered around the exclusions of trans and genderqueer people, lesbians, people of color, and working class people from the mainstream gayness San Francisco now represents. Beyond her editorship of several key queer anthologies, she is perhaps best known for her role in founding Gay Shame, the scourge of the current corporate nature and the segregation of Gay Pride spectacles.

*The End of San Francisco* is nostalgic, both a story of Sycamore's life and of a city that once seemed to promise shelter for misfits and outcasts and is now the playground of technocrats. The yearning in this novel -- for a home, for a better world, for a loving community -- is shown to be almost foolish for wanting what never truly existed or was rare even its supposed glory days. As Sycamore notes, so much of contemporary "radical queer" culture is wistful for the 1970s, an era mythologized as one of a generous public sexuality unafraid of disease, death, and marital tedium (40). Alan Sears' writing on the importance of the gay/lesbian liberation era to contemporary queer anti-capitalist politics also recognizes this impulse, calling it "an intensely eroticized body politics" that appears to him more appealing and meaningful than a de-sexualized, assimilative focus (96). Sycamore, however, locates the era of her longing in the 1990s, when she was a young queer taking cues from her radical elders and direct action was a queer imperative in the face of HIV/AIDS. This is an era where she "did experience the hope of transcendence through an engagement with gestures of public desire" despite the current tendency to accord that feeling to a mythologized post-Stonewall but pre-AIDS decade (40).

Sycamore locates some of this fleeting utopia in clubs, recognizing that "you can take any horrible place and suddenly it was the place where everyone got along where the drugs were great when there were no drugs when the drugs were actually fun when everyone was different when everyone was the same" (31). The hope and wry wonder beneath the cynicism of this description, where anywhere can be a place of transformation, echoes the realization of one character in James Robert Baker's "AIDS novel" *Tim and Pete* who explains to another character closer to Sycamore's age that the

1970s were an era where “a lot of [gay] people were feeling good about themselves for the first time in their lives” (142). Judging by Sycamore’s description of her childhood, she and her peers had the same desire to experience this kind of communal rapture at overcoming internalized homophobia despite the expectation that it was a less pressing -- and therefore less transformative -- need for queer people her age due to vaguely defined progress. The endurance of these multi-generational longings becomes clear in her experience of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) meetings which “meant politicizing everything and that’s what queer meant to me. You learned by observing the room -- generations of activism and relationships and contrasting ways of communicating, the laughter between tense moments, the process” (49).

This is significant on a few levels -- the naming of queerness as a specifically activist identity, one commensurate with “faggot” or “dyke” as Sycamore uses them elsewhere in the text, and one explicitly opposed to the normality of gayness. In 2017, when “queer” is often used as an umbrella term or tacked nostalgically for the 90s onto the end of LGBTQ, a reminder of its specifically activist recuperation works as a metaphor for Sycamore’s entire argument about how gentrification has evacuated San Francisco of its queer progress, or at least its queer progressives. In other words, San Francisco is a wasteland past redemption, but her description of the past implies that the city never was any better: ACT UP may picture utopian possibilities, and working among people who share this vision may even feel as if a small bit of utopia has been actualized, but it is explicitly founded on the recognition that the world is a hellhole for anyone without money, insurance, and good health. When the best of queerness is dependant on recognizing that being queer is apparently the worst, it seems unsurprising that the rush

of enthusiasm in finding likeminded people, something often denied to young queer people until they leave home, fades to the eventual belief that the mission (and The Mission, in Sycamore's case) is dead.

Sycamore's statement that ACT UP was the very definition of queerness to her is also troubling because she expected fellow members to "tear you to shreds any time you said something [...] definitely if you said something kind of wishy-washy and unprocessed then several people would jump on you at once" (54-55). She later describes her experience with a different activist group, filled with people who screamed in disagreement in the name of political justice, as tremendously difficult because it reminded her of when her father yelled and assaulted during her childhood. This mix of elevation and emotional abuse is at the heart of Sycamore's vision of queerness, and her discontent and hope eventually localizes itself in San Francisco. Sycamore, a member of Generation X, nearly defines her epoch as a suffering one,

a whole generation of queers who came to San Francisco to try and cope. We were scarred and broken and brutalized but determined to create something else, something we could live with, something we could call home or healing or even just help, I need help here, can you help? We were incest survivors, dropouts, whores, runaways, vegans, anarchists, drug addicts, sluts, activists, and freaks trying not to disappear [...] We were the first generation of queers to grow up knowing that desire meant AIDS meant death, and so it made sense that when we got away from the other death, the one that meant marriage and a house in the suburbs, a lifetime of brutality both interior and exterior and call this success or keep

trying, keep trying for more brutality, but when we got away it made sense that everywhere people were dying of AIDS and drug addiction and suicide because we had always imagined death. Some of the dead were among us, just like us, just trying to survive. Others were more in the distance, the elders we barely got to know except as we lost them. We went crazy and cried a lot, or went crazy and stopped crying, or just went crazy. (82-83)

A screech of pain this loud and recognizable beggars analysis, but it makes it clear that a large group of queer people, all huddled somewhere near the Mission, outside the Castro, wanted to feel safe and didn't know how. These two threads -- a childhood-influenced disposition to despair and the resulting desire for shelter, and feeling emotionally abused by peers' radical politics -- are intertwined in popular discourse about safe spaces, a concept for queer people that is entwined with queer space, the place where you are supposedly free from people who hate you, or at least will be supported in denouncing them.

The LGBTQ relationship to safe space is fraught, judging by conflicting discourses that read queerness as having a "position" on safety, a conflict mirrored by Sycamore's difficulties in navigating queer space. The current debate about safe spaces on campuses seems to particularly implicate queer people due to its roots in the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN)'s Safe Space program, which in addition to other initiatives, began in the early 1990s to distribute the ubiquitous rainbow stickers that marked locations ranging from RAs' rooms to professors' offices as safe spaces for LGBTQ students (Fox 497). As Catherine Fox notes, the promise was often

hollow and often simply affirmed heterosexual ideas of tolerance, but the underlying recognition from GLSEN was that queer students carried a history into college that prevented them from automatically seeing counselors, authority figures, and their fellow students as trustworthy. Sycamore, who dropped out of Brown because of her sense that it could never nurture her or anyone like her, struggles with the desire for “home or healing” -- safety -- in the face of her recognition that the spaces she and other queers have carved out sometimes fail to do neither specifically because they try to offer safety to victims who can only be identified and protected en masse.

In considering the demands that safe space rhetoric makes of others, Sarah Schulman’s 2016 *Conflict is Not Abuse*, deliberately grounded in her experiences as a lesbian and AIDS activist, writes that the “control elements of Male Supremacy, White Supremacy, and governmental apparatus also can describe the behavior of women and others who were violated in their youth by fathers or others” (116). The “control elements” that Schulman senses seem rooted in the concept’s psychiatric history. As Leyla Welkin writes in describing her work with a Turkish trauma therapy group, “trauma treatment connects the physical, interpersonal, and psychological parts of the process in helping survivors to develop a psychological capacity to feel personally in charge of their own safe space” (156). Schulman’s assessment of the demand for safety -- that it traps people in a framework where their feelings about past trauma dictate their responses to present conflicts in a way that is fundamentally unfair to the person asked to provide safety in the present day -- reads menace in its extension of the desire to feel control in everyday life, not just therapy.



For Sycamore queer/ “safe” spaces are some of the most challenging places she inhabits in her life. Often hurt by their harshness, she still constantly recalls herself to their possibilities indicating that they are as motivating as they can be controlling. While most participants in various safe spaces, be it a messageboard or an activist group, eventually come to some kind of agreement as to what is counterrevolutionary nonsense that hinders discussion and what is a scintillating new view working to destroy the barriers of identity politics, some of the “shredding” Sycamore experienced in ACT UP seems, frankly, terrible and destructive even if it is a likely byproduct when passionate and traumatized people band together under the threat of death. Some of this shredding might have been necessary; most people have internalized assumptions and bigotries that are at odds with their professed beliefs, and removing these layers is rarely painless regardless of methods employed. Still, Sycamore’s experience of queer space, nominally safe space, ultimately is not safe for her. She recounts being described as a rapist and essentially driven from her home and the city.

Such an attack is so effective that even as I type this I imagine being shunned for “siding with a rapist” for theoretically entertaining the possibility that Sycamore is not one. People who name their rapists are often not believed, and it is another tenet of the safe space that, since nowhere else is free of painful distrust and attacks intended to silence survivors, it must be a place where people who say they have been raped must be believed. Statistically, it is very unlikely that they are lying (Lisiak). What, then, of Sycamore, who found spraypainted letters outside her home proclaiming that she is the ultimate violator of a safe space? *The End of San Francisco* does not or cannot have an

answer to that; it simply has an account of the shame and distress she felt, and of how she left. As she describes it,

At the time I still wanted to be invulnerable, or at least to seem invulnerable, and so I channeled all my emotions into a politicized rage, rage at this culture that had made and betrayed me -- what do you mean community? I dissected the betrayal, step by step. I went off on scenerism, on followers, on the emptiness of Mission dyke posturing.

But I didn't talk about how I believed. (105)

Sycamore's recognition of the Mission's dyke milieu as the place where she was made and betrayed is crucial to understanding how sickening it was to lose belief in the essential goodness of her community. Without parents she could trust, and therefore lacking a model of benevolent adulthood, the scene had provided a pattern to which she had eagerly adhered, only to discover that it could feel as destructive as the one her family provided. The politics she had cherished and the better world she had visualized as possible because of her activism made her a person who could not be believed when she was accused without violating its foundational principles. Of course, this is the same situation in which the survivor of familial incest often finds herself and Sycamore in fact did; the family unit cannot retain its structure unless the accusing victim is disbelieved, something that is frequently more "possible" in family members' imaginations than remaking their family without the abuser, disproportionately a patriarch with control of the family finances. Likewise, what kind of dyke space could align itself with an alleged rapist without destroying itself? The utter inadequacy of any legal and/or community actions in addressing the real and present frequency with which cis and trans women in

particular are sexually assaulted in this country has made believing people who call out their rapists truly important. By painting “MATT IS A RAPIST” outside Sycamore’s home (104), her ex-friend not only made Sycamore unwelcome in spaces where she once found validation as a rape survivor whose relatives and rapist never acknowledged her abuse, but also dissolved any expectation that Sycamore may have held that her femmeness would be respected. Instead, the ex-friend’s words seem calculated to lift a veil: that Matt -- a rapist who is masculine just like the majority of rapists -- always lurked underneath the community’s apparent acceptance of Sycamore’s rejection of gender binaries. Instead, that acceptance is a utopian vision and not a reality, and she just lost all the allies she would have thought to be most likely to join her in the crusade for it.

There exists a push to rename safe spaces as “safer spaces” out of the same concern that would have us know that safe sex is an ideal, not a guarantee. Implicit within the renaming is the acknowledgment of failure to create what was promised and/or desired. Carrying on despite recognition that the project’s doom is within it seems a drive less explicable than humanity’s continuation of sexual contact, and yet *The End of San Francisco* is a text written in a spirit of persistence despite predestined failure.

Sycamore’s understanding of radical queerness is steeped in this fatalism. As Jack Halberstam notes in his book *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011) while detailing the economic and societal structures that invite radical utopians to flounder, “[f]ailing is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well; for queers failure can be a style, to cite Quentin Crisp, or a way of life, to cite Foucault, and it can stand in contrast to the grim scenarios of success that depend upon “trying and trying again” (3). While this is undoubtedly true, at points *The End of San Francisco* seems to detail grim

scenarios of failure that also depend on ‘trying and trying again’”(3). For Sycamore, it appears impossible to be a radical queer and “win,” but it is likewise impossible to be other than a radical queer without violently suppressing her perceptions of right, wrong, and her inner self.

Fittingly, considering how deeply AIDS activism has shaped radical queer thinking, Sycamore’s position appears similar to one remarked by Lee Edelman in his reading of Paul Monette’s poem “Manifesto” as part of a push to define the appropriately-acting gay subject during the early AIDS epidemic as someone who “by tossing bombs at FDA labs and limousines [...] displays his command of the aggression needed to elbow his way into the ‘political world’” (*Homographesis* 108). The bombs then as now are metaphorical, but the feeling of crisis that Edelman and Monette identified persists in the writing of Sycamore and radical queers in general. The larger battle that ACT UP fought in the 1980s and 1990s -- a battle to recognize and eliminate the societal injustices of which HIV/AIDS was a symptom -- was not resolved and instead inherited. In light of this inheritance, being other than a militant gay or his younger radical queer cousin feels impossible even if Sycamore joins Edelman in identifying some the losses -- of gentleness in all its seeming femmeness, in particular -- inherent to assuming this identity. Edelman concluded his critique with the acknowledgement that “we must recognize that ‘our’ ‘activist’ discourse is only a mutation of ‘their’ ‘master discourses’ and that its effect on them, though certain, is also always unpredictable” (*Homographesis* 111). In other words, the fight can be as destructive to “us” as to “them.”

Feelings of loss and disappointment, as well as the sense that they are intimately connected to a leftist queer identity, join more readily processed feelings of hope and defiant happiness as hallmarks of *Dirty River* and *The End of San Francisco*. It invites questions about the ultimate sustainability of radical queer feelings of community beyond the normal pendulum shifts caused by advancing time. For an identity predicated on the belief that “another world is possible,” a significant number of these memoirs demonstrate how difficult and corrosive it can be to attempt to achieve that other world. Yet neither Sycamore or Piepzna-Samarasinha reject the attempt or suggest alternate identifications; their depictions of their abusive families make it clear how desperately they need the promise of safety and love that queer space offers, even when it proves flawed or failed. It is striking that as much as these texts are nominally accounts that reject “mainstream gay life” for a more inclusive and cutting edge alternative, they wind up replicating well-known gay and lesbian narratives that have received much criticism for their hopelessness. Incestuous abuse does the narrative work of homophobic familial rejection, and the pain caused by other activists substitutes for the disgust evoked by “the twilight people” who make up the visible gay community in earlier texts ranging from *The Well of Loneliness* to *Giovanni’s Room*. This is remarkable persistence considering how much the queer landscape purports to have changed in the past fifty years.

*The End of San Francisco* and *Dirty River* are texts written in conflict with their inheritances, both from the authors’ families of origin and the radical and the queer past. Simply the fact of having a visible queer past to draw on theoretically should make a difference, but at points during both of these narratives it appears that the only change is that it provides more oppressive weight to reject. Their overall message may be that

nothing has changed spiritually in North America, despite a mainstream desire to construe marriage and increased visibility as progress, and that remains particularly true for gender nonconformists and women of color. Some of this feeling is no doubt reactionary, a desire to redirect attention from “how good you have it” to people who are still suffering. It is little comfort to the friends of murdered trans women that sodomy is now legal, even if that law might protect and comfort someone else.

It is probably hilarious that sexualities associated historically with the rejection of “breeders” are now witnessing a Bloomian anxiety of influence among their “children.” Ultimately, the queerness of the texts is inseparable from despair and depression even as the authors actively work, sometimes successfully, to alleviate these conditions in themselves and other queer people. That the alleviation is always temporary appears the answer to the question of what a current generation has learned from their queer history, and what defines Sycamore and Piepzna-Samarasinha’s queer generation. They want the lives that their activist elders mapped out as possible, and are disillusioned to discover this is not “real” even as their sadness becomes unspeakable because it is off-message during times of LGBTQ “progress.” However, they cannot hitch their wagons to a different star because that would involve a loss of their own identities as queer in the activist sense, their understanding of which depends on their understanding of the past. They have adopted this reading so deeply that it is themselves despite all projected failures among the victories they also record, and that is radically hopeful, even as it may seem a dead end.

### Chapter 3: Dreams in Theory

Five years after the publication of the anthology *After Sex: On Writing Since Queer Theory*, in which major queer theorists contemplated what it meant for a movement so linked to the cutting edge to now have a past, it seems appropriate to wonder about its legacy. Have enough years passed for us to see a second wave, or are we still picking at the bones of a movement dead enough to cannibalize? Since academic examination of LGBTQ lives and literature is demonstrably not at an end, perhaps it may make more sense to consider queer theory to consist of the texts of the 1990s and 2000s that prized anti-normativeness, while LGBTQ Studies is an ongoing discipline that is heavily influenced by such, but sometimes rejects some of queer theory's less pragmatic impulses in the name of material realism. For my purposes, I simply will declare queer theory a discrete enough period to be influential even though it may not be at an end. Both it and the more expansive materials of LGBTQ Studies are influential in the books under discussion in this chapter.

Using texts by Janet Mock and Maggie Nelson, this chapter traces the ways in which “academic” understandings of queerness and transness, particularly anti-normative readings, become part of individual conceptions of queer selves that are perpetuated in nominally non-academic memoirs, though in keeping with their influences, “non-academic” is a term that is troubled in a way that even Judith Butler might approve. This particular process of self-construction reminds me of the time I once heard the poet Sara Jane Stoner declare in a seminar that she considered queer theory texts to be self-help books; the authors I examine here often find theory and/or academic language similarly helpful in understanding themselves and expressing that understanding to readers, despite academia’s reputation for obfuscation of the supposedly simple or “natural.” Ultimately, one conventional understanding of academic work -- that it somehow explains what is happening out there “in the real world” -- collapses as it becomes clear that academic literature has helped the authors of these texts understand their dreams and desires as capable of “true” existence, even though few authors of queer theory are capable of using the words “real” or “true” without paragraph-long disclaimers. *Redefining Realness*, the memoir published by TV host and pop culture writer Janet Mock after she discussed being trans in the once-unlikely venue of *Marie Claire*, approaches academia from a different perspective and with a seemingly different purpose than Maggie Nelson, professor and critically esteemed poet, does in her genre-twisting autobiographical work *The Argonauts*, but both authors find common ground in the frequency with which they demonstrate that they are “insiders” to the texts that have now animated LGBTQ Studies for decades. In both of these writers’ memoirs, the self is a patchwork thing. While not immune to the anxiety of influence, these writers also find their best selves through their



influences, and ultimately their essence becomes indistinguishable from what they have read. Even the rejected inspirations, the texts that are not viable or even possible examples to the writers, demonstrate the painstaking work with which Nelson and Mock make themselves coherent through references and allusions their audiences must comprehend to comprehend them. Ultimately, theory mingles with pop culture and the art and communities of the queer/trans underground, as in a *papier mâché* of thoughts, to form the writer into the person she is today, the person whom memoir as a genre always promises to reveal. If we accept Louis Althusser's theory of interpellation, the power to call a queer person into being has always resided in the repressive non-queer. It makes a profound kind of sense to want that power back even when perfectly aware that the system that Althusser describes is not simple enough to reverse in that fashion. The intense engagement with reading that Nelson and Mock describe is tantalizingly close to interpellation itself, in which self-directed interaction with, for example, the writings of Audre Lorde makes something about their LGBTQ identity clear to the reader -- calls their "true" self into being. Significantly, if it is a kind of interpellation, it is an interpellation that at least pretends to be under the control and understanding of the reader, and unlike in Althusser's examples of the repressive state come knocking, it is a recognizably pleasurable experience. The pleasure of calling oneself into fuller being is traced in this chapter with an eye to how, even when well aware of the less optimistic impulses in queer theory that insist that possibility is deeply limited by the heterosexual matrix, immersion in it still becomes fodder for the dream of agency over one's own identity and the exploration of how that might be accomplished.

Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* is a short but dense text, one that begins with so many quotations from theorists with marginal attributions that it appears designed to scare off readers who may have hoped for a "mommy memoir" or a confession from the atypical to the voyeuristic typical. Nelson instead positions herself as a person, deeply rooted in the queer intelligentsia, who through the decision to give birth and the persistence of gender binaries in the imagination of onlookers suddenly reads as the troubling normal instead of someone who troubles the normal à la Michael Warner. The book maps the gaps and connections between the queer figure as idealized by theorists -- the queer dream -- and the dreams held by Nelson, the dreaming queer. At times these seem opposed, but Nelson, whose body of work demonstrates that she holds multitudes, makes a truce through exploration of her relationship, her reading habits, and her love of art.

*The Argonauts* is dedicated to Nelson's partner Harry Dodge, addressed throughout as "you," whom Nelson met as fellow faculty at CalArts. Harry, star and creator of the 2001 underground hit film *By Hook or By Crook* and all-round genderfluid icon, remains an elusive figure despite the book ostensibly being inspired by him; Nelson's recounting of the "quiet ire" he felt at being "unbeheld—unheld, even" after reading a first draft is the most poignant glimpse that we receive (46). This seems partially rooted in Nelson's sense that despite a career that includes a MacArthur Genius Grant and a wave of critical acclaim for her book *Bluets*, she remains the junior partner, particularly in belonging to a West Coast queer community where Harry, co-founder of the now-defunct but lavishly memorialized Bearded Lady space, is a guiding light. Nelson's inclusion of her furious reaction to an Amazon review that criticizes Mary

Oppen's autobiography for not containing more content about her poet husband George particularly points in this direction. She also recounts the story of a dinner party with colleagues where she is asked if she "had been with other women, before Harry?" before adding that "[s]traight ladies have always been hot for Harry" (8). This is dismaying, not least because Nelson might not have described herself as a straight lady or Harry as a woman, but it also places her in a vulnerable secondary role to Harry's centrality. *The Argonauts* may be a love note to Harry, but it also prioritizes Nelson and her perspective for anyone who may have doubted its significance and instead favored "the real story" of Harry's butchness. Through writing it, Nelson writes herself into centrality, even as she reveals the anxiety that she may not be there. The book raises two questions among many: what is a love letter, and who are we when others misunderstand us? Nelson's conception of herself and sexuality is focused outwards, alert to how it intermeshes with the phenomena of identity under her study in a career that includes the production of the book *Women, The New York School, and Other True Abstractions*. Thus, the feedback she receives about her relationship and "lifestyle" is particularly devastating. She is constantly interpellated as a wife and mother despite having no straightforward attachment to either of these identities. As Meredith Michaels, co-author of *The Mommy Myth*, commented while discussing the rise in usage of "Mama" instead of "Mom" among women socioeconomically similar to Nelson, there exists a desire "to escape the tyranny of being a mom with all that that entails. I wonder whether the embrace of the term is an attempt to see the relationship between mother and child as unencumbered by the weight of popular culture's constructions of motherhood" (qtd. in Strauss). Those popular constructions, despite their slow embrace of the most normative same-sex

couples with children, still jar with Nelson's life with a genderfluid partner, particularly considering that the memoir recalls a year in which California made it clear that even those normative same-sex couples were not accepted by a majority of the voting public. *The Argonauts* therefore is not a coming out story as the genre of queer memoir still expects, in which a person comes to an internal conclusion about oneself and braves the world's disapprobation to announce it. As Shane Phelan notes, even the most Foucauldian interpretations of the coming out narrative remain "partially a process of revealing something kept hidden" even as it is also "a fashioning of a self--a lesbian or gay self--that did not exist before coming out began" (774). Nelson instead frames her sexuality and her partner's gender as questions, not statements, as she writes these unstable identities into legibility, a necessity that remains despite how the traditional act of coming out is so irrelevant to Nelson's narrative that she never alludes to it. Her questions existed long before her memoir began and prevent *The Argonauts* from satisfying genre-specific expectation as delineated by Leigh Gilmore, who observes that "[f]or many readers, the bedrock of autobiographical narrative is confessional in the sense that the writer and reader can be taken to be in a particular relation to each other" ("American Neoconfessionals" 661). In this light, all memoir is a coming out story, but unlike with Phelan's example of a progression to an understood, acknowledged, and externally presented lesbian self, Nelson begins and ends with the image of a self under battery by the external. Meanwhile, her feelings of unease about how people understand her relationship with Harry multiply because of three events. Shaken by Proposition 8's success in California, they hastily marry before they lose the right; Nelson undergoes IVF and conceives; Harry begins to take testosterone and plans for top surgery. As discussed

in Chapter 2, marriage remains the *bête noire* of many radical queer communities, an apprehensiveness encapsulated by Lisa Duggan's 1994 commentary in "Holy Matrimony!" that marriage politics had too many gay groups sounding like the American Family Association. Nelson comments, "Poor marriage! Off we went to kill it (unforgivable). Or reinforce it (unforgivable)" (23). At the very least, this is an awkward binary in which to find oneself trapped after reading thirty years' worth of literature decrying oppressive binary thinking. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Nelson's mentor, once said: "categories presented in a culture as symmetrical binary oppositions—heterosexual/homosexual, in this case—actually subsist in a more unsettled and dynamic tacit relation" (*Epistemology* 10). However, academic resistance to binary thinking is a cliché because the binary remains so appealing, even to people who should "know better." Sedgwick herself came to decry in *Touching Feeling* the academic fascination with undoing binaries as just another kind of binary. While Nelson's description of her binary dilemma is compelling in its surface-level humorous accuracy, she allows her own life story to illustrate that she was never given -- and never could be -- the actual choice of killing or reinforcing marriage. Working through her feelings about being married, Nelson recounts how some reactions to her relationship sting. She describes cringing when Harry's ex calls the time Nelson spends with Harry and his child "playing house" (14), feelings explicitly tied to her apprehension that for cisgender women, the house is a sphere that never "really" feels transformative, radical, or any of the revolutionary things meant to be the essence of queerness once essentializing discourses about gender and sexuality were stripped away to free us all. As activists Liat Ben-Moshe and Che Gossett, et al., note, academics have been so successful in establishing the rebelliousness of

queerness that “the relationship between queerness and anti-normativity can become vaguely tautological—what is queer is antinormative; what is antinormative is queer” (266). For Nelson, a child, a home, marriage to the father of her son seem like they should be a normative “everywoman’s” dream. More specifically, they seem to be the dream of Nelson’s mother, who horrifies Nelson with her gift of a coffee mug emblazoned with a picture in which Nelson is “seven months pregnant with what will become Iggy, wearing a high ponytail and leopard print dress; Harry and his son are wearing matching dark suits, looking dashing. We’re standing in front of the mantel at my mother’s house, which has monogrammed stockings hanging from it. We look happy” (13). An astonished friend remarks that “*I’ve never seen anything so heteronormative in all my life*” (13), an obvious call to shared values that the apparent happiness of Nelson’s family in that moment seems to betray.

Judging by the persistence of the warring mother/daughter trope as seized upon by *Backlash* author Susan Faludi when she accused young feminists of ritual matricide, feminism can have the unintended result of separating mothers from daughters. Each generation’s dreams and aspirations can feel to an older generation as a rejection not just of the limits placed on their lives but of those lives themselves. This may be because rejection is an expansive action, ultimately including the supposedly neutral trappings of those limited lives until a coffee mug, participant in an aesthetics of normalized oppression, is a signifier casually treated as more loathsome than the baby boomer heterosexual marriage culture which, after all, gave birth to its most ardent critics. Nelson, aware of the illogical yet kneejerk satisfaction of assigning heteronormativity to pregnancy and a queer couple, interrogates her horror at the mug for several pages.

Ultimately, the image does not suit her ideas of how her life is or should be, and yet there she is, manipulated into flatness and mom-approved, a loathsome fate whose very loathsomeness signals how “mom” is the antithesis of the cutting edge and an apparently impossible identity for someone who is also, in the language of the MacArthur foundation, “broadening the scope of nonfiction writing while also offering compelling meditations on social and cultural questions” (MacArthur).

Compounding these feelings of displacement is the change in how the world is reacting to Harry. Nelson recounts scenarios in which Harry is read as a cisgender man and what she calls her selfish apprehension at Harry’s decision to take testosterone. Some of that anxiety seems rooted in how his identity affects hers; she recounts a miscommunication with Harry after he shows her an essay about butch/femme relationships. In Nelson’s view, she is not particularly “a femme” with the full import the term has in lesbian/queer/trans communities, but if Harry is a butch on T, does Nelson by default become the expected other half of the butch/femme equation? Butch/femme couplings have a long lesbian history, as Elizabeth Smith writes in her exploration of that history’s roots. Smith identifies resistance to such identities in the 1950s by the Daughters of Bilitis, the first known homophile organization for women, but unlike with later lesbian-feminists who considered it an aping of heterosexuality, the Daughters objected to its perceived anti-assimilationist quality (402). This tangled history, with its reversals and its yearnings for both acceptance and to be unacceptable, illuminates how *The Argonauts* processes a contradictory queer inheritance that feels the weight of historical precedent in ways the Daughters of Bilitis, aware they were writing the first accessible magazine for women-loving-women, did not. Nelson’s bewilderment at her

invocation as femme is the inevitable product of a hyperawareness of terminology and the past; someone less attuned to queer resonances might understand the term as simply a stand-in for woman and a “natural” counterpart to Harry’s butchness. It is particularly interesting that Nelson, who elsewhere searches for the anti-normative, has along with her generation lost the ability to see through the eyes of the Daughters of Bilitis to understand butch/femme coupledness as subversive. In fact, her discomfort also includes femme/femme relationships and possibly all forms of pairing off, as reflected in her description of Catherine Opie’s *Self-Portrait/Cutting* (1993).

Opie photographed her back with a drawing of a house and two stick-figure women holding hands (two triangle skirts!) carved into it, along with a sun, a cloud, and two birds. She took the photo when the drawing was still dripping with blood. ‘Opie, who had recently broken up with her partner, was longing at the time to start a family, and the image radiates all the painful contradictions inherent in that wish,’ *Art in America* explains.

I don’t get it, I said to Harry. Who wants a version of the Prop 8 poster<sup>3</sup>, but with two triangle skirts? (11)

Harry, who not incidentally appeared when younger in some of Opie’s more obviously radical work, is able to shrug off what bothers Nelson on the grounds that this may be what “Cathy” wants. The imperative he gives to desire cuts to the heart of Nelson’s anxiety about her changing understandings of who she is and how her peers as

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<sup>3</sup> The Yes on Proposition 8 (2008) campaign poster conveyed its desire to abolish a Californian court ruling in favor of same-sex marriage by depicting a heterosexual stick figure family.



well as homophobes will react to that person; however much Nelson may demonstrate that she is deeply and passionately aware of the normative connotations that attach to marriage and motherhood, she continues to want what she wants: to get married to Harry, who will be seen by many as unambiguously her husband, and to give birth to a child. To people who can or will not think outside the lines, she will be indistinguishable from the Prop 8 stick family, without even two triangle skirts setting the picture off kilter and inspiring talk about contradictions. This moment between Nelson and Harry, in which he advances a politics of queerness that centers the validity of desire and she expresses anxiety about the “meaning” of it all, encapsulates the tension between two different understandings of queerness: academic theorizing vs gut-level longing. While identifying these two approaches does not identify two singular and unconnected threads, introducing these as tendencies gives insight to Nelson’s anxiety. Even queer theorists such as Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, who particularly are interested in denouncing claims that queer theory is a rarified, fleshless pursuit, acknowledge the possibility that it is. Berlant and Warner teasingly conclude their editorial “What Does Queer Theory Teach Us about X?” with the point that “we have deferred asking the crucial question: what does queer theory teach us about sex?” (349). That the question is even comprehensible -- that queer theory is not tantamount to talking about sex -- itself indicates an academic separation of identity from desire. Considering that Nelson was “indoctrinated” in queer theory at the same institution I currently attend, it is a matter of true urgency for me to ask if anxiety-free desire is even possible after receiving a humanities Ph.D. It is, of course, deeply ironic that this is a question connected to a discipline that owes so much inspiration to a gay liberationist rejection of shame about one’s sexuality, but as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick

and Douglas Crimp would tell us, shame has been a fruitful area of inquiry for queer theorists.

In sections of *The Argonauts*, the acclaimed critics and academics that Nelson quotes seem used less to contextualize her life and her memoir project and more to show all the different ways she has been taught to believe that what she now wants is a dream incompatible with the dream of queerness. Lee Edelman comes under particular scrutiny as Nelson tries to reconcile his depiction of The Child as anti-queer -- as in “won’t someone think of the children?” -- with the child she thinks of each day and determinedly willed into her life. Despite her initial distaste for or perhaps incomprehension of *Self-Portrait/Cutting*, her knowledge of the still legible letters “PERVERT” over Opie’s chest -- the literal flipside to the stick family carved into her back -- provides a jumping off point for Nelson’s reconfiguration and then intellectualization of her longings into a dream image that incorporates her familial wants, her academic work, and the continuance of her belief in the power of the margins, a place where she still belongs. In comparison with a story she tells about being turned away from a trapeze-burlesque show because of Iggy, aged five months, in which the bouncer explained that it was not out of fear for the baby but rather because seeing the baby would ruin the mood, Nelson discusses Susan Fraiman’s ideas about how gay male sexuality remains the standard of queerness in opposition to a “procreative femininity” that might be lesbian or bisexual but not read as revolutionary (67). Nelson engages with Fraiman’s conception of “sodomitical maternity” (67), which jumps off from, Freud’s theorizing about the fear of castration theoretically inherent in a boy misunderstanding the sight of his parents have doggy-style sex and Edelman’s reconception of this “Wolf Man” case as a frightening yet

compelling fantasy of homosexual anal sex. Fraiman points out that the mother's pleasure, which the grown patient recalled vividly, has been neglected in interpretation. For Nelson, this image of the sodomitical mother, the mother who likes non-missionary sex that seems bestial in how pleasurable it is, is an image that works as a shield against those who would deny the legitimacy of her sexuality because of her motherhood.

The academia-wide impulse to reconcile Freud's ideas about sexuality with how we think about sexuality in the present day instead of simply thinking about it as a historically influential artifact is a particularly fruitful place to think about how we sometimes build jenga towers of philosophers' quotations to justify scholarly observations that elsewhere might be accepted as self-evident truths. *Of course* some moms like hot sex. The problem here is not a lack of evidence of these women's existence -- Nelson has internet access and friends -- but rather a lack of these women's existence in the *spiritus mundi*. The reasoned philosophizing that Fraiman presents, which somehow takes the carefully won knowledge academics often treat as a shibboleth and makes it work in service of the women Freud initially dismissed as irrelevant, is the fuel that can keep all of Nelson on the legible dreamscape: intellectual, mother, poet, and pervert. Fraiman -- whose 1993 work on British women writers begins with a chapter entitled "Is There a Female Bildungsroman?" -- models the disconnect between the common knowledge that women write coming of age stories and the academic knowledge that genres such as bildungsroman are carefully defined and structured to exclude the possibility of "knowing that." That Nelson's own work defies categorization seems ongoing proof that genre still cannot accommodate women.

Perhaps this lack present in the *spiritus mundi* -- and it would be disloyal to punny queer theorists everywhere to neglect to point out that this is a hole that needs filling -- explains Nelson's attraction to *Puppies and Babies*, A.L. Steiner's 2012 installation with an obvious topic. Nelson describes it as a "joy-swirl of sodomitical parenthood, caretaking of all kinds, and interspecies love" (71). Ultimately, she concludes that the installation, with its images of pregnant women bumping bellies, naked women cuddling dogs, and leather dom gear on pregnant bodies, "reminds us that any bodily experience can be made new and strange, that nothing we do in this life need have a lid crammed on it, that no one set of practices or relations has the monopoly on the so-called radical, or the so-called normative" (73). The significance of this reminder to Nelson cannot be overstated; this is knowledge she has lived and is more than capable of intellectualizing with properly sourced footnotes as well. However, she needs to see it imagined and made concrete, presented with images that show how the photographer and subjects' fantasies can repeatedly come together to make those most critically despised topics of art -- puppies and babies -- seem wildly adventurous and freeing instead of chillingly domestic and laborious, horrible pun intended. Her embrace of the term "many-gendered mothers of my heart" (57) to describe her role models also takes part in this gleeful spread of the sodomitical mother, generously enfolding people she has loved and admired to strengthen the totemic power of the image.

*The Argonauts* takes its title from Roland Barthes' description of how a person who says "I love you" is "like the Argonaut renewing his ship during its voyage without changing its name" (qtd. in 5). By the end of *Argo's* journey, the ship may not contain a fragment of its original material yet it demonstrably remains *Argo*; likewise "I love you"

is the same phrase that continues to cover the newness a lover continually must bring to saying it. Nelson reports that she and Harry disagreed on whether this was romantic or a retraction of romance before she concedes that it is both; likewise, I wonder if the significance of images such as sodomitical motherhood are necessary to Nelson because of their inherent destabilization -- already it has become something else now that I have explained here -- or because of their endurance. Women, after all, historically lost their very name; that kind of continuance was an impossibility for them. In Nelson's backwards reaching for the initially-denied sodomitical mother, does she affirm that this image was always there, always a possibility for women looking to locate themselves, or does she need to find these images again and again to affirm the possibility anew each time? The "joy-swirl" that she finds in *Puppies and Babies* is the joy of recognizing that knowledge -- that theory, more specifically -- is not some nagging parent constantly reminding its children that their lives and contributions fall short of the dream. It can also be the tools that make an art installation come alive with potential for new ways of living and being, exciting and inclusive. I imagine that the beginnings of queer theory felt the same, considering the rush of academics to join in the fun. Reaffirmation -- the constant repetition of "I love you" with newness -- appears necessary to keeping the dream alive. The joy-swirl is queerness at its most ecstatic, and its most utopian, if we understand utopianism as a moment in time. It is important that she finds this joy in the present, and not even at looking back to her multigendered mothers. For Nelson, as her last line asserts in a nod to Deleuze and Guattari's ideas in *Anti-Oedipus* about connectedness, ultimately there is "[n]o lack, only desiring machines [...] I know we're still here, who knows for how long, ablaze with our care, its ongoing song" (143).

Unlike Nelson, who insists in interviews on the difficulty of her text (Laity), in *Redefining Realness* Janet Mock renders the complex into the clearly understandable, although without sacrificing the integrity of her appraisal. Subtitled *My Path to Womanhood, Identity, Love & So Much More* and featuring a full body shot of Mock on the cover, the book eschews the abstraction that is *The Argonauts*' hallmark and instead commits to narration through centering of Mock's status as a black and native Hawai'ian trans woman from a working class family. The paperback edition comes with several pages' worth of blurbs attesting to its value. This is hardly an unusual publication decision, but the persistence with which they assure readers that *Redefining Realness* is relatable is instructive. Two of them call Mock's story truly American, a qualifier so obvious that it would not need saying if the book had not been published during the presidency of an American likewise black and from Hawai'i whose citizenship continues to appear dubious to some of the populace, including US President Donald Trump. Considering that context and that *Redefining Realness*'s appearance on the *New York Times Bestsellers' List* was overshadowed by better sellers such as Bill O'Reilly's *Killing Jesus*, the anxiety mixed with praise in the blurbs is more easily read. Mock's "grace" and decision to eschew the "polemical" merits praise from *The Rumpus*, while *Lambda Literary* assures that the book can "touch all of us" despite the apparent specificity of Mock's existence.

*The Feminist Wire*, however, frames their review from a different perspective and is also included among the blurbs. Instead of persuading readers that they might find Mock's writing palatable, it suggests that Mock has done the world of literature a generous favor:

Mock's compelling memoir entrancingly chronicles the story of a multiracial trans woman's becoming within a society that is widely antagonistic to the non-White, non-male, transgender and economically challenged among us [...] Mock has written herself into herstory. (Green)

"Herstory" has particular resonance in LGBTQ Studies as part of the Lesbian Herstory Archive, which helped popularize the term with its founding in 1973 by a group of women who "remembered a world of lesbian culture that had nourished us [...] [t]he strongest reason for creating the archives was to end the silence of patriarchal history about us" (Nestle 87). Ultimately, it is an understanding of history and literature that recognizes the impact of reading and writing on people and their sexual and gender identities. While politics focused on representation have been described as naive at best and reductive at worst, seemingly simple demands for inclusion -- which, of course, often are simple because the mechanism which excises women's history from "history" is not always complex -- can propel complex and thoughtful reactions from the people so invoked. As Shane Phelan notes in "Rethinking Identity Politics," "the truths of our lives are not to be found exclusively in our self-representations. By this I mean that only do we not understand the consequences of our generalized statements, but we do not, in fact, live the lives that our theoretic representations would suggest" (157). Recognition of these facts haunts *Redefining Realness*, particularly its introduction, where Mock attempts to justify the competing impulses of writing about oneself while a marginalized subject. As she states, her memoir "was not written with the intent of representation" because "[t]here is no universal women's experience" (xii), but at the same time, she acknowledges the absence of trans women from her cultural consciousness as a child and

how deeply she understands the significance of feedback from young trans girls who call her their heroine. Mock is known for her invention of the twitter hashtag #girlslikeus, which is a masterwork of expansive yet precise identification in how it invites fellow trans women to add their stories to a vast and differing collective even as it specifies a certain similarity and repels the contributions of (cisgender) women who will not recognize Mock as “like them.” The solidarity it offers, as well as what could be a cheering declarative statement, in the face of one of the internet’s many noxious troll hordes, Trans-Exclusive Radical Feminists (TERFs)<sup>4</sup>, is impressive and provides context to the significance of understanding Mock’s memoir as “herstory,” considering that much of TERFs’ own identities are derived from a conviction that they harbor the “real” spirit of 1970s feminism. With the publication of *Gender Hurts*, Sheila Jeffreys, best known previously for advocating political lesbianism in the late 1970s, built on her previous work to argue that “[t]ransgenderism hurts lesbian communities, which are fractured over the entryism of men who transgender [...] [t]he feminist movement, too, is harmed as transgender activists and theorists savagely criticise feminism and seek to destroy women-only spaces and services by their entryism” (3). Jeffreys’ persecution complex -- why is she so determined to understand femaleness solely in terms of oppression? -- aside, the bristling hostility with which she meets the very notion of understanding “woman” as an inclusive category rather than a show of purity that must be guarded through recourse to the worst traditions of protectionism is instructive about the forces shaping our historic imagination. With this background elucidated, writing herself into

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<sup>4</sup> Considering the comparatively small number of trans people who also use the internet, it is miserably impressive that TERFs are so omnipresent as to receive mention in Bailey Poland’s *Haters: Harassment, Abuse, and Violence Online*, where they are described as deploying similar tactics to fixedly anti-feminist men (117).



herstory is an act of optimistic imagination from Mock, who must ignore those who would insist she does not deserve inclusion, as if public consciousness were a wholly controllable phenomenon.

In *Redefining Realness*, Mock substitutes her own carefully collected history of trans femininity for the one promulgated by people like Jeffreys who only understand trans women in terms of a depressing monosexuality: either gay men so afraid of their homosexuality that they resort to feminine presentation or heterosexual men intent on invading previously sacrosanct lesbian rites. Part of the work *Redefining Realness* does is undoing these and similar readings, which are not just intellectual clashes or even emotionally hurtful interpretations of transness but the means by which physical violence against trans bodies is encouraged and justified.

For Mock, “the” narrative of trans womanhood provoked yearning in her as a child, not of aspiration but rather the yearning to negate comparisons between herself and the women under pop culture’s scrutiny. It is an understandable dream of un-identity considering that the depictions ranged

from Venus Xtravaganza’s unsolved and underexplored murder in *Paris is Burning*, to the characters of Lois Einhorn (played by Sean Young) in *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective*, and Dil (played by Jaye Davidson) in *The Crying Game*, to numerous women exploited as modern-day freak shows on *Jerry Springer* and *Maury*. Let’s not forget the “tranny hooker” credits seen everywhere from *Sex and the City* to every *Law & Order* and CSI franchise. According to the media, trans women were subject to pain and punchlines. (xv)

This is a dispiriting mirror to be offered, particularly considering that, in a warped and inhumane way, it reflects parts of Mock's life: she did sex work as a teen, she was sexually abused as a child, her parents were not always involved enough in her wellbeing, she was poor, she is multiracial, she experiences rejection and mockery. However, identifying with the pain she saw represented is and was crushing. According to the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs, which tracks violence against LGBTQ and HIV-affected people, 54% of the homicides they logged in 2015 were of trans women of color (9). Under these battleground circumstances, Mock needed to dream her own narrative to recognize her shared experiences with the trans women of color whose suffering became their only story while still insisting on her right to happiness and complexity, a narrative that could make her identity feel liveable. A significant part of this narrative depends on her active remixing of pop culture and literature into a source of strength.

In his analysis of queer performers, José Esteban Muñoz's model of disidentification considers the 'disidentificatory subject' who tactically works on, with, and against a cultural form" [...]. To disidentify is to read oneself and one's own life narrative in a moment, object, or subject that is not culturally coded to 'connect' with the disidentifying subject (12). His project in *Disidentifications* considers the multiple ways queer people of color perform politics through the disidentificatory process as the few dominant cultural forms expressing either queerness or non-whiteness make this a necessity of emotional survival. Disidentifying, then, seems a tempting way to account for Mock's use of inspirations ranging from Clair Huxtable to Michelle Obama. However, Mock's description of the process seems less disidentification and more

identification, though the emphasis on emotional survival remains. Firstly, despite the bagginess of “queer,” which has done service in describing both sexuality and gender and still often is used as an umbrella term for LGBT people, applying a critique most fixed on marginalized sexual orientations seems a blurry lens for seeing a heterosexual woman. Secondly, Muñoz’s work focused on performers such as Carmelita Tropicana and Vaginal Davis, and Janet Mock is rather a commentator on performers, a crucial distinction in motivations behind the consumption of culture. Thirdly, *Disidentifications* was published in 1994, meaning that while the cultural landscape Muñoz describes is still recognizable and would be part of Mock’s childhood, a seismic shift in how dominant cultures are maintained was underway even as he published, considering the rise of the 500-channel universe and the internet. The trans women Mock saw on TV or in movies were unidentifiable, not disidentifiable, lest Mock’s sense of survival, which hinged on recognition that she was a girl, would give way to an acknowledgment that this same recognizability made her vulnerable.

Many of the sources Mock cites seem more a process of learning how to recognize herself in spaces that should be hers than a disidentification. “[T]he vision of Michelle Obama’s fist bump” holds no poison akin to the examples Muñoz gives, such as the white militiaman that black drag queen Vaginal Davis sends up (249), but it is an association that transphobes would be eager to deny Mock. She also claims the fistbump as an empowering spectacle instead of an insidious cloaking of neoliberalism with a signifier of blackness, which is a critique I with terrifying promptness just now generated as an example of possible grounds for disidentification that Mock eschews.

The literature Mock reads and uses as a source for the quotations that introduce each new part of *Redefining Realness* was mostly written without much if any acknowledgment of transgender people. However, transness as an identity category per se is not what Mock yearns for, though she later decides that identifying this way is politically powerful; rather, she seeks recognition as a woman. For Mock, achieving the ability to stand “firmly at the intersection of blackness and womanhood,” is a crux approachable through “a collage of my lived experiences, media, pop culture, and art” (249). She draws on Beyoncé as a rare example during her teenage years of an honored and admired black woman and compares her to *Their Eyes Were Watching God*’s Janie Crawford, who finds real and sustaining love with a man. These icons of womanhood are the backdrop against which she understands her complex feelings about the women she meets on the stroll in downtown Honolulu. Beyoncé is uncomplicated in comparison, comforting, Mock’s “No. 1 friend-in-my-head” (“My Feminist Awakening”). Mock finds herself attempting to ignore any self-comparison with what she sees as the hopeless aspects of the lives of fellow sex workers even as she grows to recognize their resourcefulness and strength. Even this acknowledgment is a fraught one because it necessarily recognizes sadness and marginalization as “mainstream culture” for trans women, particularly trans women of color. It is only through Mock’s belief in what she quotes Zora Neale Hurston as writing that this becomes manageable in all its complexity: “[t]he dream is the truth [...] act and do things accordingly” (qtd. in 201). This belief in her own ability to imagine herself into a better situation is a survival skill and also, despite its seeming unreality, the very real building block she uses to transform her life so she travels from Hawai’i to attend NYU, like her girlish TV inspiration Felicity. It is

important to note, despite the usual associations attached to the story of a transgender sex worker who becomes a graduate student at an expensive university, that dreaming for Mock is not bootstrapping. It is instead the process that allows the sex worker and the student to be recognizable as one person at all times instead of forcing the narrative of a “spiritual journey” to a “new person.”

The writing of transgender lives has often depended on the trope of introduction to a new person created by a gender “change.” As Emily Skidmore notes in her analysis of how remarkably accepting the 1950s press seemed of Christine Jorgensen, one of the first women to publicly discuss her gender affirmation surgery, that acceptance was the product of their careful construction of a narrative of transformation: Jorgensen was no longer the World War II soldier she had been. Instead, she was blonde and beautiful, sickened by homosexuality and scornful of sex workers, and above all not a threat to her own idealized white family, represented by a father who called her brave and a mother who welcomed her into the kitchen. This is a process not dissimilar from the pressures of the modern memoir market, which often promises to present people healed of grief or drug use or fatness by recording the steps that transformed them and could transform readers too. Mock, for whom Jorgensen’s defenses of whiteness and “purity,” are not a possibility, resists this particular narrative. While she shares her deadname and stories of her childhood, she never presents a defined moment in which she “becomes Janet.” Instead, she tells the story of a girlhood that remains an integral part of who she grows to be. The transformative dreaming she does is a transformation of her circumstances, not her gender. As Mock describes it, her path was “an evolution from me to closer-to-menness” (227).

The writing of *Redefining Realness* is simultaneously an act of collaging and a gift to the next generation of girls like her, girls who will have a larger assortment of inspirations to piece into a vision of how their lives could be. The generosity of Mock's authorship to the next generation also illuminates the slow journey out of fear into identification with trans women her own age and older. Mock relates an incident in which she dropped behind a group of trans women while walking because of her awareness that when alone, her prettiness could protect her from the violence resulting from being visibly trans, both physical and being seen as somehow "unreal." Years later, publicly discussing her gender is the action that is both the dream and the truth: affirming her connection with the women she was once afraid to acknowledge and projecting the solidarity she did not always feel and was not always offered to her. Her writing and actions bring it into being, inspired by Audre Lorde who once famously said, "your silence will not protect you" (41).

Lorde is clearly an important figure to Mock, as she has been for many black and/or lesbian women attempting to make their way in hostile worlds that include the "public intellectual" role that Lorde and Mock both occupy by virtue of their memoirs and activism. As Lorde's biographer Alexis De Veaux contends by recounting an incident in which Lorde casually but affectionately applied sunblock lotion to her mastectomy scar, Lorde's work is part of "a history of 'texts' written on women's bodies" (65). Mock too presents her surgery as a text, one that she reads to theorize about the different ways women relate to their bodies and more generally to consider the sociological phenomenon of "passing" and how the concept "must be dismantled in our culture. [...] [C]is people are not more valuable or legitimate and trans people who blend

as cis are not more valuable or legitimate” (237). It is significant that Mock turns to Lorde as an example of the academic directness, rooted in female physicality, that can inspire this kind of political theorizing, and not to the gender theorists, with the exception of bell hooks, who followed Lorde in the academy. Unlike criticisms leveled at many contemporary gender and queer theorists, *Redefining Realness* is notable in its accessibility. The title gestures at its dual understandings of “realness” as a street term usually traced to Harlem’s Black and Latinx drag ball culture, but also as an area of philosophical inquiry usually though controversially traced to Judith Butler, who like Mock also drew a deep epistemology from a documentary of that same ball culture, *Paris is Burning*. Likewise, Butler’s self-defined project, recognition for people to live more “livable lives” is Mock’s project for herself (*Undoing Gender* 207). Mock’s offer to “redefine” realness is therefore an offer that recognizes through life experience the immediacy of what Viviane Namaste argues in “Undoing Theory”:

[t]he Transgender Question in Anglo-American feminist theory has spawned a plethora of reflection on the bodies, lives, and realities of transsexual women. For nearly twenty years now, Anglo-American feminist theory has relied on transsexual women to ask its own epistemological questions. Yet the consequences of this knowledge are troubling indeed. Anglo-American feminist theory has provided an intellectual framework in which the specificity of transsexual prostitutes’ lives is erased. Perhaps more disturbingly, such theory authorizes political actions that recuperate the violence against prostitutes into a generic violence against “trans people.” This evacuates the analytical category of

labor as central for feminist inquiry, and thus also manages to exclude the realities of most transgender women of color who are working as prostitutes. (27)

Namaste's recognition of the centrality of Butler in Anglophone academia, to the exclusion of the women whose lives provide her jumping-off place for theorizing, is important for recognizing the significance of Mock's decision to talk about Venus Xtravaganza in relationship to her own life without mentioning Butler who, likely without any personal desire to do so, has replaced Venus as the authority on being Venus. Mock's previously mentioned affection for bell hooks, who once encouraged Mock through a personal phone call to identify as a feminist ("My Feminist Awakening"), indicates that this omission is intentional, as hooks' oeuvre includes the essay "Is Paris Burning?" which has put her and Butler "on opposite sides" in the academic imagination for a long time now.

Mock very deliberately draws the distinctions that Butler deliberately leaves ambiguous. It is of immediate importance to Mock to distinguish between trans women and drag queens because she cannot wait until the next book to close up the misapprehension of gender as a removable outfit that readers continue to attribute to Butler. As Mock states, the spectre of a deceitful man in a dress that replaces the recognition of trans women as women continues to haunt the public imagination, encouraging hook up/domestic violence and transphobic grandstanding over "bathroom bills" alike. Mock's redefinition of realness forces categories such as "passing," "openly," and "coming out" into a new light, as she points out that understanding these concepts through lenses traditionally applied to race and sexuality obscures the reality of



transness. While she acknowledges a certain kind of safety that sometimes applies to “passing” as a cis woman, Mock also underscores how insistence on this mode of understanding forever asterisks her womanhood as something inherently “unreal.” Likewise, mapping the closet onto the transgender experience seems, at best, applied at the wrong juncture. A trans woman existing as a trans woman in the world is not closeted regardless of her silence about the sex she was assigned at birth; she is openly female. The simplicity with which Mock communicates this point belies how elusive it remains in academic literature that supposedly engages in transgender studies. While Butler was one of the few voices from academia in the early 90s to consider Venus Xtravaganza worthy of discussion, *Bodies That Matter* still dedicates most of the paragraphs about her to an evaluation of her “understanding” of femininity and diagnoses it as lacking. Referencing Venus’s fantasy of becoming a spoiled, rich white girl, Butler’s take on Venus’s murder attributes it to

a tragic misreading of the social map of power, a misreading orchestrated by that very map according to which the sites for a phantasmatic self-overcoming are constantly resolved into disappointment. If the signifiers of whiteness and femaleness—as well as some forms of hegemonic maleness constructed through class privilege—are sites of phantasmatic promise, then it is clear that women of color and lesbians are not only everywhere excluded from this scene, but constitute a site of identification that is consistently refused and abjected in the collective phantasmatic pursuit of a transubstantiation into various forms of drag, transsexualism, and uncritical miming of the hegemonic. That this fantasy involves

becoming in part like women and, for some of the children, becoming like black women, falsely constitutes black women as a site of privilege.

*(Bodies That Matter 90)*

More than twenty years later, Butler is the standard text on gender realness in Anglophone university classrooms despite the legendary density of her writing. Mock's approach is more readable, partly because she is uninterested in invoking Habermas or writing for an audience of philosophers, but also because it harkens back to Lorde's earlier model of texts written and read on the body. Aware of her own vulnerability and her own comradeship with the trans women sex workers she knew who hoped a man would help them pay for surgery, Mock recognizes and reads Venus in ways that Butler does not. For Mock, Venus is not dead because of her own misreadings or because she mistakenly thought that being a woman would protect her from violence. She is dead because she was a Latina trans woman and a sex worker and that is how the world treats Latina trans women and sex workers. Her feminized longing for a protective man may appear to be an uncritical mining of the hegemonic but, in the patriarchal world that Butler otherwise recognizes, it is one of the few survival strategies open to a woman on the margins. The presentation of this fantasy in an edited clip in a documentary does not preclude Venus from also having complicated thoughts about the situation, as the very presentation of it as a fantasy -- and it is clearly a fantasy that cannot "come true" -- suggests. Mock's own descriptions of her moments of fear on the streets, her refusal to allow a man to pay for her gender affirmation surgery because it ultimately would cost her more than earning the money herself, and the precautions taken by sex workers to

ward off murdering clients makes it very explicit that it is impossible for them to be unaware of hegemonic maleness.

I do not offer this comparison between Mock's and Butler's readings out of a desire to dismiss Butler as somehow generally un insightful, or insincere in her expressions of anti-transphobia. Butler had the disadvantage of writing *Bodies That Matter* when Mock was still a child, and hindsight is never particularly flattering. It also feels disloyal to the baby dyke I once was who took heart from Butler's insistence that the lessons of her bar dyke twenties were worth considering with well-read philosophic seriousness. I offer this comparison instead to demonstrate why Mock, unlike Nelson, chose to ignore a celebrity of Butler's stature when she turned to feminist writings to help her make her life more livable and more legible. Mock's choice here illuminates a reason that queer theory as a whole occupies an increasingly shaky position both within the academy and without. Its failure to accommodate specificity within the revolutionary potential of the wide-embracing queer, as Namaste points out, is a failure that has material consequences and may account for some of the re-emergence of hardcore identity politics among college undergraduates that has so worried their professors recently.<sup>5</sup> For Butler, realness is a categorization that is always in crisis yet whose invocation tends to reify hurtful gender norms; for Mock, acceptance as "real" is a path to safety that can and should accommodate more than the most punishing gender binaries. The difficulties of maneuvering against the compounded pressures of societal matrices granted, Mock's insistence on her ability to redefine realness should not be overlooked as naive or uninformed. Instead, Mock's return to Lorde, who took strength from a 70s-style

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<sup>5</sup> See "Campus Identity Politics Is Dooming Liberal Causes" in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* as one example.

battlecry of “black lesbian feminist mother warrior poet,” is perhaps demonstrative of the appeal of a revenant identity politics, is instructive in thinking about the interconnections of academic, popular, and social justice spheres in first person accounts of queer and trans lives.

Memoir remains a field dependent on the fantasy/reality of agency. As Judith Taylor asserts while considering the impact of memoirs by feminist activists, “analyses of women's life narratives demonstrate the politics and promise of memoir as a site in which individual and collective identities are forged and contested, agency and resistance are asserted, and strategies for change are mapped” (706). Considering this, it seems important that Maggie Nelson and Janet Mock both insist on their dreams and desires even as they record an often academicized resistance to them. Significantly, those same academic texts also often help them name, understand, and pursue those dreams. These texts become part of who they show themselves to be. In both Nelson and Mock’s cases, tracing the ways in which their memoirs respond, reject, and make peace with queer theory and identity studies offers insight on the porousness of the supposed ivory tower and real world divide. It also illuminates how academic theorizing “holds up” under thoughtful incorporation into daily life. Queer and trans lifewriting is a particularly good focus group for this kind of academic testing specifically because the pressures of difference continue to encourage the investigation of the self. Guided by the increasing ubiquity of queer theory/LGBTQ Studies on the undergraduate level, as well as a generation of increasing college attendance, the mixing of theory into a genre predicated on an examination of the self means that the rising generation of queer and trans memoirists inevitably refer their self-conceptions to what they have read, a phenomenon

still relatively new, despite a long history among LGBTQ people of the creativity to read queerly, considering how carefully these accounts historically have been repressed in the classroom and in publishing.

As evidenced by Mock and Nelson, what the self dreams is an area that is particularly fraught territory for academic research: desire is notoriously unregulated by the intellect, and yet it is of course responsive to and dependent on input. *The Argonauts* and *Redefining Realness*, then, walk a narrow line between what is sayable because of texts the authors read and what has become unsayable for the same reason.

#### Chapter 4: Thinking of the Children

The mainstream visibility of transgender youth is probably the biggest change that the millennial status quo has to offer, one especially noteworthy because the rhetoric around this visibility asserts that it is self-directed, the result of learning how to most truly be oneself. While further examination reveals a complicated mishmash of parental, communal, and media influence in these narratives, their easily accessible existence still occasionally seems miraculous when thinking of the barriers to autonomy trans children and teenagers face. As I write this, our default expectation for parents of trans youth continues to be a profoundly depressing one, and in recompense parents who offer minimal acceptance and support to trans children – or at least claim to do so through

social media – often receive acclaim that seems disproportionately laudatory if we truly believe that trans children automatically deserve love and care.

In such an environment, it is not surprising that memoirs of trans youth often presume a parental audience in addition to the expected one of readers who identify with the author, and these books seem specifically invested in gaining the understanding of those parents.

Along with cisgender, usually heterosexual parents, the quietly expected audience is LGBTQ adults. Both of the texts that this chapter examines likely would not exist without the interest and support of this community, and so, despite my earlier description of these memoirs as the product of self-directed teenagers, these teens are not moving through this territory without adult guides, sometimes self-appointed. This raises the question of my primary interest; is the way “we” as adults dream now the same dream that these teenagers hold? I chose to examine *Some Assembly Required* by Arin Andrews and *The Trouble with Normal* by Katie Rain Hill specifically because these memoirs are connected to each other as well as deeply intertwined with what appears to be a growing public need, one both LGBTQ and straight/cisgender but at its most poignant when LGBTQ, to believe that queer/trans teenagers are living lives unmarked by the pain we have so long associated with otherness.

Katie’s<sup>6</sup> and Arin’s memoirs are short, likely because they respectively were about 20 and 18 years old at the time of publication, and ghostwritten, which makes them similar to some of the best advertised trans memoirs ranging from Jazz Jennings’ *I Am Jazz*, an autobiographical children’s book from a young reality TV star, to Caitlyn

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<sup>6</sup> I have used first names in this chapter to distinguish between family members who share surnames in these memoirs.

Jenner's *The Secrets of My Life*. Simon & Schuster's decision to work with Katie and Arin clearly stems from the media attention they received, both in their native Tulsa, Oklahoma as teenagers willing to talk to local papers about gender, and from morning talk shows charmed by the supposed novelty of two trans teenagers in love with each other. Both Katie and Arin -- and their mothers -- are very conscious of how greatly the media undervalues their actual personhood and anything approaching an expansive sense of trans cultures or histories. Arin relates his surprise at being referred to as part of America's first teen trans couple, something not even true in his personal experience. Hill notes how explicitly the attention they receive results from the sense that they look "normal" -- white, attractive, and able to pass as cisgender -- though that normality is always qualified by even presumably well-intentioned publications such as *The Huffington Post*, who in defiance of science but in the best monster movie tradition tagged an article about the two with "transgender teen couple swap genitalia" (Sieczkowski).

However, their life experiences do not make it possible to eschew this attention without feeling it tantamount to cowardice. They are frequently praised and given awards by LGBTQ adults for their courage in talking publically about their transitions. Before they met, Arin found hope that his mother could be supportive by reading about Katie's mother Jazzlyn, who had learned to embrace and encourage her daughter, in the local newspaper *Tulsa World*. Knowing how important others' stories had been to them pushes them into a relationship with the media that might never reflect who they are, but might also allow other teenagers to know themselves. It is an effort that relies on the as-yet-unfulfilled promise that visibility equals progress, but it also speaks of an enormous

generosity from Katie and Arin as well as from the adults who attempt to protect and guide them despite how all of these relationships are also attempts to fill needs, sometimes longstanding, that cannot always be met. All of this generosity depends on what a sociological study of a white, middle class transgender support group in the early 2000s called emotional mobilization, “the process through which feelings are suppressed, evoked, and used in multiple contexts so as to foster and/or support activism” (Schrock 62). It is a strategy that works for Katie and Arin even as it also accrues some losses. Despite the title of Katie’s book, a longing for normal -- or at least to be treated as normal -- pervades both texts as well as the desires of the adults they encounter along the way. I say this not as a criticism of her attempt to rethink “normal,” but to acknowledge how deeply the yearning to be loved and cherished, something often still withheld because of difference, motivates the actions of everyone in these memoirs. For some of the adults in the texts and the texts’ adult readers, it is far too late to experience maternal nurturing or a sense of acceptance as a teenager, and so supporting Katie and Arin either through the auspices of the local LGBTQ Center or by following their careers becomes a method of healing. Ultimately, these texts demonstrate how the utopian impulse, not always perfectly, works generationally through what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick might consider reparative reading, in which “the reader has room to realize that the future may be different from the present [so] it is also possible for her to entertain such profoundly painful, profoundly relieving, ethically crucial possibilities as that the past, in turn, could have happened differently from the way it actually did” (*Touching Feeling* 146).

Unlike the texts in Chapter 2, in which the protagonists essentially decide their childhoods are unsalvageable and best jettisoned in their search for a better adulthood,



*Some Assembly Required* and *Rethinking Normal* carefully shape narratives in which much is redeemable and life is possible without fleeing to coastal cities. The fundamental sameness of these memoirs -- both detail what Susan Stryker in *Transgender History* describes as a “personal issue” approach in which being transgender is “something that an individual experiences inwardly and works to bring into social reality by sharing it with others” (1) -- means that together they offer a roadmap for other trans teens to grow from suicidal kids to happier adolescents. There now exists a body of psychiatric work on gender nonconforming children apparently unimaginable in 1991 when Sedgwick, invoking the suicide rate among lesbian and gay youth in her discussion of texts about “effeminate boys,” declared in “How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay” that “[i]t’s always open season on gay kids” (18). However, Katie and Arin’s stories reiterate how powerfully the image of suicidal queer/trans children continues to motivate pleas for parental and societal acceptance in 2017. For Katie and Arin, their suicide attempts also propel change; their mothers<sup>7</sup> stop policies of denial and/or suppression in favor of allowing their children wider autonomy. However, as Katie notes, “[t]he only sadness is that it had to happen so late. All mothers want to experience raising a happy child, but we’ve been able to do that only at the very end of my childhood” (243). She pays some of that lost happiness forward to the younger Arin, who in reading about Katie’s mother is finally able to imagine a different solution to his own familial conflicts.

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<sup>7</sup> Katie and Arin’s fathers, while sometimes mentioned positively, are conspicuously absent from the memoirs’ focus on the loving and fun relationships that can bloom between parent and child once the child’s gender is treated as valid. They join a long historical and literary line of fathers who fail to participate in queer/trans familial redemption.

Arin's mother Denise felt deep investment in the idea of having a beautiful daughter, going so far as to name him after the Emerald Pool on Dominica because "it was the most beautiful place she'd ever seen" (3). This vision of a pretty girl proves hard for his mother to surrender. He describes the bows his mother placed in his hair when he was a child attending a Christian elementary school, how "every ribbon felt like a ten pound rock on my head" but found disobeying her dress code unimaginable. His inability to imagine himself separated from his mother's desires, and his recognition that "she loved having a little girl" results in the inability to sleep and a diagnosis of ADHD. His survival comes in the "secret information, handed down from cousin to cousin" that he hears outside his mother's earshot, "full of half-truths, outright myths, and penis jokes" that finally allow him to imagine a different body (29). This set him on a collision with his mother, who enlisted him in beauty pageants in an attempt to bolster what she saw as a self-esteem crisis. While Arin tried to lose himself in masculine-coded motocross, where his body could feel weightless, his mother continued to insist on the presentation of an attention-grabbing femininity (47).

It is a truism of coming out stories that cisgender/ heterosexual parents must complete a stage of mourning for their imagined child -- dream children are never LGBTQ -- before they can accept their queer/trans one. As Rich C. Savin-Williams and Eric M. Dubé noted in 1998, little empirical evidence existed to support the necessity of this pop-psychological processing, but still

[p]ersonal narratives, popular advice-giving tracts, and "selfhelp" books composed by and for parents often present the act of disclosure by youths of their gay/lesbian identity as necessarily creating a crisis within the

family. This literature promotes the view that as a result of this disclosure, irrevocable damage is done to the child-parent relationship. MacDonald (1983) noted that healthy family relationships under such circumstances are "uncommon" and that trauma must necessarily beset families with a sexual-minority youth. (7)

This trope remains remarkably persistent; Arin's psychiatrist, himself the heterosexual father of a gay son, tells him, "you should also respect that it might take your mom a little bit of time to come around. Don't go blowing the hinges off that closet door" (109).

While it is normal for parents to be apprehensive about transphobia and homophobia in the wider world for which the closet might seem a convenient and protective solution, particularly if they have no personal experience of longterm silence about an everyday part of themselves, there is something strange about the psychiatrist's invocation of respect. Denise already *knows*, so he actually suggested letting Denise continue to pretend to have the child she wants in front of everyone else. This seems to cross a line between advocating patience with a parent's frailty and instead supports the continuance of a delusion, one which had resulted in Arin -- not Denise -- taking Prozac for what seemed to be situational depression caused by an enforced inability to exercise any agency over the length of his hair, let alone the rest of his body. As Denise admits, she was expending a good deal of energy in make-believe about her child:

[t]he binder is fine because I know your breasts are still there. I can even get behind the idea of the testosterone, but that's because I think it's something that will initially be mostly invisible. But the hair is external. I've seen what you look like with your hair pulled back, and you're right, I

can see a boy in there. And I know once you take that step, it's one that I won't be able to tune out. There's no going back. I won't be able to pretend anymore (126).

Openly stating the desire to tune out one's child is likely a difficult confession, but consistent with the apparently powerful desire to maintain the illusions that make the sacrifices of parenting seem worthwhile. As Jessica Fields noted in her 2001 study of a support group for the families of lesbian and gay people, there persists the sense that “the moral value of being mothers and fathers rests on their having raised ‘normal’ men and women” (166). The question for trans children – or better yet, trans-affirming adults – remains how to channel this deep need in parents to hold onto the fantasy of the normal into similarly rewarding scripts that do not leave children like Arin with suicidal anguish as their only bargaining chip in parent-child interactions. Arin's gender therapist offered the example of what he generalized as Native American two-spiritedness, a solution unlikely to please those frustrated by the meaninglessness resulting from careless borrowing of misunderstood and marginalized cultures, but one that resonated with Arin and his mother as they were in search of an explanation of transgender identities that offered “proof that what was happening to [Arin] had been going on in others since humans had first existed” (127). Most importantly, it allowed Arin's mother to understand him in a role other than despised and condemned: “It just makes so much more sense to me now [...] What he said about Two-Spirits often being healers. I mean, look at how you healed [a baby flying squirrel]” (128). This is the thin end of the wedge that allowed her to attend a trans teen support group with Arin and immerse herself in a discourse very different from the one she knew as a Christian in Oklahoma.

Arin finds his own model on the internet, where “a hidden gate [he] hadn't noticed before suddenly swings open” (89), a description comparing self-realization to playing video games or the moment when a much fantasized cure is announced for “some horrible disease” (89). This is an engaging moment for the reader, who has participated in his pain with the expectation that it will be alleviated, and is now presented with the notion that “discovering oneself” is a process that has road signs and stories from other travellers and moments that feel so revelatory that they mimic the magic of fantastic portals. “The not-so-secret life of a transgender teen,” as the memoir's subtitle promises, reveals that what had been kept secret from Arin is what every LGBTQ memoir ultimately assures its LGBTQ readers: you are not alone. For the trans male reader, Arin can pass on the knowledge that “there was suddenly a path laid out before me, where there had been none before. I now had a clear set of steps that could help guide me to becoming the person I knew I was” (89).

The discovery that Arin was not alone was important for both Arin and Denise, as it moves them towards queer/trans youth groups, a relationship with Katie, and the impetus for his involvement in trans youth advocacy: the recognition that the personal can also be communal. When Denise starts to bring Arin to meetings at the remote yet “local” LGBTQ Center, the group's default expectations of an accompanying mother start to structure how Denise sees herself as well as Arin. One of the attendees, when comparing his parents unfavorably with her, embarrasses her into admitting she had not been on board, but the past tense of that statement is really the only possible option in that setting despite any reservations she still might hold. The nakedness of the other attendees’ desire for parental love seems to have invoked protective feelings in Denise.

Likewise, Katie is an extremely important factor in Arin's acceptance, both of himself and by his family. His father makes a point of how gorgeous she is, a guy-to-guy expression of approval that seems to lift some of the weight of prettiness from Arin, who felt very alone and misunderstood when his father told him he was too pretty to be a lesbian while he was dating a girl. This is an echo of his mother's comment, as she “cannot believe that [Katie] was born a boy [...] No way! She's too pretty!” (152). His mother in particular is extremely encouraging of their relationship, and it is hard not to read that as an attempt to finally find a satisfying daughter, especially when Katie wears the femme clothes that Debbie had bought for Arin. Katie's ability to pass, overcoming the “disadvantage” of being trans to achieve the conventional attractiveness that continues to be a powerful measure of a woman's worth, acts as assurance to Arin’s parents. If Katie can seem “normal,” then Arin can too, and just as recognition of her beauty acts as an affirmation of her womanhood, it also signifies that Arin is a “regular guy” if he can attract a pretty girl despite cisgender competition. While both Katie and Arin come to question this narrative, it is not surprising that this kind of approval is initially reassuring despite its similarity to the focus on beauty that initially so tormented Arin. Their books offer photographs at the beginning of every chapter, giving readers a chance to likewise “approve” even though the intention was likely to approximate the transition videos on YouTube that Arin found helpful. The flipside of this attempt to affirm others, of course, is the thought of readers who will think they have the right to give or withhold approval of how two teenagers look in relationship to their own deeply internalized ideas about gender, which is perhaps not dissimilar to Susan Sontag’s argument that photography violates in presenting a view of people they cannot

themselves hold. Katie and Arin are notably good at sharing “their side” of things, but ultimately the memoirs and the photographs function as acts of exposure that may be rewarding or may attract hostility.

Katie’s conventional prettiness can seem “a good thing” when considering the treatment of trans women who do not conform to reductive standards of feminine beauty, but as Talia Mae Bettcher points out in her discussion of the murder of seventeen year old Gwen Araujo, there is a widespread cultural belief that trans women are “deceivers” who deserve punishment for appearing to be cisgender that allowed defense attorneys to construe Araujo’s attractiveness to heterosexual men as a crime (43). Katie is, of course, keenly aware of this; she recounts secretly clutching a pocket knife when a new boyfriend told her he had googled her and discovered she was trans; however, he tells her she is “still the most beautiful girl” (223). These memoirs are fairly sanitized and about teenagers “lucky” enough to have homes, access to health care, adult advocates, and the white privilege that Gwen Araujo lacked, but their ambitiously uplifting tenor can only remove Arin and Katie so far from the necropolitics that have destroyed so many of their trans ancestors and peers; their beseeching focus on the necessity of parental awareness that transphobia may lead to suicide and the adult acknowledgment of their “bravery” in coming out repeatedly affirms that the sovereignty to determine if they should live or be killed rests elsewhere (Mbembé 11).

These memoirs’ format -- relentlessly first person limited, purportedly tell-all, and focused on positive representation -- cannot contain much of the weight of transphobia in America because they cannot accommodate blame for that transphobia while they attempt to convert readers who are like Jazzlyn and Denise: potential allies. As these

texts demonstrate, this is lifesaving work, and yet the attempt to impose linear narratives of growing acceptance leading to growing happiness sometimes cracks. Arin and Katie's engagement with the moments of American teenhood deemed typical are often unsuccessful and hurtful despite the pressure to demonstrate that the contemporary era is one of acceptance and possibility once some hurdles are cleared.

Arin opens his memoir with the news that “[g]etting dumped at prom sucks” (1). The strategy here is fairly obvious; he is a normal teen with normal teen anxieties. Underneath this, the gambit towards an approach that “de-inspirationalizes” his life goes into play. If Arin “feels like the prom king decided to have [him] executed” (1), he can hardly be one-half of the normative fantasy of king and queen that high school rom coms hold out as a fulfilling and defining moment of teen life in general, a narrative now adopted by mainstream LGBTQ publications that has shifted attention from a long history of queer/trans anti-proms to the potential affirmation of being allowed participation. Despite the feel-good virality of roundups of schools with trans prom kings and queens, and/or queer couples taking these positions, *The Advocate's* commentary on their listicle of the same makes clear how long it's been since their name applied: “[w]hile the school year doesn't present many opportunities for an institution to actively demonstrate its commitment to trans equality, after being voted onto the court by their classmates, the royal students themselves often walk away from the moment inspired to keep working for the rights and visibility of LGBT people” (Kellaway). This is an obviously ass-backwards approach; while prom could be a gratifying moment, it means little but good PR for the school if that institution believes it has “few opportunities” to be trans-positive. An active anti-bullying policy, inclusive sexual education classes, a



commitment to lowering trans drop-out rates, trans-friendly bathrooms and locker rooms, and supportive guidance counselors and teachers all seem like great opportunities for schools to show their support. Without these, a moment of attention at prom -- which always comes with comments from aggrieved cisgender parents and an outpouring of hatred from the vilest corners of the internet -- is a consolation prize from the student body, thwarted by bureaucrats and parents from expressing more meaningful solidarity.

Katie did not attend prom except through her youth group; she had to resort to a painfully isolating virtual school because the bullying became intolerable. Arin went as a precocious sophomore, experiencing the disdain of a date who wanted a gay girl, not a trans boy. His experience makes clear how powerful the idea of being totally accepted in the near-mythological sphere of prom remains. His first major social event he attended while open about being trans, it “felt unreal and incredible at the same time” to Arin when his date's father helped him with his boutonniere, giving him “a little pat on the shoulder. All he had to do was refer to me as ‘son,’ and it would have been a moment right out of some cheesy prom episode of a sitcom. I was going through the same motions that generations of American boys had gone through before me” (5). However, his date's apparent embarrassment at appearing in public with Arin and the anonymous text he receives, asking “[w]hat do you have in your pants?” (9), combine instead to underscore how the presence of LGBTQ prom kings and queens at some high schools hardly ensures that people will have the opportunity, in the words of women’s magazine *Bustle*, to “rock[] their school dances without sacrificing who they are and conforming to societal expectations, in the process helping put an end to bullying and discrimination against LGBTQ teenagers” (Kravitz).

The expectation that queer/trans youth, through their effervescent existence, will end centuries of variously expressed rejection of the sexual and gender Other, is so blithely reassuring that it practices a powerful allure. This take is perhaps typical in what it anticipates from the participation of LGBTQ youth in activism:

Youth are transforming and revolutionizing the society and its institutions by challenging overall power inequities related to sexuality and gender identity categorizations and hierarchies, and they are also forming coalitions with other marginalized groups. They are dreaming their dreams, sharing their ideas and visions, and organizing to ensure a world free from all the deadly forms of oppression. Along their journey, they are inventing new ways of relating and being in the world. Their stories, experiences, and activism have great potential to bring us to a future where people across the gender and sexuality spectrums will live freely, unencumbered by social taboos and cultural norms of gender and sexuality. It is a future in which all the disparate varieties of sexuality and gender expression will live and prosper in us all. (Blumenfeld 82)

It is compelling to believe that American politics has seen a steady progression, decade by decade, from the homophile movement to today's "LGBTQ youth advocates" in which rights have been incrementally but steadily won and will now, thanks to a final push from the children who are our future, culminate in an end to disgust and discrimination. It is even arguably realistic; contemporary young women-loving-women, for example, have more options than did the average Daughter of Bilitis.

Unfortunately, the very impulse to call Arin, Katie, and their peers brave indicates that this future is further than we may hope, which makes youth who believe their own hype vulnerable if they suppose this utopia will come to pass fairly immediately. These mixed intergenerational impulses of mutual protection and validation are particularly noticeable when Katie receives an award at Oklahoma's Equality Gala, which functions as a more accepting prom for Katie and Arin and their first major date. Arin comments on the poetic satisfaction of giving his prom suit a second chance. It is, of course, an event arranged by LGBTQ adults, many of whom we can assume did not attend prom, did so as closeted, or were part of the first bullied wave of out queer/trans teens at school dances. Their desire to praise Katie's commitment to trans visibility was palpably sincere, and I furthermore do not think that the gesture becomes any less loving or important if we question what motivates the invitation of teenagers to gala events that a generation or two ago would have been adults-only for fear of bigots' accusations of recruiting. There is an element of protective largesse here, most visible when anonymous donors pay for Katie's gender affirmation surgery and college tuition. It seems inevitable that the adults are actually protecting their past selves projected forward – the man who comes to speak to Arin's mother is a prime example of this wistfulness; in talking to a parent he sees as affirming, he contends with the memory of himself as an unaffirmed child who in the present can only be healed metaphorically, through recognizing that someone like him will have what he lacked. If their own pasts lack galas, they can at least see Katie and Arin dance at one. Perhaps most affectingly, if their own courage went unrecognized during their adolescences, they will ensure that this becomes untrue for at least a few teenagers. It is a process of proxying that perhaps inevitably leaves the proxies confused,

as when Katie experienced what she felt as hostility at a trans convention for discussing being transgender as a process of becoming a gender instead of using the “assigned male at birth but still born female” formula favored by the adult trans women in her breakout group. It is completely unsurprising that Katie would understand her life in these terms and would expect adults to agree with them; hadn't she received accolades and attention from adults precisely for being open about transitioning “into” a girl? Notably, and perhaps relatedly, this is the only time she details meeting adult trans women; the head of the Equality Center, who gets a few paragraphs, is a gay man. Later, an adult friend tries to comfort her with the old chestnut about queer people taking out their anger on each other. It may be true, but the queer adults in Katie and Arin's memoir seem less invested in anger and more so in nurturing. If there is violence in this, it is not a violence of resentment that these teenagers' lives appear less marginalized than their own. Instead it is the violence of nearly parental, or at least sororal/fraternal, expectations.

In *The Queer Child* (2009), Kathryn Bond Stockton describes the fraught relationship between the queer adult and the queer child, commenting

For these adults, talk of a gay child may trip a tenderness. It may release, however unsought, a barely allowable, barely admitted sentimentality. One may be pricked by, pained by, feelings – about one's childhood – that, even now, are maudlin, earnest, melodramatic, but understandable pangs of despair or sharp unease. One can remember desperately feeling there was simply nowhere to grow. What would become of the child one feared oneself to be? For adults, then, who from a young age felt they were attracted to others in wrong ways, the notion of a gay child –

however conceptually problematic – may be a throwback to a frightening, heightened sense of growing toward a question mark [...]. Truly, one could feel that one more readily had a future with a word – *homo*, *faggot*, *gay*, or *queer* – words so frequently used by kids – than with the objects or subjects of one’s dreams. (3)

Some of these complex feelings can be seen on display in the It Gets Better™ project, now a multimedia, carefully curated collection of affirmations to youth from LGBTQ and straight allies that, as Danielle Bobker writes, makes explicit that miserable queer/trans youth simply need to hang on through high school to reap the same life rewards as the adult videomakers. While the goal of preventing suicides obviously justifies itself, the potential for targeted youth to internalize unexpected or unintended riders on the rationale for living seems high. If it does not, in fact, get better after high school does that mean that their struggles were meaningless, or somehow a queer/trans failure? The rapidity with which the It Gets Better videos spread and grew in number demonstrated a clear need on the part of LGBTQ people (and a baffling number of cisgender and heterosexual celebrities who surely might have been more useful addressing the bullies) to view themselves as people with something important to offer to LGBTQ youth. Sex columnist Dan Savage, It Gets Better’s most public face, described the making of videos addressing teens and children as a process of “giving ourselves permission to speak directly to LGBT youth” (qtd. in Bobker 57-58). As he saw it, this addressing was the sign of a new world order, which makes sense because of how deeply many older LGBTQ people have internalized the fear of homophobic/transphobic accusations that their very existence is bad for children. The project thereby embodies a fantasy of intergenerational

connectedness with several moving parts: 1) that their stories of success will be meaningful and instructive; 2) that youth with nascent queer/trans identities will identify with them, and not with the disgust apparently rife in their communities that would revile these adults, much as Janet Mock in the previous chapter as a teenager feared identification with older trans women; and 3) that hearing years may lie between them and happiness will not be discouraging. For a child who wants more than anything to hear that it will be all right then and now, and with the family they already have, the self-actualization story in which *It Gets Better* specializes of moving away and leaving blood relatives behind may be a threat, not a reassurance.

For the teens who seemingly shorten that period of misery to be happy in high school, even in locales that many *It Gets Better* participants described as misery pits to be escaped, they may seem frontrunners in the queer/trans race towards happiness, with attendant privileges and responsibilities. Arin confesses that he cannot imagine his life without Katie precisely because it would be so disappointing to everyone who expected him to be a role model, a position he was invited to fill by adults. It takes Katie a long time to break up with Arin, saying, “[h]ere we were, two trans kids in Oklahoma who had, against all odds, found each other and fallen in love. Yes, it’s an amazing story, and I feel so lucky to have met Arin, but it was as if everyone’s hopes and dreams for finding love were somehow pinned on us. I just couldn’t do it anymore” (219).

Perhaps because she is older, perhaps because Arin’s family has more money than hers, and perhaps because she is a woman, more of this pressure to gratify benefactors -- to satisfy hopes and dreams -- fell on Katie. An anonymous donor offered her free tuition to the University of Tulsa, but only if she maintained a 3.0 GPA. While this expectation

was not a problem for her to meet, it is an interesting restriction despite being fairly common when it comes to scholarships. It is a standard of “doing well” that does not account for possibilities particularly pressing for trans students; that the college will be hostile to trans people and classes therefore difficult to attend, that mental health may be more difficult for trans students to attain than their more accepted cis counterparts and could cause a “bad semester” and a GPA dip, that biased professors might be unfair graders, that the activism Katie was doing might take time away from studying.

Demanding a certain GPA is essentially demanding that Katie stay on track to pass through the gates to normative success and the future job imagined to be the result of dutiful work in college. Considering the disastrous employment rates for trans women (MAP), it is hard not to see the scholarship as a demand/promise that things will be different for Katie than they have been for so many trans women before her.

The beginning of Katie's memoir, which was ghostwritten by Ariel Schrag of former teen lesbian cartoonist fame, is likely deliberately banal. Knowing that her readers expect a certain story from her, the story promised by the cover art of a downcast young boy whose shadow is a confidently striding woman, she starts by informing us that she hates flies. “That's one fun fact about me. [...] What else?” We already know “what else,” but she delays the reveal with a few more autobiographical details before telling us the deadname that she dropped five years ago, when she was fifteen. Here, as often in the memoir, she is in the awkward place of knowing that she has been and will be defined by the expectations even of the most well-meaning people; that, in fact, those people may have altered her life for her more recognizably than the traditional enemies of young trans women managed. It is no doubt an amazing fact of our historical moment that Katie's

memoir exists and makes some young adult librarians' reading lists. But Katie herself is not a walking metaphor for how the world has changed, and a significant portion of her memoir details unhappiness at the pressure placed upon her to be a good role model and activist.

Katie makes it clear that her new relief and joy due to gender affirmation surgery and passing well marked her first college experiences:

[t]hree years before, I had been a gangly teenage boy, braces and glasses, face hidden underneath a black hoodie, horrified by the thought of anyone looking at me. I was teased every day, spat on, and called 'fag.' Now I was Katie, an attractive woman with long, shiny, dark brown hair, high cheekbones, boobs, and a butt that fit in my new feminine clothes perfectly. What can I say? I felt like the queen of the world. (6)

Katie remains the queen of her own fairytale, one striking in the mundanity of its reiteration of cliched fun at college, for a few weeks. Two years later, her nostalgia for this period underscores every description of the inarticulate, mildly homophobic boys who flirted with her, the girls who accepted her, and the inane jokes that sent them into hysterics. To date, this was the only time in her life when she felt accepted by her peers outside of the comparatively safe space of local queer/trans teen support groups; as she says, before enrolling at Tulsa University, "I'd never really had friends like that before, people I could just relax and be myself around [...] the teasing was so bad [in high school], I had to drop out of school and enroll in virtual school" (11).

Katie's choice of the phrase "be myself" might be at first glance disconcerting, since she had not yet felt comfortable enough to tell them that she was trans. However,



the conflicting truisms of politically commended LGBTQ behavior leave a lacuna between the imperative of coming out and the recognition that being transgender is an affirmation of a gender identity that she always already had. Paradoxically, the LGBTQ teen support groups, where being transgender was Katie's entree, became places where she was not necessarily made to feel unqualifiedly a young woman, and college, where her friends' progressive politics appeared lacking, was where her gender was most intelligible. Thus, the averageness of her introduction to college is a fantasy come true simply because of its bland acceptance of her.

This group of friends ultimately excludes Katie, likely for transphobic reasons, but the spectre of what might have been haunts the text. Perhaps because the decision of when and how to come out is permanently beyond her control due to the permanent availability in *Tulsa World's* online archives of her life story, the text frequently records moments in which Katie longs for an entirely stealth life, which is maybe an unexpected attitude in a memoir solicited because of the author's recognition as a voice for transgender teenagers, one who in high school gave a talk at a conference that affirmed,

when I first came out, my dream was to go stealth as a woman [...] I wanted to forget I was ever born male, forget that I was trans, and have people view me just as Katie, an average girl, nothing more. My feelings on this have changed, however. As I've become more confident in myself and overcome many of my doubts and worries, I've realized how important it is for me to be active in the LGBT community. I want to be there for others. (168)

This is a moving goal and likely the defining mission statement of much queer/trans activism: *I will be there for others because too few people were there for me.* The setting of this statement practically demanded it, however. Katie was invited to speak on a panel on LGBTQ rights at the University of Oklahoma, an honor that presumes that the invitee has something wise to say. Katie unquestionably did say something wise; it is the work of a lifetime to let go of doubts and worries about your place in society and even recognizing the possibility in yourself is an enormous feat for an adolescent. However, Katie's return to the dream of going stealth throughout the memoir indicates that she is caught in a cycle between knowing what she "should" do to be a "good" trans woman, a person worthy of offering instruction to other LGBTQ people, and knowing what she desires in her disavowed heart of hearts.

Anyone with the faintest grasp of human psychology might guess that Katie had not banished her fears at that age, so why did she assume the audience wanted to hear that she had? The panel organizer's solicitousness, seeking out her participation and then continuing to hope for it through a string of difficulties, indicates that something special must be expected of her. It can be assumed that anyone attending a conference on LGBTQ rights, with the possible exception of a few troublemakers, wants most of all to hear that LGBTQ rights are achievable or, better yet, achieved. Katie at the time was in the midst of a collective failure by authorities to provide a safe high school experience -- or even a remotely adequate online equivalent -- so her basic right to education was in peril even as she described herself as someone who had moved past her difficulties into a mentorship position.

College, the traditional refuge of those miserable in high school, had so much potential to compensate for the mythically carefree adolescent years she never experienced. However, Katie's decision to appear on *Inside Edition* finally outs her to her friends when she agrees to be part of a segment on transness that included depicting her and Arin as the perfect couple (30), complete with a voice over assuring the audience that "[t]hese two teens couldn't be happier together! Looking at them today, you would never know that she was once a boy and he was once a she" (qtd. in 30). Katie says little about the sensationalized tone and retrograde rhetoric of the segment, but she does note that she was starting to feel unhappy in the relationship. It is notable that when she describes her stealth life fantasy her future husband is not Arin, and she writes about her attraction to one of the boys in her group, Billy.

While her former friends never explained why they suddenly cut her off, the timing and one friend's shocked proclamation that she had heard a rumor that there was a trans person at the school seem self-explanatory. Katie remembers the announcement of the rumor happening immediately after Billy told her that she was "a ten. Ten body. Ten face. Ten personality. You could have anyone" (30). It is a heartbreaking moment, as Katie knows at this point that it would be fantasy to think that she lives in a world where Billy's affirmation will always be unqualifiedly true. At the risk of sounding like one of Sedgwick's paranoid queer readers, the antithesis of the reparative reader, it seems likely that the reason a mainstream media outlet found Katie and Arin so perfect for each other is that their relationship presumably kept them from looking for love from cisgender people. Billy makes it clear that her gender history erases any previously held sentiments about what and who Katie could have.

There is a level on which it would be very easy to dismiss Katie's experiences here as somehow unformed, sufferings begging for an epiphany of what "really" matters and that maturity will erase as though they never happened. She herself moves to do so even as she cannot quite force herself to deny what she actually felt and experienced; "While I tell myself I don't care, that I don't want to be friends with people like that anyway, the truth is, it broke my heart. I was finally the girl I'd waited so long to be, and I'd had this whole group of awesome, fun, smart people who'd seen me and liked me for who I was. Not as Luke, not as Katie the transgender girl, but as just Katie. And then they were gone" (34). It is telling that Katie repeats "adult wisdom" about what she should want even though it is clearly not what she actually wants, and it seems questionable "adult wisdom" that made a high schooler Googleable forever by every idly curious person she will know, without any attempt from *Tulsa World* (that Katie records) to discuss the ramifications of that possibility. As of now, we appear to have eliminated the closet and not the issues that sometimes make its safety necessary. As Suzanna Danuta Walters writes in a chapter of her book *The Tolerance Trap*, entitled "Coming Out is So Last Year," despite hopes that youth live in a post-gay world, it seems more as though the timeline of gayness has simply sped up. This is an acknowledgment that also seems applicable to Katie and Arin's experiences of recognizing their transness. As Walters asks,

what does it mean to "come out" if one has never been in? Does an early recognition of "queerness" therefore undermine the "before and after" teleology of older out-of-the-closet narratives? And are contemporary youth both more open and nonchalant about sexual difference and

reluctant to subscribe to the identity categories of earlier generations? Indeed, if coming out and coming of age (and into sexuality) are not sequential but synonymous, then the linear narrative that has so informed coming-out stories necessarily gets disrupted. This is enormously significant, although we won't know how far-reaching this is for years to come. If coming out has long been a "before and after" story, dependent on some period of "the closet" and hiding for its narrative logic, then these young kids— who simply can't have much of a "before"— may upend the very framework of coming out. (49)

Judging by the narratives presented by *Rethinking Normal* and *Some Assembly Required*, which may be a fraught project considering how these "personal" stories come filtered through ghostwriters and the demands of a mainstream publisher, Walters is right about how little time spent hiding exists between the moment of self-realization and the moment of sharing it. But if there is a disruption to the linearity of coming out, it is a disruption familiar to previous generations; "after" is not a stepping stone to a post-out life but rather an endlessly repeating process of coming out. Katie and Arin experience very little before, but certainly they are very familiar with after.

Compounded with her presence in Oklahoma, one of the places that Walters acknowledges that queer theorists and activists often vaguely indicate may be "different" from the liberal enclaves from which their adult life experience draws, Katie's small knowledge of the closet seems a good reason to be curious about what could have been. Her wistfulness could be understood as anti-activist, but criticizing a college student's emotions seems less pressing than understanding why she might prefer this scenario to

the supposedly liberatory present we credit her with inhabiting. Despite historical connections, there are moments in which the LGBTQ family model with which Katie is familiar -- one of shared community centers, shared award ceremonies, and shared narratives of self-revelation -- seems counterproductive to Katie's trans specificity, particularly in considering the metaphorical closet. For a LGB person, coming out ideally means that others acknowledge the authenticity of their emotions and desires. For a trans person who otherwise would experience unquestioning acceptance of their gender, coming out leaves their gender open to doubt, forever asterisked as inauthentic in the minds of some observers. However, as Katie notes, there are reasons, both personal and political, to make the choice to be visibly transgender when it is a choice. Katie's recognition that perhaps her life could be easier were she not so visible has the effect of construing it as a gift to others, just as a previous generation tried to offer her validation and praise as a protective gift. A look at Katie's experiences with the press give some clues about what some of the recipients of this gift seem to expect.

When Katie "reads" the media attention she receives, she reads it as an expose not of her life but of what people want from her. Speaking of her relationship with Arin, she relates

[w]e pretended to still be happy together. That was what everyone wanted, right? To express how I really felt would be letting so many people down, not only our moms (who were still our relationship's biggest fans) but also the public who looked up to us. It wasn't supposed to be our relationship that was inspirational, it was supposed to be our life stories -- but I knew our romance made others happy. (226)

This observation ironically comes before Katie's recounting of the advice she had for a daytime talk show audience, which was "listen to your children" (226). Presumably the aspect of her life attracting praise was her forthright and articulate sense of self, and yet she did not feel this translated to opinions about her romantic relationships. This also raises questions about who exactly they were making happy and to what purpose. Presumably the people to be made happy, the audience and the host of the *Trisha Goddard Show* are most interested in whether these two teenagers have sex with each other and what kind of genitalia they have. The assumption is that no penis in the equation would "leave out a love life [...] Can I put it like that?" (qtd. in 227). As Janet Mock wrote in *Elle* about an interview Katie Couric held with celebrity trans women in which Couric asked questions similar to Goddard's,

[l]et's be clear though: This story is larger than Couric; it's about our culture and its dehumanization of trans people's bodies and identities. Because trans people are marked as artificial, unnatural, and illegitimate, our bodies and identities are often open to public dissection. Plainly, cisgender folks often take it as their duty to investigate our lives to see if we're real.

The grotesquery of an adult asking a pair of teenagers for the delectation of other adults about the mechanics of their sexual interactions compounds the act of dissection that Mock identifies. Goddard's posture of unfathomable ignorance -- surely it cannot be possible that all of her staff think every act subsumed under "love life" requires a penis -- allows her to maintain a kind of sexual innocence in front of her public even as it systematically strips the presumption of that same innocence from Katie and Arin. This

occurs despite the fact that the sweetness of a teen romance is the alleged draw for the viewers. Katie's discomfort with this moment indicates that the actual audience is not her real target, but rather an imagined one. Her own experience, in which she discovers the word "transgender" in an online article about child reality tv star Jazz Jennings, seems to guide her to see past the dissection-minded masses to form an empathetic relationship with the people out there who will understand. For those people, her relationship with Arin likely was important on some level: a promise that they were lovable and not destined for the lives of loneliness often depicted as the fate of trans people. In this sense, the still-lacking depiction of Arin and Katie together improves on the mainstream cultural insistence that being transgender is a personal medical problem; any attempt to tell their story must include the youth group through which they met, which raises the possibility of acceptance and friends to any trans teenager watching who still longs for these.

As previously discussed, the Andrews family seems to derive a sense of intelligibility from Arin's relationship with Katie. Katie's mother may share some of those feelings -- she describes Arin as a boy she herself would date if she were seventeen again -- but her primary motivation in supporting them as a couple seems to be the specter of Hawthorne, the cis boy Katie dated before Arin. Separated from his own family, Hawthorne comes to live with the Hills and proceeds to be an inconsiderate and entitled houseguest who refuses to do chores, is rude to Katie's brother and mother, and cheats on Katie. She writes of her shame at not defending her family at the time, and explains she could not break up with him initially because "despite everything, he was sweet to me, and I genuinely believed he cared for me. I was just beginning to live my



life as Katie and was still painfully insecure. I didn't think anyone else would ever love me. I liked that Hawthorne was dependent on me. It meant he couldn't leave" (157-158).

Hawthorne's dependence, and Katie's desire for it and him despite his poor treatment of her, finds its own justification in her own family mythology, which claims no female from her mother's family is destined to have a happy relationship. However, if Katie is afflicted with any ancestral curse, it seems to be a curse upon her other family: the violence and callousness marking the literary and actual history of trans women. Contrasted with Hawthorne, Arin is a heroic solution. This is an indictment of cisgender people even as it seems to welcome a containment solution to the supposed romantic deceitfulness and sorrow of trans people that pervades popular culture. As Jack Halberstam writes about the character Dil in *The Crying Game* who infamously "surprises" the cis male protagonist with her penis, "[t]he tragic transgender, indeed, weeps because happiness and satisfaction, according to transphobic narratives, is always just out of reach" (82). For Jazzlyn, who made a tear-stricken bargain that she would always be proactively supportive in exchange for Katie's promise that she would not follow through on her suicidal thoughts, allowing Hawthorne to live with them despite her frustration with him must have seemed like part of this bargain. Hawthorne initially had seemed to accept Katie's transness, and Jazzlyn's sense that she was fighting for Katie's life -- "no matter how hard it gets" (90) -- seems to have made a truly happy relationship, one where Katie would not be used by a boy concerned with his own needs just as Dil's boyfriend-protagonist was, seem out of reach while in survival mode. Arin, whom Jazzlyn met first and talked up to Katie, must have seemed a heavensent

alternative. Since he also is invested in undoing transphobia, he could be trusted with Katie's safety and happiness in ways that cis men en masse could not.

The pressure to be each other's private solution to the culturally pervasive demonization of trans people who might seek love and romance with cis people contributed to their relationship's end. Katie recounts an encounter in which it appears clear that the initial presumption that her mother or onlookers might have held -- that Arin was part of a line of defense against her death -- had transformed into stakes in which she should be suicidal *about* him:

“Tell us how you couldn't live without Arin,” the interviewer said as I awkwardly sat on Arin's lap in the boat.

“But I could live without him,” I said.

Arin looked at me, hurt. “What?”

“Come on. We're teenagers who have been dating for a year and a half. We're not going to kill ourselves if we break up,” I said. What I was thinking was, *And I kind of want to break up right now. If all these people weren't here, that's what we'd be talking about.* (214)

While Katie had developed or maintained a sense of self outside the public perception of her, Arin's response to her revelation -- that he could not live without her -- indicates his deeper investment in the shelter the relationship symbolized. Picking up on Katie's interest in experiencing sex with someone with a penis, he interprets their breakup as a message that his body is inadequate. It could be read as a betrayal of trans solidarity, especially if you were the one getting dumped. However, the fact that teenaged relationships are not necessarily long lived aside, there is still something hopeful in the

conclusion of these texts for those people who want to believe that we live in a post-gay, post-gender world, or even just a kinder one. Katie pushed through her knife-clutching fear of a cis het boy to discover that he liked her “anyway,” and with significantly less need to process his own sexuality than appears in most of the trans memoirs and novels that Katie recommends in a list at the back of her book. Meanwhile, Arin falls in love with a boy and describes falling asleep holding his hand while *Brokeback Mountain* played on the TV. Katie and Arin declare themselves best friends. Not needing New York or San Francisco to live a fulfilling life (so far), they all stay in Oklahoma. So there is plenty of material in which the LGBTQ reader can if needed find hope for the future, whether in the progression of *Brokeback Mountain*’s sadness to Arin’s happiness, or in the sense that a “red state” seems like an okay place to live, or in the possibly less normative potential of friendship over romance as a sustaining force. Arin concludes his memoir with his confidence that he lives in “a fast-changing world of increasing trans acceptance, where so many options and doors that were never there before are suddenly opening” (236).

*Rethinking Normal* and *Some Assembly Required* have modest goals in comparison to the other texts studied in this dissertation. This may seem like too much attention to slim books, seemingly rushed into print to take advantage of an identified narrowcast gap in the market. Yet just as I move to dismiss the texts as over-mediated, I am struck by the repeated and recognizable image of Katie or Arin searching for their own likenesses. Katie acknowledges that in some ways, this should not be hard considering how easily they are absorbed and even “normalized” by social media:

[o]ne image of us that went viral showed us standing in our bathing suits with the caption: “DOES THIS COUPLE LOOK NORMAL? THAT’S BECAUSE THEY ARE.” The intention of the caption may have been good, but what did it even mean by ‘normal’? That we passed as cisgender? Were heterosexual? White? Able-bodied? Attractive? If one of us hadn’t been any of those things, would they still have called us normal? (232)

Almost certainly not, and this realization triggers the impulse to say that “enough” attention has been paid to teenagers who have experienced the rewards of having these characteristics. Still, I continue to consider Arin’s insistence that his readers see *Boys Don’t Cry*, a film about the murder of a young trans man named Brandon Teena that came out in 1999. Later, in his own appendix of trans media, he comments that “[i]t definitely makes you think about your safety” (247). Its inclusion definitely made me think, too, as seeing *Boys Don’t Cry* in the theater when I was sixteen was unforgettably distressing. I felt protective anger that this critically acclaimed -- but often theoretically savaged -- film from nearly two decades ago that literally gave me nightmares was his most accessible transgender film. I forgot everything I had been told about the counterrevolutionary mundanity of positive representations and mentally commissioned thousands of bland yet heartwarming trans movies. However, the references to *Boys Don’t Cry* gesture to something Arin’s own memoir formally could not convey and my imagined bounty of films would not assuage.

*Boys Don’t Cry* takes place in Falls City, Nebraska, which as Jack Halberstam notes in *In a Queer Time and Place* is, like all of rural America, not on the map as

determined largely by those LGBTQ people who participated in an exodus from such locations to New York and San Francisco, where their numbers gave them gravitas in the American imagination. Meanwhile, separated by Kansas and time, Arin and Brandon find small affirmations of themselves in midwestern rituals of masculinity that are not part of urban filmic and literary understandings of gender. Arin takes pleasure in motocross, mountain climbing, and industrial machinery, and his trip to New York at the end of the book is not the permanent one readers have grown to expect. In *Boys Don't Cry*, Nebraska (or a fearful version of it) is a brooding presence in ways that Oklahoma never quite seems in *Some Assembly Acquired*, likely because Arin is focused on sharing what about his life could be similar or helpful to a variety of other people, an audience potentially as global as that of the YouTubers who inspired him. The glimpses -- his Christian school, the distances he drives to see Katie or other trans kids, the apparent size of his backyard -- serve to underscore the differences from what is expected in these narratives. For example, the most commercially prominent collection of the voices of trans teens, *Beyond Magenta*, entirely focuses on teenagers that the interviewer/editor met through New York's Callen-Lorde Center.

Likewise, in contrast to the relentlessly upbeat tone of *Some Assembly Required*, *Boys Don't Cry* wallows in misery. Driven by his need to demonstrate that parental, communal, and medical actions at the right time can make trans teenagerhood much happier, Arin's moments of unhappiness cannot be given the immersive run-time of a feature length film. His own fears about his safety and potential cruelty from his peers must be submerged so that he can quiet those of adults who might use them as a reason to block his access to testosterone or boys' clothes. When surrounded by many people with

protective impulses that may sometimes feel smothering, *Boys Don't Cry* offers a comparatively unvarnished chance to consider, and vicariously experience, some of the life of another young Midwestern trans man. The comparison likely intensifies Arin's gratitude for his family and friends.

Initially overlooking all of these reasons for it, my horrified reaction to Arin's connection to *Boys Don't Cry* returns us to the reason why otherwise unremarkable memoirs capture a complex network of hopes and desires by and for LGBTQ teenagers. The protectiveness of adults towards LGBTQ teenagers is logical considering the statistical pitfalls still inherent to queer/trans comings of age, yet that protectiveness struggles with its own economy of inspiration and demand. For LGBTQ adults who remember parental and societal failures to nurture them, Arin and Katie's stories reassure that this is a problem that their own comings out helped to solve, retroactively giving positive significance to bad memories even as it denotes a better present and the potential of realizing a future utopia. For cisgender and heterosexual parents such as Jazzlyn and Denise, these memoirs offer guidance on how to be a supportive parent. They also promise that loving, mutually satisfying relationships are possible between teenagers and their parents, something elusive enough for those who share similar personal experiences of gender and sexuality. Transgender teenagers, judging by the books' careful elucidation of steps to take from addressing parents to seeking LGBTQ community to surgery, can find models to use for their own lives even as Arin and Katie announce that these are just some of the possibilities; the news that there exists a multitude of self-directed trans stories is in some ways the most hopeful news in memoirs that already comfort some common fears about coming out as trans. Readers who fall into none of these categories,

to whom Arin's appendix guide entitled "How to Talk to Your New Transgender Friend" seems to address itself, receive a narrative in which they and the authors could be friends, and in fact better friends thanks to learning by reading about classmates ranging from careless to cruel. Functioning as outreach pamphlets writ large, these texts continue a long history of books from sexual and gender minorities that insist on their inherent mundanity, if only some ignorance from others could be conquered.

However, as Katie's title indicates, the process of normalizing oneself is not always possible or desirable. The trouble with normal, if normal is defined by people writing patronizing captions on photos of teenagers that go viral in the name of acceptance, is that it offers hope that the right to belong will not be questioned even as it sets up the stakes through which it inevitably will be. This seems clear from Katie's fear that she would disappoint audiences by ending a relationship that became newsworthy precisely because to unknowing viewers it seemed to offer an engaging simulacrum of a cisgender, heterosexual relationship that could be "revealed" as otherwise, thereby initiating viewers into a secret that in actuality was invented to "educate" the public. The conflict is obvious between Katie's dream to offer the same kind of hope she found in reading about Jazz Jennings and the audience's manufactured, formatted desire to assimilate her into their worldview instead of changing it. The potential conflict between LGBTQ adults and LGBTQ youth is often less obvious, but Katie, and to a lesser degree Arin, make it clear that their absorption into a feel-good progressive narrative about change and possibility for trans youth does not come without personal costs, which sometimes lead to furtive, perpetually thwarted fantasies that they could exist somewhere well to the back of the local vanguard.

At the risk of overemphasizing fleeting moments of fantasy about other possible lives, there remains a disjunction between the desires of adults to offer support to teenagers' search for what often are called their authentic selves, and the truth that this desire does not come without its own expectations that may make that search more difficult. At least in these memoirs, everyone ends on the same page, and yet it is clear that "the way we dream now" may have some fissures between adults and youth that our current model of LGBTQ youth groups and similar attempts at support cannot quite account for in how it looks backwards, solving the past teenaged concerns and hurts of adults only in the present.



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