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Queer Borders and Belongings: Reparative Storytelling from El Paso

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Queer Borders and Belongings

Reparative Storytelling from El Paso



Honors Thesis

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Department: English

Advisor: David J. Fine, Ph.D.

April 2020

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Abstract

At its best, queer theory exposes how reproductive heteronormativity functions to write gendered relational scripts ordered around roles of dominance and submission, but often queer theorists respond to the problematic relationships they identify with retreat and resignation. This thesis takes a different approach by looking to stories collected through a month of interviews at the border in El Paso, Texas in order to explore a queer ethic of repair which, through Iris Murdoch's conception of love as "*really looking*," disrupts and rewrites hegemonic relational scripts. First, I investigate the role reproductive heteronormativity plays in shaping hierarchical and patriarchal notions of citizenship, immigration policy, community organization, and national belonging. Then I look to the ways queer kinships enables alternate ways of forming relationships around solidarity, and I end with a discussion of the communities these queer relationships make possible. Ultimately, I argue that by disrupting hegemonic relational scripts and pushing us toward the particulars of one another, queerness makes loving communities and relationships possible.

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And, Dr. Fine. Four years ago, the only thing more monstrous than my sentence length was the depth of my rage. After 27 credit hours and even more patience, you've liberated my writing from the shackles of passive voice and taught me how to look upon the world with wonder. Your teaching gave me stories and theory as a window into the possible, and—against my most stubborn instincts—your care has given me a way to beyond certainty, forward, toward love. For stringing and restringing the beads of this project and for guiding (and sometimes dragging) me toward the Good—thank you.



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A Quick Note before a Long Thesis:

For the sake of accessibility and out of a desire to keep the stories of those whom I interviewed at the center of this project, I have attempted to limit my use of theory wherever possible. Though I believe that theory is best suited as an analytical lens rather than as the driving force of an argument, there are many moments in this thesis where I compare the perspectives of queer theory with the perspectives of the stories I tell or where I use theory as a way of understanding what's at stake. For this reason, the Appendix contains a theory cheat sheet that explains some theoretical ideas and defines words when their use in this thesis is different than how they might be used in the mainstream. Additionally, the Appendix summarizes and contextualizes the major theorists whom I cite and the branches of theory they fall within and provides suggestions for further reading if any of those ideas sound interesting to you

“Remember that all our failures are ultimately failures in love. Imperfect love must not be condemned and rejected but made perfect. The way is always forward, never back.”

- Iris Murdoch, *The Bell*

PREFACE

In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks writes, “I came to theory because I was hurting—the pain within me was so intense that I could not go on living. I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend—to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most importantly, I wanted to make the hurt go away. I saw in theory then a location for healing” (59). It was with the same pain that I approached queer theory. Before I had access to theory, I had lived my life in a world whose boundaries were drawn by a lifetime in Catholic education. Baptism marked and ordered my body within the context of patriarchal reproductive heteronormativity, and I suffocated under the weight of my skin. I wanted out, but I did not want to sever my relationship to the body that tethered me to my relationships and my communities.

I came to queer theory because I needed a way forward. I was hurt by a world ordered around hegemony, and I wanted to learn what it might mean to hold something or someone close in a society whose order depends on distance, to relearn how to belong to the world. In many ways, queer theory has served as that place of possibility. By identifying the ways the state manufactures and mobilizes reproductive heteronormativity to order society around force and oppression, queer theory is able to identify many of the wounds that need healing and provide necessary salve.

But for queer theory to be restorative—for it to heal the same hurt that makes it necessary—queer theory must do more than just identify the enemy. I came to this realization for the first time during my sophomore year when I read Gloria Anzaldúa. In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, she cautions against combative approaches to justice. She argues:

It is not enough to stand on the opposite river bank, shouting questions, challenging patriarchal, white conventions. A counterstance locks one into a duel of oppressor and oppressed; locked in mortal combat, like the cop and the criminal, both are reduced to a common denominator of violence. The counterstance refuses the dominant culture's views and beliefs, and, for this, it is proudly defiant. All reaction is limited by, and dependent on, what it is reacting against. Because the counterstance stems from a problem with authority—outer as well as inner—it's a step towards liberation from cultural domination, but it is not a way of life. (100)

Instead of combat, Anzaldúa responds to her queerness by developing a mestiza consciousness that rejects the binaries which order the world into oppressed and oppressor and, instead, seeks to “break down the subject-object duality that keeps her [the mestiza] a prisoner and to show in the flesh and through the images in her work how duality is transcended” (102). Though her position as queer contributes to her understanding of justice and injustice, Anzaldúa broadens her subjectivity by refusing to define herself and her range of possibility within and against the systems that create her oppressions.

While Anzaldúa thinks through a personal ethic that makes room for healing, Sedgwick offers an approach to theorizing that is generative as well as critical. In “Paranoid and Reparative Reading, Or, You're So Paranoid You Probably Think This Essay is About You,” Sedgwick identifies queer theory's slant toward paranoia, which, like Anzaldúa's counterstance, depends on a strong theory of negativity focused on

identifying the presence of systemic injustice and conceptualizing the world in terms of these systematizing forces. She argues that while paranoia has its place in queer theory, it must also be paired with reparative readings of the world—ones that leave the reader open to surprise, that make room for pleasure and joy despite the presence of oppression.

The better I understood systemic oppression, the easier it became to spot racism, sexism, and heteronormativity in the world around me. Paranoia was easy, and the rage that came with it seemed to give me purpose. But I quickly learned that identifying and naming the forces of oppression at work in our world is not enough to fix them. Pointing to societies' "isms" wherever I found them made me feel vindicated, but my constant criticism without the reparative pushed me further away from the people and places whose connections I had valued.

The theory I read helped me to make sense of the factors which construct personal, social, and national identity, and, through that learning, I began to understand queerness as the rejection of reproductive heteronormativity. As queer theorist Michael Warner writes, "'queer' gets a critical edge by defining itself against the normal rather than the heterosexual" (xxvi). Instead of just proving guidelines on homosexuality, queer theory offers a takedown of reproductive heteronormativity as a normative regime. But none of that helped me address hurt in a productive way. Really, what I needed to understand was how to be human. In starting this thesis, that's what I set out to do.

The activists within popular LGBTQ movements and queer theorists within the academy have all responded to the oppressive forces of heteronormative state-making in very different ways with varying strengths and weaknesses. Where activist work makes important strides in alleviating the material oppressions of LGBTQ individuals, often this

work relies on assimilationist strategies that maintain heteronormative value systems. Conversely, where queer theorists succeed at pointing to the pervasiveness of heteronormative value systems, often their work at the theoretical level can be too abstract and generalizing to be useful in alleviating lived suffering. Instead of falling victim to paranoia and focusing exclusively on the weakness of each approach, I want to draw from what each school of thought or approach does well. For a queer ethic to succeed, it must maintain the urgency of popular LGBTQ movements and match the critical inquiry of theory. In balancing queer inquiry with queer activism, a queer ethic can allow us, as Michel Foucault puts it, to “learn how to become gay” by developing relationships that challenge the hierarchies of *how* we relate rather than just *who* we relate to (150). Understanding the structural systems that mark us in ways that keep us apart remains urgent. But if queer theory is to be about relearning closeness in order to heal divisions, then it must climb out of its ivory tower and learn from the rainbow-clad popular LGBTQ movements and start from the place of lived experience.

At its best, queer theory gives us tools to reorient our relationships to make room for love and justice, but it cannot do this if it is caught up in the anger that takes us away from our body and our people. To be useful within our relationships, theory must start from the place of lived experience because “When our lived experience of theorizing is fundamentally linked to processes of self-recovery, of collective liberation, no gap exists between theory and practice” (hooks 61). Allowing our experiences to inform our theory helps us to develop a theory that we can use within our lives. Therefore, my approach to methodology is indebted to Mari Ruti who responds to the detachment of much of queer theory by stating:

In principle, I do not have a problem with the idea that the purpose of theory is to show us what is wrong rather than to tell us what to do. At the same time, I am more inclined to look for “real-life” referents for my theoretical paradigms than those who believe that theory is—or should be—an imaginative activity wholly divorced from the exigencies of lived reality” (38).

In taking up this thesis, my goal is to produce queer theory that starts with real life referents and attempts the work of making queer lives more livable.

Embodied queerness functions as “an act of kneading, of unity and joining” (Anzaldúa 103), one that resists moments of separation, but often the formation of LGBTQ identities relies on bordering that creates new distances. Ultimately, I am writing this thesis because I have felt the ways anger and my own queerness has threatened to separate me from myself, my relationships, and the communities I belong to, and I am not ready to relent to that distance. The questions that drive it—What does it mean to be gay? How does sexuality structure our relationships? How does it shape our communities? —are the same questions that haunt me. This thesis is my very best attempt to respond to Foucault’s call to learn how to become gay, to being to understand moments of queerness for the possibility they offer rather than as sources of damnation.

My hope in doing this work is to understand where queering our theories, perspectives, and curiosities can help us to live better lives. In my call for queer theorizing, I want to distinguish between where queer theory expands our possibilities for connection and where it is driven by a distance out of touch with the necessity of belonging. Rather than just an account of LGBTQ experiences at borders, this thesis explores the way individuals from a variety of backgrounds theorize their experiences of heteronormativity as it attempts to form the ideal citizen, family, and nation. By attending to the border as a site of identity formation instead of taking for granted the givenness of

identity, my project responds to Judith Butler's request for a "sexuality against identity" (318) with the hope that understanding where individual lives grate against the demands of heteronormativity can denaturalize the hierarchical positioning of sexual identity categories—both straight and LGBTQ. When we take a queer lens that looks beyond identity, we can understand how the political, social, and personal scripts we occupy complicate our ability to do justice. And, when we understand where different ways of being within ourselves, our communities, and our nations are available to us, we have the ability to live differently.

For this reason, my thesis looks to storytelling as lived theorizing. I spent four weeks of June 2019 in El Paso sitting with individuals inside and outside of the LGBTQ community and listening to how their experiences of queerness and interactions with reproductive heteronormativity shaped their relationship to their self, community, and national identity. Though my use of interviews as my research methodology is informed by my background in the social sciences, my method of analysis comes from the humanities. By analyzing these stories through close reading, I attend to these stories in the same way I would attend to literature. Close readings ask us to do more than identify what we know. Instead, close readings ask us to identify how language forms an experience of reading that leads us to a certain meaning. While literary approaches to qualitative analysis are not typical, I believe this approach is valuable for the types of knowing it makes possible. I love literature for the ways it brings us close to human experience through the intimacy of details, connects us to the world through moments that move us, and allows us to draw meaning from the beautiful. By approaching ordinary

stories with the same wonder we approach art, we are able to maintain a reverence for human experience as it exists, outside of just our desire to learn from it.

Though many different locations could have served as sites for this research, I chose El Paso because it is a place that I love and a place where that love has moved me. I spent May of 2018 conducting interviews in El Paso for a storytelling project about human rights at the border. Again and again, the people whom I met challenged how I understood the inevitability of oppression through the ways they managed to choose love within a political system premised upon division and domination. And so, I returned to El Paso to hear more stories and to continue to learn from those models of love.

Critical theory helped me to understand how scripts of domination and supremacy wove racism, misogyny, and homophobia into almost every level of our interpersonal, familial, and national relationships, but the stories of those whom I met in El Paso surprised me by showing me the unlikely ways love managed to triumph anyway. When I had previously thought about the relationship between love and queerness, I placed love in the rainbow typeface of signs and shirts declaring “Love is love” and “love yourself.” But through this research process, theory has been useful in helping me refine my concept of what love is and is not. Where popular culture describes love in nebulous and romantic terms, Iris Murdoch writes that “The love which brings the right answer is an exercise of justice and realism and really *looking*. ... It is a *task* to see the world as it is” and, therefore “love should be inseparable from justice” (91). For Murdoch, love is more than just a feeling or sentiment. She explains:

Love is the general name of the quality of attachment and it is capable of infinite degradation and is the source of our greatest errors; but when it is even partially refined it is the energy and passion of the soul in its search for Good, the force that joins us to Good and to the world through Good (103).

Murdoch's sense of love as an ethic of attention and knowing rooted in seeing the world and others through the lens of justice helped me to understand how queer love functions within the context of the stories I heard.

Because of the way heteronormativity relies on narratives of love to locate men and women into relationships of dominance and submission, the love experienced within the hegemonic discourses is often "capable of infinite degradation and is the source of our greatest errors" (Murdoch 103). By challenging the coherence of the identities which root us in these discourses, queerness invites us to encounter one another by "really looking" (91) at who someone is outside of their relational position. When attention to the individual replaces adherence to a relational script, queerness makes way for Murdoch's love through the ways it unsettles the injustices of heteronormativity.

I returned to El Paso for this project looking for that love at work in the world. I hoped that understanding how Murdoch's sense of love as an ethic toward justice operated in the real world would give me a way forward and help me to understand how love could function in my own life. I wanted to learn something about the way people live together in this world that did more than just confirm my own paranoid style of theorizing. The friendships I have made across my two summers in El Paso, and the stories shared in those moments of coming together, allow me to see what critical theory has often obscured for me: hegemonic relational codes encourage relationships of oppression, but love makes better ways of belonging to one another possible. With a creativity and resilience that surprised my paranoid perspective, the love of those whom I met in El Paso pushed me toward the reparative and helped me to understand the capacity of listening to stories and forming relationships to upend our paradigms and certainties

about what it means to live within a hegemonic and heteronormative society. Spending time with these stories has been a privilege, and I am a better student, friend, and theorist because of what I have learned through the relationships foundational to this thesis.

Just as my theorizing is shaped by the way that I love El Paso, it is also shaped by my position to the city of El Paso. Demographically, El Paso is 82% Latinx, and the racial and ethnic breakdown of the people whom I interviewed is largely consistent with that composition. Writing this thesis is a work of wrestling with the tension between the importance of learning from identities, experiences, and cultures different from my own and acknowledging that my own whiteness and the privilege that accompanies many of my other social positions means that I will never fully understand these experiences, and I am certainly not in the position to speak on behalf of them. I haven't quite decided whether critiquing white supremacy within queer theory and the world that queer theory responds to from the position of my own whiteness is an attempt at humility or an act of hypocrisy. But I am absolutely certain that I will make mistakes.

Though I am writing from a place of love and good intentions, I recognize that love is easier to get wrong than right, and good intentions are not enough. But as hard as it can be love, gives us a way to take up the task of looking at and learning from the world. I attempted the work of this thesis because I believe the work and practice of love are worth engaging in. In "The Idea of Perfection," Murdoch explains: "I have used the word 'attention,' which I borrow from Simone Weil, to express the idea of a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality. I believe this to be the characteristic and proper mark of the active moral agent" (327). Learning from others through love makes

us better, and I am grateful for the compassion and mercies I have been afforded along my journey trying to learn how to do justice within my attempts to get things right.

As a woman I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman, my country is the whole world.

- Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas*

INTRODUCTION

Through an analysis of the stories of individuals who live by the US-Mexican border, this thesis seeks to understand the role that heteronormativity plays in forming the ideal citizen and placing him or her within national communities and relationships structured to maintain the hegemony of the state. The borderland, as a setting, lends itself to this type of analysis because of its unique and contradictory position as the site where the state most explicitly forms his citizens and where the boundaries of citizen and state are the most precarious. While, on one hand, border policy and enforcement functions to “actively participate in producing sexual, racial, class, gender, and cultural categories and link . . . them to broader processes of nation-making and citizenship” (Luibhe and Cantu xvi), the borderland exists, on the other hand, as a place where the mestiza consciousness invites a “movement away from set patterns and goals toward a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes” (Anzaldúa 101). Borders become the site where the sexual and political citizenships assigned by the state are both constructed and contested. When we understand the particularities of how bordering functions to construct and regulate social identities, we can begin to imagine a queer ethic that can undo this regulation.

Before I get into the stories at the center of this endeavor, this section functions to set up the theory that underpins my analysis. To start, I introduce the mainstream political theory work surrounding the organization of the nation-state, and then I explore some of the queer and feminist theory that explores the relationship between the formation of the

nation-state and reproductive heterosexuality. While we often take the relationship between the nation and the state for granted, a complex web of forces actively cooperates to join our idea of nation to the mechanisms of the state. In the US, national identification links the citizen to the state so effectively because instructions on how to belong to the patriarchal “American Family” easily translate into instructions on how to belong to the paternalistic American nation-state. The word “nation” comes from the Latin *nationem* which means birth. In this sense, the national must be continuously birthed and reproduced to be kept alive. Heteronormativity makes the nation feel safe because it roots the national within a stable and predictable mode of relation. To belong to and pledge allegiance to the United States of America is to promise loyalty to the patriarchal and heteronormative forces that act to secure the nation-state. Though patriotism draws its etymology from notions of kinship and bonds of loyalty, in the US context patriotism more often signifies nationalism’s spirit of supremacy and exclusion.

Within mainstream political science, the state is the basic unit of organization. When political scientists theorize and write about the state, they usually mean what Max Weber defines as “a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory.” In other words, the state is the culmination of institutions (such as the government) that controls when and how legal violence (implicit and threatened) is used. Because the state is bound up in the use of force, it often grounds its sovereignty in militarized masculinity and patriarchy. Citizens allow the state a certain level of violence to enforce its rules because we trust that the state will use force in line with our interests against those who act against our interest.

While the state can be pretty clearly understood as a patriarchal, sovereign, unitary, and hegemonic institutionalization of power, the forces that make up the nation as far more amorphous. Where the state functions as an organization of power, the nation serves as a scheme of identification. In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson defines the nation as “an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (6). For Anderson, nations are imagined because they depend on a sense of unity or “communion” among a set of people too wide to ever live together concretely in the way their sense of community imagines (6). Unlike the state whose coherence is based in a material organization of force, the nation’s sense of unity is maintained through social and cultural narratives which rely on patriotism or nationalism to cohere a sense of shared identity. Political theorist Montserrat Guibernau writes that, since national identification often draws from a feeling of what is shared, “being a nation usually implies the attachment to a particular territory, a shared culture and history and the assertion of the right to self determination” (13). At their best, these articulations of nationality rooted in community help us to understand how certain orderings of society can function to make room for loyalty and solidarity. But Guibernau also argues that when the nation and the state align within the nation-state, the citizen’s emotional identification with the nation justifies the citizen’s acceptance of the state’s use of force.

Throughout this thesis, I rely on both queer theory and feminist international relations to understand how gender and sexuality function to fuse identification with the nation to the mechanisms of the state. I find that often the state uses processes of gendering and sexualization to form and place citizens within patriarchal and heteronormative relationships. Insights from feminist international relations allow us to

understand how patriarchy genders individuals and places them within relational roles into positions of dominance and submission. Queer theory enriches the work of feminist theory, in turn, by denaturalizing reproductive heterosexuality as the force that stabilizes relational gender roles and exposing the ways in which the state actively has to enforce heteronormativity in order to legitimize nationalism. Drawing from the work of feminist and queer theory, I center my analysis around two major insights on how heterosexuality, patriarchy, and bordering all work together to form communities that uphold the primacy of the nation-state. First, I argue that the process of national security often starts within the reification of gender roles. Then, I point toward the ways the state maintains these gender roles through tacit and administrative violence rooted in reproductive heteronormativity.

National security depends on citizens operating within patriarchal gender roles. According to feminist political theorist Johanna Kantola, the state has gendered—and primarily masculinist—characteristics. Kantola argues that state sovereignty is constructed patriarchally in the sense that the state rules absolutely over a body that accepts its rule the same way gender requires and reproduces a masculine body legitimized by its position over a feminine body. For the US state to secure its patriarchal position as a sovereign, hegemonic, and unitary authority, it must locate others as obedient, subordinate, and stable subjects. Feminist international relations allows us to understand how gender—as a fluid, relational, and contingent force—constructs men and women and then orients them within the patriarchal roles of dominance and submission necessary for hegemonic citizenship. Cynthia Enloe, one of the germinal thinkers within feminist international relations, writes that “Heterosexism is necessary for genuine

national security” (23). In *Maneuvers*, she argues reproductive heteronormativity becomes the breeding ground for citizenship because children learn allegiance to the paternalistic nation-state within the context of their patriarchal family. The state defines itself as dominant against the submissive and gendered identities of those who make up global society, and then the state secures the citizen by tasking him or her with the civic responsibility to operate within and maintain these hierarchical roles.

Reproductive heteronormativity orients men and women within their respective gender roles. The state utilizes reproductive heterosexuality as a discursive tool that orients the citizen within the patriarchal gender roles that ensure the continued production of the national. Queer theorists David Bell and Jon Binnie’s argues that “*All citizenship is sexual citizenship*, in that the foundational tenets of being a citizen are all inflected by sexualities” (10), and Lauren Berlant argues that this heteronormative mode of relationality is crucial to the nation-state because it enables an American dream that “fuses private fortune with that of the nation: it promises that if you invest your energies in work and family-making, the nation will secure the broader social and economic conditions in which your labor can gain value and your life can be lived with dignity” (4). Queer theory allows us to see that neither the family nor the state is naturally ordered around a patriarchal and violent power—rather the state and family work together to recursively justify the order of the other. In this process, reproductive heterosexuality becomes a tactic of bordering, and static and normative sexual identities emerge as a prerequisites for citizenship.

The national fantasy prescribes heterosexuality as the universal bond that grounds national identification while the state applies force to punish and regulate queerness to

reinforce the centrality of this organization. Children who learn to submit to a patriarchal household learn how to submit to a patriarchal nation. The national citizen accepts this force because any mode of being that challenges the primacy of the heteronormative and paternally ordered family also challenges the primacy of the paternalistically ordered nation. For the nation to be secure, it must be clear about who it includes and excludes, but the fluidity of the border makes this boundary maintenance nearly impossible. The regulation of queerness persists especially at the border because the edges of the nation are the places where its cohesion are the most vulnerable.

In writing this thesis, I am hoping, however, to do more than just identify where patriarchy and reproductive heteronormativity distort the relationships at the center of our communities. Right now, our organization around the state reproduces the hierarchical relationships which make up the patriarchal family as a way of justifying its own hegemonic power. When our views on sexuality are overly centered on where our identity place us, we remain bound in hierarchical modes of relationality. But queerness, taking up Butler's "sexuality against identity" (318), disrupts the stability of our relational locations and forces us to find new ways of being together. When we look to the lived experiences of those at the border—the place where the nation-state is most malleable—we are able to see where the state's mechanisms of oppressive regulation fail and where the persistence and creativity of those in El Paso make better ways of being together possible.

Ultimately, this thesis argues that queerness makes better ways of being together possible by making room for love. Both queer and political theories undersell love as a radical tool for revolution, but storytelling—as a methodology—reminds us why love

matters by rooting our ways of understanding the world in the particular. Patriarchy and reproductivity heteronormativity demand that our relationships be defined by gendered and sexualized logics of who someone ought to be to us, but queerness disrupts these relational scripts and invites relationships that are responsive rather than prescriptive. When we decenter gender and sexuality as the technology through which we understand others, we are pushed to pay attention to the specific of those around us. In this movement away from rigid roles, queerness moves us toward love. Love, then, becomes a way of continuously working toward others despite the structural and social distance. This love is queer because it invites us to see others beyond their social positions within the heterosexual normal.

When queerness undermines the sovereignty of patriarchy within our personal relationships, it undermines the same patriarchy that justifies the violence of the state by mimicking oppressive relational scripts. And, once individual ideas of the nation become misaligned from the domain of the state, an individual's identification with a community detaches from structures of force that purport to act on behalf of that community. In the absence of patriarchy, patriotism becomes a form of love. And when love, rather than nationalism, coheres our communities, relationships becomes the places where hierarchies are disrupted rather than enforced.

“And true to her traditions, the beautiful city sought to hide stark ugliness under beauty, and she decked herself as though for her wedding; her flags streamed out on the breeze in their thousands. With the paraphernalia and pageantry of glory she sought to disguise the true meaning of war.”

- Radclyffe Hall, *The Well of Loneliness*

PART I: FORMING THE NATION-STRAIGHT

In El Paso, the city streets carry the names of states. At the border, America starts at its edges. Country and people are defined by the lines they draw around themselves.

Anzaldúa explains, “A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants” (101). The people who move through El Paso and Juárez breathe a life force of shared duality into the joint cities while an anxious border enforcement attempts to police the queer fluidity of the borderland by creating a rigid sense of our nation. The legalistic and symbolic mechanisms of our border develop as a response to the defiant and complicated reality of El Paso where national, social, and individual identity all defy easy categorization.

As a border city, El Paso is defined by migration, and migration is defined by family. Iliana, an immigration attorney, explains that “At the heart of it, immigration—our immigration system—was created to preserve family unity and promote family unity.” Within the family, the migrant becomes legible as a citizen and an American. Since the family unit provides the gendered education necessary for socializing individuals into obedient citizens, the migrant who falls outside of the white reproductive family unit becomes written into a threat. At many levels, the state uses border-patrolling

as a tool to regulate belonging and citizenship so that they align with the heteronormative family. In this section, I argue that the nation relies upon rigid, binary, and essentialist identities to orient citizens within heteronormative roles whose scripts uphold the hierarchy of the state and justify its use of force. I place this argument into conversation with the stories of immigration and assimilation I gathered in El Paso.

Carlos

Carlos, a retired border patrol agent whom I interviewed, talks about family as if it is a barometer for criminality or threat. He explains that Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) “facilities are meant for single males because that has been the tradition of border patrol apprehensions. Single males, you know, very few single females, never the family units.” In this sense, the setup of detention facilities discursively constitutes the illegal alien as one who is detached—alienated—from a family. Quite literally, there is no room to punish any other type of person.

When I asked Carlos about families who are apprehended crossing the border, he explained that in these cases, “The criminal element is there, or you know that they are using the family units to get their illicit business across, which could be using families to bombard or overwhelm an agent so they can cross their shipments across another area or cross their criminal element or their drugs, or whatever, disguised as a family unit.” In Carlos’s view, there seem to be criminals who might *use* family as a way to breach the laws of the nation, but there are no criminals who *belong* to a family. Family is associated with purity. To belong to a family is to belong to society. Additionally, this purification of family erases the reality of our immigration detention system by ignoring the reality of family detention. There *are* families who are detained. By arguing that the only families

who are detained are those made up of criminals “disguised” as a family, Carlos racializes the family as white by rejecting the legitimacy of any undocumented migrant’s claim to his or her family. In his view, undocumented immigrants can appropriate family, but they cannot be in one because to be in a family is to belong to a community, and therefore, a nation.

My interview with Carlos happened the day after the news broke the story of a secret border patrol Facebook group where CBP agents posted troubling memes laughing about migrant deaths and the conditions faced by children held in detention. During my interview, high-profile Democrats in congress were on a tour of the nearby Clint Detention center. When I asked Carlos about these two events, he said:

The majority of the agents are parents. Most of the agents that I’ve talked to, especially at the Clint Station, have a lot of empathy and they have a hard time with working at the Clint Station because of the situation with the children there. You have children from two years old to fifteen or sixteen, and it’s always hard to see the little ones. They see their kids there. They see their kids in those kids. So, the majority of the agents have a lot of empathy, and they care the best they can for the immigrants. They provide the best care they can.

Similar to how Carlos perceives distance from family as proof of deviance, Carlos makes an argument for the morality of border patrol agents based on their location within a family unit. In Carlos’s view, parenting begets virtue. A parent who cares for their child is elevated to the status of caregiver of all children. Additionally, family relationships become the lens through which empathy becomes legible. CBP agents extend care—not on the basis of personhood—but because their status as parents allows them to extend care within the parameters of parenting. Though Carlos frames this type of empathy as all encompassing, a queer reading that rejects the heteronormative family as a universal

ordering of society recognizes that inclusion based on how well a person fits into certain roles is not inclusion at all.

Carlos's story helps us to understand the way family units make us legible to the state and how heteronormative narratives of family values mediate the terms of that legibility by determining who does and does not have access to the family. Additionally, Carlos shows us how queerness alienates immigrants from the nation-state by creating a position of illegibility where the state cannot imagine a place for the queer within its national family.

Antonio

Antonio, an immigration attorney in El Paso who both identifies as gay and represents LGBTQ clients in asylum cases, demonstrates the way rights-based approaches to LGBTQ issues work to remedy the illegibility of queer migrants within the heteronormative organization of the nation. In order to mitigate the normative threat that queer individuals pose to the state, immigration laws and other asylum proceedings often serve to contain queerness within a secure identity category that does not threaten the relation scripts foundational to the nation-state.

Legal scholar Susan Berger argues that US asylum rights are extended to members of the LGBTQ community only when queer individuals can prove their sexual divergence remains in line with the accepted notions of what a homosexual is. Gay men are expected to be campy, and lesbian women are expected to be radicalized feminists. Within this universalization of identity around an essentialized trait, "the critical examination of how 'difference is established, how it operates, how and in what ways it constitutes subjects who see and act in the world' is lost" (Berger 679). Ultimately, this

push toward establishing coherent oppressed identities reinforces the paternalistic status of the United States as a protector. Berger asserts that the asylum process “organizes and interprets the experiences of heterosexual and lesbian women in ways that speak to hegemonic systems” (681) by forcing those who seek asylum to prove their vulnerability arises from a minority identity and can only be addressed within the civilizing and modernizing society of the United States.

When immigrants are accepted into the US because of their essentialized vulnerability, the US retains its power as a patriarchal and paternal figure. Essentializing LGBTQ immigrants based on a vulnerable sexualized identity feminizes them as a way of enforcing the masculinized force and authority of the state. To ensure that vulnerability remains essentialized, asylum law tames queerness in terms of LGBTQ identities. Antonio explained to me the ways in which identity-based rights perpetuate these identity-based conceptions of sexuality out of line with how individuals often understand their own experiences. He told me:

In Ecuador I remember speaking to one client, who had been raped by a police officer at gunpoint. I asked him if he was gay, and he said, “No, I’m masculine.” And I thought, “Okay, that’s not what I asked you, but I understand you have a different cultural orientation.” And so I had to explain how imputed characteristics work, even though I’m pretty sure he is gay and is just not out to himself. You just have to work with people’s frame of references where they’re at, and then help them to understand where you’re coming from, and what it may mean to their judge so that there’s a bridge of understanding when we’re having a conversation about what we think what what’s going on in their particular cases. So, in that case, I explained to him:

“This is what I’m going to say to the judge. I believe that your persecutors have had an imputed perception of who you are, you may not yourself identify as gay, but they may have believed that you were a person who’s gay, and that’s part of the reason why they felt like they could intimidate you this way and cause harm to you because they thought you might be more susceptible to submitting to them if you

were persecuted in this particular way. I need you to understand that if you're not there and that's not who you are, that this is how the mechanics of this works legally, that it is possible to be considered part of a social group, or perceived as a part of a social group, even if you're not. I'm not passing judgment on where you're at in your own life.”

Antonio’s story demonstrates the tension between the essentialist notions of sexuality written into law and prevalent among LGBTQ activism and the constructionist tendencies of queer theory. At the most basic level, constructionist notions of sexuality are rooted in the Foucauldian idea that sexuality is discursively produced at the sites where power is enacted within a society and does not exist outside of those power structures, while essentialist constructions of sexuality are rooted in the Lady Gagian idea that gay people are “born this way.” In practice, this distinction means that theorists often consider how political and social forces determine the way we access identity while popular activism considers how political and social forces respond to existing identities.

Essentialist notions of sexuality ground the asylum law that Antonio practices. To qualify for asylum, Antonio explains that his client has to prove his sexuality—understood as an imputed characteristic—meant that he was part of a particular social group and was discriminated against on that basis. The essentialist rights-based approach required Antonio’s client to prove he was gay despite the fact that his “frame of reference,” or cultural discourse, might not include “gay” the way that American law does. By placing him within the discourse of American law, Antonio’s client becomes gay at the places where state authority is performed and enacted. Rights discourse falls into the domain of the state, and as a result of this proximity, rights claims rely on the adherence to identity categories in line with the state’s own position.

While Antonio's client does not see his own sexuality as aligned with a feminized social position, Antonio's work as a lawyer genders his client by positioning him within the demasculinized identity category of "gay." In doing this, Antonio positions his client's sexuality within state hegemony by presenting it to the state as proof of a feminized vulnerability—first when he declares "This is what I am going to say to the judge," and then when he contextualizes his client's sexuality in terms of "what it may mean to their judge." Though Antonio assured his client that he's "not passing judgement on where you're at in your own life," his work as a lawyer, and thus as agent of state authority, organizes his client's experience of sexual assault in a way that essentializes his client on the basis of his vulnerability. His access to the national depends on his ability to prove a subjugated place within it. If Antonio's client can submit to the nation as a demasculinized and vulnerable victim, then the nation can position itself against Antonio's client at the head of its own patriarchal and heteronormative order.

Antonio's legal strategy of using sexuality to position his client within a position of vulnerability reflects the hegemony of the globalized international system in addition to the internal hierarchies of the state. In *Queer Globalizations*, Cruz-Malavé and Manalansan argue that national anxiety around queer cultures and identities often reflect broader anxieties about where citizens belong in the globalized world which exists beyond national boundaries. They write:

While globalization is seen to liberate and promote local sexual differences, the emergence, visibility, and legibility of these differences are often predicated in globalizing discourses on a developmental narrative in which a premodern, pre-political, non-Euro-American queerness must consciously assume the burden of representing itself to others as "gay" in order to attain political consciousness, subjectivity, and global modernity. (6)

As Cruz-Malavé and Manalansan argue, requiring migrants to step out of positions of ambiguity and into the Western conception of “gay” becomes a way to stabilize the West’s position to the migrant they allow into their borders. Migration laws delineate a relationship through which the West functions as an Enlightened, liberal, and tolerant state which rescues migrants from the backwards, oppressive, and undeveloped world. Through this liberation of the “oppressed” migrant, the Western state secures its own identity as a paternalistic and liberating force.

Queer legal scholar Lisa Duggan argues that rights-based claims like these are dangerous because they “require us to specify who is and is not a ‘member’ of our group” (9), which implies that vulnerability is a static characteristic of social membership rather than a fluid and relational construction. In addition, Bell and Binnie argue that these “rights claims articulated through appeals to citizenship carry the burden of compromise in particular ways; this demands the circumscription of ‘acceptable’ modes of being a sexual citizen” (3). Immigration policy becomes a site where this regulation intensifies because, as Berlant argues, “It is precisely under transnational conditions that the nation becomes a more intense object of concern and struggle” (13). The fluidity of transnationalism threatens the sovereignty of the state, so the state responds by intensifying its regulation of ambiguity. At the locations where national identity is most insecure, the state must work the hardest to continually assert its position as masculine, paternalistic, and thus, dominant.

Ultimately, the state can manage homosexuality if practices of homosexuality are normative in their mimicking of patriarchy, but queerness threatens the threads that holds citizen to nation. Popular LGBTQ political movements respond to the productive

demands of heteronormativity by insisting that gay people can also produce citizens. On the one hand, this process of framing queerness as a mode of citizenship gave Antonio's client access to asylum status and the critical and life-saving repercussions of that status. On the other hand, this identity-based and essentialist treatment of sexuality depoliticizes the nature of the sexual violence. According to feminist political scientist Laura Shepherd, "Violence establishes social relationships... it marks and makes bodies ... it constitutes subjects even as it makes them incomplete" (2). By implying that Antonio's client was raped as a result of being gay, asylum law ignores how violence serves as a tool to author subordinated gendered and sexualized relational roles. Instead of recognizing how perpetrators create homosexuals as a subordinate and vulnerable class by responding to a perceived lack of masculinity with sexual violence, identity-based asylum law presumes that being gay makes someone inherently vulnerable. Asylum law's separation of political violence from ordinary violence ignores the way that all violence functions politically to orient relationships around exerted power.

Queer and feminist theories are valuable in deconstructing the schemas which demand certain identification with vulnerable. These critical theories help us to understand the sexual violence committed against Antonio's client by considering how and why power functions to create certain identities. When Antonio told his client:

you may not yourself identify as gay, but they may have believed that you were a person who's gay, and that's part of the reason why they felt like they could intimidate you this way.... because they thought you might be more susceptible to submitting to them if you were persecuted in this particular way

he is arguing that the men who raped Antonio did so because he was powerless.

However, poststructuralist theories of gender and sexuality from feminists such as Butler and Shepherd, which argue that the material violence of gender result from its discursive

and violent performances, allow us to understand that sexual violence creates powerlessness by forcing someone into a feminized role. By considering sexual violence and the legislation that responds to it as political tactics that organize gender, feminist and queer theories allow us to see that violence enforces power rather than results from powerlessness. When we can see how violence—rather than any immutable characteristic—normalizes relationships of domination and submission, we can begin to understand that relational oppression may not be our only available mode of relationality.

In Antonio's story, we see the ways identarian and essentialized constructions of sexual citizenship function to fuse the nation with the state. By legislating a gendered and sexualized citizenship for national belonging that locates LGBTQ individuals within vulnerable and feminized roles, the state asserts and enforces its sovereignty as masculine and thus, bound with force. Immigration policy, and its bordering, serves as a prime site for this process of national construction because determining the terms in which someone is granted citizenship allows the state to control the way the citizen relates to the nation-state. Though LGBTQ political movements have successfully secured queer people rights and inclusion within society, their identity-based approaches often legitimize the anxious nation's aggressive regulation of identity under the guise of security and accept homosexuality as indicative of an inherent marginalization.

Victoria

Talking to Victoria about her experience in the military allowed me to understand how patriotism relies on certain practices of sexuality and gender to link the nation and the state. Just as a gendered and sexualized citizenship locates individuals within the

nation-state, the practice of a patriotic and civic gender and sexuality also allows the citizen to secure and defend the nation-state. While immigration laws and border policies create a national identity that appoints the state as a patriarch in control of national force, US military strategy seeks to assert a masculinized soldier as the protector of national security. Enloe asserts that “Militarization requires both women’s and men’s acquiescence, but it privileges masculinity” (3). She argues that the military doesn’t just exist as a patriarchy, but a patriarchy rooted in a reproductive heteronormativity that reproduces imperialistic relations through force and violence. The inclusion of queer soldiers within the military with the repeal of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell has not changed the heteronormative and patriarchal ordering of the military because LGBTQ soldiers are integrated within a violent and masculinist paragon of citizenship that constructs nationalism as submission and obedience to the state’s use of force. Militarism, regardless of the sexuality of soldiers, advances masculinity—and the expectation of force that comes with it—as the ultimate source of state power. Militarization is central to the cohesion of the nation-state because the development of the soldier as the ultimate patriot links national identification directly to the state’s use of force. Love of a community becomes distorted—bound to the acceptance of the violence used in the name of that community.

Today, years detached from activism around Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, inclusion within the military continues to be predicated on inclusion within heteronormative patriarchy. Victoria explained how—in her experience as a lesbian within the military—she was accepted by her peers because of the ways she was able to live up to patriarchal standards of the soldier. She says:

For me, the way identified—the way I identify, actually—I identify as more masculine. And so even being in the military, I was accepted as one of the "bros." And so, for me, it was more of like, I had to fit in with the guys. And then I did fit in with the guys, but it wasn't an option to not. And so, not to toot my own horn or anything, but I always kept up on my physical activities. I always strived to meet the male standard. And that's not something that females usually would do.

In rising to a standard that valued performances of masculinity, Victoria was able to inhabit the privileges of the patriarchy. Victoria's status as a woman and a lesbian did not threaten a hegemonic order that valued masculinity because she performed to the expected standard of masculinity. When she acted on behalf of the nation through her role as soldier, she did so as an agent of the masculinized and unitary state. As a result, she "was accepted as one of the 'bros,'" and her success in this capacity enforced the masculinist construction of soldier and the image of nation he protects.

In the popular LGBTQ rights movement, advocacy around military inclusion has been framed in terms of a patriotism rooted in a similar patriarchy that values soldiers for their ability to be men. LGBTQ rights activists who organized for the repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell argued for an inclusion of queer individuals within the military based on a model of a gay patriot. The movement relies on narratives of (mostly) men who served in the army and emphasizes their bravery, selflessness, and service as qualifying of rights and recognition. This framing invests its arguments in a citizenship based on military participation: people who are gay and want to serve in the military are honorable and deserve respect because the military is honorable and deserves respect. Stories and iconography that portray individuals within the LGBTQ community as ideal soldiers situate them within hegemonic constructions of masculinity. Just like heteronormative patriarchy frames marital love as the domination of men over women, masculinist militarism frames offer a love of country tied to use of state force over those who require

discipline. In its normative approach, this framing legitimizes the military industrial complex as an organizing force of nationhood.

Though the repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell means that, as a lesbian, Victoria was able to join the army, she still cannot be in the army *as* a lesbian. During our interview, Victoria told me, "When you're in the military, yes, you're still a person, but you're not really who you are." Victoria explained:

When I was in the military, I don't think I was looking for anything that had to do with my personal identity because I didn't really have an identity while I was in the military. So as far as I identify, I'm multicultural. I identify as black, but I wasn't looking for things that were about any of the parts of the culture that I am, it was just military, military, military.

Victoria's story illustrates the danger within political narratives that equate inclusion within structures to the transformation of those structures. As Warner argues, inclusion is not "synonymous with equality and freedom" (xix). Including lesbians within the military does not queer the nation-state. Rather, by taming divergence through the erasure of particularity, the military polices identity to ensure that its soldiers secure, rather than threaten, the heteronormative nation. Through erasing aspects of the soldier's identity which do not fall in line with the patriarch-soldier-patriot, the military ensures that a soldier's patriotism extends the same homogenous nationalism central to Kantola's construction of the state as a homogenized and unitary sovereign actor. In this way, assimilation exchanges a queer's ability to challenge heteronormative and patriarchal norms for the security of being included within those norms.

Victoria's story helps us to understand how sexuality constitutes and borders, not only because the army base she served at sits right outside of El Paso, but also because the military serves to protect the dualistic binaries and borders that make up the nation.

Victoria explains how her service in the military enforced the patriarchal and heteronormative relational scripts that Enloe describes:

When we look at LGBTQ and even lesbian relationships—right because I'm an open lesbian—some people like that Butch, femme, dynamic. Other people are just like, “No, I don't really like that.” But I like that. And again, I think that's because I'm trained by the military to see in terms of black and white. And that's not even just with gender and sexuality. I see black and white with everything. And that's something that I'm trying to unravel. Right now, within myself, as I'm out of the military.

The military—in training Victoria to act on behalf of the nation-state—trained Victoria to enforce the binaries fundamental to the makeup of the nation. In order to protect the national, Victoria stepped into a masculinist role to confirm the patriarchy of the state. Though on paper her lesbianism threatens the heteronormativity of the state, functionally she fulfills heteronormative roles in a way that undermines any subversive tendencies of her queerness. In Victoria's relationships, “black and white” thinking functions as a tactic of bordering by creating rigid gender roles in line with the heteronormative hegemony of state power. Heteronormativity provides a clear and binary script—either you use force to defend the nation or, through obedience, you submit to it.

Like Antonio's story, Victoria's story allows us to see the danger within popular and assimilationist LGBTQ responses that emphasize inclusion within the nation-state. While liberal polices often respond to individual precarity and social vulnerability by situating individuals within a protected identity status, the rigidity of this categorization limits the available ways that individuals can relate to one another and the nation. Sexuality, when reduced to categories of identity, authors gender by positioning individuals into roles of dominance or submission based on relational vulnerabilities. Reproductive heteronormativity socializes us to believe that hegemonic and patriarchal

structures of power are the fundamental units of organization through which we must relate to one another. This socialization legitimizes the state's monopoly on the national and allows the citizen to buy into the violence of the state when it is conducted by a soldier whose hegemonic masculinity establishes him as a credible patriot. Similarly, national belonging, when attached to the state through patriarchal relationships of paternalism and vulnerability, reproduces the sexualized and gendered citizens necessary to populate the hegemonic state.

Queer activism has tried to challenge assimilationist agendas based in inclusion within the military by challenging the underlying patriarchal value system at the center of militaristic patriotism. Instead of appealing to militaristic American values as they are constructed in narratives of patriotic soldiers, queer theorists and activists surrounding Don't Ask, Don't Tell advance an alternative queer nationality whose collectivity was based on queer relationships free of hegemonic ordering (Berlant and Freeman). As a foil to the popular LGBTQ rights movement for inclusion, the anti-assimilationist organization Queer Nation protested with drag queens who paraded the streets with signs reading, "Not every boy dreams of being a marine." In contrast to the popular LGBTQ movement's construction of the homosexual as a patriot, man, and soldier, the queer anti-assimilationist movement frames itself against masculinist ideals of worth and identity. Organizations such as Dyke Action Machine launched an anti-military campaign where they parodied and drew attention to the toxicity, and often covert homoeroticism, of military propaganda by releasing their own propaganda with portrayals of femininity undermining masculinity (Highleyman). Through the assertion of a queer nationality, queer activists challenged the union of the militarized state and the nation by creating an

alternate “space of non-identification with the national fantasy of the white male citizen” (Berlant and Freeman 220). Rather than rejecting the sort of unity that comes with the US national, Queer Nation functions to rewrite what national identification might look like.

Adri and Camilla

Adri, a queer and trans activist in El Paso, demonstrated how government institutions rely on binary modes of gender as a way of bordering citizens already within the state. Once, when Adri was pulled over for speeding, they said a “cop started very intentionally misgendering me during the entire interaction. And I felt completely unsafe.” Another time, when Adri was taken in and processed for another traffic violation, the police who processed them were angry throughout the processing and kept having to switch protocol because the guards could not figure out the right way to process Adri outside of clearly gendered scripts. According to Adri, the process “was a super dehumanizing experience. Jail always is. I wasn't in there for a very long time, but even in that experience, I got a ton of transphobia from all five people that were working there at the time.” When crossing the border, Adri experiences a similar tension with CBP agents struggling to respond to their gender presentation: “Everybody always gets through CBP faster than me, even if I'm the first person in line. And even if they don't say anything outwardly transphobic, they really do keep me there for an excessive period of time usually.” Because Adri's non-binary gender does not provide them with a clear place within the paradigm of men who protect the nation and women who are obedient to it, agents of the state struggled to situate Adri in a clear civic role.

The same queerness that alienates Adri from the nation-state alienates them from their family as well. Adri explained that that their isolation from their family had the most

tangible impact in their interactions with the legal system. Growing up, their queerness alienated Adri from their family because, “my family was never okay with my queer identity. When I came out as a lesbian, or when I came out as bi they weren't okay with it. When I came out as trans, they weren't okay with it.” Because of their alienation from family, Adri says they have had to rely on the parents of their friends. They told me that two of their best friends:

have really filled in family roles and family support structures, with themselves individually, but also making me a part of their families in some ways. Both of their moms are people that I call when I need help. Both of their moms have gotten me out of trouble with the law or trouble with like a car accident, things like that. So they're really the people that I've turned to for not only my identity, but also just like practical family things that I lost because of my identity.

Because Adri's gender nonconformity disrupts their relational roles within family and state, Adri's queerness alienates them from these organizations. But Adri's dependence on their friends' parents makes it clear that this alienation from family care and support isn't sustainable. Adri explains that “anytime that I am in a situation where somebody is looking at my driver's license, I feel unsafe.” The very nonconformity that alienates Adri from community structures also increases their precarity and makes networks of support and protection even more crucial.

Though the process of alienation is most explicit within the immigration system, various agencies of the state are all structured to accommodate individuals made legible within family structures. Camilla, a worker within federal housing in El Paso, explained to me that much of their response to homelessness in El Paso relies on family units to provide assistance:

I really do believe that it has to do with our culture and the close-knit family households. You don't want your family to experience homelessness at a shelter

level. I really do believe that's what it is. When we've seen households who become homeless for the first time, really the neighborhood comes to help them, family members come to help them, and they just don't end up in our shelters. And so that's kind of what we see. So, if my brother and his family were to become homeless for whatever reason, I'd probably have them come live with me before they would go to a shelter.

Because the state relies on the family to unit to localize care, those who are alienated from the family unit risk being alienated from the state's care as well.

Adri and Camilla's stories demonstrate how the state's designation of the family as the site through which it interacts with the citizen and gender as the mechanism for those interactions sets up a paradox. The state's inability to interact with Adri's nonbinary gender shows how deeply the state relies on binary and heteronormative gender roles to script its interactions with citizens, while Camilla's story shows how the state is often limited to interactions through family. Considering the ways that queerness often alienates individuals from the care that the family unit provides, queer individuals are often more reliant on state intervention to provide social service. However, because this queerness interrupts the state's ability to access the queer citizen, the state is unable to provide those services.

The stories within this section allow us to understand how sexual orientation and gender function as regulatory mechanisms of the violent and militaristic state by using identity paradigms as the parameters to construct, grant, and practice citizenship. When embedded into national hegemony, "The logic of identity is a logic of boundary defining which necessarily produces a subordinated other" (Seidman 130). First, in Carlos's story, we see how immigration policies and border enforcement rely on a morality and sense of "Americanness" steeped in patriarchal hegemony and reproductive heteronormativity to

recursively differentiate between and construct the virtuous citizen and the threatening alien as identity paradigms. Then, Antonio and Victoria's stories demonstrate how assimilationist rights-based strategies function to include LGBTQ individuals within the category of the virtuous citizen in ways that often reinforce the patriarchal and heteronormative values that underpin these identities and construct them as opposite and exclusive categories. Finally, in Adri and Camilla's stories, we see how the state's location of the citizen within the family alienates queer individuals from the gendered scripts needed to interact with the state and the domestic position from which to interact with the state from.

Though my analysis of these stories draws critical attention to some of the heteronormative schemas reflected in how Carlos, Antonio, Victoria, Adri, and Camilla articulate sexuality, I want to be clear that analysis is not an accusation. Looking to stories as a way of understanding sexuality matters, because, as sociologist Ken Plummer argues in *Telling Sexual Stories*, "Identities are built around sexuality; an experience becomes an essence; and the new stories that are told and written about homosexuality hold it all together" (86). Stories do more than just give us a way of understanding sexuality—the act of telling stories about sexuality gives meaning to sexuality by shaping it into identity. But Plummer reminds us that "The world of stories is much larger than a mere focus on narrative—overflowing to the social and political conditions that generate some stories and not others, enabling some to be heard and not others" (31). Instead of just reflecting certain social realities, storytelling gives us a glimpse into the social reality that creates stories. In identifying how heteronormativity works through the stories featured in this section and throughout this thesis, I am speaking far more about the

hegemonic discourses which form each subject through the stories that they tell rather than the speakers themselves.

This form of queer critique and analysis allows us to see how homophobic border policies, and the LGBTQ activism that responds to these policies, often reify rigid identity categories to soothe national anxieties, but—like the counterstance Anzaldúa cautions against—this mode of criticism “is not a way of life” (Anzaldúa 100). Simply pointing to the dangers of heteronormativity and the failure of LGBTQ activism to properly respond to these dangers does little to respond to the material wounds caused by homophobia. But when we see the attachment of the citizen to the patriarchal and heteronormative as produced, we can recognize that militaristic nationalism is not the only possible way of displaying loyalty to a nation. In *Thought and Change*, Ernest Gellner argues that “Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist” (169). Once we deconstruct the violence of nationalism by deconstructing the hegemonic American Family that underpins it, queerness becomes a tool to reimagine what the nation could be.

“I understood, in a very dimly lit way, that I would need to find the place where my own life could be reconciled with itself. And I knew that had something to do with love.”

- Jeanette Winterson, *Why Be Happy When You Can Be Normal?*

PART II GOING OUT AND COMING HOME

El Paso and Juárez are nicknamed Sister Cities. Though there is much that separates them—physically, a wall, but also the wounds of a global order which impacts the social, economic, and political order of both cities differently—each city depends on the other. In naming the other family, both cities inherit the obligation of that relationship. Family becomes a technology of wholemaking, an attempt to reject the unnatural division of a rigid border placed over the fluidity of the Rio Grande. Though the reproductive heteronormative family is certainly problematic in its production of hierarchal roles, kinships remains necessary because it instructs us on how to be together. A model of queer kinship must hold in tension the anti-pastoral reality that any mode of being together opens us up to suffering and oppression and the reality that—regardless of what’s hard about togetherness—community makes queer lives livable.

Unlike activists within the popular LGBTQ movement, queer theorists have resisted agendas based on political inclusion within the heteronormative state. At its core, queer theory rejects the primacy of the heteronormative family as the building block of society by imaging alternative ways of being together. However, queer theorists differ in their sense of what mode of kinship can best escape the violence of heterosexuality. Often, a movement away from heterosexual relationships is followed by a movement away from all relationships. Notably, Judith Butler, in “Is Kinship Always Already

Heterosexual?” challenges what queer kinship might mean in a society dominated by discourses of marriage equality. She asks, “Does the turn toward marriage make it thus more difficult to argue in favor of viability of alternative kinship arrangements and for the well-being of the ‘child’ in any number of social forms?” (Butler 17). Berlant and Warner echo Butler’s anxiety about tying kinship to existing family structures and explain, “Making a queer world has required the development of intimacy that bears no necessary relation to domestic sphere, to kinship, to couple form, to property, or to nation” (171). In their own discussion of sexual citizenship, Bell and Binnie argue that just expanding the notion of who counts as family isn’t enough because it suggests that “to retreat into the family-space is a necessary strategy for citizen status—something that closes down ways of living and loving that don’t accord with the model of family no matter how it is expanded” (5). Though queer theory is united in its criticism of reproductive heteronormativity’s hegemonic demands of family, queer theorists struggle and disagree on providing an alternative form for kinship.

The queer imagination asks us: How can we be together outside the relationships of domination and submission prescribed by heterosexuality? What options do we have for relationships beside the sitcom-shaped family? Whom should we love? How should we love them? In this section, I argue that queer kinship is more than just a flight from the oppressions of heterosexual organizations. Instead, queerness functions as a tool for those marginalized by heteronormativity to reconstitute—rather than retreat from—the same kin-based and familial relationships structured to reproduce the hegemonic state. While the queer paradises and escapes imagined by much of queer theory are useful as spaces that inform consciousness raising and equip LGBTQ individuals to imagine what

other modes of relationality can exist outside of reproductive heteronormativity, these models of queer kinship are most useful when they provide a way back into—rather than away from—the communities that queer individuals are embedded within.

Queer Theorists

The imagination of queer kinship and queer spaces often started with radical lesbian feminists who envisioned kinship networks centered around women. Radical lesbians within this strain of queer theory argue that lesbianism functions as a political choice that resists the hegemonic relationality of heterosexuality. In her deeply influential “Compulsory Heterosexuality and the Lesbian Existence,” Adrienne Rich argues that heterosexuality is not merely the expectation of men and women to relate sexually; it is often the demand that this relation takes the societally sanctioned form of a powerful man dominating a vulnerable woman. Since compulsory heterosexuality normalizes heterosexual relationships ordered around dominance and submission, women are left no way to relate to men sexually or socially except from a subjugated position. Rich presents lesbian existence as a political tool against male domination because it refuses to allow men to trap women into this compulsory subjugatory relationship. Additionally, a lesbian existence expands the opportunity for female relationships beyond sexual exchange or marriage. According to Rich, a lesbian existence is not merely an escape from male relationships; it exists also as a movement toward female ones.

In “Lesbianism: An Act of Resistance” Cheryl Clarke echoes these sentiments and argues that lesbianism is a political act because it serves as to reject relationships of subjugation—both racist and heterosexual. In refusing to be the subject of heterosexuality, the lesbian thwarts the ability of the man to impose colonizing

relationships upon her. Thus, the man is disempowered as colonizer. Instead, of perpetrating heteronormativity's colonizing relationships, lesbianism offers women a place for bonding and relationships outside of powered hierarchy. Within her "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," Audre Lorde describes the erotic as a force beyond sexual performance that binds women together through creative and fulfilling energy. Lorde argues that contemporary society has isolated women from the power of their eroticism by framing it as suspicious and contingent upon male consumption. When women are made to distrust their eroticism, their sexuality is diminished to a pornography of sensation rather than a sensuality of emotion and power. In sharing the erotic through female-driven spaces, women are able to share meaningful experiences with others and are given access to deep joy.

Though he is not a lesbian, Foucault, in his "Friendship as a Way of Life," complements strains of radical lesbian feminists. Foucault argues that love and companionship, not sex, are the most disruptive part of homosexuality. Homosexuality offers a way of relation outside of the institutionalization of desire and centers on forging relation outside of the sanctioned paths and means for relation. Like Rich, Clarke, and Lorde, Foucault argues that queerness expands our possibilities for relationships by expanding how we relate—not just who we relate to—when gendered subordination is no longer the expectation. While heteronormativity emphasizes the monogamous, sexual, reproductive, and submissive relation between a man and a woman as the primary site of social relations and personal fulfillment, radical lesbian feminism and Foucault's emphasis on friendship unsettles the centrality of exclusive sexual relationships by acknowledging other ways and contexts in which we desire one another.

Thinkers within queer theory's anti-social turn take a markedly different approach to re-imagining kinship. While lesbian feminists address the issue of patriarchal and oppressive relationships by rejecting gender and gender-roles as the basis of romantic and social formation, anti-social theorists challenge the notion that same-sex relationships escape heteronormative power dynamics. In "Is the Rectum a Grave?," Leo Bersani rejects the notion that homosexuality is intrinsically democratizing and exposes the sites at which homosexual relations perpetuate—rather than subvert—powered, heteronormative, and hegemonic relationships. Rather than redeeming or insisting on a homosexuality that is democratic and reforming, he argues that sex needs to be considered for the ways it offers a space of shattering and destruction. He urges for a queer theory that rejects homosexual sex as inherently liberatory and instead considers the role of shame, power, and oppression within sexual relations. Drawing from Bersani, Michael Warner argues that queers should not try to frame homosexuality as something that is good or moral. Rather, Warner argues that queerness offers a way to lean into shame and accept it as a part of all sex and relationships. Where lesbian feminists imagine queer kinships in a pastoral scene somewhere far away from the oppressive organizations of heterosexuality, anti-social theorists often paint gay bars and club as their site of queer kinships and countercultures.

Manny

Manny started DJing at gay bars in El Paso in 1970, the summer after the Stonewall riots happened in New York. Manny said Stonewall, "didn't just have an effect in New York, but everywhere. It's just like, it almost seemed like the police got this message that the bar was going to be our safe haven. It was like a truce. It was like, okay,

when you're in here, you can do whatever you want.” In reflection, he describes those times as some of the happiest in his life where music connected him to a brand-new community and he “got to make friends with a bunch of different kinds of folks from all walks of life.” For Manny, the gay bars he DJed at (mostly the OP and the Pet Shop) were like entering a whole new part of the world. He explained that while “everybody else was watching *Saturday Night Fever* and wearing bell bottoms and the flowy pants and all the rest of it,” El Paso’s gays bars were defined by a queer Latino subculture where “it was all about your hair.” And, unlike the gay bars in other parts of the country, Manny says El Paso’s were attended by men and women from all over the community; in El Paso, gay bars “became the community center.” Manny explains that El Paso’s proximity to the border heightened the sense of escape the bars could offer. For his friends who use to come in from Juárez for a night out, Manny says be able to cross over to the US side of the border—where it was more acceptable to be gay—was like knowing there was “alternative universe close by that you could just walk into and be safe.”

But, like the gay bar scene in most of the world, the culture in El Paso changed when the AIDs epidemic hit. Manny describes DJing during this time like throwing “a party on the Titanic” and explains:

it was terrible, just like everywhere else. And living through that time, it was shocking. Everybody was just like hanging on the news, wondering what's going on now. And remember, things like the announcement of the testing and, you know, going and getting tested and all the things. But we didn't have good news sources. So it was just a lot of fear and misinformation.

Where gay clubs once offered an escape from the horrors of the world, the AIDs epidemic both increased homophobia in the media and in popular culture and heightened the danger within the counter-cultural spaces that gay men relied on for community and

escape such as gay-clubs and bathhouses. And just like the AIDs epidemic had an enormous impact on the everyday life of queer individuals, the AIDs epidemic also shaped queer theory and laid the foundational for the anti-social turn. In “Is the Rectum a Grave?,” Bersani explains how panic about AIDs spreading into the “general public” intensified the perceived social conflict between queers and the American families who felt threatened by gay sexual immorality. Within the LGBTQ community, social panic also led to the internalizing and redistribution of shame where more privileged gay men framed their sexuality as a sanitized category of identity apart from the act of heterosexuality in order to separate themselves from queers being vilified for having unhealthy, unsafe, and unclean sex perceived by popular culture as implicated in spreading HIV.

As LGBTQ individuals lost the feeling that queer spaces could offer the safety and community that early lesbian feminists dreamed of, theorists in the anti-social turn took a darker turn. In their reflection on responses to the AIDs epidemic, Leo Bersani and Adam Philips write that “to be stricken with a life-threatening disease as a direct result of having sex with another man can hardly fail to reactivate at least some of the shame that even the proudest of gay men probably felt when they first discovered their sexual tastes” (32). Where queer theory had once been about arguing about the liberating power of queerness, anti-social theory focused on the death drive and argued for an understanding of sex as “an orgasmic embrace of annihilation” (Bersani and Philips 35), where individuals chased sex for the way it could destroy their own egos and reject the reproductive heterosexual paradigm of coupled, intimate, and fulfilling sex.

Outside of theory, Manny explains that for him, this time was similarly marked by “hedonism.” He explains that, “gay people are the pioneers of everything. Anything that was out in the world was also here in the clubs,” and drug and alcohol abuse skyrocketed in the places that were once sanctuaries. One moment during the height of the epidemic sticks out to him He says:

“Don't Cry for Me Argentina” was blaring over the speakers, and at a certain moment in time, when that song is playing, we triggered the confetti cannons and the strobes are going and the strobes are perfectly aligned to slow the descent of the confetti as it falls down on to the people dancing below. So it's flash, crash, flash, crash and then the chorus—Don't Cry for Me, Argentina. And I looked down there, and you can smell the marijuana smoke, you can smell the poppers. People are already really all out, as far as how they're dressed, and all the crazy things. And I knew it couldn't go on that way anymore anyway. You know, even if there wasn't any AIDs, it couldn't go on. If it wasn't risky sexual behavior, it was the drugs, you know, or something else.

Stories like Manny's demonstrate much of what was at stake in the AIDs epidemic.

Queer theory makes it very clear how the state's investment within reproductive heteronormativity shaped and facilitated the crisis. Because the state viewed men suffering from AIDs as threats to the “general public” made up of those who fit safely inside heterosexual family units, the state put more effort into alienating potential queer threats than into looking for a cure or investing in care or treatment.

Manny's story helps us to learn something about the relationships between sexuality, precarity, and kinship. In many ways, the kinship at the center of the pre-AIDs club scene was made possible by precarity because of the ways the precarity of queer sexualities forced LGBTQ individuals outside of the public and into gay clubs like the OP and the Pet Shop. The added dimension of the border also shaped how this kinship functioned. While the heteronormativity of the Mexican side of the border increased the

precarity experienced LGBTQ Mexicans and drove them into El Paso, the same culture increased the feelings of kinship within these spaces by uniting those in the scene within a specifically Latinx queer subculture.

But the larger story of the AIDS epidemic and Manny's story in specific also point to the where queer kinship and community aren't always enough to mitigate the impacts of some vulnerabilities that come with being gay. Though gay bars could remain apart from the homophobic public and provide a valuable space for community removed from some of the public's more explicit violence, they could not shield queer people from the violence of reproductive heteronormativity which damned a large population of people to die in the name of national security. Additionally, the same vulnerability that brought queer people into these spaces brought substance abuse and the additional dangers of addiction.

The substance abuse that plagues queer spaces and the violent language of some anti-social theory—whose aestheticism often toes the line of reframing sex as a means of self-abuse—highlights the danger of framing queer spaces and relationships as escapes. While anti-social theorists are right to point out that exclusive and monogamous relationships, whether heterosexual or homosexual, will ultimately fail to live up to the false heteronormative promises of personal fulfillment, their detached hedonisms fail to offer an alternate with the capability of sustaining individuals in the dearth of any meaningful alternatives.

Brenda

Brenda, who runs El Paso's LGBTQ community center, is wary of how narratives about gay bars and cultures as safe havens for the LGBTQ community persist today. She

explains that, though she acknowledges that the narrative “is true to some degree, but they’re gay havens that are filled with dangers.” She offered me a metaphor to explain this tension. According to Brenda, trying to escape to a gay bar is:

like going into the beautiful castle, but the beautiful castle has a dungeon, and it has hostile people chasing you through it and it has a slippery staircase, so you might fall down and break your neck, so it for sure has some hazards. But is it protection from the elements? Hell yes, it is. Is it safety from the invading horde? Yeah, it might be. Does it have food and water? It does, right. So you can't deny that it's a resource. But it has its price.

For Brenda, her major concern with spaces in the LGBTQ bar and club scene is the exploitation that happens there. She remembers that the alcohol industry and tobacco were among the first of the corporate industries to throw their support behind pride. She explains that these companies “can make rainbow beer bottles and everybody's jumping for joy,” but nobody thinks through the danger of this mode of consumerism.

Brenda founded her community center as a way to provide queer people, and especially younger queer people, with a space free from alcohol and drugs. Where queer bars are often framed as an escape from wider society, Brenda describes her resource center as “lighthouse providing a beacon of visibility to the whole community” and “a site of ambassadorship.” The center serves to address some of the particular precarities caused by queerness by providing counseling services and group therapy for LGBTQ people in El Paso, programming and education for the larger community, offering “a foodbank for anyone who needs it.” A major focus of the center’s programming is aimed at family members of LGBTQ individuals and is geared at helping challenge a lot of the cultural homophobia that’s taken for granted within the majority Catholic community of El Paso. According to Brenda, the services her center offer are important for the ways

they offer LGBTQ individuals a way into their communities rather than a way out of them.

Because of its focus on outreach, Brenda's community center is markedly different than Manny's gay bars and the reclusive counterculture of the anti-social turn. For Brenda, her goal is to change community norms rather than just transgress them. Though this approach could be interpreted as playing into the respectability politics that anti-social theorists such as Michael Warner are quick to criticize as assimilationist, Brenda's attention to the ways those in LGBTQ subcultures and bars often fall victim to exploitative practices of consumerist alcohol industries suggests that there are no true escapes from the capitalist and heteronormative exploitations. Harkening back to Anzaldúa's critique of the counterstance: all reaction against any dominant culture is inevitability tied to the same discourse it critiques. Just as LGBTQ assimilation within heteronormative discourses fails to undermine homophobic values systems, queer anti-assimilationist strategies locked into a counterstance against heteronormative discourses remain defined by the values they reject.

The failures of these two opposite responses to the dominant culture of heteronormativity suggests that the move from heteronormativity toward queer kinships requires "a third element"—Anzaldúa's *mestiza* consciousness (102). Where assimilationist and anti-assimilationist responses choose between a position within or outside reproductive heteronormativity, the *mestiza* consciousness starts from the position of being "cradled in one culture, sandwiched between two cultures, straddling all three cultures and their value systems" (Anzaldúa 100). By holding contradictions in tension, the *mestiza* escapes rigid identity through balance which functions "to break

down the subject-object duality that keeps her a prisoner” (Anzaldúa 102). When queer kinship starts with this mestiza consciousness, queer kinship acts outside of the boundaries of hegemonic heteronormative relationships rather than merely working within or against them.

William

William, an activist who works in HIV prevention, approaches queer kinship with an ethic that unites the tensions within the spaces he straddles. He explained to me the parallel ways his queerness and lack of documentation work together to alienate him. Anti-social thinkers such as Bersani often frame the alienating results of queerness as avenues for the homosexual (almost always white and male) to detach from society and therefore able to access some higher meaning, but understanding the precarity caused by lack of documentation helps us to see that this alienation from the family is a privilege that not everyone can afford. William told me, “for me, there was kind of an overlap between being undocumented and being queer. You're coming out of the closet when gay, and you're coming out of the shadows when you're undocumented.” While sexuality and gender provide discursive access to citizenship, documentation provides literal access. As a result, being both undocumented and queer intensify the ways in which William is alienated from the nation and the state. In stepping into both identities and “coming out” as queer and undocumented, William steps into an extreme position of deviance from the correct way of belonging to a community.

In some ways, William’s queerness isolates him from a family and a community his lack of documentation renders him increasingly reliant on:

it took me a while to kind of come out to myself because culturally, in Mexican households, there's a lot of machismo that exists. I think it makes it harder because

for Latinos, family is huge. It's very important. And being gay and being Catholic and being queer doesn't mix in these spaces. And so it makes it very difficult. And because of that, I think there's an intimidation for men specifically to come out because of rejection, and we see that with other identities, also in the LGBT community.

But William's relationship to his family is more complicated than just a tie that his vulnerability makes necessary. At one level, the instability of William's immigration status makes it necessary to maintain family bonds to decrease his alienation from the nation-state. But, on another level, the shared precarities of queerness and undocumentedation make his family relationships possible. William explains:

for me, specifically, it [coming out] was hard, because I knew my father disagreed with LGBT issues, but in talking to him, there's so much similarity, that what we share because he's undocumented, and I'm queer. So I'm just like, you understand that we're all constantly hiding. We both have to hide for our safety. I was able to relate that to him and explain this is why there's parallels in my identities. And that kind of opened his eyes. I was very fortunate to kind of have that same issue with my father because he accepted it.

Where antisocial theorists often view queerness as a cause for isolation from family and the heteronormativity that comes with familial relationships, William uses his queerness as a source of solidarity by framing his queerness in terms of him and his father's shared experience of undocumentedation. Though his father might not accept William in a rainbow kind of way, shared solidarity allows William and his father to continue to support one another in the face of systems of oppression. While Anzaldúa acknowledges that systemic injustice means that "Although all your cultures reject the idea that you can know the other, you believe that besides love, pain might open this closed passage by reaching through the wound to connect" (153). Reproductive heteronormativity makes the false assertion that family relationships should fill all of an individual's emotional and

material needs, but approaching family outside of these narratives allows individuals to diversify the relationships they rely on and thus appreciate degrees of care when they are available whether or not they line up with the expressions of care dictated by familial roles. William's relationship with his father might not be freed from pain, but solidarity starts with the commitment to work through pain.

Traditional queer narratives often revolve around a young queer (often white man) fleeing a homophobic family and moving to a gayborhood in a city somewhere far away where prejudice cannot touch him. But William explains that he always prioritized maintaining family bonds: "I think for people who grew up outside of the majority, it's a norm. You want to cling on to whichever few people that you have because that's it, that's all you're gonna have." Queer people who operate within relatively privileged social locations often conceptualize all systems of oppression in terms of family, but William's experience with undocumented status expanded his view of systemic oppression beyond just heteronormativity. Queer theory can get caught up in a narrative that oppression originates in the family, but William's expanded perspective accounts for the way family might replicate and intensify the oppressive relational scripts which organize our larger roles, but also acknowledges that family relationships are not responsible for creating oppression.

In his "Making Queer Familia," Richard Rodriguez echoes this sentiment. He acknowledges that the centrality of the family within Latino culture makes writing off family ties nearly impossible but argues that chosen families and queer collectives can serve as "an organizing principle for Chicano/a cultural politics." The specific material and cultural context of Rodriguez's argument means that he avoids some of the dangers

of abstractions in both social and anti-social turns. Unlike radical lesbian feminists, Rodriguez's view of queer collectivity is not pastoralizing: he cedes that queer collectives cannot transcend oppression and often reproduce gender inequality. And unlike thinkers within the anti-social turn, Rodriguez maintains that kinship and other relationships are necessary for minorities whose identities leave them vulnerable. Instead of an all or nothing approach, Rodriguez sees both queer collectives and biological families as places where the violence of patriarchy can be reproduced. For both Rodriguez and William, queer kinship is a tool to work through patriarchy rather than a way to escape it.

Because of the ways William depends on relationships to mitigate his vulnerability, the gay bar doesn't offer the same potential for escape and liberation to William as it does for theorists like Warner. Warner describes the gay bar as a place for the "acknowledgement of all that is most abject and least reputable in oneself" where shared shame "cuts against every form of hierarchy you could bring into the room" (35). But, for William, oppression is about more than sexual shame in dimly lit basements. Rather than democratizing, William describes gay bars as isolating because, as he explains, "I don't feel like I can engage with someone in the way that I would in other places, and so personally, I think that there's this barrier that exists in gay bars. I can't go to up to someone in a bar and be like, hey, let's go talk about oppression or about our identities." The same universalizing nature of a gay bar that appeals to Warner makes the space isolating for William.

William's investment in community as a response to precarity shapes his approach to his activism around HIV. Though nationally there has been a significant decline in HIV infections, William explains that HIV infections have increased among

Latino men. William says that this increase comes from the reality that HIV resources are often not accessible to Spanish speakers and when the resources do exist, they are not embedded within community centers. For resources to be effective, William explains that they need to be both “culturally and linguistically accessible” and that this accessibility is impossible when activism around HIV and other queer issues happen at the margins of society and culture. To address this issue, William founded a group called “entre nos (which means between us) as a way for queer Latino men to come together, and, in Spanish, talk about our emotions and feelings and attitudes towards living in the border.” For William, this space was so important because “so much of how we access our identity is tied to language... having those spaces in Spanish felt like home.” William’s language of “home” starkly contrasts the ethos of the anti-social turn. Where Bersani and Philips categorize a response to the AIDs epidemic marked by a flee from relationships and traditional intimacies, William’s response to the current rise of HIV among Latino men recognizes that access to the resources necessary to prevent the spread of HIV depends on connecting and routing these resources through home spaces.

William’s story reflects the reality that there are no ways of organizing our communities that free us from relational oppressions. As anti-social theorists are quick to remind us, all relationships reproduce powered relationships in one form or another. But instead of just fleeing from relationships damned to replicate hierarchies, William reminds us that queer kinship is about queering the ways in which we form our communities rather than just who we are in relationship with. Heteronormativity writes hierarchy and reproduction into relational scripts which organize relationships on the basis of who is allowed to use whom and how should they use them, but William’s queer

kinship focuses of developing a shared consciousness that grounds relationships in solidarity. Instead of leaving the home space, William's queerness allows him to reinvent what it means to belong to a home and to expand the intimacy of the home space into public spaces that traditionally try to function apart from private relationships.

Antonio (again)

Antonio, the queer immigration lawyer from earlier, explains how queer spaces—and the relationships they often make possible—have given him resources to work against oppressive regimes even when they have not functioned as a perfect haven away from them. Antonio told me that while growing up, finding queer community saved his life. When he was younger, he “was afraid of homelessness and being rejected and been exiled from our communities because we don't think that we have a place.” The first time he truly remembers feeling safe was at a gay bar. He explains:

Gay bars have always been our safe spaces. I remember as soon as I turned 18—girl, let me just tell you—I was like, I'm done pleasing everybody. And I made a decision that I was going to start living life for myself because I couldn't do anything to please everybody else. So, I found the phone book, and I look for the OP. I called them to ask where they are because there was no Google Maps. There is no Facebook. There is just the phone, cell phones were just barely coming out. So I used a landline, and I called the OP and asked them when they were open because they didn't have web pages really back then. And they told me like well we're open on Friday and Saturday and this is how much our cover is and this is the streets that we're on. And I went myself. I was so scared. And I parked on the wrong side of the street.

And when I went over, that was the first time that I met somebody who kissed me and who liked me for who I was, and I couldn't believe that there was somebody that thought I was attractive. And he was so nice. And at the end of the night he asked me for my number, and I was too afraid to give it, so I gave him my email address. I'm sure it was like really lame. But ever since then, that was our safe place because that was where we could kiss people. And we could hold hands and we could talk to people. We weren't afraid that someone was going to cause harm to us.

Though anti-social theorists are quick to argue that gay bars are important for the ways they make space to share shame and anti-normative behaviors, Antonio's description of his first experience at a gay bar recognizes how the space made love and intimacy possible. Instead of an escape from relationships, gay bars offered a place where new relationships were possible, where Antonio could feel desired and act on desire. And, where queer theorists such as Gayle Rubin focus on sexual countercultures where non-normative sex makes new modes of power and pleasure possible, Antonio focuses on handholding, the most vanilla flavor of all intimacy.

Throughout his teenage years, Antonio remembers feeling pulled between spaces like the OP and the danger within the rest of the world. He told me another story about being 18, when he and Jerry, his first boyfriend, crossed into Juárez to go to bars where they'd be legally allowed to drink. Jerry bought them a bucket of beers to share, which they went to drink in the nearly empty upstairs. Antonio remembers that Jerry—because he was “just so much more the bold person”—reached across the table and kissed him. Soon after, someone from the bar came over and told them they had to leave. Antonio remembers:

We just knew we had been caught. And he walked us out like we were a bunch of perps, never mind we had paid for the beer and stuff. Never mind that there were no signs that said gays aren't allowed or anything. And I remember being so embarrassed that I wasn't welcome in a space for being who I was. And I remember that Jerry grabbed my hand anyway. And Jerry said, “hold your head up high, Antonio. You don't need to be ashamed of who we are.” And so we did. And even though it was embarrassing, he picked his head up. And he walked us out like that.

Though it's easy to imagine anti-social theorists flinching at Antonio's remembered instruction from Jerry telling him "you do not need to be ashamed," I think there's something important to learn from this moment.

Anti-social theorists are right to argue that when popular movements use respectability politics to prove that homosexuality, their situation of homosexuality within society's sexual moralism reinforces that moralism and redistributes the shame to new targets. But I also think that anti-social theory tends to take for granted the fact that all relationships are perpetually organized by scripts damned to reproduce hierarchy in some way. While all relational scripts risk replicating hierarchy, queer love—rooted in an attention to the particular—makes room for us to engage beyond relational scripts. Antonio's story allows us to see that loving attachments, not nihilistic disengagements give us ways to live with and acknowledge shame. In valuing access to holding someone's hand, Antonio's stories remind us what intimacy can provide.

In the story that Antonio described, Antonio and Jerry lifted their head ups, "even though it was embarrassing." The hedging of "even though" makes it clear that this act of pride was not about refusing the experiences or feeling of shame. And, given the ways Antonio's voice wavered throughout the telling of the story, it's clear that the same feeling of "being caught" that filled Antonio with shame then still affected him decades later as he told me the story. But, instead of giving him a way out of that moment of shame, love and the ability to share intimacy gave Jerry and Antonio a way through it. In reaching for Antonio's hand and directing Antonio to hold his head up, Jerry acknowledged the ways in which they were in a space marked and defined by homophobic ideas of what love is and is not acceptable, but his own gaze and assertion

added to that homophobic space by providing an alternate lens through which to define that moment.

Where lesbian pastoralizing theory tries to use queer love to escape shame and anti-social theory risks giving up love and investing in shame, Antonio's first queer relationship with Jerry gave Antonio a way to hold shame and love in tension. For him, love—in the context of queer kinships—provided the sustenance needed to work through the shame and discrimination that comes with queerness. Though queer relationships don't offer a magic mode of love which heals all the wounds of homophobia, the love that they do offer provides emotional resources which support the work of healing.

This same understanding of queer kinship as a shared lens through which to work through oppression shapes how Antonio approaches his relationship with queer clients. Antonio explains that experiencing that discrimination prepared him to be a lawyer because it allowed him to understand the discrimination of his clients. For him, those shared insecurities allow him to form family-like relationships with his queer clients.

Antonio explains that:

the first client that hired me that was gay was also transgender, and she told me that she felt more comfortable speaking to me because she didn't have to explain who she was to me. Like we're both gay. She doesn't need to explain how discrimination or prejudice works. She didn't need to explain the mechanics of how she expresses herself as a trans woman to me or what pronouns I'm supposed to be using. In our linguistic culture, among Latinos, we use the word family because it's code for "Are they also gay like us?" Here we've created our own family relationships with one another because we have solidarity in those shared gay experiences.

Antonio's use of the word "family" to signify "are they also gay like us?" speaks to the resilience of social bonds. Because queer relationships have allowed Antonio to understand that relationships have the potential to lead to more than just heteronormative

ends, through a queered notion of kinship, family becomes transformed into a site of solidarity. This solidarity is a defining part of what makes queer kinships possible. While heteronormativity locates and defines relationships between men and women for the ways they are opposite to one another, solidarity becomes a way of reorienting relationships based on what we have the potential to share.

While the anti-social turn is useful for its consideration of how power within relationships extends and permeates beyond gender, its guiding premise that all relationality perpetuates some form of power imbalance often produces conclusions which argue for a detachment from relationships. In her critique of the anti-social strand of queer theory, Mari Ruti argues that anti-relational queer theory comes from a place of privilege and:

has been promoted mostly by white gay men interested in the subversive potential of radical negativity, particularly the connection between jouissance and self-undoing, whereas the relational strand has been promoted by ‘the rest of us,’ by those who have been interested in the complex entanglements of sexuality with class, race, gender, nationality, and other collective identity markers (6).

Ruti asserts that while anti-social theorists often critique institutions such as marriage as a way for the most privileged members of the LGBTQ community to hew to normative standards, this critique ignores that marriage and other family-based social bonds are often a necessity for queer individuals with other social identities which marginalize them from social and political spheres. When arguments about family networks only consider gender and sexuality, it is easy to argue that the family unit is too shackled by demands of submission and production to offer a generative way of being together. However, as Ruti points out, when we consider the additional precarities that are introduced by

socioeconomic status, race, gender-presentation, ability, and immigration status, we begin to understand why not everyone can afford to simply “opt-out” of family or relationships.

Alex

While the anti-social turn frames the gay bar as an escape from moralistic heteronormative discourses of family and respectability, gay bars in El Paso seem to offer more in terms of reconciliation than retreat. When I asked Alex, a drag queen from El Paso, about his first time in a gay bar, many parts of his experience were consistent with how anti-social and lesbian theorists describe queer spaces. For him, his first experience at a gay bar (in his case, the OP) was “eye-opening” in the sense that it allowed him to discover a mode of community that he didn’t realize existed. But for Alex, the gay bar wasn’t Warner’s dimly lit basement outside community norms. Rather, Alex described the OP as “a staple in the community like it was the place to be like, and after all the bars in El Paso closed” and explained that “it had been around for years. My mom and my grandparents went to it.” Consistent with Rodriguez’s assessment that “Latino/a queer spaces might not always be exclusively queer” (329), El Paso’s gay bars reframe the space in which family appears but do not flee from family itself. For both Alex and Rodriguez, making queer familia involves continuing to “critically assess and negotiate their relationships with the family to whom they are born as well as to those whom they are joined by necessity.” By providing a sphere where biological families could experience and be transformed by queer sensibilities, gay bars offer a site for assessing and negotiating.

Similarly, Alex’s view on drag breaks from the theorizing of Butler and Warner which both frame drag’s performativity as a way to unsettle and destabilize normative

and cultural systems of meaning. While Warner envisions the drag that happens in underground gay bars as rooted in an ethic of shame “where the most heterogeneous people are brought into great intimacy by their common experience of being despised and rejected in a world of norms that they now recognize as false morality” (36), Alex sees his own performances of drag as moments of art that connect him back to the best of what his community’s cultural norms have to offer. For Alex, music makes him feel connected to a uniquely Mexican culture, and sees performing to that music as a way to “showcase what we offer and how we feel in our community, not only to the LGBTQ community, but the Mexican-American LGBTQ community, through being on stage and educating those that are not familiar with our show of our culture.” While Alex says that the large Catholic presence in El Paso means that many of his Catholic friends and relatives have a hard time understanding his experience, “drag, as a form of art” gives him a medium to share and communicate his experiences of queerness to those around him who might not understand it by contextualizing queerness within culture and music that they share.

Because drag is so central to the way Alex feels able to communicate his gender and sexuality with members of his community, for Alex, gender performativity is much more than Butler’s categorization of gender performativity as “parodic replication and resignification of heterosexual constructs within non-heterosexual frames” (314). Drag doesn’t destabilize Alex’s sense of self but, instead, puts him “on a journey of self-realization of who I was and who I wanted to become.” Instead of exposing gender as meaningless, Alex says drag allows gender to feel meaningful for him because through drag he can “play around and have fun,” but also “get the best of both worlds when you

get a man, and you get a woman.” Where Butler’s sense of gender-performativity seems aimed at undermining gender as an institution, drag gives Alex a means of living within his gender in a way where doesn’t feel squashed by the moralistic aspects of gender as a heteronormative regime.

The discrepancy between drag in queer theory and in how Alex practices it comes back to the tension between queer ethics that move away from familial bonds and queer ethics focused at reorienting kinship relationships. Drag, for Alex, has expanded his resources for building and reorienting relationships. His first time in drag was for a benefit to raise money for the family of a murdered community member. During that first show, Alex remembers how much he appreciated having friends take care of him and the certainty he felt “being in good hands.” Beyond just an escape from the relational violence that often comes with living in community, drag allowed Alex a way both to care for precarious members of his community and to feel cared for by his community. Additionally, Alex says that drag “opened my eyes and exposed me to the experiences of certain groups within the LGBTQ community” which allowed him to understand his responsibility to show up for the most vulnerable members of the LGBTQ community. Like Antonio, the lessons that Alex learned from queer kinships and queer spaces trained him in a new mode of solidarity. Instead of thinking about sexuality only in the terms of his own identity as “gay,” Alex became able to situate his own sexual divergence in terms of all those who similarly act against the norms.

Ultimately, Alex performs drag as a tool and an art that allows him to make room for himself—and specifically his queerness—within the context of a community that he has always felt simultaneously attached to and alienated from. When I asked Alex what

his most powerful experience performing was, he described his first time performing in front of his mom:

The Spice Girls were a big part of my life growing up. I would be like five years old performing their music for her. I would tell her, “you need to stop everything you're doing. The evening is mine.” So when she came to watch me perform, I did a number by them. I don't know if you've heard “Viva Forever,” but that's the song I did. And it just made me think about my grandma and my mom: the two the women in my life that supported me. Now, my mom's all I have. I don't really talk to my other family only because, again, when I was younger, I had those family members who really isolated me and made me feel like I wasn't part of them or part of the group. So having my mom there, I was able to channel the memories of me back then performing for her, and I just felt like it was only me and her all over again. And it made me feel brave, and it made me feel powerful because that's one of the biggest reasons that I do what I do.

In this moment, drag was empowering for Alex, not because it allowed him to escape family (read heteronormativity), but because drag allowed him to queer his past experiences of family as a way of maintaining the parts of his childhood and relationships that continue to sustain him. There's a level of misogyny in some queer theory that frames a man's choice to perform in drag as his choice to embrace the most shameful parts of human experiences, but by performing and presenting as a woman while honoring women whose care he valued and learned from, Alex rejects patriarchal and heteronormative gender binaries which rely on rigid and fixed conceptions of gender to uphold a system where masculinity trumps in order to devalue femininity. Because queerness destabilizes what family is supposed to be, it allows Alex to reframe his relationships in terms of what those in his life mean to him.

While often, both queer theory and LGBTQ activism frame the move toward queer kinship as a movement away from the heterosexual family, the stories of those

whom I met in El Paso complicate narratives that place queer chosen families at odds with heterosexual biological families. Queer narratives around “families of choice” suppose that we can escape bad relationships by moving into good ones, but this mentality ignores that, since all relationships are defined within hierarchal relational discourses, all relationships require work. Undermining the patriarchal and hegemonic mechanisms of the state requires undermining the model patriarchal and heteronormative family that underpins it, but the stories in this section complicate the relationships that queer theory often draws between heterosexual families and patriarchy and queer kinship and liberation.

Queer spaces and relationships offered the individuals within this section a way to understand and access relationships that could exist outside of reproductive heteronormative, and this consciousness led to a development of solidarity which made queer kinship possible. Queer kinship gives us a way to be in relationship outside of what José Muñoz describes as “the pull of identitarian modes of relationality.” In these stories, queer kinship is more than just an alternative to reproductive heteronormativity. Instead, queer kinships is a practice. As Muñoz says, queerness often means “a kind of striving for belonging that does not ignore the various obstacles that the subject must overcome to achieve the most provisional belonging” (418). Though it does not liberate, queerness becomes the means through which individuals practice agency and change the terms of their existing relationships so that they are able to operate beyond reproductive and heteronormative scripts.

“To know and love one other human being is the root of all wisdom.”

-Evelyn Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited*

Part III: Being Together

Local activists call El Paso the New Ellis Island, a title which invites us to imagine a nation where the Statue of Liberty’s golden door stands in the place of the border wall. Among El Paso’s many murals of Mexican artists, farmworkers, labor activists, church leaders, Chicana feminists, and Aztec art, stands Lady Liberty. From the walls of a border city, Lady Liberty’s torch casts a new light on what this nation could be. Part I of the thesis looked at the ways in which reproductive heteronormativity, as the foundation for relationships, upholds the hegemonic US nation-state, and Part II of this thesis looked at the development of queer kinships which challenge the hegemonic ordering of reproductive heteronormativity. In Part III, we’ll look at what these queer alternatives offer in the reorganization of our communities. If queer critique and theory allow us to shake the hierarchies of the patriarchal family unit at the center of our nation, what does queer love leave us to rebuild with?

Because, at the end of it all, queer theorizing needs to be invested in reimagining and rebuilding. Though we must acknowledge the ways in which our conceptions of the nation are rooted into dangerous and oppressive regimes, it is equally important to remember that any structure or idea that reminds us of our bonds to one another and unites us toward working for a shared good is worth redeeming. Through disorienting our relational scripts, queerness provides a mode of relationality that misaligns the nation and the state and offers a technology for understanding our responsibility and relationship to

the community of individuals we are united to that is responsive to individual realities rather than prescriptive on the basis of hierarchical roles. While the rigid heteronormative rules of relationality central to the state demand that we access the other through the lens of whom their gendered and sexualized positions say they are to us, queerness allows us new ways to theorize and practice belonging detached from these relationally based hierarchies. Bell and Binnie argue, “‘stories of living together’ in diverse and multiple ways can be used to rethink the connections between notions of community and notions of citizenship” (31). The stories in this section show us a new mode of queer citizen made available through the queer organization of communities.

Though nationalism relies on a loyalty to the state rooted in violence and domination to distort what it means to belong to a community, not all loyalty promises to replicate violence and patriarchy. In *Three Guineas*, Virginia Woolf argues that “unreal loyalties” (95) to the state’s symbols replicate and perpetuate the violence of patriarchy. While I agree that symbolic and unreal loyalties (such as the patriotism which upholds the military industrial complex) are dangerous, the stories of those whom I met in El Paso helped me to understand how real loyalties—rooted in and fortified by practices of love—create communities oriented toward justice. In this section, I argue that because queer love detaches us from the symbolic and moves us toward the specific, a queer patriotism—rooted in solidarity rather than nationalism—may become possible if we find new ways of belonging to each other and our communities, and, in doing so, reattach our communities to the nation through alternative organizations of power.

Clavo

Clavo, a veteran and activist in El Paso, explained to me his process of finding a new way to belong to country and community. While Clavo identifies as straight, he practices a queer ethic of relationality that disorients normative and patriarchal ways of relations. Though he—as a man—loves women, his refusal to incorporate gendered roles of submission and domination into his personal relationships undermines how heteronormativity prescribes men and women relate to one another.

Together, Clavo and his ex-wife formed a chapter of the Brown Berets in El Paso. Clavo explains that, traditionally, the Brown Berets are a nationalistic and patriarchal group who often rely on violence to restore Aztlan, a Chicano nation-state. When he started his chapter, he explained the national organization didn't want him "supporting gays. They didn't want to supporting blacks. They didn't want us supporting Irish. So anything that wasn't Mexican American or Chicano, they said we're not part of it." But Clavo decided that, "we're not going to be a nationalist group. There's some leadership in California who tell the young kids that they're recruiting we're going to be the military force for Aztlan which is a horrible thing to say." Instead, Clavo decided that his version of the Brown Berets would be "a women-led movement." According to Clavo, "all the men who joined at the time were very supportive because there's a huge group of men in this region who are just sick and tired of the machismo and the patriarchy, all the mistakes that have been committed by men in the past." By decentering masculinity as the organizing force of the nation-state, Clavo's Brown Berets queered national bonds. While the typical nationalism of the Brown Berets functions based on the idea that Chicanos will achieve power through the violent domination of others, Clavo's chapter of

the Brown Berets queer nationality by expanding sociality beyond relationships of domination and submission and toward horizontal communities based in solidarity.

Clavo explains that he changed his views on activism and decided to take a feminist approach to his chapter of the Brown Berets when he fell in love with his ex-wife and recognized the value of her work. The heteronormative nation depends on personal relationships to teach patriarchal submission and domination for individuals to reproduce as national ties, but the love that Clavo learned within his relationship to his wife disrupted the viability of that oppressive relationality. Before meeting his ex-wife, Clavo explained that he felt comfortable within his position of masculinity:

I was always out there, and I was just doing the man thing. I grew up that way. You know, the man goes out, he works, he does whatever. He comes back and wants to stop at the bar and can get some drinks before he goes home. As long as he's bringing home the money, he can do whatever he wants. So she [his ex-wife] broke me of that very, very quickly. So when I saw what she could do, I thought, this lady is unstoppable. She does a lot of great things. At the time, we were just always side by side. So one was never more important than the other. And that's how we made everybody feel in the community.

The patriarchy that often structures heterosexuality caused what Murdoch describes as a “degradation” (103) of love. According to Murdoch, “False love moves to false good” (102). When Clavo viewed love in patriarchal terms, his false love moved him toward a practice of care rooted in violence and nationalism. However, when Clavo’s ex-wife broke him of his patriarchal sense of what women are capable and he “saw what she could do,” Clavo’s love became rooted in Murdoch’s love “which brings the right answer” and “is an exercise of justice and realism and really *looking*” (91). Love—when tied to an attention to the particular of whom his ex-wife was outside of the rules of

gender roles which had always shaped his worldview—gave Clavo a way to move beyond patriarchal ways of relating to his ex-wife.

Still within the context of heterosexuality but freed from its prescriptions, Clavo's love became queer. As a result, his vision of community expanded beyond dualistic relationships of dominated and dominator, and his sense of care extended in response. And this queer love spread through to other men in the Brown Berets. Love, when detached from patriarchy, allowed the men to see the women in their communities outside of their expected position of submission. When they learned that loving their wives did not mean dominating them, they were able to access a way of loving their nation that did not require violent force either.

Additionally, when Clavo experienced love outside of the unilateral relationship between dominator and dominated, Clavo's sense of whom he was expected to love and relate to expanded horizontally. Instead of only supporting those within their national group, Clavo explained that his version of the Brown Berets, "were involved in everything. There wasn't a pride parade that we didn't march in, there wasn't the Martin Luther King Jr parade that we didn't march in." According to Anzaldúa, queered consciousness allows us to "look beyond the illusion of separate interests to a shared interest— you're in this together, no one's an isolated unit. You dedicate yourself, not to surface solutions that benefit only one group, but to a more informed service to humanity" (155). Clavo's understanding of identity as more than just relational power exerted over someone else gave way to his view of solidarity as a way of building shared power, and Clavo's sense of nation became rooted in the people around him instead of the symbol of the state. He explains that this shift meant that "I'm more about my brother

down the street than I am my brother on the battlefield, now.” Anzaldúa describes this move from country to community in her notion of a queer mestiza consciousness. She explains, “As a mestiza I have no country, my homeland cast me out; yet all countries are mine because I am every woman’s sister or potential lover” (102). Both Clavo and Anzaldúa muddle relational roles in a way that muddles the rigid demands of identity-based nationalism.

When each person “surrenders all notions of safety, of the familiar” (Anzaldúa 104) in order to enact new fluid ways of belonging, they can access diverse communities without domination. Love connects the nation to community instead of to the state by multiplying and diversifying ways of relating. Through his intersectional approach to activism, Clavo puts Anzaldúa’s mestiza consciousness into practice by work premised upon recognizing shared oppression and “uniting all that is separate” (Anzaldúa 101). While both the stories in Part I reflected a nationalism premised upon rigid and hierarchical identities, Clavo’s mestiza consciousness functions “as a blending that proves all blood is intricately woven together” (Anzaldúa 107). Rather than a stable identity category, mestizo and queer are both ways of being that reiterate Butler’s “sexuality against identity” (318) in that they situate themselves against the norm. Patriotism, in Clavo’s context, becomes love of a people united by tangible experience rather than symbolic loyalty to the categorization of division.

Clavo’s queer and feminist patriotism fulfills the emotional needs for community that nationalism offers, but it does so without nationalism’s replication of the violence of the state. Anderson, one of the political theorists from the Introduction, argues that birth of nationalism responded to the fall of theocratic empires and kingdoms by continuing

the two primary cultural organizations that gave meaning to previous arrangements of sovereignty: religion and dynasty. He explains that nationalism provides a response to the decline of religiosity by remaking meaning out of suffering and death through “a secular transformation of fatality into continuity, contingency into meaning” (Anderson 11). As an organizing force of meaning, Anderson argues that the nation succeeds when it provides a route for the citizen to “glide into a limitless future” (12). The nation serves to offer some of the meaning that religious afterlives once did by locating citizens within an inherited history and positioning them as working toward a shared future. In the heteronormative nation state, Anderson notes that “Kinship organizes everything around a high center” (19) and justifies loyalty to a patriarchal ruler.

Anderson’s explanation of why nationalism emerges allows us to understand why we still hold onto nationalism and why heteronormativity is such a substantial part of that. We need a sense of futurity—a way to believe that our actions matter. However, one of the most foundational thinkers within the anti-social turn, Lee Edelman, critiques the way in which our senses of futurity are often tied to reproductive heteronormativity. In *No Future*, Edelman discusses how society’s sense of the political future is invested in the abstraction of the children to come and therefore tied to reproduction. In this framing, reproductive heteronormativity sustains the future while queerness, thought of in terms of the death drive, erases it. He offers a queer reading that reorients attention away from a future and toward the present, arguing that a society focused on the abstract needs of a fantasized and fleeting child is unable to care for or recognize the adults that children become. For Edelman, a queerness with attention to the present reality can overcome the gaps between the symbolic relationships of reproductive discourses and their actual

subjects. Though these anti-social perspectives advance useful criticism about the ways in which futurity functions, they risk missing the importance of the hope that a sense of futurity allows.

When I asked Clavo what gives him hope, he gestured toward one of the kids in the community space we were meeting in. She was one of the children who was often there, and we both knew her because of her activism advocating for environmental and educational justice in the school zoning process. He explained that, “She gives me hope. She and kids like her. Because when I was a kid, when I was in high school, there was no way I was going to speak in public.” He then explained to me that his father raised him with the instruction “not to make waves,” but that kids in this district “were always there fighting.” Clavo’s hope is tied to his understanding that he is part of a legacy of people working actively against the status quo rather than a passive optimism which assumes the future will inevitably reproduce the good. Just as Iris Murdoch’s love is an ethic of seeing clearly rather than feeling deeply, Clavo’s version of hope is not a comforting sentiment but a resource for imagining and acting toward the good.

Though there is a long history of injustice in their district, Clavo explained that some of the “successes that they had is what inspired them to do more and grow and build and keep learning and keep striving.” Because of their persistence, Clavo says he feels hope:

Knowing that there's others like us, but 40 years younger, that they're going to fight for us. You know, if I'm laying in a hospital bed and I'm being mistreated, I know that there are kids out there who jump out and say, “Hey, let's help Clavo, what did he do for us” That's how, that's how I sleep.

Reproductive heteronormativity displaces children by thinking about their needs and interests as abstract and in tension with the adults of today, but Clavo’s relationship to the

children of his community is based in the way he learns from children and children learn from him. In this way, he queers the obligations of community by recognizing how the responsibility to care is shared by all rather than just delegated to mothers whose gendered identities mark them as the sole caretakers of children.

Clavo's queered mestiza nationality offers us a way of being in community with one another that sustains love because it draws upon our human desire for kinship and futurity—which Anderson argues drives us toward the national—without filling these needs with the symbol of the heteronormative family as, according to Edelman, the state often does. Anderson's explanation of how nations came to be and why they matter reeks with a reproductive heteronormativity that makes it clear why our current idea of the national relies so heavily on the family. Per Anderson's description, the nation is what fraternity, what brotherhood, makes possible. The reproductive heteronormative family succeeds as an organizing force of nationhood because reproduction gives meaning to mortality by pointing towards futurity and the kinship structure justifies the authority of patriarchal leaders by building on our acceptance of parental authority. However, in Clavo's queered patriotism, solidarity links a community beyond just domestic and reproductive bonds. And love, not submissive loyalty to a patriarch, grounds the citizens sense of obligation.

Clavo maintains solidarity through investing in the social bonds at the center of kinship but does so without replicating how heteronormativity orders these bonds to only value kinship in the reproductive sense. Edelman argues that the problem with reproductive and heteronormative futurity is that national discourses privilege the abstract kids of the future at the expense of individuals who exist now. But the way Clavo loves

his immediate community roots his sense of futurity within tangible relationships. Again, his love is rooted in the particular and specific that his just love allows him to see rather than the symbolic discursive community that reproductive heteronormativity narrates. Clavo's relationships are queered in the sense that his expanded sense of community frees him from constrictive loyalties based around familial roles. But rather than isolating him, this freedom gives him new—and non-paternalistic—ways of relating to children outside of the role of father.

Cemelli

Cemelli, a queer single mother, is one of the women who runs the community space where I met Clavo. The building that houses the community space used to be a factory, but it was shut down when NAFTA moved jobs and labor to Mexico. The government tried to buy the space to turn it into a child detention center, but according to Cemelli:

Women had been organizing in this community for years, and they definitely felt that was an insult to the community and to the vision that they had for their children. And so they fought that proposal and marched up and down the streets for days, met with stakeholders, community leaders, politicians, and eventually were granted the right to repurpose this building.

Now, the building serves multiple purposes—the backroom has a museum space “led by women to invest in their ancestral knowledge,” the front section serves as a restaurant with indigenous food “to create access, not only to their culture, but also to their health,” and the space as a whole hosts the home-base for a network of women's activists and organizers. Unlike queer theory which often has a tendency of fleeing painful spaces, grassroot networks like this one—rooted in shared histories and positions—build on and over historical injustice as a work of reconciliation.

And though some queer and feminist theories reject motherhood as a passive and apolitical location designed to hold women into places of location, for the women in this community, motherhood serves as the starting place for their activism which become the starting place for their politicization. Once their political activism as mothers undermines the patriarchal paradigm Enloe describes where mothers function for the state as the passive teachers of obedient citizens, this subversive motherhood changes the ways in which mothering is tied to marginalization. When mothers organize in a space like the one Cemelli leads—where a community of care eases the responsibilities of motherhood which lead to a mother’s marginalization (such as childcare responsibility)—we see that motherhood and care are not a tools of oppression. Rather, reproductive heteronormativity makes motherhood into an oppressive position by insisting mothers serve as the exclusive caregivers for their family. When women are exclusively responsible for caregiving within a community, this obligation cements the marginalization of women to the private sphere. But when care is shared and multiplied beyond the roles of the heteronormative family, care becomes a way for communities to tend to one another and the wounds they share.

While the lesbian island of some queer theory functions as a retreat from suffering and oppression into the pastoral, this woman-led space links women across generations to the work of justice and community building. Cemelli explains:

About half of us are sort of like the new women of the community, and the other half is the women who built this community. And so, to be able to plan with them, to brainstorm with them, to envision a future with them is definitely an honor—to hear their struggle and their story of what I would call success. They sacrificed a lot for this community and for the future.

Instead of providing an escape from patriarchy, Cemelli argues that the all-women space is valuable as a way to understand where women have existed and continue to exist in relation to patriarchy as a way to work through that patriarchy. Though Cemelli recognizes that this consciousness aids women in their political rejection of patriarchy as an inevitable norm, she realizes that sex-segregation does not fix injustice. She explains that:

As far as being a woman, a minority—we're always going to be in the struggle. I think we're a long ways away from seeing the true fruits of justice yet. No that I want my daughter to struggle, but I want her to have the tools to struggle with dignity and integrity. And I think that that's what this place gives us.

Both Cemelli and anti-social theorist Michael Warner maintain the language of dignity in their queer ethic. Warner describes a “queer ethic of dignity in shame” (37) where the shared “indignity of sex” “begins to resemble the dignity of the human” (36). His argument is based on his premise that since queer people cannot escape the indignity of sex, they must reclaim a new dignity through the acknowledgement of shame. While Cemelli’s sense of dignity is similarly based in her recognition that the marginalizations of minority statuses are not easily overcome, her sense of dignity differs from Warner because of the way she grounds it in continued struggle despite the inevitability of failure rather than just relenting to failure.

The difference between Warner’s anti-social conception of dignity and Cemelli’s dignity rooted in shared struggle comes down to privilege. Consistent with much of the anti-social turn, Warner responds to systemic issues that cannot be overcome by relenting to a position on the margins and finding alternate meaning within the place of that marginalization. However, Cemelli’s far more precarious position means relenting to the margins isn’t a viable option if she wants herself, her community, and her daughter to

survive. Cemelli recognizes that her identities as a woman and a minority are materially legitimate in the sense that they place her in an inevitable position of marginalization. However, unlike Warner, she claims autonomy through and beyond that marginalized position. By grounding her identity within a shared community built alongside women who struggled against gendered and racialized vulnerabilities before her, and her daughter, who will continue to struggle against a gendered and racialized vulnerability after her, Cemelli recognizes that dignity exists in reclaiming autonomy through that struggling despite the inevitability of suffering rather than allowing that inevitability to justify surrender.

In “Subject of True Feeling,” Lauren Berlant argues that “the everyday struggle is a ground on which unpredicted change can be lived and mapped—but the new maps will not reveal a world without struggle, or a world that looks like the opposite of the presently painful one” (45). According to Berlant, struggling against oppression cannot free us from oppression entirely, but it can give us a new position from which to interact with social oppression. By maintaining her gendered identity as a site of inevitable struggle, Cemelli escapes pastoralizing promises of female liberation which imagine a world beyond struggle. But in refusing to define herself as subject to that struggle, she also refuses the impulse of identity politics to enter relationships through the orientation of that struggle. While Cemelli acknowledges that being a woman is inevitably bound up in struggling against—and sometimes under—patriarchal norms, Cemelli understands what it means to be a woman through collective resistance instead of conceptualizing womanhood as a subordinated position.

When I asked Cemelli when she felt most powerful, she told about a hunger strike she went on with mothers and children from her community to protest the building of a school in an environmentally hazardous zone. Cemelli describes it as:

A really spiritual experience where you recognize a level of sacrifice that needs to be had, but it was also this level of connectedness. In so many aspects of that struggle, of those days of struggle, you felt the spirit in you. I don't know how else to explain it, but I guess that's when I felt most powerful. When you literally had nothing just water and community.

Like theorists such as Sara Ahmed, Cemelli recognizes that liberation does not necessarily come through happiness. Instead, suffering and pain are often necessary feelings in our work toward justice. But where Bersani views suffering as a more aesthetic discipline that frees us from our attachments, Cemelli and Ahmed both recognize how drawing near to community sustains us in our suffering. Spirituality and love make sense of suffering where anti-social nihilism can only try to escape it.

Like others in El Paso who rejected queer moves away from relationships, Cemelli recognizes that isolation does not provide safety. For Cemelli, living in community—when communities are structures away from the hegemonies of the state—provides a queer alternate to violent bonds. Like much of queer theory, this reshaping starts with imagining new ways of being together. Cemelli explains that:

We, as a country, as a "nation," or as a people, we've been taught not to think and outside the box. We haven't been taught the alternatives. We haven't been taught that a time existed before these borders did. And what did that look like? And if we have been taught those pieces of the histories, they are very manipulated through the eyes of the colonizer. But many indigenous communities co-existed in spaces much like this where the environment—mother earth—was respected, where humans were taught how to be responsible, where we were taught how to be a society, how to be living in a community. You know, a man isn't meant to be an island. We're meant to be a community, a family, and when you function under

those sort of laws, more natural laws, there's more room for peace and collaboration.

In addition to helping Cemelli see how other ways of community organization might be possible, indigenous perspectives have been fundamental to how Cemelli understands queerness. She explains, “by helping us to see that another world is possible, they also offer a really beautiful way for us to reconsider the way that discrimination happens for our LGBTQ and two-spirit community.” Cemelli explains that, “We’re a reflection of our world.” And while Western discourse has limited ideas about what types of sexuality are and are not natural, indigenous communities recognize “the different ways of human expression.” Cemelli says that the indigenous two-spirit tradition “is not just based on sexuality, it’s based on the idea that when you have the male and female spirit, you’re able to see the world more clearly.”

While a paranoid reading might reject any ideology that uses the language of “natural laws” or operates within a binary of the “male and female spirit,” a reparative perspective allows us to see the value in Cemelli’s vision despite the epistemological issues of an essentialized narrative of peaceful mother earth or inherent sexuality. After all, the primary danger in essentialized constructions of gender roles and identity lies in more than their epistemological errors. Instead, essentialized notions of gender are dangerous because of the material violence that follows from essentialized masculinist ideas of force, domination, and governance when essentialist ideas about masculinity naturalize violence. When gender is essentialized and put in a binary where masculinity is valued and femininity is its devalued opposite, this schema leads to colonial ideas about communities as warring and violent. However, the two-spirit notion of gender as complementary rather than derivative leads to a vision of gender roles where relations are

not limited to violence and submission. In denaturalizing binaries, this worldview undermines the ideology which informs gender as hegemonic.

Though poststructuralists—and specifically Butler in her characterization of gender as “an imitation for which there is no original” (313)—might have a problem with Cemelli’s notion that “we’re a reflection of our world,” Cemelli’s argument that indigenous cultures reflect the natural harmony of nature remains materially useful. Though this argument remains essentialist, these tendencies are balanced by Cemelli’s point that our ideas about gender—and what they mean for the ways we organize communities—are “manipulated” or “taught.” This language recognizes the work that has been done to socialize us to accept violence and reminds us that the same work can be done to socialize us toward peace. By grounding her queer vision for community in indigenous traditions and nature, Cemelli’s argument is rhetorically effective because it reminds us that alternatives to violent patriarchy are more than just imagined—once, they were lived.

Adri (again)

Adri’s position and life as a community organizer and coalition builder has been informed by their experiences of queerness because of how queerness has helped them understand what it means to build relationships of care, what it takes to imagine alternate realities, and what working together to build those realities can accomplish.

Adri’s first experiences with activism came in college when they became involved with feminist organizing and LGBTQ advocacy. At this point, Adri was first realizing that they were trans and struggled to find resources or community. Adri remembers how they “felt really hopeless. And I was really depressed. It was one of the

absolute darkest times in my life. And I was so angsty. I was so like itching to get out of my body.” It was through these early experiences of organizing that Adri met another trans person for the first time. They remember being at a meeting in a feminist club, “and this queer looking person that dead-ass looks like Rachel Maddow walked in.” Adri soon learned that this queerer Rachel Maddow was actually Jazz, a trans person one year into their medical transition. Later, at a party, Adri says:

I got drunk and I started crying and told Jazz that I was trans. And they just held me and told me it was okay. It was a really, really emotional moment. And later on that night they actually buzzed the sides of my head and gave me a mohawk, essentially. And when I woke up the next morning on their couch, they left me a really cute note as well and a toothbrush. And that was my coming out.

While up to that point, Adri’s experience of queerness had been defined by feeling alienated from their body, their family, and their community, sharing that moment with Jazz allowed them to understand their body and gender within the context of a relationships. Together, through a drunken haircut, Adri’s gender expression became a shared experience of making sense of what had previously felt unspeakable. For Adri, being able to share queerness within a community of care and support means “Nothing’s ever going to be perfect, but it’ll never be anything as close to wanting to crawl out of my own skin.” Eve Sedgwick notes that “shame turns itself skin side out” (38). But for Adri, sharing experiences of queerness and situating alienated bodies within relationships and communities gave them a way to return to and live within their skin.

While originally a source of alienation, Adri’s awareness of feeling out of place within their body has helped them to understand the ways gender orients individuals in certain spaces. Recently, they’ve been most aware of gender in the moments gender has made them feel unsafe. Adri explains:

when you look at me, you would probably read me as a man. I never get read as a straight man. I still always get read as a queer man, right. It's so weird to realize that being read in society as a queer man makes me feel more unsafe than when I was being read in society as a queer woman. I think I felt more comfortable as a queer woman because I've learned better ways to deflect and to de-escalate situations with anybody that was being inappropriate because I've been doing it for so long. And then all of a sudden, I didn't have that anymore. Like I couldn't deflect anymore with femininity in the way that I used to be able to. And not that I should have had to, not that anybody should have to, but I learned how to survive in that mode. And then all of a sudden, I was completely lost.

Falling outside of normative gender regimes has allowed Adri to better understand how gender operates. It wasn't until Adri lost access to femininity as a resource to navigate unsafe spaces that they were able to understand all the ways that they had been relying on femininity. In her "Queer Feelings," Sara Ahmed describes queerness "an acute awareness of the surface of one's body" (425). According to Ahmed, queerness is not an identity as much as a feeling of misfitting that comes with the awareness that you are not interacting with the world in the way the world has been designed to accommodate. As argued in Ahmed's queer phenomenology and demonstrated in Adri's experience, we learn about the often imperceptible structures which give shape to our world when we feel displaced by them.

Ultimately, the queer feeling of being "completely lost" gave Adri the personal experience needed to ask better questions about the ways in which gender was operating in world. They explain that "I've always been somebody that didn't take any narrative at its face value. I was always questioning things and pushing deeper and asking why. Why are things like this?" Because so many of Adri's questions have originated within feelings of uneasiness with how they were moving through the world, they've understood queerness in line with Ruti's call for "real life referents" which make sense of the

“exigencies of lived reality” (38). This connection to the real lends itself to theorizing as a way of understanding how we belong to the world rather than just the forces that create alienation.

Just like misfitting into the gender binary fed Adri’s curiosity, growing up in a border discourse delimited by national boundaries pushed Adri to question the stability of the binaries which ordered their world. Adri explains that:

growing up in a binational community where these "borders" divides us, I grew up going back and forth between the two cities—Juárez and El Paso. While the border was a very real barrier for people in my family, it was always something that I was constantly transcending. So I think my entire identity has both been defined by binaries but also defined by overcoming binaries, and it's just really weird to exist in that as a Mexican-American on the border and also a transgender person and also a queer person right like in all senses of the word, where it was just like fuck your binary—I'm going to be what I am outside of this system and how it's been like given to me.

While Adri was born into the binary identities of citizen and woman, they learned to understand those positions through the ways they fell outside of those identity-based locations rather than through the boundaries of those identities themselves. Because of the ways in which Adri’s theorizing has been linked to their lived experiences of both gender and nation, Adri has been able to understand the ways in their experiences of both are linked by the same unstable and violence enforcement of binaries over spaces defined by duality and fluidity.

Queer alternatives gave Adri a way to look for ways of understanding themselves and their location in the world outside of the binaries which had always structured their reality in like with Anzaldúa’s mestiza consciousness. Like both Clavo and Cemelli, their indigenous roots have helped them to reconceptualize what it could mean to be queer and to live in community. Adri explains that though they have not always had words to

adequately describe their experiences, they've appreciated the ways indigenous practices of prayer and dance offer new ways to communicate and share identities. Adri tells me the dance they do:

is called Ome Massa, which means two deer. And that dance specifically is about the duality of energy in the universe and in ourselves. So, I have always deeply identified with that even though it's limited to a binary with two forces. I was always identified with that balance of masculine and feminine energy. And so that's one of the ways I think that other languages come into my identity. I even have two deers tattooed on my calves because you use your calves to dance and dance on your toes like a deer, like prancing. It's all very gentle, but powerful at the same time. It's a really beautiful dance. Really beautiful, difficult dance and prayer to do that always leaves me feeling like I gave everything to whatever we were praying for.

Queer theorists such as Butler and Sedgwick often argue that refuting the premises of reproductive heteronormative identity through language within reproductive heteronormative often reinforces the primacy of those discourses. As we saw in Antonio's translation of his client's sexuality into hegemonic Western sexuality discourses, trying to reframe queerness within discourses where sexuality is exclusively articulated as an identity positioned within patriarchal roles of dominance and submission contains queerness within either end of the binary of powerful or powerless. Instead of this translation, Butler and Sedgwick argue that queer language and performativity can destabilize these discourses. But Adri's story helps us to see where alternative queer discourses can be generative instead of just destabilizing. Beyond just "an identity fracturing discourse" (Sedgwick 8) which exposes the lies of static identities, dance gives Adri a means through which to articulate and share the duality they feel to be true about without the limits of verbal discourse which remains semiotically "limited to a binary with two forces" even as it tries to articulate duality.

Additionally, queering language within an existing and problematic discourses also gives Adri a way to communicate their identity at the edges of those discourses.

While the grammar of Spanish language operates through a binary sense of gender, Adri says:

I've really seen a shift in language and a shift in sticking to rigid language rules. Now, it's just like we're making this up as we go. And it's valid. Right? So now there's queer pronouns for me in Spanish. People use “elle.” Instead of ending the letter with a feminine a, you end it with a gender-neutral e, and it flows very smoothly. But those are all like very recent things that I've noticed in language and how people talk about queer identity. And that's something that I didn't have even seven years ago.

Though performativity in language can be useful in exposing the incoherency of certain semiotic premises, eroding the link between what words signify and the cultural context they signify from risks eroding the ability of language to communicate meaning within these contexts, and—as a result—risks alienating individuals from those within the contexts they inhabit together. But, when these linguistic subversions are embedded within communities “making things up as we go,” these linguistic rebellions connect individuals within the discourses their actions are shaping.

Connection to community remains of the utmost importance to Adri because ultimately their queerness has been about helping them understand the ways in which they are linked to—rather than alienated from—their community. In El Paso, Adri explains that activism is unique because “We're predominantly a Latinx community, so a lot of our organizing is based on personal relationships.” In their experience, “organizing in the northeast has been very grounded in theory and almost so caught up in theory that it loses its praxis,” but “organizing in the southwest is very much grounded in community and in personal relationships and in our personal stake in this work.” While their activism

originally focused on gender and sexuality, Adri says they got really involved in border and prison abolitionist work “because it was affecting me and my community. I didn't think that I would get involved in this work. I didn't think that this would be my life path, but it just became necessary as a means of survival for me and my community.” Though queer theory can be skeptical of mainstream visions of communities because of how the state embeds hegemonic systems of power within every community and relationship, Adri's own experiences of queerness allowed them to understand that the systems of power which at times alienated them from their community are linked to the broader systems of power at the center of other marginalizations. As a result, Adri has realized that working against the broader marginalization their community is up against also works against the marginalization which works its way into their community.

Since queer theory exposes that gender roles are bad, queer theorists often follow with arguments premised upon the notion that all relational roles are bad. However, Adri emphasizes that understanding our roles in a community in terms of what we can offer one another and what we need from others is fundamental to organizing toward justice. According to Adri, collectives and coalitions are central to social justice because of how they recognize as the places where justice begins. They explain:

depending on who's in the coalition, certain people have different roles. And I think fundamentally the revolution or culture change really is dependent on each of us knowing our role and fully coming into our roles at the right moment and respecting each other's roles as equally valuable and important to the work that we're doing.

These roles are queer because they do not view worth through patriarchal ideologies which value masculinist roles over roles embedded in caregiving and do not rely on gender to determine who fulfills which role. Instead, individuals are oriented within roles based on needs they identify in others and skills they identify in themselves.

Heteronormative discourses organize our communities based on relationships ordered around gendered roles of reproduction, dominance, and submission which uphold the power of the state, but these coalitions view relationships as collaborative rather than hierarchal. In this sense, relationships offer a way to undermine, rather than reinforce, the gendered violence of borders and binaries. Monique Wittig argues, “The real necessity for everyone to exist as an individual, as well as a member of a class, is perhaps the first condition for the accomplishment of a revolution, without which there can be no real fight or transformation” (108). As Wittig articulates, queer consciousnesses which allow us to see ourselves outside of the prescription of gender roles aren’t supposed free us from relationships, but instead give us new criteria for how we approach relationality. The work of transformation does not happen when we are moved outside of our community, but instead when queered identities give us new ways to position ourselves within them.

According to Adri, community organization is successful in El Paso because “We’re all fiercely protective of El Paso. And we all love this city with an enormous, enormous, enormous tenacity.” Adri explains that, “Here, we all love El Paso so much and do this work because we want to improve our city.” While all relationships risk reproducing state violence, love within relationships becomes a tool to subvert that violence. Because love for El Paso drives the desire for activists to improve the city, love moves those activists toward Murdoch’s good.

Just as relationships provide a location for justice-based work to start, relationships also sustain organizers in their work toward justice. Because of the work they do, Adri says, “I have to believe that what I’m working towards will one day get

better. I have to believe that people are capable of transformation.” Their experience working with people in detention, though grim, has sustained Adri because all the people who Adri has organized with and on behalf of “have so much hope.” Adri tells me:

I've always, always, always, always, been a deeply hopeful person. I don't know why, but some of my earliest preteen memories are deeply believing that a better life and a better world was possible, whether it was for me, or, as I grew older, being a better world for all of society... Quite frankly, as a person that was living through difficult situations as a preteen and continues to live through some difficult situations now, I think it's something that keeps people alive—hope.

Through their community organization, Adri has realized, “it’s just a fundamental part of being human—to have hope.” Many queer theorists, especially in regard to futurity, are quick to dismiss hope as a dangerous form of optimism that ignores and displaces the injustices of the present, but Mari Ruti argues that hope “is not a conservative form of complacency but rather a way of sustaining a spirit of imaginative inquisitiveness that allows us to envision alternatives to the life-arresting logic of the heteronormative present” (125). If the queer imagination functions to help individuals recognize of what justice might be possible outside of the limits of reproductive heteronormativity, and love provides a clearer vision of that justice, then hope—when embedded and shared within relationships—sustains communities in their work toward a just and loving alternative.

While nationalism relies on reproductive heteronormativity’s symbolic love to secure the citizen’s “unreal loyalties” (Woolf 95) to the state, Clavo, Cemelli, and Adri’s queer love cultivates community through a patriotism of sorts which disrupts the symbolic and makes room for the specific. Anzaldúa tells us “if you’re not contained by your race, class, gender, or sexual identity, the body must be more than the categories that mark you” (134). The most paranoid impulses of queer theory expose the dangers

within nationalism and the heteronormative state and tend toward a retreat from its structures, but queer love and kinship provide a way back into our communities through a new sense of our selves. Through queer nationality—rooted in solidarity rather than hegemonic relationality—the queer citizen shares “a category of identity wider than any social position or racial label” (Anzaldúa 138). Though it’s true that relationships are often the sites where hegemony of the nation-state is constructed and reproduced, queering those same bonds allows us to remake and rework the communities they uphold.

“Because love, at its best, repeats itself.”

- Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

CONCLUSION

I certainly didn't embark on an analysis of the reproductive heteronormativity at the center of citizenship with the expectation of finding good news, but this project concludes hopefully. The hope at the end of this all is a queer one, based in the realization that heteronormativity may be everywhere, but it is not everything. In their dialogue “Hope and Hopefulness” Lisa Duggan and José Esteban Muñoz offer a discussion of this kind of queer hope. While they acknowledge that much of “American political hope has been premised on nostalgia in false histories, complacency about brutal presents, and desires for an idealized future of unchallenged domination” (275), they argue that the practice of queer hope “helps escape from a script in which human existence is reduced” (278) by fostering a revolutionary spirit that acknowledges “our current situation is not enough” but then mobilizes that anger and paranoid energy through “shared collectivity” (279). By their reading, a queer hope starts with identifying the heteronormative scripts which constrict our sense of possibility and then relies on collective resistance to contest the reality that reproductive heteronormativity writes for us.

The paranoid queer critique within this project made it abundantly clear to me that hegemonic relational codes persist at every level of our relationships and function to construct and adhere symbolic loyalties to a patriarchal state. As explored in Part I, the state shapes citizens through identity-based scripts which locate citizens within rigid

relational roles which uphold the patriarchal violence of the state. But, according to Duggan and Muñoz, queer hope starts from this critical acknowledgement. When we recognize the ways heteronormativity and other oppressive social structures constrain and limit us, our anger lends itself to an energy which helps us break out of those scripts. However, unlike much of anti-social theory, Duggan and Muñoz argue that this negative force must lead us into the social and political rather than out of it.

The stories in this thesis do the work of pushing us beyond a paranoid retreat toward the social and political realms where repair becomes possible. Those whom I met in El Paso acted on what they knew to be broken about the world and took a “sideways step into political engagement in a disappointing world, via the educated hope” (Duggan and Muñoz 280). After critique points toward the heteronormativity which distorts relationships along the lines of patriarchal domination, queer love, hope, and kinship become resources to “repair our relation to the social and political world that we have also wished to mutilate, explode, and destroy” (Duggan and Muñoz 280). By disrupting gendered scripts and relational roles, queerness allows us to act outside of our positions within a hierarchal and heteronormative social order and find new ways to be together.

Where homosexuality and heterosexuality are both sexual orientations which place the citizen in a location where he or she is either a subject to or agent of patriarchal violence, queerness functions as a sexual disorientation that undermines the logics of these relationships. Freed from hegemonic scripts, love becomes rooted in what we learn when we attend to the particularities of others. Rather than a way out of oppressive relationships, queer love gives us a way to untangle scripts of oppression and rework our relationships into sites of justice. And, when our interpersonal relationships lead us away

from the state's hegemony and toward solidarity, love becomes a tool to reform the fabric of our community.

When it is removed from the exigencies of ordinary life, queer theory points to and flees from the violence of familial roles. But queer ethics of being—when embodied in creative acts of reorganizing and reframing our relationships—give us a way to encounter, and then return to, family as people who exist outside of and despite those roles. At its best, queer love offers a way for us to disrupt the reproduction of interpersonal relationships that violently reproduce the hierarchies of the nation-state. Essentialist and identity-based notions of sexuality and gender orient the citizen within relationships that socialize men and women into roles that reinforce and replicate the dynamics of the patriarchal state, but queer kinship seeks ways of relocating relationships outside the scripts that distort them. Because queering kinship through love allows us to disrupt and reinvent the family unit that underpins the nation-state, love provides a new technology for cohering our communities and coexisting outside of the distances of hierarchies. Queerness, as a lived ethic of transformative love, heals the divisions which theory identifies.

Queer theory cannot save us from the ugliness of the world, but it can bring us into the beautiful parts of being together that spring from our careful cultivation of love. Queer love will not fix division or oppression, and often the same queer consciousness that alerts us to violent structures intensifies the pain caused by structural injustice as we learn to recognize it. But queer hope and love are “a politics oriented towards means and not ends” (Duggan and Muñoz 281). While we cannot depend on false promise of liberation from injustice, Duggan and Muñoz remind us that “hope and hopelessness exist

in a dialectical rather than oppositional relation” (280). Negativity and paranoid theory—and the hopelessness that accompanies the realization of all that we are up against—pushes us toward anger while the hope and love fostered through and within our communities gives us a way to mobilize our anger by providing us with something worth acting for. We act through love and on behalf of whom love attaches us to.

But love, as Murdoch reminds us, is not easy. Even our best and queerest efforts at love are bound to fail. Duggan and Muñoz caution us that, “there is fear attached to hope—hope understood as a risky reaching out for something else that *will* fail, in some if not all ways” (279). No one whom I met in El Paso got relationships exactly right. Whenever we enter into relationships bearing the burden of skin that makes us fragile, fallible, and needy, we are bound to bring with us our own selfishness, thirst for power, and other shortcomings. But Duggan and Muñoz remind us that even when our relationships fail, collectivity sustains us. Queer love—when detached from the pastoral promise that love completes us and the reproductive imperative that love is a tool of produce and reproduction—allows us to see love as a start, rather than an end. As Murdoch writes, “all our failures are ultimately failures in love. Imperfect love must not be condemned and rejected but made perfect. The way is always forward, never back.”

“I think us here to wonder, myself. To wonder. To ask. And that in wondering about the big things and asking about the big things, you learn about the little ones, almost by accident. But you never know nothing more about the big things than you start out with. The more I wonder, the more I love.”

-Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*

THE WAY FORWARD

Here, at the end of this thesis, I’ve come to a kind of obvious conclusion: If we want to figure out a better way to live in community together, then we need to learn how to love one another. In a lot of ways, it feels silly to have traveled thousands of miles and spent years reading and writing to figure out something that I probably knew when I was eight.

Months ago, when I wrote the preface to this, I wrote, “Really, what I needed to understand was how to be human.” At that point in time, I was hoping that—with enough queer theory under my belt—I could find some sort of answer or ethic of being that would give me the answers I needed to resolve the tensions within my relationships. And—though I didn’t quite have the self-awareness to articulate it—there was also a part of me that hoped studying queer theory would soothe the Catholic shame and guilt that haunted my most liberal and secular sensibilities and made me wonder whether or not queer love was even possible.

The most paranoid version of myself thought that theory and research would prove useful if they could give me a way through the ambiguity of relationships complicated by the ugliness of the world we live in. Desperate for resolution, I was drawn to theory that promised to offer a cohesive lens that exposed all the ways injustice warped our world. But the, spending a year conducting interviews, building

relationships, and attending to these stories did something for me that theory couldn't. Stories brought me into the same ambiguity that I leaned into theory to escape from, and attending to the details of those stories taught me how to look with grace and learn from what I saw. Stories—with the magic that only they possess—loosened my grip on the rigid prescriptions of theory and guided me to the places where stories surprised me and disrupted my sense of what ought to be true about queerness and love. In the details and particularities of these stories, I found hope within the realization of what love could do. I cannot thank those whose stories are featured in this thesis enough for what their vulnerability, friendship, and perspective helped me to understand about the world.

And—beyond learning what love could do—this project taught me how to approach research through love. Learning from stories allowed me to see things about the individuals I met that the logics of both gendered scripts and queer critiques would have usually obscured. Instead of the answer about how to be human that I was looking for in theory, these stories taught me that love starts when we look beyond rigid rules for ourselves and others and replace certainty with wonder. Queerness isn't a new world order; it's a way beyond order itself. And though this means that a queer imagination or consciousness couldn't give me easy answers to mend my relationships, queerness led me toward love by giving me the resources to see others through the lens of justice. Love gives us a way to work through the structural distances of reproductive heteronormativity and find our way to one another.

At the beginning of this all, I was worried whether or not queer love was possible. But, along the way, I learned that queerness makes love possible. This is true, not because straight people can't love, but because relationships gendered to uphold the

patriarchy work against justice. Instead of giving me a way out of the muddle and tensions of my relationships, queer love gave me a way forward. Love might not be enough to undo all of the ways heteronormativity and other hierarchal structures mark and maim us as the locate us within hegemonies. But—in love—we find ways to relate outside of those wounds, straining against the boundaries of our own selves toward the start of someone else.

Words and Theories about Sexuality

Reproductive heteronormativity:

Beyond just an expectation that everyone is straight, reproductive heteronormativity refers to the cultural value system which assigns moral value to sex that reinforces the patriarchal and productive relationship between men and women and punishes sex that challenges patriarchal ideas about relationality. Said another way, reproductive heteronormativity regulates who people have sex with and how that sex ought to happen to ensure relationships maintain the domination of men over women. According to reproductive heteronormativity, sex should be between a man and woman, private, romantic, in a married and monogamous relationship, driven by and pleasurable for the man, and for the purpose of reproduction. Though reproductive heteronormativity focuses on the straight, homosexuals can participate in it so far as their relationships and positioning upholds a system of sexual morality which distinguishes between good and bad sex by holding it up against the morality of the normal.

Queer:

Most simply, queer refers to anything that disrupts the norm. More specifically, something is queer when it challenges the norms of reproductive heteronormativity by subverting relationships as the site where men enforce power over women. Therefore, sexual relationships between men and women can be queer when they break the rules of dominance and submission, and same-sex relationships can be heteronormative when they reinforce the idea that one sexual and masculine partner should have power over a feminine one. While in popular culture queer often refers to a sexual orientation or identity, within the terms of theory, queer is an anti-identity position which refuses the idea that gender and sexuality are essential to who we are or that gender and sexuality operate in rigid binaries.

Essentialist:

Essentialist notions of sexuality operate under the premise that how we experience sexual attraction and who we are attracted to is something inherent to who we are (nature instead of nurture). Under this view, your attraction speaks to who you are—if you have homosexual attraction, then you are a homosexual. Essentialist views of sexuality are often at the center of rights claims. Because essentialists most often believe people are “born gay” and that sexuality is part of someone’s identity, essentialists argue that punishing people for homosexual behavior counts as discrimination because they see homosexuality as an immutable characteristic.

Constructivist:

Constructivist notions of sexuality originate with Foucault and differ from essentialist views in that they think that our sexual desires are shaped by how power functions in the world and limited by the resources that we have available to us. Where essentialists see

sexuality as inherent, constructivists view sexuality as contingent. So someone can't know that they are into cybersex unless computers are part of the world they live in. Additionally, there's nothing inherently attractive about a man in uniform, but since our society associates masculine power with some uniforms, an attraction to uniforms reflects that power at work. In constructivist views, sexuality is less about whom a person is attracted to but what that attraction reflects about the society someone lives in.

Assimilationist:

In terms of queer theory, “assimilationist” is a critique of LGBTQ politics and approaches focused on social inclusion. Critics—especially in the anti-social turn—argue that assimilationist stances (such as gay marriage, adoption rights, inclusion within the military) reinforce heteronormativity by making a place for LGBTQ people within heteronormative social structures.

Anti-social turn:

Closely associated with queer negativity, anti-social queer theory can be understood as theories of “queer unbelonging” (Caserio et al.) which rejects pastoralizing notions of a queer escape from oppression and argue instead that oppression and power pervade every type of relationships.

Who and what to read if you want to know more about:

- Reproductive Heteronormativity: “Thinking Sex” by Gayle Rubin
- Queerness: “Critically Queer” by Judith Butler
- Essentialist vs. constructivist views of sexuality: “Identity and Politics in a Post-Modern Gay Culture” by Steven Seidman
- Assimilationist Politics: “The Trouble with Normal” by Michael Warner
- Anti-social turn: “Is the Rectum a Grave?” by Leo Bersani

What it Actually Means to Keep Saying Gender and Sexuality are Social Constructs

Discursive:

The idea of discourse and the discursive comes from poststructuralist thought which argues that nothing has a fixed meaning outside of the social context we read it within. Discourses are cultural systems of symbols that we understand our world through. Symbols give meaning to our realities, but our sense of meaning is also limited by our availability of symbols. In a lot of ways, discourses function like self-fulfilling prophecies. Just like a discourse gives meaning to things, it also limits what we have the ability to articulate or conceptualize because our ability to express or perceive certain realities are limited by the symbolic tools we have available to us. To say something is discursively constituted is to

say it has meaning within the context we read it within, and that the context we read it within gives it meaning.

Gender as discourse:

Gender is discursive because our senses of man and woman are shaped by how we act as men and women while, simultaneously, our ability to act as men and women is limited by what the discourse of gender makes possible. Discursively, gender functions to place men and women in opposite roles, and we “gender” the world to reinforce this function. For example, though there is nothing inherently “gendered” about going to the bathroom, bathrooms are discursive spaces because they reflect our understandings of gender as binary, and the way we use bathrooms further reinforces and limits us to that binary. Because gender discourses organize men and women into opposite groups, we build two separate bathrooms for men and women. And, every time we make the choice to enter a bathroom, we reinforce our own idea of gender as a category where our position in one of two groups defines our position within the world. Since we build our world with the conceptual tools of our discourses, our world accommodates those two binaries and then our ability to conceptualize and practice gender becomes limited by the world we built around our shape of gender. We change and reinforce discourses by acting within them. When we begin to understand gender beyond binaries, we build gender neutral bathrooms, and then in interacting with those bathrooms, we have material access to those new ideas.

Who and what to read if you want to know more about:

- Sexuality as Discourse: *The History of Sexuality* by Michel Foucault
- Gender as Discourse: “Imitation and Gender Insubordination” by Judith Butler

The Words that Keep Going with “System of Oppression”

Patriarchy:

The patriarchy is a value system where the masculine is valued and the feminine is devalued as a way to maintain the position of men over women and to naturalize (or lead us to overlook or take for granted) the power, force, and violence that men exert to maintain that position.

Masculinist:

To say something is masculinist is to say it reflects the patriarchal assumptions of how the world should work. Since patriarchy legitimates the use of violence and force as masculine—and thus, valuable—traits, masculinist ideas of the state believe that acting on behalf of the state should mean acting through violence or force.

Hegemonic:

Hegemony is dominance of one party, entity, or group over others. A system or society is hegemonic when it is structured to maintain or naturalize this dominance. Sociology

describes gender as a hegemonic system because gender regimes exist to justify the dominance of men and subordination of women. In the context of this thesis, reproductive heteronormativity is hegemonic because reproductive heteronormativity creates a social value system structured around the masculine as powerful and the feminine as vulnerable in both interpersonal relationships and the political sphere.

Binary:

Binary understandings operate along the assumption that, not only that there are two types of things, but that those things are opposites and have meaning for the ways they are opposite from each other. For example, to think of black and white through binary thinking ignores all shades of gray and insists that everything is either black or white. Within this binary thinking, you know something is black if it is not white and, then, conversely because something is not black, it becomes white.

The **gender binary** operates under similar logic. Men (and masculinity) and women (and femininity) are distinct and opposite, and their meaning comes from this oppositional relational position. For example, since men are powerful, then women have to be powerless. Therefore, anything that isn't masculine/powerful, has to be feminine/vulnerable. Additionally, if someone or something isn't powerful, then you know there are feminine. As since something that is feminine cannot be powerful, you know that a woman is vulnerable.

Binary ideas about sexuality are similar in that heterosexual and homosexual are seen to have opposite qualities that define one another. (To be straight is to say that you aren't gay, and so if you aren't straight, then you have to be gay.)

Theoretical Lenses and Positions as Used in this Thesis

Paranoid vs. Reparative Reading:

The ideas of paranoid and reparative reading come from Eve Sedgwick. She argues that in queer and feminist literary studies, critical scholars often approach works with the intention of identifying systems of oppression at work (pointing out all the places where things are racist/sexist/homophobia). Sedgwick argues that this **paranoia** often comes from a place of fear—if you're expecting to find oppression everywhere that you look, it loses its ability to surprise you. In her words, the "first imperative of paranoia is There can be no bad surprises" (130). The paranoid impulse is an anxious one—the paranoid reader grapples with oppression by desperately trying to control and tame it.

While Sedgwick acknowledges that paranoid readings are important if we are to understand the world we live in, she argues that the paranoid must be paired with the **reparative**. Reparative reading starts with entering what Melanie Klein calls the depressive position. The paranoid reader's anxiety about oppression pushes her into a constant attempt to know oppression to avoid pain, but through the depressive state, the reader sits with and accepts

the inevitability of pain. Once the reader accepts pain as part of her reality, she is able to begin reparative reading which is curious about what else could be true about the world. Where the paranoid reader studies the world with the intention of confirming what she knows to be true about it, the reparative reader remains curious and open to surprise. The paranoid reading style is fueled by a self-important desire to be right about the world, but the reparative reading takes pleasure in the act of reading and learning from the world.

Counterstance:

This idea of the counterstance comes from Gloria Anzaldúa, and it's similar to Sedgwick's paranoid positioning. According to Anzaldúa, the counterstance "locks one into a duel of oppressor and oppressed" (100) where the oppressed defines her position in terms of her location against the oppressor. While the counterstance allows the oppressed to critique the views of the oppressor, the binary move of defining herself against the oppressor traps the oppressed within the oppressor's belief system.

Mestiza consciousness:

A mestiza consciousness is one that sees the world through duality rather than through binaries. For Anzaldúa, her mestiza consciousness comes from her experiences making meaning through the racial and cultural contradictions of living in the borderlands and the interpersonal contradictions of being queer. A mestiza consciousness is cultivated through straddling contradicting cultures and worldviews and the tolerance for ambiguity which comes from balancing rather than reconciling the inconsistencies in these positions.

Queer Theorists and Theories

Leo Bersani:

Queer theorists often attribute the advent of the anti-social turn to Bersani who, in "Is the Rectum a Grave?" makes the bold statement that "there's a big secret about sex: most people don't like it. According to Bersani, sex is defined by how we navigate power within our relationships. He describes sex as "anti-communitarian," "self-shattering," and "anti-identarian." Rather than redeeming or insisting on a homosexuality that is democratic and reforming, he argues that sex needs to be considered in terms of the "death drive" for the ways it offers a space of shattering and destruction. He urges for a queer theory that rejects homosexual sex as inherently liberatory and instead considers the role of shame, power, and oppression within all sexual relations. According to Bersani, sex functions—not to make us whole or complete us—but as a way to understand and transcend the limits of our ego by inviting a sense of powerlessness.

Michael Warner:

Much of Warner's arguments critique the heteronormativity of popular LGBTQ politics, especially in terms of gay marriage. Warner argues that society's views on sex are shaped by sexuality morality which views some behaviors (usually those that reinforce existing

social structures and hierarchies) as good and healthy sex and other behaviors as bad or immoral sex. According to Warner, gay assimilationist politics function to include certain types of homosexuality (respectable, white, gay couples) in the category of good and healthy sex but do nothing to undermine the hierarchical moral system which elevates one type of behavior over the other. Instead of these respectability politics, Warner advocates for a queer ethic where “the ground rule is that one doesn’t pretend to be above the indignity of sex” (35) and people confront their own shame. Like many anti-social theorists, Warner rejects homosexuality as the moral opposite to heterosexuality’s immorality, and instead sees queerness as behavior that exposes no sex or relationships are inherently moral.

Lee Edelman:

Edelman contributes discussions of “futurity” to the anti-social turn. He discusses how society’s sense of political future is invested in the abstraction of the children to come and therefore tied to reproduction. In this framing, reproductive heteronormativity sustains the future while queerness, thought of in terms of the death drive, erases it. He offers a queer reading that reorients attention away from a future and toward the present, arguing that a society focused on the abstract needs of a fantasized and fleeting child is unable to care for or recognize the adults that children become. For Edelman, a queerness with attention to the present reality is able to overcome the gaps between the symbolic relationships of reproductive discourses and their actual subjects.

Poststructuralist/Constructivism

Judith Butler:

Widely cited for her theory of gender performativity, Butler uses drag as a lens to expose that all gender is performance in that there is no correct or original way to perform any gender. For Butler, to say that gender is performed does not mean that gender doesn’t matter. Instead, Butler argues that there is nothing natural, permanent, or essential about how we understand gender because gender only takes on material meaning through rituals and relationships. That means there is no sense of male without a corresponding sense of femaleness. Butler argues that heteronormativity functions to create the illusion that male and female are separate and cohesive entities outside of one another. As a result, she responds to the lies heteronormativity, not by trying to refute its lies through establishing a stable sense of homosexuality but by performing exaggerated versions of heteronormativity’s rules to draw attention to its faulty logics. For her, gender performativity is subversive because it seeks to undermine, rather than refute, the rules of reproductive heteronormativity.

Performativity:

Butler argues for a queerness that performs—rather than merely repeats—gender and sexual norms to expose the ways that they are unnatural and unstable. Butler is critical of approaches to LGBTQ politics which argue gay relationships follow the same rules as straight relationships. Instead, Butler argues that performativity

exposes that the rules of heterosexuality are just as fake. By leaning far into heterosexuality's conventions of what a man or woman should be, performativity exposes the parody within those norms. Butler uses drag as an example of performativity because in performing drag, men take on hyperfeminine qualities and costumes. Where the logics of heteronormativity assume that the more someone checks the boxes of "woman" the more of a woman that person should be, the absurdity of drag exposes that these norms, even when performed to the fullest extent, don't actually culminate in the right kind of woman.

"Sexuality against identity" (318):

Because Butler understands sexuality as attached to gender performativity, Butler's goal is not to engage with and resituate LGBTQ+ categories of sexuality within the current discourse of sexuality, but to perform identities as failures of the existing categories in order to make clear their temporality and uselessness. She argues that both the construction of homosexuality as a copy or origin of heterosexuality maintains the notion of sexual priority, so these categories must be inverted rather than reversed. For this reason, Butler concludes that "sexuality must be worked against identity, even gender," so "that which cannot fully appear in any performance persists in its disruptive promise" (318). For her, queerness should not be a new identity, but a refusal to live within the category of identity itself.

Michel Foucault:

Foucault argues that knowledge shapes our sexuality. Instead of a fixed part of us, our sexual desires are bound by the information we have available to us and shaped by the way power functions within our world. According to Foucault, the idea of sexuality existing as an orientation or identity is relatively new—historically, sex was thought of only in terms of acts. Through this discursive view, Foucault argues that homosexuality and heterosexuality are inventions of the time we live in, and not inherent or ahistorical.

Eve Sedgwick:

According to Sedgwick, neither gender nor sexuality are fixed or binary identities. Instead, sexuality mediates the relationship between bodies to create gender. She offers queerness as an alternative to static identity. To her, things are queer when they misalign the binaries they exist to reinforce. In this sense, queerness moves beyond homosexuality and includes possibilities in sexual orientation, expression, practice, fantasy, desire, companionships and relationships ordered around all these sites. She bases her conception of queerness within the sphere of sexuality, she but acknowledges how queerness disrupts and opens possibilities in identity discourses beyond gender and sexuality.

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