Identity Positivity in Decolonial Worlds: Making Room for Gender and Sexual Possibility

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

IDENTITY POSITIVITY IN DECOLONIAL WORLDS: MAKING ROOM FOR GENDER AND SEXUAL POSSIBILITY

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN ENGLISH

BY ERICA CHU

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

After years of white Evangelical Christian education, indoctrination, and repression, I moved to Chicago in 2006 to start graduate school. Upon arriving, I met up with a friend who came out to me and told me a story about his faith that made me realize I’d been judging others and myself too harshly. I started coming out to people as queer and then fell in love. What came after was a flood of life changes; broken and severely damaged relationships with family, friends, and communities; self-discovery, trauma, healing, and exploration; religious changes, alienation, distress, and worldviews shaken and then shaken again. During this time, I was trying to learn and be challenged in an educational environment in which I felt—and sometimes was made to feel—grossly inadequate. This is what the period known as “grad school” was for me. Eventually, I couldn’t do the work required of me, was severely depressed, and not able to do much of anything. I took some time off, spent a lot of money on more adequate mental healthcare, became more open about being nonbinary, sought medical intervention, tried to find more economic stability, and began finding communities of scholars in databases and in real life that made my life and my status as a student scholar seem more possible. And slowly I returned to the writing. I’d like to say this story is about overcoming hardship, but it’s not. I have completed a dissertation, but I haven’t overcome anything. I have, however, survived. And when I say survive, I mean everything that comes with that term because this has indeed been a life-threatening experience.
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My gender sees themself in the callouses of people who call me lovely.
—Zenaida Peterson, “My Pronouns Are Black”
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ABSTRACT

Identity Positivity in Decolonial Worlds: Making Room for Gender and Sexual Possibility

defines identity positivity as theory that makes room for a full range of gender and sexual diversity, including LGBTQIA+ identities that are already well understood (such as gay and transgender) as well as forms of gender and sexual variation that are less known (such as asexual or mati) and identities still forming. Identity Positivity emphasizes the role of European and US colonial violence in enforcing western forms of gender, homophobia, and transphobia over the last 400 years, but it also criticizes Eurocentric queer theory for decades of advocating for conceptions of identity that also support western colonial power. This dissertation argues that pedagogical and reading practices that take these critiques into account have two main outcomes: first, recognition of gender and sexual variation that already exists; and second, creation of more space for people to be able to explore their own gender and sexuality apart from rigid definitions of what is acceptable for queerness. This second outcome is especially important because gender and sexually diverse people have high rates of mental distress and suicide risk, which are compounded by stigma against mental distress. Academic practices that assert wider ranges of diversity for gender and sexual variance, therefore, help readers and students see their identities, and by extension their very lives, as possible and worth pursuing. This dissertation explores these possibilities by recognizing radical identity theory in texts produced by online asexual communities, arguing for decolonial pedagogy in queer and transgender studies classrooms, reexamining what is queer in Michelle Cliff’s fiction, and recognizing the value of mental
distress in Cameron Awkward-Rich’s poetry. Utilizing decolonial theory, queer and transgender of color criticism, and disability and mad studies scholarship, *Identity Positivity* argues for new ways of seeing LGBTQ studies that make room for all of who gender and sexually diverse people are and can be.
INTRODUCTION

WHAT THE FUTURE CAN HOLD

Over her lifetime, Sylvia Rivera had been part of organizations like the Young Lords, the Gay Activists Alliance, and Street Transvestites Action Revolutionaries (STAR), which she founded with Marsha P. Johnson. She organized, advocated, and fought for street youth, gays, lesbians, and other queer and transgender people—even on her deathbed advocating for a trans-inclusive non-discrimination bill.1 Today the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) food pantry, where she once served as director, now bears her name, the MCC youth shelter she advocated for opened in 2003 and is called “Sylvia’s Place,” and the Sylvia Rivera Justice Law Project carries on her tradition of prioritizing the social, health, and legal needs of people who face discrimination at the intersections of poverty, racism, and gender and sexuality.2 In 2001, Rivera was invited by the Latino Gay Men of New York to give a talk at the Lesbian and Gay Community Center (AKA “the Center”) in New York City, but she had previously been banned from the building. Rivera, a Stonewall veteran, weeks before her fiftieth birthday and about eight months before her death of liver cancer, had to receive special clearance to be allowed in the Center built upon the liberation movement she and other “frontliners” had fought so hard for.3

1 Wicker, “Sylvia Rivera Trans Movement Founder.”
2 “Our Approach and Principles/Nuestras Práctica y Principios.”
3 Rivera and Fountain-Stokes, “Sylvia Rivera’s Talk at LGMNY, June 2001, Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center, New York City.,” 118.
Rivera was banned because she had once tried to destroy the front desk of the Center, which had come to represent the oppressive structures against which she had originally struggled. At the talk she gave at the Center, she said:

I am tired of seeing my children—I call everybody including yous in this room, you are all my children—I am tired of seeing homeless transgender children; young, gay, youth children. I am tired of seeing the lack of interest that this rich community has. This is a very affluent community. When we can afford to rerenovate a building for millions and millions of dollars and buy another building across the street and still not worry about your homeless children from your community, and I know this for a fact, because the reason that I have to get clearance every time I come in to this building is because I saw many of the kids before the building was being renovated up the street, many of the children are sleeping on the steps of that church. I went in there with an attitude. I raised hell. Yes, maybe I did try to destroy the front desk, but I did not attack anybody. But what did this community center do to me? My thanks for everything I have done for this freakin’ community? Had me arrested and put in Bellevue! So I’m supposed to kiss their asses? No, I don’t kiss nobody’s ass cuz I haven’t lived this long, because I don’t kiss nobody’s ass.4

As cisgender gays, lesbians, bisexual, and queer people gained more and more legitimacy among respectable society, her “children,” as she called them, for whom she had fought to make room in society, had failed to make room for her—and they failed to make room for youth who were like her—without food and housing security, dealing with addiction and mental distress, engaging in street economies, and lacking in deference to law enforcement and respectable authority. A front desk does not have to police who gets to come in. It can welcome people in, provide resources, and offer direction. These responsibilities were exactly what STAR was dedicated to providing, and something Rivera continued in her work through MCC.

What determines who is and is not allowed in the center? Whose center is it even that we seek entrance to? And is destroying the mechanisms of gatekeeping even possible when there is so much to know, to understand, to trust, to learn to listen for and to? The history of gender and

4 Rivera and Fountain-Stokes, 120.
sexual variance in the United States might on the surface seem like a movement toward ever increasing progress, and in some ways it is, but it is also a movement of hardening new boundaries that sometimes we—well-meaning queer people and their allies—are responsible for enforcing. Today Rivera is celebrated as a founding mother in queer and transgender advocacy, but she also began her advocacy before transgender people became an identity group with wide recognition—and even before “transgender” as a term developed the meaning that it has today. In light of her legacy, we might think about what futures we are currently engaged in creating.

Rivera helped make space for gender and sexually variant people even as the boundaries between who was acceptable and who was not hardened around her. How do we, like Rivera, make way for a future that makes space for what we and others may become? Even the unrecognizable, the forgotten, the mad?

This dissertation considers these questions and looks for opportunities to push back against assumptions made by early canonical queer theory—about what’s radical about sexual identities, how priorities about knowledge production are made, the role of conformity and resistance from the norm, and motivations for depathologizing transgender identity. In this age of ever-growing support for LGBTQIA people in the United States, making space for greater gender and sexual diversity is key for halting the building of new hierarchies that create possibility for some gender and sexual identities and marginalization, or even impossibility, for others. I argue for identity-positive approaches to the study of gender and sexuality, so that we can make space for further gender and sexual diversity—that which has been marginalized and also that which has not yet been articulated or been allowed to form.
This project is titled *Identity Positivity in Decolonial Worlds* because it examines a theoretical approach to gender and sexual identity that affirms all types of identities. “Identity” refers to how one identifies and is in its most simple form a label, but such a label also represents a way of being in the world that stems from experience and self-perception. For example, a person’s gender identity is the gender that person identifies as. A person’s gender cannot be assumed based on a name, the gender marker on a government-issued identification card, the gender assigned at birth, biological attributes, style of clothing, or how the person expresses themself when they communicate. As much as those things may affect a person’s experience of gender, their gender identity is self-determined. To be even more specific, if a person identifies their gender as a princess, that does not mean they identify as a woman or transgender woman or femme or transfeminine person. It means their identity is princess. It’s possible that person may also identify as a femme or any other term, but for the person’s gender identity to be femme and princess, they must consent to that identity. Any other gender attribution always risks misgendering.  

So, when I speak about identity positivity, I’m talking about this level of consent and self-determination in gender and sexual identity categories. Identities are essentially individual words/phrases, and they have special significance and meaning to individuals and to

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5 This way of understanding gender and sexual identity has not always been widely recognized, and even today researchers, online forums, and different communities have different ways of understanding how identity is determined. The ongoing cultural commitment to biological gender and how the sex of infants is determined (especially intersex infants) speaks to the ongoing disagreement with what gender, sex, and identity are. The increasing visibility of nonbinary identities has aided in the recognition of self-determined gender and sexual identity, but openness to self-determination is far from a widespread cultural norm even within many gender and sexually variant community spaces. I follow Kate Bornstein in the separation of gender attribution and gender identity, where attribution is when others assume a gender and identity is self-determined (*Gender Outlaw*, 24–27).
communities of people who share that identity or a closely related one. Distances of time, location, culture, and experience make understanding the connections between identities difficult (such as the relationships between “invert” and “gay,” “Latinx” and “Latine,” “bisexual” and “pansexual,” “fa’afafine” and “trans woman”). Identity categories imposed by researchers, agencies, and forms are convenient, but they imperfectly attribute identity and should be understood as doing so. Gender and sexual identity are ultimately self-determined and intensely particular to one’s relationship to culture, history, and communities.

I use "positivity" in my title to indicate positive regard for something in the face of systems of oppression that attempt to diminish its value.6 “Sex positivity” communicates investment in the affirmation of all types of sexual pleasure in the face of societal pressure to stigmatize or render invisible forms of sexual pleasure that are not commonly accepted. “Body positivity” also expresses affirmation of all types of bodies and responds to a system that values bodies based on Eurocentric notions of beauty, function, health, and ability. In a similar way, "identity positivity" expresses affirmation of all kinds of gender and sexual identities despite societal pressure to stigmatize or render invisible identity types that are not in keeping with those that are most widely understood and accepted under western cultural and political colonization.

Identity positivity is not recognition of gender and sexual diversity for the sake of diversity alone but requires investment in intersectional analysis because power structures privilege some identities over others. What identity positivity offers that is not already included in intersectionality is a specific consideration of the conditions that make space for gender and

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6 My use of “positivity” bears no relationship to the term positivism (in contrast to social constructivism) though my critique of canonical queer theorists is often aligned with post-positivist realist writers like Linda Martín Alcoff (Visible Identities), Michael Hames-García (Identity Complex), and Tobin Siebers (Disability Theory), because of their focus on relationality and the materiality of identity.
sexual possibility. Where a focus on intersectionality might describe the conditions that make life easier or harder for people with various identities, identity positivity describes the conditions that make some gender and sexual identities possible and others impossible or less likely to occur. For instance, intersectional analysis notes the consequences of a disabled white asexual person experiencing ableism and acephobia but also relative racial privilege. Intersectionality has a stake in affirming all identities especially marginalized ones, but identity positivity’s work to affirm gender and sexual diversity also requires examining the conditions that made the articulation of “disabled asexual” identity possible—which also includes attention to the conditions that make disabled asexual lives possible. What epistemologies, communities, self-exploration, healing, and frameworks of support, affirmation, information, and other resources made the iteration of this particular identity possible? And what other articulations of identity (whether gender identity, another form of asexuality (like panromanticism), or another combination such as (mad and disabled asexual) could be made possible with access to other epistemologies, communities, and resources? For many individual people, perhaps no other identities would be possible even in even utopic conditions, but in a classroom environment, for example, providing access to information about gender identity and support for gender variant students could make room for students to explore their gender identity in new ways. In addition, what forms of gender and sexual identity could be newly articulated and/or claimed with the space made by information, support, and other resources? I’m not suggesting teachers recruit cis/straight people to be gender and sexually variant, as the accusations used to go, yet I am suggesting we build environments of accessible information and support that empower everyone to explore their identities and feel free to express them in ways that are new to them, us, and perhaps the world.
This dissertation is rooted in LGBTQIA studies, queer theory, and transgender studies, yet identity positivity also relies on indigenous studies, African American studies, and postcolonial studies because colonialism has institutionalized Eurocentric standards of gender and sexuality that continue today through ongoing Eurocentrism in queer and transgender studies. Making space for gender and sexual diversity also means attending to colonialism in past and present forms and contributing to the eradication of US colonial systems through decolonial epistemologies, archives, pedagogy, and ultimately engaging with indigenous movements that address national sovereignty. Making more room for indigenous and nonwestern epistemologies in discourse around gender and sexuality is vital to fighting against Eurocentric colonial logics that harm gender and sexually variant people who are indigenous and people of color. These same logics also harm all gender and sexually variant people by denying additional possible identities. I will discuss these topics in more detail in chapters two and three, but this point shapes my work because the futures we create through identity positivity are beyond our imagination. A fully identity-positive world cannot exist or even be fully conceived under the oppressive conditions created by colonialism, but we who support gender and sexual diversity will work to create it anyway. We have all already engaged in creating a future, but identity-positive frameworks encourage expanding our vision of what could be and actively making room for that possibility. For white settlers and other nonindigenous people in the US, decolonial futures can be frightening, but supporters of gender and sexual diversity need investment in decoloniality to think beyond narrow visions of LGBTQ or even LGBTQIA+, to the conditions that make Two-Spirit, māhū, fa’afafine, muxes, and other indigenous and nonwestern gender and sexually variant lives possible. I am not suggesting that nonindigenous folks embrace indigenous forms of gender and sexuality, but the conditions that make room for indigenous gender and
sexually variant lives also make room for a loosened grip on Eurocentric epistemologies that stifle gender and sexual diversity and that enforce colonial power. The worlds we create today make room for what the future can hold. None of us can fully imagine what exactly that is, but an identity-positive future requires decolonization to undo the material and epistemic harms caused by colonization and to make room for more expansive gender and sexual possibilities.

Some of the criticism made against inclusion efforts is that inclusion into unjust institutions is not worthwhile. This dissertation is subtitled Making Room for Gender and Sexual Possibility, but I do not mean to convey that the goal of my project is that all gender and sexually variant people gain access to a limited and oppressive version of the world. Instead I am arguing that gender and sexual diversity depends on the room that is made for it—whether through information, community, or other forms of support. This results in self-identification or public recognition, but it really just boils down to being able to say “there is space for me on this earth.” Very present in my mind is the well-being of gender and sexually variant people who live with minority stress that comes from the lack of space for them in the communities in which they inhabit. Though it’s lovely to think we can all survive and find places where we are seen, understood, and able to thrive, this is just not the case. Many of us die. And many stop short of being who we are for lack of support in imagining what all we are and can be. In this project, I look at the room made in online communities, classrooms, novels, and poetry for gender and sexual possibility. Making room for possibility means making room for life, for survival, and for all one’s bodymind needs to stay alive. The conditions of gender and sexually variant possibility require all one needs to feel fully free to love and be themselves as they are and as they are

7 Conrad, Against Equality.
becoming. And this requires networks of survival—real and virtual; online, literary, and theoretical texts, which I explore through this project are part of these networks.

Anti-Relational Theory and Women of Color Feminist Tradition

Queer theory has often focused less on possibility for the future and more on queerness as radical difference. Because the AIDS Crisis was so influential to the creation of queer studies, queer theory has long celebrated the impossibility of queer life in normative society and sought to explore the power of anti-normativity, failure, and queer positionality without futures. In the 1980s and much of the 1990s, queer lives included the looming reality of death, and they included trauma, memory, and the survivors who created meaningful, loving, and outrageous art and communities. Queer theorists such as Leo Bersani, Lee Edelman, Michael Warner, and Jack Halberstam all write on these themes, which have become standards for understanding queerness and theorizing the beauty of resisting the norms of heterosexuality, yet what futures does this kind of work imagine? This way of understanding gender and sexual variance creates opportunities to celebrate communities outside mainstream society and to understand what value lies in queer difference, yet it also rejects the future, or claims to be the future, through holding firmly to an assertion of difference that marks queers as exceptional.

In No Future, for instance, Edelman argues for queer rejection of the future: “By figuring the refusal of the coercive belief in the paramount value of futurity, while refusing as well any backdoor hope for dialectical access to meaning, the queer dispossesses the social order of the ground on which it rests: a faith in the consistent reality of the social—and by extension of the social subject; a faith that politics, whether of the left or of the right, implicitly affirms.”

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8 Edelman, No Future, 6.
Such rejection of the social heightens the divide between queer and straight populations and eliminates the possibility of interdependency or cooperation. Edelman’s claims focus on the rejection of the Child, a symbol of reproductive futurism. He implies LGBTQ parents have internalized oppressive futurist logic, yet he does not address the status of queer children. According to Edelman, access to jouissance is possible outside reproductive futurism, but what queer presents—let alone queer futures—exist for queer children who want to die because they cannot imagine the possibility of queer life? Or what jouissance exists for children and adults who have not had access to the space to become anything but presumably straight and cis? These are the types of questions that remain unanswered in what José Esteban Muñoz, in *Cruising Utopía*, labels “anti-relational approaches to queer theory,” which he states, “are romances of the negative, wishful thinking, and investments in deferring various dreams of difference.”

Muñoz argues that most anti-relational work “moves to imagine an escape or denouncement of relationality as first and foremost a distancing of queerness from what some theorists seem to think of as the contamination of race, gender, or other particularities that taint the purity of sexuality as a singular trope of difference.” For Muñoz, anti-relationality attempts to study queerness in isolation, as if queerness could exist apart from other forms of identity and as if connection within and across sexual identity categories was never desirable or necessary. Investing in the future or seeking acceptance for gender and sexual variance among straight populations can definitely seem like internalization of normative heterosexual logics when one does not account for other forms of identity, but if white queer people can be anti-Asian, and

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9 Edelman, 17.


11 Muñoz, 11.
Asian American populations can be homophobic, where does a queer Asian American person turn? Jouissance in the moment or shared within communities of queer Asian people is important, but forgoing investing in other collective futures is not attractive or even possible for many who experiences forms of oppression other than homophobia.

In *The Queer Art of Failure* Halberstam responds to Muñoz and expands the archive of the anti-relational to include more accessible popular works and work by more women and people of color.\(^{12}\) Halberstam takes up and reverses Edelman’s critique of the Child to adopt a more hopeful and creative outlook for the future,\(^{13}\) but queerness is still made exceptional through failure, and the focus is not on the immediate needs of queer people but the symbolic power of failure. In closing a discussion of the harsh realities of several children’s films, Halberstam summarizes some of the lessons learned: “To live is to fail, to bungle, and ultimately to die: rather than searching for ways around death and disappointment, the queer art of failure involves the acceptance of the finite, the embrace, of the absurd, the silly, and the hopelessly goofy.”\(^{14}\) The message Halberstam gleans from children’s films has power for rejecting the myths of normativity and addressing the sometimes violent narratives in children’s films, but when considering the high costs of homophobia, transphobia, racism, ableism, and other forms of oppression, searching for a way around death and disappointment seems essential. Muñoz’s assertion, that some anti-relational work attempts to isolate sexuality from other forms of identity, lingers even in Halberstam’s analysis of a more diverse archive. Intersectionality is quite popular in feminist, queer, and transgender studies, and I do not mean to diminish its


\(^{13}\) Halberstam, 25.

\(^{14}\) Halberstam, 186–87.
importance by noting its current market value in gender studies. As Sara Ahmed says, “When intersectionality becomes a ‘happy point,’ the feminist of color critique is obscured.”

Though Halberstam successfully offers analyses of archives inclusive of a range of racial and cultural contexts, the urgent needs of real people and the power of cross-identity relationality are overlooked. Something is certainly being obscured in anti-relational work when contrasted to women of color feminism.

In her 1981 preface to *This Bridge Called My Back*, Cherríe Moraga writes of an incident in which a 14-year old Black boy is killed by a white police officer: “I hear there are some women in this town plotting a lesbian revolution. What does this mean about the boy shot in the head is what I want to know. I am a lesbian. I want a movement that helps me make some sense of the trip from Watertown to Roxbury, from white to Black. I love women in the entire way, beyond doubt.”

For Moraga, her queer love for women means loving all women, and being concerned with all women’s concerns and fears—as women, as mothers, as bodies with aches, pains, and anxieties. This is her queer “theory in the flesh.” In thinking about the conditions that give rise to freedom to express and assert gender and sexual variance, a women of color feminist theoretical tradition values the lived experiences of women of color, queers of color, and other people of color, poor people, and marginalized populations with a sense of urgency about the injustice they face. Halberstam is certainly not alone in building a less direct argument for and about the populations about which Halberstam writes, but Ahmed’s observation that feminist

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17 Moraga and Anzaldúa, 19.
of color critique is dulled in the taking up of white-driven forms of intersectionality also rings true.

In her 1997 essay, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens,” Cathy J. Cohen sees the shared stake LGBTs have with many straight populations such as single mothers on state assistance. She decries the raced and classed refusal on the part of queer activism and queer theory to engage with necessary relational work beyond the queer/straight divide:

Queer theorizing which calls for the elimination of fixed categories of sexual identity seems to ignore the ways in which some traditional social identities and communal ties can, in fact, be important to one's survival. Further, a queer politics which demonizes all heterosexuals discounts the relationships—especially those based on shared experiences of marginalization—that exist between gays and straights, particularly in communities of color.  

For Cohen, relationality across identity categories is necessary for working to end the oppression and marginalization that comes from heteronormativity, institutional racism, patriarchy, and class exploitation. Cohen’s focus on politics across identities is reminiscent of arguments about feminism made in bell hooks’s 1984 *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, in which she argues that feminism is not a lifestyle or a counterculture: “[Feminism’s] aim is not to benefit solely any specific group of women, any particular race or class of women. It does not privilege women over men. It has the power to transform in a meaningful way all of our lives.” For hooks, feminist movement cannot afford to allow feminism to be the sole work of and benefit to the small population of those willing to participate in women-centered separatist

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19 Cohen, 446.

countercultures.\textsuperscript{21} And similarly, Cohen argues the potential of queer politics is not in positioning queer people against straight people but in relational, intersectional work against oppression and marginalization. As I consider the claims of anti-relational queer theorists, I see arguments meant to highlight the power of distinctively queer positionality. But gender and sexual variance cannot be isolated from other forms of identity, and queer countercultures are not the only places gender and sexually variant populations inhabit. Cohen’s and hooks’s commitments to ending oppression, as well as Moraga’s love of women “in the entire way,” speak to their investment in not just diverse archives or even intersectional analysis but also in intersectional justice, which requires relationality across identity categories and concern for the urgent needs of gender and sexually variant people facing oppression.

Halberstam argues thoughtfully that the queer art of failure assists in rejecting heteronormative and capitalist investment in success and allows for new ways of queer thinking, but Halberstam doesn’t connect these new ways of thinking to the urgent needs of actual populations of queer people—especially those with limited political power and resources. Halberstam concludes the book: “Rather than resisting endings and limits, let us instead revel in and cleave to all of our own inevitable fantastic failures.”\textsuperscript{22} This is a moving and thoughtful message that calls for pride and reinvention, but it also leaves me wondering, “What about when the world fails you?” Halberstam is one of many theorists and critics—white and people of color—who engage with theory, criticism, representation, language, and symbol but less directly with the actual populations of people represented in the identities addressed. It’s easy to do when

\textsuperscript{21} hooks, 27.

\textsuperscript{22} Halberstam, \textit{The Queer Art of Failure}, 187.
engaging with texts and not stakeholders. But this dissertation endeavors to go one step further in the tradition of women of color feminism represented in work by Moraga, hooks, and Cohen—to resist exclusivity and anti-relationality and to connect theoretical messages to the collective material and psychic needs of real stakeholders. In this project, I think anew about texts, theory, and symbols to make room for the actual lives and identities of the people written about and writing the texts I study. And to me, this is even about life and death. Let me explain this with an example that might seem—for the moment—off topic.

*Conditions of Possibility*

In 2014, black teen Laquan McDonald was shot 16 times by white police officer Jason Van Dyke, who “feared for his life” when McDonald, visibly in distress, refused to drop the knife he was holding. The city of Chicago tried to bury the story about his death, but through the concerted efforts of organizers, protestors, and journalists, the dashcam footage was released, the Chicago Police Superintendent was fired, the Cook County State’s Attorney was voted out of office, the mayor did not seek reelection, and the officer who killed McDonald was fired and prosecuted. The Department of Justice investigated and found a pattern of unreasonable force based on systemic deficiencies on the part of police and the city, and the Chicago Police Department was put under a consent decree, which requires a federal judge and independent monitor oversee police reforms. What has happened in Chicago in the aftermath of the McDonald case is neither swift justice nor a radical shift in state violence and social control, yet it is significant progress for police accountability. What enabled this degree of response? In recent history, these consequences were made possible by the outcry over the deaths of Trayvon Martin, Stephon Watts, Rekia Boyd, Dominique “Damo” Franklin, Jr., Eric Garner, Mike Brown, Tamir Rice, and others in the three years before the McDonald case came to light. In the
immediate years before and during the McDonald case, there were countless vigils, rallies, protests, art projects, performances, hashtags, social media posts, meetings, campaigns, articles, videos, zines, and other publications that raised consciousness, furthered conversation, and theorized the movement for black lives and for state accountability. As details about the McDonald case became known, and as local activists and journalists sought to hold the city accountable, the activist work being done around the McDonald case became intertwined in the larger Black Lives Matter movement, which began following the 2013 acquittal of George Zimmerman of the murder of Trayvon Martin. The sequence of events that progressively stoked national outrage and the history of activism around police brutality surely played a role in this level of accountability being possible in the McDonald case, but the events and labor of the very recent past are not the only work of relevance. Other cases have galvanized the movement against black criminalization and state violence in Chicago; for instance, accountability for a police torture ring has been a prominent issue in recent decades, and in the longer history of Chicago organizing, direct action, activist journalism, and mass demonstrations have played major roles in work that involved high profile figures such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Ida B. Wells and groups such as the union of Pullman Porters and the Haymarket anarchists. More recent and long-standing traditions of organizing, public demonstration, and consciousness raising are part of the historical and cultural conditions that made #LaquanMcDonald a hashtag and that raised the consciousnesses of voters, journalists, politicians, and community members and made this level of accountability possible.

And as much as this accountability is progress, I have to ask, too: what are the conditions that could have led to Van Dyke not pulling the trigger once—let alone 16 times? What are the conditions that would have led to Laquan McDonald being a grown man looking back at a police
encounter that did not end in death? What are the conditions that would have led to more healing and support for McDonald as a young child as he struggled after being removed from his home, was abused in foster care, and lacked support in his schools? What would have led to the money that paid for extra patrols that night to have been spent instead on extra therapy and other resources for him and his family, and extra opportunities for mentorship, fun, and rest? What are the conditions that would have led to that past? To his future? And given that we cannot change the past, what are we doing now to ensure that there are more young people given space and opportunity to live, heal, and grow rather than be subject to surveillance, restraint, and demands for compliance?

Laquan McDonald’s future was cut short, not just by a cop, or even by a racist policing system. His adult life was not allowed to become possible due to larger cultural failures to imagine and value his possibility. Part of what identity positivity does is reimagine, recognize marginalized visions, and make space for what we as a culture and we as individuals cannot yet imagine. I am of course not alone in asking these questions about the possibility of black life. My work is greatly influenced by the Black Lives Matter and the prison abolitionist movements, both of which emphasize biopolitics beyond the numbers of who is alive and who is not and also make space for imagining the conditions of black possibility. BLM was built upon the work of black intellectual and activist traditions—notably black queer feminist writings, such as those by Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, and Cathy Cohen, and feminist abolition work by writers like Angela Davis and Beth Ritchie. These writers, along with Chicana feminist writers such as Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga; queer abolitionist work by Dean Spade, Reina Gossett, and others; and queer decolonial writing by Qwo Li Driskill, Laura Scott Morgensen, and others are a backdrop to my work, always shaping my outlook of what theory does, how it works, and
why it matters. My dissertation is not specifically about the movement for black lives or the abolition of the prison industrial complex, but it is a part of the imaginative work that makes space for all black lives, and for black lives within spaces that already claim to be for gender and sexually variant people. Though the BLM movement is not the main subject of my work, I see my project and BLM as linked, motivated by the same historical forces, propelled by many of the same women of color feminist texts, and united in creating possibility for what has been marginalized and made impossible by contemporary racist colonial systems. Focusing on “ending racism” or “ending transphobia” is a failed pursuit. Oppressions are always interlocking, tied up in each other, and, following Cohen and hooks, who call for relational approaches across identity categories, I see that the same work that goes into making space for Two-Spirit men, trans women of color, and nonbinary asexuals is also the same work that goes into making space for kids like Laquan McDonald. We are not just fighting against bad cops or racists and homophobes. We’re fighting against the internalized logic of colonialism and all of the gendered and racialized fictions of inferiority and superiority that it carries. We’re fighting not just to eliminate murder, hate, and suicide. We’re fighting for life. For joy, expression, freedom, self-determination, community, knowledge, identity, creativity, healing, confidence, love, and all the other things that make life possible—and diverse life at that.

Chapters

In Chapter 1, I explore asexual identity, theory, and community in early online writing by and about asexuals and compare those representations to the concerns of anti-assimilationist queer writers in order to frame asexual identity politics as radical despite is mischaracterization as conservative. I show how identity positivity relies on theoretical systems that acknowledge all
sexual identities as equally valid even if they don’t have the appearance of what some segments of queer community have considered radical.

In Chapter 2, I take a closer look at the epistemological systems that make identity positivity so necessary as I explore the consequences of European-based settler-colonial gender systems being enforced in academia. Through an examination of work by María Lugones, Qwo-Li Driskill, and Scott Lauria Morgensen, I take stock of transgender studies’ investments in Western-based epistemological systems, and I ultimately pursue a decolonial gender-affirming pedagogy that benefits all kinds of people—especially students in queer and transgender studies classrooms.

In Chapter 3, I argue that even though early canonical queer theory has focused on deviance from the norm as a way of marking gender and sexual variation, Michelle Cliff’s 1987 novel *No Telephone to Heaven* provides ample evidence that gender and sexual variance is found in conformity to gender and sexual norms that exist outside Eurocentric gender and sexual epistemologies and, therefore, are rarely recognized, understood, or valued under colonization. Conforming to indigenous and nonwestern gender, sexual, and kinship systems is a strategy through which Cliff’s characters attend to their whole selves as mixed-race Jamaicans attempting to heal from colonial trauma.

In Chapter 4, I focus on the relationship between madness and transgender identity in poetry by Cam Awkward-Rich, who writes about his experience in the context of racialized, sexual, and gender trauma. I argue that imagining transgender futures without mental distress does not actually reduce oppression but guarantees it by imagining distressed transgender people out of existence. I explore how the bodymind can use distress to communicate what it needs, but
I also show that because distress is just a feature of many people’s lives, wishing transgender distress out of existence does actual harm.

Each of these chapters takes on a distinct set of textual objects and theoretical archives to explore how gender and sexual identities can remain diverse and continue to proliferate. As a concept, identity positivity is not entirely new, but in offering a vocabulary for talking about it, this dissertation will contribute to worldmaking that ensures greater gender and sexual diversity, but also self-determination for all. In as much as we’d all like to see ourselves as someone like Rivera, creating spaces for gays, dykes, queens, street people, and all the rest as we claw away at a front desk that should never have been built to keep people out, it is often we who, in some context or many, are the ones stumbling behind a front desk not even aware we are the gatekeepers to a center in which we don’t even fully belong. This project is created in an effort to spur on our thinking about how gender and sexually variant people and their allies can increase our efforts to make space for the vast network of gender and sexual identities, positionalities, and lives that are possible—and to imagine and create worlds and futures that center all of who we are and who we might become.
CHAPTER 1

“ON THEIR OWN TERMS”¹: RADICAL VISIONS OF ASEXUAL IDENTITY

Each year, with increasing urgency, progressive academics and activists seek ways to complicate the unspoken norms shaping LGBTQ agendas by encouraging work addressing the experiences of a variety of racial, ethnic, national, and class backgrounds as well as work dealing with indigeneity, diaspora, the transnational, and a diversity of body types, abilities, embodied experience, and sexual activities. Such work is identity positivity in action in that it overturns assumptions about what experiences count as LGBTQ identity, and in many cases, it even redefines how variant sexuality and gender are articulated (i.e. “gay and lesbian” vs. LGBT vs. LGBT2Q vs. LGBTQ+ vs. “queer and transgender” vs. “gender and sexual minorities,” among many others). One identity recently added to the long list of identities significant to queer studies and advocacy is asexuality.² The movement for visibility among asexuals is as much about survival as it has been for gay men and lesbians, bisexuals, transgender people, and other gender

¹ This phrasing comes from David Jay in the film (A)sexuality, when a group of asexuals march in the San Francisco Pride Parade and pass out flyers to those gathered there. In one scene, an unnamed man interrupts Jay and says “I pity your poor soul.” Jay asks “Why?” and the man answers, “Because I don’t stand for what you stand for.” Jay responds, “I stand for everyone being sexual on their own terms” Tucker, (A)Sexual.

² In this essay, I use the commonly used definition of asexual identity developed by the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN): “Asexual: a person who does not experience sexual attraction” (“Main Page”). It is also important to acknowledge that even though AVEN is a central force in the exploration and canonization of various theoretical models for understanding asexual identities, the definition adopted by AVEN and placed on its main page is not universally accepted by all people who identify as asexual. Rabger, for instance, defines an asexual as someone who “does not experience primary sexual attraction and/or sexual desire” (Rabger, “Asexuality, in All Its Parts”). Writings by and about asexuality are not always consistent in defining asexuality-related terms. The dominance of AVEN as a networking space, however, has encouraged theoretical methods and definitions that have become widely sanctioned.
and sexually variant people. Invisibility offers protection from stigma,³ but it also makes community difficult. In the face of compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory eroticism, community can be a lifeline for coping with the negative messages being sent about those who do not conform to these normative requirements. Advocating for visibility is an identity-positive endeavor because proclaiming “asesuals exist” provides opportunities to replace isolation and shame with community and pride, which enable asexuals to survive acephobic spaces. It also makes self-recognition possible among those who may disidentify with the identities that are visible to them. Such proclamations also help others see how their assumptions failed to make space for asexuals, and they have the opportunity to rectify that failure. All these actions result in making room for asexuals and asexuality to exist.

Despite the common investments LGBTQs and asexuals have in resistance to compulsory heterosexuality, asexuality is not widely recognized in queer spaces or queer studies.⁴ Given stigma and shame cast upon a wide variety of sexual activities, experiences, and identities, it’s no wonder that among LGBTQs pride in sexuality has become a central component of identification and a cause for fierce defense. For many sexually variant people, defense of queer eroticism is an act of defiance against a homonormative culture that at worst wishes queer people out of existence and at best wants them out of sight. To claim an absence of sexual attraction, therefore, sounds akin to the shame that forces queer people into the closet.

Compulsory eroticism is strongly entrenched in LGBTQ cultures, and those interested in expanding the field of queer studies to include a wide range of possible transgressions from

³ John D’Emilio says, “Visibility is a precondition of gay and lesbian politics…but it also means that every homophobe in America knows what we look like and where to find us.” (Making Trouble, 94).

⁴ Though this trend is changing for the better especially among youth who rely on the internet and gain information about LGBTQIA information including asexuality.
normative sexual identities meet substantial resistance when addressing asexuality. This essay responds to some of that resistance by demonstrating how asexuality provides an opportunity to revise the assumed radical identity politics that has been invested in toppling compulsory heterosexuality but has not expressed much commitment to resisting compulsory eroticism. I will do this by exploring identity negativity in work by queer writers who often identify themselves as anti-assimilationist radical queers.

Radical identity politics calls for systemic change. In the case of feminism, radical feminists differ from cultural and liberal feminists in that they seek to change how society is organized rather than find ways for women to fit into the current social structure. Similarly, radical queers resist heteronormative (or homonormative) assimilation, criticize LGBT reliance on respectability politics, and call for systemic change that would end oppression against all queer people, not just those with the greatest social capital among heterosexual elites.

Unfortunately, because so-called radical feminists have come to focus so narrowly on a set of feminist dogma rooted in biological essentialism, their identity politics are anything but radical. Disturbingly, those who gather under the banner of “radical feminists” (often labeled Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists or TERFs) today are overtly antagonistic toward transgender identities such as denying that trans women are women or even purposely

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5 Though asexuality would be a type of sexuality when “sexuality” is defined as a sexual orientation, “sexuality” can also be defined in opposition to asexuality (much like “cisgender” to “transgender”). In this essay I indicate the second usage by using the term “eroticism.” Others use the term allosexuality

6 I’m invoking the definition of “radical” here as it is used to distinguish radical from cultural feminisms. In a 1984 article, Ellen Willis writes: “Cultural feminism is essentially a moral, countercultural movement aimed at redeeming its participants, while radical feminism began as a political movement to end male supremacy in all areas of social and economic life, and rejected the whole idea of opposing male and female natures and values as a sexist idea, a basic part of what we were fighting” (“Radical Feminism,” 91). In Willis’s usage, “radical” denotes systemic change that would “end male supremacy” and improve the lives of people regardless of gender.
misgendering them. They then claim victim status and reinscribe their trans antagonism as necessary protection from lesbian and female erasure. Radical queers are not necessarily antagonistic toward asexuals, but they have yet to resolve their unstated assumption that asexuals don’t or shouldn’t exist. As asexuality becomes more visible, I expect this conflict to become resolved, yet I find the identity-negativity of anti-assimilationist radical queer writers worth exploring because their work is in many ways extremely identity-positive. Exploring these contradictions can reveal how difficult identity positivity is.

In addition, my focus on asexuality in this essay challenges queer hegemonies that would mark asexuality as invisible and as less worthy of critical attention because it is supposedly not “radical enough” in its transgression of the cultural limits placed on eroticism. In common parlance, both “radical” and “extreme” are frequently used to indicate distance from the norm. Most feminists, for example, believe in challenging gender inequality, but “radical” feminists are either celebrated or criticized for their extremist views. In LGBTQ circles, being “radical” is celebrated as a transgression of traditional boundaries, so a queer reading of asexual identity might find that asexuality is a radical identity because of its distance from the sexual norm. But sex-positive activists and intellectuals who have fought long battles against sexual repression and shaming might argue that asexuality is in keeping with a normative fear of sex. Instead of either of these options, I contend that a critical focus on asexuality provides feminist and LGBTQ scholars and activists the opportunity to revise formerly accepted notions of radicalness and to focus instead on systemic change that values the position of all kinds of sexual identities—

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7 Trans-exclusionary “radical feminist” work sometimes has the appearance of reliability though it is typically shunned in feminist academia and among those who value intersectional feminism. Examples of trans antagonistic work by “radical feminists” include scholarly work by Sheila Jeffreys and blog posts by Meghan Murphy. While “radical feminism” seems like a remnant from the past, online platforms have given it new life.
whether asexual or erotic. Such a revision takes the following positions as axiomatic: 1) Accounting for asexual identities highlights the need to revisit the assumed spectrum of conservative-to-radical sexualities; 2) Discussing asexuality discourages reliance on positivist models of identity that assume monolithic identity categories and instead encourages asserting identity on the basis of each individual’s sense of their preferences and desires; and 3) Addressing asexual identities creates a new and useful theoretical vocabulary for discourse on erotic sexuality, feminism, and LGBTQ theory.

Conservative and Radical Sexualities?

An assumed spectrum of conservative-to-radical sexualities has developed in recent years, largely in response to the LGBT movement’s current focus on respectable gayness and its privileging of a middle-class majoritarian structure. In the wake of the debacle over California’s Proposition 8 in 2007, for example, new and more established organizations alike were able to mobilize massive numbers of people all across the US to take action in the fight for same-sex marriage. Instead of attempting to resolve institutional injustice by calling for more inclusive and just systems for everyone, protesters marched by the tens of thousands to invite government regulation of their romantic relationships and to receive social and institutional advantages in the guise of “equal rights.” Major national and state organizations in the LGBT rights movement had been fighting for state and federally recognized same-sex marriage and for the inclusion of gays and lesbians in the military for years. These campaigns reaffirmed and encouraged commitments to social respectability, institutional regulation, traditional family, and imperial enterprises, which in the 1960s and 70s prompted the radical rebellions and public displays of queer
solidarity that were celebrated as the beginning of the modern LGBTQ rights movement. It would seem, therefore, that the freak flag, under which anti-marriage, anti-war, sex-positive, anarchist, and queer folks of many kinds had once gathered, had been replaced by a banner of social and institutional assimilation.

LGBTQ organizations such as ACT UP, Queer Nation, Gay Shame, and Bash Back! resisted the dogma of respectability that has come to characterize much of the contemporary LGBTQ movement. Out of that political tradition scholars and activists have increasingly questioned how mainstream LGBTQs view and prioritize their cultural identities and political needs over a larger community of sexual and gender variants from a wide variety of ethnic and class backgrounds. In the introduction to the 2008 edition of That’s Revolting, Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore condemns the gay mainstream for working to meet the needs of white masculinist middle class men while actually supporting the structures that put marginalized LGBTQs at risk for poverty, violence, and death. Similarly, in the introduction to Against Equality, Yasmin Nair criticizes the privileging of the experiences and needs of members of the LGBTQ community most interested in appearing like the white heterosexual middle-upper class. She writes: “This anthology insists that we stop looking for ‘equality’ in the narrow terms dictated by neoliberalism, where progress means an endless replication of the status quo.”

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8 These public displays of queer solidarity include the Compton’s Cafeteria Riots and the Stonewall Riots. The feminist movement, anti-war movement, and development of a hippie subculture were also a part of a broader social movement that sought alternate ways of living, being, and interacting with the state during this time period.

9 ACT UP began in response to growing political dissatisfaction during the AIDS crisis. Queer Nation rose to fame in the early 1990s for its brash attitudes and the invocation of “queer” as a political rallying cry against straight respectability. Gay Shame developed as an alternative to the commercialization of pride events, and Bash Back! developed a more explicitly anarchist approach involving direct action against oppressive organizations.

10 Sycamore, “There’s More to Life.”

These writers reject the dogma of respectability and resist queer inclusion into historically unjust systems such as the military, capitalism, and marriage, and they call upon the gay mainstream to reexamine its investment in white heterosexual privilege. Their writings are identity-positive because they condemn the elitism of the mainstream LGBT movement and seek to diversify the identities significant to the movement: Not just rich gay men and lesbians who stand to benefit from shared employment benefits and tax breaks, but also poor and working-class POC and white queer, trans, gay, and lesbian folks who don’t stand to benefit from the perks of same-sex marriage and who have other more significant needs such as single-payer healthcare, a higher minimum wage, and solutions for homelessness. These writers paint portraits of anti-assimilationist queers who are oppressed, angry, unapologetic, and even irreverent because they are viewed as too rowdy, too flamboyant, too indiscreet, too sexual, and too radical to have their concerns become central to the LGBT movement. For instance, in the *That’s Revolting* collection, Rocko Bulldagger writes, “We’re out to create a world where lovers can cut, brand, fist, bleed, shit, and piss on each other, love each other our very own way…. I am part of a sexual revolution designed to deconstruct the social state as we know it.”¹² In a world where we are regularly told that masturbation is a sin, men wearing heels is a sick joke, and gay men are all rich, white, stereotypically pretty, and well-behaved, such identity-positive counternarratives of variant gender and sexuality are desperately needed. Theoretical, historical, artistic, and even pornographic works that are sex-positive and queer- and trans-affirming offer alternate perspectives to individuals with limited views of the options afforded them and the rest of the

¹² Bulldagger, “Dr. Laura, Sit on My Face,” 215.
world. Such counter narratives celebrate queer difference from the cultural hegemony of compulsory heterosexuality and respectable gayness by rejecting assimilation, but they also risk essentializing queer identity as always atypically erotic and therefore radical. This results in the potential for identity-negativity directed at those who neither fit the mainstream narrative nor this counternarrative.

Anti-assimilationist critiques represent a radical political ideology, yet they often come with identity-negative flippancy and criticism directed at those who appear to have made conservative choices. Anti-assimilationist writers criticize “conservative” gays for supporting the social and institutional structures that enforce respectable gayness, but in showing irreverence for these structures, they also criticize the choices and cultural practices of those who are not sexually active and/or engaged in typical sexual relationships. In doing so, they can replicate an oppressive system of valuing some identities over others, an identity-negative system they fight against when it contributes to the reification of heteronormal and homonormal relationships and identities. For example, in the conversation that concludes the Against Equality collection, Hilary Goldberg is asked what she thinks of LGBT people becoming leaders in organized religion. She answers, “It makes me cry blood. The only atonement gays should be thinking about is a nice bondage scene.” In another example from That’s Revolting, Sycamore, writes:

The holy trinity of marriage, military service and adoption has become the central preoccupation of a gay movement centered more on obtaining straight privilege than challenging power. And since we’re talking about the trinity, let’s not forget that all-important issue, the one we’ve been crossing our fingers and toes for: ordination into the

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13 Such works include (but are certainly not limited to) books such as Gender Outlaw, My Gender Workbook, GenderQueer, zines like Fat Girl, Lickety-Split, Original Plumbing, and many of those found on the Queer Zine Archive Project, documentaries such as Paris is Burning, Venus Boyz, The Aggressives, films like By Hook or By Crook, A Dirty Shame, Shortbus, Homotopia, Criminal Queers, and pornographic works such as Pansexual Public Porn, No Fauxxx.Com, and The Crash Pad Series.

14 Sycamore, “Why Gay Marriage IS the End of the World (or the Queer World, At Least),” 74.
priesthood! Sure, for white gays with beach condos, country club memberships, and nice stock portfolios with a couple hedge funds that need trimming every now and then (think Rosie O’Donnell or David Geffen), marriage might just be the last thing standing in the way of full citizenship, but what about everyone else?\textsuperscript{15}

Goldberg’s and Sycamore’s irreverence supports their larger points that straight white privilege at all costs has become an obsession for the gay mainstream, but the expectation that cultural and religious traditions take a backseat to the politics of atypical eroticism is akin to expecting LGBTQs to give up their cultural and national traditions. Even if religious and cultural institutions have been founded in oppression and may continue to do damage to LGBTQ people, many LGBTQs value their choices to remain within those institutions, or are embraced and empowered to participate in new versions of traditional sexual, gender, and cultural identities.\textsuperscript{16}

Many gender and sexually variant people are not willing to completely abandon the expression of or identification with these institutions, nor should they. Cultural identity and practices can be useful and meaningful aspects of our lives, however socially constructed they are and however coopted by those who wield them as weapons. While cultural identity—including that related to religious and kinship structures—can inhibit the lives of LGBTQs, it can also add considerable meaning.

I do not mean to suggest that anti-assimilationist writers are oppressing traditional LGBTQs. What I take issue with is the confusion about what is actually conservative about respectable gayness. Specifically, I reject the assumption in some anti-assimilationist rhetoric that traditional gayness and atypical eroticism are the two poles on a conservative-to-radical

\textsuperscript{15} Sycamore, “Breaking Glass,” 1–2.

\textsuperscript{16} For example, gender and sexual variants who develop new faith communities or advocate for acceptance in religious traditions change the landscape for what being a person of faith means in those communities. In addition, because of the history of colonization and globalization, in some cultural settings, participation in traditional cultural and religious practices promotes gender and sexual variance. More on this discussed in chapter 3.
spectrum. Nair has made clear her position clear on this misconception and brings up the vulnerabilities experienced by those new to radical queer community. In an article titled “Your Sex is Not Radical,” she writes:

I've heard from too many people that they felt pressured, especially as young and vulnerable new activists, to be particular kinds of sexual beings and made to feel less political simply because a particular sex scene wasn't really their scene. That needs to stop. The revolution will not come on the tidal wave of your next multiple orgasm had with your seven partners on the floor of your communal living space. It will only happen if you have an actual plan for destroying systems of oppression and exploitation.\(^17\)

Like Cohen and hooks, Nair argues for political orientations that fight against oppression rather than countercultures that claim deviance from the norm. For Nair, radical ways of being queer are about self-determination—in identity but also in being able to ensure survival for all kinds of queers and everyone else. Though Nair, Cohen, and hooks never specifically considered asexual identity, examining how asexual identity is articulated can provide an opportunity for exploring how seemingly conservative orientations and preferences do in fact spur radical change that supports self-determination. Indeed, understanding asexuality in a framework of LGBTQ studies and advocacy requires a shift in advocating not just for the sexuality of people who are LGBTQ, but advocating for sexuality on one’s own terms.

Despite their common investments in the dismantling of compulsory heterosexuality, anti-assimilationist LGBQs and asexuals have not often been grouped together.\(^18\) Anti-assimilationist narratives counter the master narratives of compulsory heterosexuality and respectable gayness and promote an understanding of what Michael Warner calls “sexual

\(^{17}\) Nair, “Your Sex Is Not Radical.”

\(^{18}\) Here and elsewhere in this chapter, I refer to LGBQs because of the focus on sexuality in particular rather than also referring to gender expression and gender identity by including the T in LGBTQs.
variance,”¹⁹ but the developing canon of queer narratives has had the less-intended effect of rendering asexual identity invisible or even labeling it invalid and abnormal. Asexuals are not often directly accused of being assimilationist, but for many LGBQs, not being sexually active or not voicing sexual attraction is associated with involuntary entrance into the closet and is therefore aligned with assimilating into normative society or trying to pass as straight. Because asexuals as a group are not perceived as being specifically targeted by institutionally oppressive forces (due to their invisibility rather than the stigma associated with LGBTQ’s hypervisibility), the level of camaraderie LGBQs are willing to extend has thus far been fairly low. In my experience, most LGBQs respond to asexuality with skepticism and distrust—mainly because they assume asexuality to be a way of coping with the fear of being LGBQ. In addition, many erotically atypical LGBQs have experienced or witnessed the damaging consequences of suppressing eroticism as a result of cultural, religious, institutional, or partner-derived pressure, and asking them to value asexuality can elicit the same effects as asking them to respect the tenets of reparative therapy. Like gender variant folks who can pass as cisgender and sexual variants who can pass as straight, most asexuals are perceived as heterosexual and therefore experience the double bind of having their identities ignored or made invisible in the straight world, and in LGBTQ spaces being suspected of “selling out” their “authentic” erotic and gender variance in favor of more conservative ideology and identities.

¹⁹ Warner condemns the social and institutional structures used to police sexuality, claiming they inhibit sexual autonomy and prevent sexual variance. He writes: “Sex does not need to be primordial in order to be legitimate. Civilization doesn’t just repress our original sexuality; it makes new kinds of sexuality. And new sexualities, including learned ones, might have as much validity as ancient ones, if not more” (Trouble with Normal, 11). Warner uses “sexual variance” to talk about the range and diversity of sexual practices, but I focus my use of the term more on sexual identities.
Like the critiques of feminism that developed from focusing on the lives of lesbians and women-of-color, an asexual-focused critique of the LGBTQ movement calls for an already marginalized group to question power structures and grapple with issues of privilege and inclusion. Because the sex-positive movement has been organized around opposition to the cultural pressure that limits sexuality, many sex-positive supporters view the possibility of asexual lives as needlessly limiting and deeply conservative. A critical focus on asexuality, however, necessitates a reassessment of how assimilation, the conservative, and the radical are conceived.

In a Foucauldian vision of identity, conforming to gender norms reinforces the structures that regulate patriarchy and binary gender roles, and failing to “take one’s place” among the docile bodies is a radical act that alters the Panopticon’s policing structure. If we were to envision the docile bodies of the Panopticon as vehicles in motion, they might resemble freight cars traveling down track laid by the narrative models that precede them and propelled by the desire for affirmation and the fear of punishment. Some feminist and queer theorists lament the railroad while celebrating the vehicles that break away from the tracks to form alternative narrative paths. Anti-assimilationist writers such as Nair and Sycamore further argue that alternative paths can be just as conservative because the same institutions are enforcing a system of rewards and punishments onto the vehicles on those roads.

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20 Foucault focuses less on identity being developed and more on bodily action being controlled (Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, 135–69, 195–230).

21 Sandra Lee Bartky argues that women who fret about hair and makeup are inmates in Foucault’s Panopticon, and their desire to look acceptable is obedience to patriarchy (“Foucault, Femininity”). Judith Butler celebrates drag performance for openly revealing the contrast between inherent and performative identity (Gender Trouble).
In *The Trouble with Normal*, Michael Warner calls for reducing the role of institutions in defining sexuality so that individuals can play, experiment, and add to the range of sexual variance, but the latest sexual identity benefiting from his emphasis on sexual variance may appear unexpected. Asexual identity breaks with normative narratives of identity, but if appearing too rowdy, too flamboyant, too indiscreet, and too sexual is the standard for radicalness, asexuals appear fairly conservative. Locating the position of asexuals on the Panoptical map, however, disrupts the anti-assimilationist assumption that atypical eroticism is more radical than asexuality. A focus on the validity of asexuality among other forms of sexual and gender variance reveals that the celebration should not be in *how differently directed* and *how far away you are* from the railroad tracks and highways but *that you are driving your own vehicle*. Contrary to anti-assimilationist assumptions, a conservative-to-radical spectrum ought not to be used to describe *identities* such as asexuality, gayness, or atypical eroticism but should instead describes *systems* that support and encourage sexual variance in all its forms, whether identities or practices.

Understanding asexuality in this framework and LGBTQ studies and advocacy requires a shift in advocating not just for the sexuality of people who are LGBTQ (LGBTQ sexuality including homosexuality, bisexuality, and the sexual practices common to those groups) but in advocating for sexuality on one’s own terms. This includes heterosexuality, which there is already wide support for; homosexuality, which LGBTQs are used to advocating for; bisexuality, which they have some experience supporting; asexuality, the new addition; and polyamory, nonmonogamy and kink, which have not been central to much LGBTQ advocacy in recent decades but which are of great importance to many LGBTQs. This is a shift from a Foucauldian focus only understanding the nature of oppressive systems that shape identity to changing how
we value responses to those oppressive systems. Queer responses have too often been to celebrate deviation from the norm rather than self-determination. An identity-positive perspective places emphasis on agency and on altering systems to give individuals more opportunity for self-determination. Radical identity politics then is not to advocate for assertion of nonnormative identities, but to advocate for individual agency in the face of normalizing forces.

Re-envisioning the construction of identity in this way is not just more accommodating of asexual identities—it completely alters how other “conservative” identities and choices are perceived within various communities. Lesbians and gay men, for example, are often considered conservative in circles where people identify as bisexual, but if agency is the celebrated factor in articulations of identity, not the identity itself, all identities are equally supported. Just as feminist theorists have had to reexamine their preconceived notions of female liberation as they grapple with issues such as sati, female circumcision, purdah, veiling, and religious fundamentalism,22 queer theorists and LGBTQ activists must reconsider how traditional cultural practices such as marriage, monogamy, abstinence, and religious observation fit into their revisions of sexual freedom. Once again, it seems necessary to explain I do not accuse queer theorists and anti-assimilationist writers of being overreactive. The threats of heterosexism, cissexism, and homonormalization are real and require extensive criticism, which contributes to identity-positive theory and worldmaking. At the same time, a critique of anti-assimilationist’s likely unintentional identity-negativity is necessary in order to protect and make space for sexual variation.

A truly radical LGBTQ politics is one that works toward systemic change to support the full diversity of sexualities, genders, and kinship structures that exist among gender and sexually variant people while also working against power structures that privilege some identities and practices over others. The systems of rewards and punishments that privilege more traditional routes must indeed be dismantled, and the roles of the state and social institutions must also be altered so that all narrative paths are supported. Radical identity politics seeks to overturn oppressive structures, and though anti-assimilationist writers are adept at offering much-needed criticisms and alternatives to specific institutional policies, they have incorrectly assumed that choosing what looks like traditional forms of cultural expression to be an assimilationist decision. It may be that, but it may also be one option of many that individuals may choose. And all self-determination is actually a form of resistance to forces of assimilation that attempt to eliminate agency.

In terms of the ability of asexuals to live self-determined lives relatively free from the constraints of institutional targeting, asexuals—especially hetero- or aromantic middle-class, white, cisgendered asexuals—often have relatively more privileges than other people with non-dominant sexualities, yet experience of stigma alone cannot determine one’s radical identity politics. Though LGBQ individuals who value monogamy, marriage, and raising children may appear to be assimilating to traditional heterosexual and cisgendered identities and lifestyles, a progressive and indeed radical LGBTQ politics cannot find fault with the actual choices being made but instead with the tendency of traditional LGBTQs to expect that all sexual variants act like them or should if they are to survive capitalism.

If ending compulsory heterosexuality and promoting sexual variance are among the goals of anti-assimilationist politics, then the movement must represent itself more as a collective of
self-determined identities rather than a collection of atypically erotic identities. Not only would this be more inclusive of asexuals and traditional LGBTQs, it would enable the building of coalitions that could aid in bringing about the kind of structural change that is so desperately needed. That being said, asexuals must investigate their relationship to the LGBTQ community, resist the structures that stifle expression of sexual variance, and invest in the same kind of system-altering politics anti-assimilationist writers are suggesting will meet the needs of poor and working class queer and trans folks of all races and ethnic and national backgrounds. It is through this kind of coalition-building that we have a real shot at toppling the structures that limit, control, and damage the lives of sexual and gender variants.

Models of Identity

Asexuality challenges the common reliance on positivist models of identity that assume monolithic identity categories. Other forms of identity have also prompted the opportunity to negotiate identity on the basis of preferences and desires rather than monolithic society-produced categories, and in this section, I explore how focusing on asexuality helps continue a progression toward more radical identity politics that advocate for identity positivity rather than just the recognition of an additional identity category.

Because religious and social conservatives accuse people engaging in homosexual acts of having made the choice to be depraved, the distinction between “preference” and “orientation” has been very useful for LGBQ people to assert a narrative of identity that is not subject to accusations that their “chosen lifestyle” is “perverse.” The “I was born this way” argument has been extremely successful for those coming out as LGBQ because it assumes that homosexuality is not an act one can choose to engage in but an inborn identity that one discovers and must choose to embrace or unhappily/impossibly resist. Many gender variant folks have also made use
of a model of inborn identity, and because so many have also sought gender-related medical intervention, the body has played a significant role in the development of popular transsexual narratives. The medicalization of trans identities and the medical establishment’s dominant role as gatekeepers to gender-related medical treatment has aided in the dissemination of a single “born in the wrong body” narrative that all people who question their gender identity are forced to confront, regardless of whether that narrative fits.

These narratives rely on positivist models of identity that assume identity is based on certain criteria like behaviors and attitudes, and are motivated by the desire to present a coherent identity narrative that is not subject to accusations from the right. Often the presumed criteria are also assumed to have biological explanations. This reliance on biology detracts from the ways that identity is socially constructed and individually negotiated based on each person’s understanding of themselves and the social constructions that surround them. Some activists and theorists have been rightly critical of the canonization of positivist narratives of identity. Anne Fausto-Sterling, for instance, criticizes the notion of “biological sex,” arguing that the intricacies of sexuality cannot be determined exclusively by genetics, and Judith Butler has noted that the search for the “gay gene” is a misguided search for justifying essentialism. Kate Bornstein takes particular issue with the word “orientation” and defends the widespread use of the word “preference” because it emphasizes the variety of sexual and gender identities available as well.

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23 Sandy Stone reveals how those seeking genital reassignment surgery from Stanford’s dysphoria clinic were able to ensure access to surgery through learning and reproducing the medically-approved narratives of transsexual identity. According to Stone, a single text, Harry Benjamin’s 1966 *The Transsexual Phenomenon*, served as the basis of the Stanford clinic’s criteria for surgery and, therefore, as the surgical candidates’ informal handbook for proving their qualification for surgery (“The Empire Strikes Back: A Transsexual Manifesto,” 227–28).

24 Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality*; Breen and Blumenfeld, “There Is a Person.”
as each person’s desire for different kinds of sexual roles and acts. She claims, “If we buy into categories of sexual orientation based solely on gender—heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual—we’re cheating ourselves of a searching examination of our real sexual preferences. In the same fashion, by subscribing to the categories of gender based solely on the male/female binary, we cheat ourselves of a searching examination of our real gender identity.” Bornstein’s emphasis on “a searching examination” requires either having access to narratives of identity/activity from which one can pick and choose or the cultural freedom to envision and express new identities. While the word “orientation” is useful as a way of describing significant long-term tendencies, Fausto-Sterling, Butler, and Bornstein point to the limitations produced by the canonization of certain characteristics/expressions as orientations/identities.

“Preference” may also be an inadequate term because it makes one’s choice seem whimsical, but both “preference” and “orientation” can be used to describe how we situate ourselves. Bear with me, in the following example: I have always hated mustard—so it seems clear I am not mustard-oriented. I am, however, chicken-oriented. On any given day I may have a preference for beef over chicken, but that won’t change the fact that I have a very strong chicken-orientation. I might at some point make the conscious decision to stop eating chicken and would then have to consider whether I was a non-practicing chicken-oriented person, or whether I’d stopped being chicken-oriented completely. You will not likely find me consuming mustard, but since I imagine my tastes will change over time, I honestly hope I can one day enjoy it. These examples may seem needlessly silly, but my point is that the seriousness with which we have been forced to consider our sexual orientations and gender identities are similarly

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25 Bornstein, Gender Outlaw, 38.
ridiculous. Focusing on individual orientations and preferences as well as recognizing the temporal nature of our identity constructions would mark a radical shift in constructions of gender and sexual identity and would therefore allow for a system in which everyone is encouraged to assert their own identities regardless of dominant cultural trends. A radical identity politics would be identity positive and support individual agency in negotiating one’s relationship to oneself and others rather than merely advocating for the recognition of the newest vocal minoritized identity.

Positivist models of identity are a myth, and though some individuals may feel they have always known their preferences and orientations were one way and not another, the widespread assumptions and stereotypes supported by “born this way” narratives are dangers comparable to compulsory heterosexuality. There is a rapidly increasing number of LGBTQ folks who recognize that identities are useful social constructions not essentialized identities dictated by objective truth. A model of self-determined identity is not based on the preconceived idea that Expression ABC = Identity A and that Expression XYZ = Identity Z, but it instead makes room for an individual to name their own identity and to independently choose from among the whole alphabet of expressions (as well as develop more) depending on the individual’s orientations and preferences at any given time. The recent surge in people identifying as asexual demonstrates this movement away from a positivist identity model and toward more self-determined identity models. The Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN) has facilitated the creation of a common vocabulary for discussing asexual identities, and because of its emphasis on user-based forums in developing this vocabulary, AVEN supports a more self-determined model of identity.
Like the early feminist and LGBTQ organizations that preceded it, AVEN supports those who have a stake in dismantling compulsory heterosexuality. AVEN has had the privilege of developing primarily as a consciousness-raising and educational group, not as a support system for those experiencing immediate targeting by cultural and institutional forces or as a staging ground for political campaigns that would provide its members with more job security or freedom from police harassment. I do not want to suggest that the social and political needs of asexuals are insignificant; asexuals face oppressive systems particular to asexual identity such as invisibility, which leads to abuse, sexual assault, violence, and mental health concerns, as well as a medical and mental health establishment unprepared to meet the needs of asexuals. Asexuals also have a stake in breaking down the institutional structures that reify the nuclear family—including partner-based health insurance and other financial benefits as well as the use of nuclear family members as default legal proxies. But by and large, the articulation of asexual identity is not mandated by a Foucauldian notion of oppressive targeting or out of an immediate need for political mobilization. Many other identity-based groups have developed and emphasized self-determined models of identity. While the self-determination of identity among AVEN users owes a great debt to the successes of LGBTQ movements in making space for sexual difference, one of the most significant factors in the asexual movement’s development of this identity model is AVEN’s genesis as a user-based social network that accepts and organizes contributions from

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26 As an organization, AVEN demonstrates commitment to supporting LGBQ identities—in part because of the theoretical relationship between asexuality and other sexually variant identities, but more so because so many of its members identify as asexual LGBQs—whether as “lesbian,” “gay,” “bisexual,” or “queer” or as “homoromantic,” “biromantic,” “panromantic,” or some other identity configuration with close ties to LGBQ communities.

27 Foucault claims that in the West people who engaged in homosexual practices did not become a class of people or develop a group subjectivity until societal surveillance systems had specifically targeted their activities and therefore their identities (History of Sexuality, 15–50).
all of its members and makes much of its content available to nonmembers. AVEN has operated as a support system for a group of people who experience life differently from the general population, and its relative freedom from responding to political stigma has allowed it to develop a structure that accommodates the diversity of its members.

While people who might have identified as asexual have always existed, since 2001, a large number have been networking, writing, and recording their developing vocabulary on AVEN’s site (among others). I will not claim that AVEN is or has been a perfect haven for plurality and freedom from hegemony for all asexuals—especially considering the centrality of AVEN as a single organization and the technological literacy and capital necessary to access it—but AVEN has succeeded in creating an environment of transparency and plurality that the dominant institutions involved in the theoretical development of other identity groups were not able to replicate when their concerns began to reach potential allies, coalition partners, and the mainstream public.  

Focusing on the pluralist and agency-based aspects of asexual identity offers feminist and LGBTQ critics and activists an opportunity to reassess the goals and structures of their institutions, organizations, and fields.

AVEN’s “Overview” and “General FAQ” pages are texts of primary importance for many people coming out as asexual or joining AVEN. Both documents highlight the fact that there is variance in asexuals’ experiences with arousal, masturbation, engaging in sex with partners, and being/desiring to be in romantic relationships. Further investigation into the AVEN forums and AVENwiki reveals a similar respect for the various types of identities associated

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28 My work on asexuality relies on content available on AVEN’s website, and though I’ve made note of what documents I’ve used and when that information first became available, more scholarly work needs to be done on the history of AVEN and how its theoretical leanings have developed over time. See also Hinderliter (“Asexuality: The History of a Definition”).
with asexuality, including gray-As who may identify as asexual, semisexual, or in a gray area where “asexuality and sexuality are not black and white.”29 Even outside AVEN, asexuals writing about identity online utilize the same pluralist sensitivity to variant asexual identities. For example, the blog *Asexual Advice* contains a glossary that illustrates a consciousness of diverse asexual identities.30 The fact that blogs such as these quote frequently from AVEN content and forum areas does not prove that such pluralism derives from AVEN, but it does highlight the fact that AVEN is a centralized source for theoretical information on asexuality and has played a major role in developing a group subjectivity that is extremely pluralistic. Websites, message boards, and social media have not traditionally been conceived of as “theory,” which academia has traditionally reserved for single author texts that are frequently inaccessible/uninteresting for the vast majority of those about whom the theory is made. Refiguring academic conceptions about what theory is and who gets to write it is a task feminists of color have long advocated for,31 and given how digital texts play an increasingly important role in the real lives of individuals, communities, and queer and feminist theory, it’s necessary we continuously update our notions of what theory is, who gets to write it, who gets to read it, where it’s located, and how it’s accessed.

AVEN’s user-based forums are often rich with tension over AVEN’s definitions and theoretical language, but like the blogs that reference AVEN content, forum contributors and moderators tend to have respect for the pluralist sensitivity AVEN promotes. AVEN’s section on identity affirms that “most people on AVEN have been asexual for our entire lives” but it also

29 “Gray-A/Grey-A.”

30 “Glossary.”

31 hooks, *Feminist Theory.*
states that some may identify as asexual for only part of their lives. The “Overview” page goes on to conclude: “There is no litmus test to determine if someone is asexual. Asexuality is like any other identity—at its core, it’s just a word that people use to help figure themselves out. If at any point someone finds the word asexual useful to describe themselves, we encourage them to use it for as long as it makes sense to do so.”

Denying the existence of a litmus test is an identity-positive move that recognizes diversity within and outside the category of “asexual,” and the phrases “to describe themselves” and “use it for as long as it makes sense to do so” recognize the agency of individuals to make decisions about what their identities are at any given moment. According to the Internet Archive Wayback Machine, the earliest archived equivalent to this page comes from 2003 and makes even more allowances for variation in asexual identity. It contains this note in the introduction:

Asexuality, like all identities (especially sexual ones) is self-proclaimed; someone is asexual if they say that they are. There are no set criteria [sic] that make someone asexual or not, no test to see if someone “qualifies” as asexual. Like all sexual orientations asexuality is not a scientifically discernable condition that one either “is” or “isn’t,” it is a social construct, a word that can be used to help someone figure themselves out and find others like them. Anyone who thinks that the term “asexual” might be useful in thinking about themselves and explaining themselves to others is welcome to use it.

The 2003 language emphasizes resistance to medicalized definitions and is more direct in defining identity as a social construct. The change in wording on the webpage today is actually more identity-positive because it leaves ambiguous how asexuals might determine their identities (i.e., primarily as socially constructs or positivist narratives).

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32 “Overview.”

33 “Am I Asexual?”
AVEN has emphasized to both its members and the public that there are many possible narratives for asexual identities, and the choice to identify as asexual is individually negotiated and articulated. AVEN’s significance to articulations of asexual identity in the early twenty-first century cannot be underestimated, and addressing asexuality in light of the pluralism AVEN represents encourages the continued movement away from understanding identity as a naming based on positivist interpretation of a given number of facts and a shift toward a new focus on identity as self-determined based on how one perceives and narrates the facts about oneself.

A New Theoretical Vocabulary for Sexuality Studies

In addition to supporting individually-negotiated models of identity, asexuality also introduces a new theoretical vocabulary to discourse on sexuality—whether asexual or erotic. Redefining sexuality makes space for asexuals in the larger discourse of sexuality studies and advocacy surrounding sexual identities. Doing so also makes space for those whose identities and experiences have been made invisible by defining sexuality primarily in terms of eroticism. The mere process of explaining what asexuality is radically alters the vocabulary necessary for talking about eroticism, sexuality, or sexual orientations. There is an assumption that all asexuals are completely opposed to both engaging in sex of any kind and being in a romantic relationship, but the asexual spectrum is wide indeed. When speaking about asexuality, several divisions within what we commonly think of as “sexuality” become necessary, the most significant to feminist and LGBTQ scholars and activists being:

a) one’s orientation toward sex with partner(s), i.e. one’s sexual attraction

b) one’s orientation toward sexual activity, i.e. one’s sex drive

As is the case with gender and sexual orientation, a spectrum is a limited model, but because of its dominance as a way of envisioning asexuality, I’ve decided to use the term while also acknowledging its limitations.
c) one’s orientation toward sensuality, i.e. one’s *sensual preferences*

d) one’s orientation toward sexual partner(s), i.e. one’s *sexual orientation*

e) one’s orientation toward romantic partner(s), i.e. one’s *romantic orientation*

f) one’s orientation toward intimacy, i.e. one’s *intimacy preference*\(^{35}\)

Again, let me emphasize the difference between “orientation” and “preference” is based on the cultural canonization of certain human proclivities over others. I use “orientation” to indicate significant tendencies and “preference” to indicate more whimsical choices, though one could easily use the word “preference” for both, as orientations are not permanent and preferences not random. Many feminist and LGBTQ critics and activists often think of sexual orientation as a key aspect of sexuality and as an identity but often conflate or overlook the other components mentioned above. Talking about asexuality does not just require more information; it also creates a new vocabulary for exploring sexuality and intimacy. In this concluding section, I explain how asexuality presents the opportunity for scholars and activists to rethink their theoretical positions because taking asexuality into account significantly alters the layers of discourse possible when describing both asexual and erotic identities.

*Sexual attraction* may seem a familiar term that feminist and queer theorists have used to describe a variety of aspects of sexual orientation and identity, but most have only considered sexual attraction significant in terms of what type of person one is sexually attracted to—not *if* a person experiences sexual attraction. Like heterosexuality, which until the articulation of

\(^{35}\) I developed this model for talking about sexuality in my attempt to synthesize the various asexual identities I have encountered in my research. My way of defining and grouping identities associated with sexual attraction and sex drive are based in part on Rabger’s model (“Asexuality, in All Its Parts”). And my definition and grouping for sensual preference and intimacy preference are based in part on the AVENwiki entry for “Attraction” (“Attraction”).
homosexuality had gone largely unnoticed, eroticism in the western tradition is commonly accepted as a natural part of humanity and is a central element in the institutional and social structures that support compulsory heterosexuality. AVEN departs from the narrative of compulsory eroticism when defining an asexual person as someone who does not experience sexual attraction. In these terms, experiencing sexual attraction is not a universal human condition, and asexuals stand in contrast to those who experience sexual attraction and identify as heterosexual, gay, or some other erotic identity. Opposing compulsory sexual attraction is a necessary component of dismantling compulsory heterosexuality and ultimately promoting sexual variance in all its forms.

The presumption that all people do and should experience sexual attraction has led to the creation of institutional and social structures that feminist and LGBTQ critics and activists also have a stake in overturning, such as the reification of marriage and the traditional family unit. The recent surge in people identifying as asexual in the last ten years marks the creation of a newly identifiable political standpoint from which to approach the state. The asexual community is diverse, so a unified asexual political standpoint would value the needs of asexuals in partnerships and/or nuclear families as well as those adopting other kinship structures that are individual-based or based in networks of friendships or romantic partnerships. Such identity politics would focus on the needs of the individual regardless of whether they experience sexual attraction or what kinship structure they choose, and this standpoint shares much in common

36 Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality.*

37 Resisting compulsory sexuality/sexual attraction should not be confused with opposing sex or being sex-negative. Asexuality is not a medical or psychological diagnosis or an excuse for accepting one. Fighting against sexual shame should remain a priority for sex-positive LGBTQs and for sex-positive asexuals, but the shame placed on those who do not experience sexual attraction should also be shunned.
with other sexual and gender variant communities. A larger coalition of LGBTQAs (with the A standing for asexuals) seeking structural change could work for single-payer health insurance, power of attorney registries, self-determined hospital visitation, and adoption reform that is accommodating to a diversity of kinship structures in addition to fighting against the general social and institutional reification of marriage, monogamy, and the nuclear family. The social and institutional structures that enforce heterosexism and cissexism also enforce compulsory eroticism. For LGBTQs dealing with issues of depression, anxiety, and harassment, networks of LGBTQ service providers have been established to provide support. Access to culturally competent resources are needed, and the number of asexuals who also identify as gender variant or romantically variant also necessitates greater understanding of asexual identity within LGBTQ service agencies and among LGBTQs and allies.

Interrogating sexual attraction provides a newly articulated social and political standpoint around sexuality, which enables new coalitions to develop that include asexuals; it also adds a layer of understanding about sexuality that has been previously under-emphasized or completely unobserved. The same is true of a deeper investigation of concepts like sex drive and sensual preference. A new realm of narrative options is available for people who may not have previously considered themselves asexual because they engage in some kind of sex. Yet engaging in sex does not disqualify identification as asexual. For example, some asexuals experience arousal, others do not, and each person has a different orientation toward wanting to engage in sexual activity. Some masturbate regularly, some infrequently, some not at all. Some are repulsed by the idea of engaging in any kind of sexual activity while others are indifferent
and may engage in sexual interaction as a way of responding to a partner’s sexual desires. Though sex drive is by no means a new concept, focusing on asexual identities requires sex drive to be questioned rather than assumed in light of sexual activity. There are many descriptors used to discuss the variety of sex drives among asexuals, such as repulsed, nonlibidoist, indifferent, and/or autosexual. Asexuals may also identify their sensual preferences, which is a common part of establishing and maintaining preferred sexual activities and roles for those expressing variant erotic identities. Asexuals, however, are more likely to focus on sensual aspects that do not include genitals, such as hugging, cuddling, kissing, and caressing. Such actions are most often associated with sexual relationships and assumed to be a part of sexual acts, but focusing on how they take place between nonsexual partners can be useful for the study of how all types of people negotiate and establish sensual boundaries and norms among various kinds of relationships. The frequency with which non-genital sensuality has been reduced to sexual acts or “foreplay” overlooks the significance of these acts as signs of romantic, friendly, intimate, or other kinds of affection that can be but are not necessarily sexual.

The vocabulary that has developed around the issue of sexual attraction among asexuals has also created space for a distinction between sexual orientation and romantic orientation. For some asexuals, this has meant maintaining identity as a lesbian, gay, bi, pan, or straight asexual, for example, in their romantic orientations. Breaking down sexual and romantic orientations has also led to the emergence of identities such as demisexual, semisexual, and gray-A. According to AVENwiki, those who identify as semisexual and gray-A experience sexual attraction in a

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38 I make a distinction here between sexual activity (which may or may not include masturbation) and sexual interaction (which would involve one or more partners). It should be noted, however, that “repulsed” is often used to describe asexuals who are repulsed by the idea of sexual interaction.
variety of ways, but they share an assertion of identity somewhere between the asexual and erotic ends of the spectrum.\(^{39}\) Demisexuals are those who experience only secondary sexual attraction.\(^{40}\) The fact that demisexuals, semisexuals, and gray-As have found camaraderie, acceptance, and affirmation in the asexual community is an encouraging sign that contemporary articulations of identity are changing in a way that are more identity-positive.

Some LGBTQs now understand their community as containing an A for asexual and have started adopting vocabulary derived from the developing discourse surrounding asexuality to address their own sexual identities. Sexual orientations now include the categories LGBQs have become accustomed to (homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual, pansexual, etc), but it also includes asexuals—those who do not desire sexual interaction.\(^{41}\) Romantic orientations, on the other hand, contain similarly gendered constructions, such as homoromantic, heteroromantic, panromantic, etc., but also includes aromantic, for those who do not seek romantic relationships.

For LGBQ people, the distinction between sexual and romantic can be significant, but the terminology necessary for describing asexual lives provides useful insight to the study of more normative subjects as well. Take, for instance, the traditional narrative of the nuclear family. It is very common to describe a husband and wife as being in a monogamous relationship in which

\[\text{\footnotesize 39 Again, the asexual to sexual spectrum is a limited model, and since I argue that identity need not be based on positivist models, I don’t adhere strictly to the notion of a spectrum.}\]

\[\text{\footnotesize 40 Rabger, who developed a model of the sexual spectrum in an AVEN forum in 2005, is most often cited when defining demisexuality. Rabger’s model makes a distinction between primary and secondary forms of sexual attraction, the former being instant sexual attraction based on readily available information and the latter a developed sexual attraction based on the emotional connection between partners (“Asexuality, in All Its Parts”).}\]

\[\text{\footnotesize 41 Some asexuals may be quick to point out that asexuality is characterized by the lack of sexual attraction, not the lack of sexual desire because desire implies choice. I’ve already established myself as seeing a very blurry line between choice and identity, orientation and preference, and in this case attraction and desire for interaction. Identity/orientation is only more important than choice/preference because we participate in the claim that this distinction is necessary. But such identities/orientations are merely canonized choices/preferences/desires that shape our ability and willingness to assert our narrative paths.}\]
both partners are heterosexually oriented; however, it is far less common to ask questions about the romantic orientations and romantic relationships of each spouse. In addition, it is even less common to examine how such potential romantic relationships might affect the definition of monogamy that each spouse is using. Addressing asexual identities brings new focus to one’s *intimacy preference*, which explains how one experiences intimacy, whether through partnership, closed groups, open groups, open relationships, some combination, or not at all. LGBTQs and sex-positive feminists are more familiar with terms like monogamy, nonmonogamy, and polyamory to describe these intimacy groups, whereas AVEN forums contain references to other terms such as community- and partner-based intimacy. Addressing asexuality requires a new understanding of what desire, intimacy, and sex are, and feminist and LGBTQ critics and activists who have been invested in exploring these topics will find their task all the more rich, complex, and meaningful when taking to heart the expanded definitions a critical focus on asexuality offers. If we are to take seriously the identities and vocabulary deriving from asexuality, we must take new approaches not only to the study of sex, sexuality, and desire, but also to romanticism, intimacy, and monogamy.

Asexual theory raises questions about the ways everyone may experience sexual activity, arousal, sensual attraction, desire, intimacy, romantic attachments, erotic attachments, and kinship. These questions are vital for gaining insight on identity constructions as they existed in the past and as they continue to exist and require political action at the institutional level today. Much more work is needed on this expanded notion of sexuality, and LGBTQIA+ theorists and

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42 “Attraction.”

43 Scherrer, “Asexual Relationships: What Does Asexuality Have to Do with Polyamory?”
scholars have the opportunity to continue asking these questions. It must be said, however, that I am suggesting the theoretical appropriation of asexual identity for the purposes of expanding knowledge about sexuality. Yet there is no reason that all boats cannot rise. Revising our definition of intimacy and sexuality to include asexual identities is key to increasing knowledge about all kinds of identities and relationships—asesexual and erotic. But a word of caution must be extended to those of us intending to further this line of research, and identity positivity brings new questions about the work we do: are we taking theoretical positions that value all identities—including those still forming? What new revisions will come, and how can we create theoretical constructions that affirm the full diversity that exists among those with asexual identities, those with erotic identities, and those with identities we have yet to encounter?

Identity politics has affected numerous academic disciplines and activist movements in the past century, and as feminist and LGBTQ activists and scholars seek to be as inclusive as possible to all identities, it is becoming increasingly important to include asexual perspectives. Critically focusing on asexuality requires a radical revision to feminist and LGBTQ identity politics by bringing to light the need to redefine what conservative and assimilationist mean, by encouraging the shift from positivist to self-determined models of identity, and by creating a new vocabulary to enrich discourse on sexuality and intimacy. Asexuality is certainly not the only identity that has necessitated a revision of sexual identity politics, but in this historical moment, it represents a telling example of how systems opposing oppression can be enriched and transformed by taking account of lesser-known minority identities. If we can see this much potential benefit in welcoming asexuality into the fold of identities significant to queer theory and politics, imagine the possible gains if we were to make conscious efforts to be so identity-
positive that major revisions were not required each time an identity came into widespread consciousness.
CHAPTER 2

ACADEMIC INTERVENTIONS: THE NECESSITY OF DECOLONIAL PEDAGOGY
FOR THE GENDER AND SEXUALITY CLASSROOM

In the case of asexuality, identity positivity is mainly future-focused, making room for what has not been recognized before. The same is true in the case of decolonial sexual and gender identities, but when considering the history of colonization in US-occupied land, identity positivity requires a vision of the future that intentionally looks back at how possibility has been suppressed not only by homophobic and transphobic colonial forces but also liberal assertions of queer and trans theory. This chapter will explore such a decolonial vision of the future and call for academics in general and teachers in particular to take these lessons to heart.

Historically, gender and sexual variance in the west has been demonized and marked as unnatural and dangerous; thus “queer” and “transgender” have developed as non-normative positionalities in relation to normative status within compulsory (cisgender) heterosexuality. But this narrative takes into account only European-based and Christian-influenced notions of gender and sexuality. Other cultures, locations, and contexts have had varied definitions for what gender

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1 I use the term “sexual variance” rather than “queer” or LGBT-type acronyms, and I use “gender variance” rather than “transgender” or a similar word. The reason is to be conscious of the range of gender and sexual diversity that may or may not align with the traditions, ontologies, and epistemologies that produced those terms. I still use the terms “queer,” “LGBTQIA” and “trans,” but when I use those terms, I am naming more specific subgroups of gender and sexual variants who would self-identify with those categorizations. Using “gender and sexual variance” is not a perfect solution, but it does gesture toward the need for this type of distinction.
is, how it is attributed, and what meanings are produced by it in relation to embodiment, sexuality, and community among other things. A double bind has occurred in which cultural contexts that affirm gender and sexual variance are erased and violently written over by European-based assumptions of universal morality that exclude such variation. And to add insult to injury, queer and transgender theorists center European-based pockets of resistance to compulsory (cisgender) heterosexuality as they attempt to universalize gender and sexual variance, which also writes over other culture-based gender systems.

This second and newer form of erasure is Eurocentric hegemony continuing the work of colonization even if it also resists heteronormativity. Some scholars have responded to this problem by attempting to de-universalize their Eurocentric theoretical work and call for non-Eurocentric inclusivity within gender and sexuality fields.\(^2\) This is a useful strategy that takes its cues from postcolonial feminist theory by not speaking for the other,\(^3\) but the call for inclusivity is ultimately inadequate in that it offers to include non-Eurocentric contributions only on its own Eurocentric terms, and those with the power to include stand to gain legitimacy at the expense of the Other’s labor.\(^4\) Given scholarship’s relationship to institutions of higher education, labor practices, capitalism, and the state, it is no wonder these problems continue. And since the academy is itself Eurocentric, demonstrating one's investment in Eurocentric knowledges is part


\(^3\) For instance, Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s critique of western feminist academic representation of nonwestern women (Feminism without Borders).

\(^4\) Sara Ahmed states, “People of color in white organizations are treated as guests, temporary residents in someone else’s home. People of color are welcomed on condition they return that hospitality by integrating into a common organizational culture, or by ‘being’ diverse, and allowing institutions to celebrate their diversity” (On Being Included, 43).
and parcel with legitimizing one’s presence in academia; therefore, any field of study seeking to be recognized as producing academic knowledge is in effect seeking to be included among those who are invested in Eurocentrism even as it seeks to alter the rules of what counts as academic knowledge.\(^5\) Queer and trans studies are of course not exempt from this process.

María Lugones says, “Decolonizing gender is necessarily a praxical task”\(^6\) and the classroom is the most immediate site of academic praxis. Scholars can participate in reshaping narratives of gender and sexual variance, but queer and trans studies’ largest impact is in college classrooms where students—regardless of gender or cultural background—come in contact with lecture, discussion, texts, and assignments that not only make the case for what counts as academic knowledge but also what is possible in the world outside the academy.

I also see teaching as one requirement of better theory. One might consider teaching to be secondary to theory; in the traditional sense, theory informs a teacher’s scholarship, which would then inform teaching. This is of course true for many, yet I’d also argue that theory itself can be viewed as praxis, and in the academy, teaching is the primary site where this can occur. In this sense, theory informs teaching, which informs the scholarship of the teacher as well as any

\(^5\) Scott Lauria Morgensen states: “the pursuit of Indigenous methodologies bears activist implications; and, as a counter to colonial research, it directly affects “the academy.” Yet any sense that the terms activism and academia posit an intelligible distinction implodes once Indigenous methodologies demand, in the first and last instance, decolonization. Reframed in this way, we find that the academy cannot contain the aspirations of Indigenous knowledge production even while it remains a key site of critical engagement—one where non-Indigenous critics also are held responsible to allied work” (“Destabilizing the Settler Academy,” 88).

Ahmed discusses the whiteness of institutions and the cloning that takes place in hiring practices: “The ‘hey you’ is not just addressed to anybody: some bodies more than others are recruited, those that can inherit and reproduce the character of the organization, by reflecting its image back to itself, by having a ‘good likeness.’” Ahmed’s comments apply directly to the academy, and its hiring practices as well as disciplining tools such as the politics of tenure, publication, and measures of academic knowledge and scholarly practice (On Being Included, 40).

\(^6\) Lugones, “Toward a Decolonial Feminism,” 746.
students who go on to join the academy as scholars or create work that informs the academy. And that scholarship and work then creates or informs new theory. In this way, theoretical shifts in teaching have a much wider effect on the academy than theoretical shifts in scholarly production—not to mention a more immediate effect on those most affected by oppressive theory. I do not mean to imply that teaching is more important than scholarship. Both are deeply imbedded in what is an essentially unjust institution, and both can revolutionize from within and create room for something altogether different to follow. This is precisely the decolonial identity-positive approach that is needed from white scholars in the US and from nonindigenous POC scholars like myself. We are not called upon to imagine the details of a decolonial future, but our labor is valuable in making space for some kind of decolonial future that is yet unknown.7

College students in the US are not just European-descended and Christian-influenced people, and even those who are would benefit from knowing about the systems of gender and sexuality rendered invisible by colonialism and their own continued participation in colonial systems. To accurately teach about gender and sexual variance in the US today, it is necessary to adopt decolonizing strategies because all kinds of students benefit—especially indigenous, POC, and/or LGBTQIA students. Failing to do so erases non-Eurocentric gender and sexual epistemologies and reinforces the assumption that gender and sexual variance is a western/European-descended construction. In this chapter, I argue that because gender is a

7 Tuck and Yang offer this helpful note on the quest for reconciliation between indigenous people and settlers: “Reconciliation is about rescuing settler normalcy, about rescuing a settler future. Reconciliation is concerned with questions of what will decolonization look like? What will happen after abolition? What will be the consequences of decolonization for the settler? Incommensurability acknowledges that these questions need not, and perhaps cannot, be answered in order for decolonization to exist as a framework. We want to say, first, that decolonization is not obliged to answer those questions decolonization is not accountable to settlers, or settler futurity. Decolonization is accountable to Indigenous sovereignty and futurity (“Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor,” 35).
culturally determined system, teaching gender in the US requires that decolonial perspectives be theoretically central to the production of knowledge about gender and sexual variance taking place in the classroom. Using gender theory invested in indigenous, postcolonial, Asian, and African studies, I argue for the urgent need to historicize homophobia and transphobia when teaching about gender and sexual variance and then discuss decolonial approaches when teaching all kinds of students.

While critiques of Eurocentric gender and sexual systems are needed in scholarly discourse, the stakes are most immediately evident in classroom environments where gender theory is addressed and can do the most immediate good as well as the most immediate harm. Students in such classes are interested in how gender and sexuality are constructed in the US, and they stand to benefit from a deeper understanding of these topics because so many gender and sexual minorities enroll in these courses to explore their own identities. These same students will also be more likely to enter academia as scholars or participate in the creation of artistic, political, or community work that will be of significance to gender and sexuality scholars in the future. In a colonial framework, however, gender and sexual variance is marked as predominantly white and settler, and produced out of cultural alignment with white settlers and European constructions of normative vs. nonnormative identities. When instructors rely on colonial discourse, it not only inaccurately represents gender and sexual variance, which damages knowledge production; it also works to support colonialism, which does violence to indigenous peoples as well as POC and those outside of Europe and settler states. Surprisingly enough, relying on colonial discourses about gender and sexual variance can do the most immediate harm to gender and sexually variant students in classrooms where faculty have made a concerted effort to include content related to queer and transgender studies. Such students need
access to accurate and affirming information about gender and sexual variance the most. This is less possible—especially for indigenous and POC students—when such information is produced in a colonial framework that colors acceptance of gender and sexual variance as a product of white settlers. Teaching such limited information about gender and sexual variance tells students, in effect, that they must conform to specific types of gender and sexual variance to have valid identities apart from compulsory (cisgender) heterosexuality. Those students who fit identities sanctioned by class-discussion of such limited gender theory may feel affirmed, but those who don’t could feel alienated or pressured into being something they don’t want to be. Take for instance, a Mexican American student who identifies with her specific cultural identity but disidentifies with both heterosexuality and LGBTQ identities as she has understood them thus far.8 If she then takes a class that addresses gender and sexual variance that uses only Eurocentric gender theory to position western-originating LGBTQ identities as the only site of resistance to compulsory heterosexuality, the student learns that she must sacrifice either her cultural identity or sexual variance. Neither was affirmed, and both were called into question. Even if the class also includes narratives about Latinx LGBTQs, these narratives can be interpreted as narratives of those who were forced to choose sexual variance over cultural identity. In some ways, this situation is even worse than if gender and sexual variance had not been addressed in class at all.

It has become more necessary than ever to have pedagogical practices in place to deal with the diversity of gender and sexual identities in one’s classroom, and these include identities outside of an occidental LGBT or even LGBTQIA+ theoretical framework. This chapter blends

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8 Muñoz states that disidentifying with dominant cultural identities is part of queer worldmaking (Muñoz, Disidentifications, 25).
theory produced in gender studies, area studies, as well as identity studies based on cultural
groups and colonial/transnational power for the purpose of reshaping how gender and sexuality
is taught in the classroom and ultimately creating a more identity-positive academic community.
When students learn about gender and sexuality in a way that acknowledges colonization and
historicizes gender and sexual variance, it opens up opportunities that do not exist otherwise.
And these opportunities lead to the diversification of gender and sexuality among indigenous
people and POC both in and out of the classroom and to the diversification of gender and
sexuality full stop.

A Note on Terms

Readers may notice my tendency to seemingly conflate sexual variance and gender
variance. Most in the academy make a clear distinction between gender and sexuality. This is
incredibly useful in many contexts, but the line between gender and sexuality is often blurred and
overlapping. For instance, gender is the root of both gender identity (both in terms of social and
biological identities) and sexual identity/orientation in that the definition for “lesbian,” for
instance, is dependent upon the definition for “woman.” In addition, because sexual orientation is
not something that is usually very visible (especially in a classroom environment), one’s sexual
orientation is often read through gender expression such as mannerism, clothing, hair, and body
modifications. These expressions may or may not be viewed as related to gender, yet their
meanings are most often interpreted through one’s understanding of gender. Using “gender and

9 Judith Butler famously modified the assumption (grounded in Simone de Beauvoir) that gender is socially
constructed and sex is biological. She says in her introduction that “sex will be shown to have been gender all along" (Gender Trouble, 11). Anne Fausto-Sterling makes a similar argument (Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality).
sexual variances” would be useful in recognizing the differences between gender identity and sexual identity, yet because gender and sexuality are intersecting identities that often constitute each other, culturally-based systems determine the differences between gender and sexuality if any difference exists at all. Thus “gender and sexual variance” identifies a wider category than what both individual categories could reference. Using the term “variance” also makes room for variation beyond known constructions that might relate to gender and sexuality. Such unknown constructions may be beyond the speaker’s current knowledge because of lack of familiarity, lack of access because of time or colonial erasure, or because they may have yet to be created.

I use “gender and sexual variance” to refer to variation in types of gender and sexual identities, expressions, or roles. When I use this term, I am most often referencing constructions of gender identity or sexual identity that are something other than cisgender heterosexuality, but the choice to emphasize variation rather than deviance from an established norm is important because established norms vary based on cultural context. Megan Sinnott insightfully notes, “Queer politics and theory—its assertion of and search for the nonnormative, the destabilizing of gender, the rejection of heteronormativity—is an already configured set of interpretations that may add little to the analysis of sexual and gendered systems in specific Asian locations.” The choice to use “gender and sexual variance” and not “transgender and queer” or “LGBTQIA” is therefore purposeful in that the latter two constructions are more specific to contemporary Eurocentric theoretical investments that label cisgender heterosexuality as normative and “queer” as non-normative and “transgender” as crossing from one gendered location to another. Some cultural contexts make constructions of gender and sexuality based on deviance from cisgender

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heterosexuality nonsensical because gender and sexuality outside cisgender heterosexuality have a long history of being culturally sanctioned forms of gender and sexuality. Examples include Samoan fa’aafafine, Hawaiian māhū, and Cherokee constructions of gender and sexual variance which have no specific name.\(^{11}\) Consequently, I try to use the terms that individual populations would use, and I use “gender and sexual variance” as an umbrella term for identities that are not cisgender and heterosexual. The term is admittedly not perfect, yet it is less weighted down by Eurocentric theoretical investments than many available options.

One final introductory note, in keeping with criticism of critical race theory’s application to Native and indigenous peoples,\(^ {12}\) I make a distinction between indigenous people groups and people of color (POC) while also recognizing that for non-indigenous POC descended from African slaves, indigeneity was violently interrupted by colonization. For others in Africa, Asia, and the Pacific, other histories of colonization and imperialism complicate migration patterns that would label all non-indigenous people settlers. I follow Jody Byrd’s usage of the term “arrivant” as a third status beyond the categories of indigenous and settler. In *The Transit of Empire*, she describes “arrivant”: “a term I borrow from African Caribbean poet Kamau Brathwaite to signify those people forced into the Americas through the violence of European and Anglo-American colonialism and imperialism around the globe.”\(^ {13}\) Refusing to include arrivants in the category of settler acknowledges the complex history of colonization and imperialism and the migration patterns it has required—most notably the Atlantic Slave Trade.

\(^{11}\) Driskill, “Stolen From Our Bodies,” 55.


\(^{13}\) Byrd, *The Transit of Empire*, xix.
Making these distinctions is useful for understanding the roles and responsibilities at play in decolonization. The experiences of settlers versus arrivants coming to grips with the violent history of the founding of the US and their assumptions of national belonging are very different, yet in decolonization, both groups must nevertheless grapple with their current occupation of stolen lands. Contrasting both to the category of indigenous acknowledges the way non-indigenous groups today work toward potential economic progress and state recognition made possible by the colonization of indigenous peoples. Depending on a person of color’s background, they could be classified as indigenous, arrivant, or settler, so most often I use “non-indigenous POC” with an understanding that arrivant or settler status will vary.\(^{14}\)

Making these distinctions between indigenous, arrivant, and settler is also necessary because indigenous people are so often erased in what Byrd calls “liberal multicultural settler colonialism” wherein they are cast as another shade of POC, which erases settler colonialism and inhibits work to deal with the underlying condition of colonialism.\(^{15}\) This chapter, therefore, attempts to center indigeneity and work from that center to specify relationships to decolonization.

**Decolonial Praxis**

As I will discuss below, scholars invested in queer, trans, Native, indigenous, feminist, Asian, and African studies have been concerned about the continued problem of Eurocentric discourses related to sexual and gender variance being universalized and applied inappropriately in scholarship. Many in postcolonial and globalization studies have also critiqued calls for a

\(^{14}\) Here and throughout this piece, I use the singular they when the gender of the singular antecedent is unknown or when “they” is a person’s designated pronoun. I also use “themself” when the subject is singular.

\(^{15}\) Lawrence and Dua, “Decolonizing Anti-Racism,” 130–31; Byrd, *The Transit of Empire*, xvii.
return to tradition as a remedy because such calls seek the impossible separation of the (formerly) colonized subject from the European-tainted context that contributed to its production.\textsuperscript{16} In Achilles Mbembe’s reflection on this problematic approach in the quest for African cultural identity, “The ‘dismembered body’ will be reconstituted at the imaginary zenith of race, and if necessary, in the light of myth. Then an attempt will be made to locate Africanity in a set of specific cultural characteristics that ethnological research is expected to provide.”\textsuperscript{17} Mbembe’s critique is important as the past cannot be reconstructed without the stain of the present and all its multiple influences and motivations, but Qwo-Li Driskill’s definition of decolonization is useful here: it refers to “ongoing, radical resistance against colonialism that includes struggles for land redress, self-determination, healing historical trauma, cultural continuance, and reconciliation.”\textsuperscript{18} Driskill speaks from a mixed-race Cherokee perspective in the US, a place where settler colonialism is cast as a necessary but unfortunate event of the past. Hir definition fights back against the invisibility of colonialism and emphasizes ongoing resistance, cultural and political agency, and attentiveness to the past as it relates to the present.\textsuperscript{19} Though Mbembe and Driskill speak of two very different contexts, I find Driskill’s definition instructive. The point of turning to tradition is not to return, not to seek some kind of pure version of the past, but to attend to the past and deal with its ongoing wounds and to envision the future with attentiveness to both the past and present history of colonization. Cultural

\textsuperscript{16} Mbembe, “African Modes of Self-Writing”; Appiah, \textit{Cosmopolitanism}.

\textsuperscript{17} Mbembe, “African Modes of Self-Writing,” 14.

\textsuperscript{18} Driskill, “Doubleweaving Two-Spirit Critiques,” 69.

\textsuperscript{19} Here and elsewhere, I use individuals’ designated pronouns.
continuance will of course remain a contested site that need not determine culture but inform it, and ethnological research remains a useful decolonizing tool in that process but not the only one. Driskill’s focus on self-determination in hir definition of decolonization makes room for all variety of cultural change, so whatever version of the past that is recovered is only one component in decolonial work. Identity positivity requires this type of decolonial analysis of the past as it looks toward future possibilities.

I’m not suggesting that indigenous and nonwestern forms of gender and sexual variance are confined to pre-colonial periods or some version of pure culture or “authenticity” and tradition. Indigenous and nonwestern individuals and communities interact with multiple other gender systems and exist in worlds with porous borders. In addition, the incredible variation among indigenous peoples and among similar nonwestern cultural groups therefore creates wide variation in gender and sexual systems, and relationships to other gender and sexual systems will vary based on the individual, people group, language, location, etc. So when teaching about gender and sexual variance, it is important to recognize indigenous and nonwestern gender and sexual epistemologies even as we query the relationship between indigenous, nonwestern, and Eurocentric versions. In recent decades, the term “Two-Spirit” has helped shape transnational relationships among many indigenous gender and sexually variant people in the US and Canada. The editors of Queer Indigenous Studies state, “Crucially, many Indigenous GLBTQ2 people define Two-Spirit identity as at once a point of continuity with tribal traditions and a statement of

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20 Testimonies and stories of those who have been harmed by attempts to erase indigenous culture and sexual and gender diversity need not be included in ethnological research to be believed and responded to. Driskill says, “Two-Spirit critiques see theory practiced through poetry, memoir, fiction, story, song, dance, theater, visual art, film, and other genres. Theory is not just about interpreting genres: these genres are theory” (“Doubleweaving Two-Spirit Critiques,” 82).
contemporary intertribal identity and politics, thus showing that the term cannot be drawn along an analytical distinction between ‘traditional’ and ‘nontraditional.’” I am not making any claims about what is authentic to any specific culture but rather calling for purposeful action that responds to the fact that gender and sexual variance has been targeted by colonizing forces with attempts to systematically erase culturally based systems and theories of gender and sexuality other than the supposed universal European-based Christian version of gender and sexual acceptability.

Driskill’s definition of decolonization is useful too because it allows application to colonialism, settler colonialism, globalization, and race, geography, and culture-based Eurocentric hegemony more broadly—all in a framework that accounts for indigenous knowledge systems. Though I am looking at colonization broadly speaking, beginning with indigenous knowledge systems is vital to not only do responsible academic labor on occupied land but also to most accurately represent knowledge systems benefitting gender and sexually variant people. Driskill notes that indigenous people are not served by queer of color and queer diasporic critiques and that Two-Spirit critiques “create more robust and effective interventions in systems of oppression from which both Native studies and queer studies can benefit.”

Dismantling heterosexism in the US requires investment in queer and trans studies as well as in the many kinds of knowledge systems that produce gender and sexual variance. This chapter is a response to Driskill’s call for integrating indigenous theory into gender and sexuality studies.

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23 Driskill writes, “While I don’t think that scholars need to change the focus of their work, I do expect scholars to integrate Indigenous and decolonial theories into their critiques” (78).
and it is also an attentiveness to non-indigenous POC in the US as colonized subjects whose own indigeneity in many cases has been erased or written over with Eurocentric narratives because of colonial violence. Positioning gender and sexual systems in a decolonial framework in a classroom prepares students for encountering multiple gender and sexual systems born of multiple individual communities, nations, diasporas, and relationships to colonization.

There are numerous culturally specific gender and sexual systems that produce numerous and often overlapping culturally specific gender and sexual identities. Mbembe calls these systems “social imaginaries.” These systems produce and are produced by numerous types of theories about gender, sexuality, identity, community, and the like. Queer and trans studies have unfortunately maintained primary and often exclusive investment in occidental notions of gender and sexuality as universal at worst and either ignored or commodified iterations of gender and sexual variance at best. I do not deny that theory produced by Eurocentric gender and sexual systems are relevant in academia today, but there is a definite overemphasis on it that results in a lack of attentiveness to other gender systems in scholarship being produced. Even when nonEuropean subjects are taken seriously by scholars in the west, Eurocentric theory is still invoked as universal or primary. Howard Chiang and Alvin K. Wong note "non-Western queerness oftentimes remains as merely the empirical ‘object’ of study within area studies formation severed from ‘theory’ proper." Scholars in indigenous studies have made similar complaints, which has prompted “a methodological turn to indigenous knowledges” that centers

24 Mbembe states, “Sexuality and gender are both social imaginaries (norms, rules, languages, values) materialized through different forms and a whole complex of socio-historical institutions” (“On the Postcolony,” 163).

the knowledge systems particular to indigenous communities. Such methodological shifts rely on an indigenous rather than Eurocentric framework. I echo Driskill’s call for the theoretical basis of the study of gender and sexuality to shift in a direction that is accountable to Two-Spirit critiques and support pedagogy that is theoretically accountable to Two-Spirit and gender and sexually variant indigenous critiques, queer of color critiques, as well as critiques made by those in Asian, African, and postcolonial studies. Scholars and especially teachers need to be accountable to gender and sexually variant people who are indigenous, POC, and nonwestern since these are who have not been central to the contemporary conception of LGBTQ studies.

The question of course is whether LGBTQ studies is worth saving from theoretical Eurocentrism or whether nonEurocentric studies of gender and sexuality should be relegated only to area and culture-specific studies where more attention can be given to the context from which sexual and gender identities are articulated. The study of gender and sexuality certainly should be taken up by scholars capable of giving full attention to cultural contexts, and Eurocentric investments are not the only ones that have contributed to LGBTQ studies as it has developed. LGBTQ studies is not worth saving as it is, but an LGBTQ studies transformed by Two-Spirit, queer of color, postcolonial, diasporic, asexual, intersex, disability, and other critiques is worth investing in. Whether this is called queer and trans studies, LGBTQ, LGBT2QIA+, gender and sexuality studies, gender and sexual diversity studies, or something else, the field must be not only nominally diverse, but identity-positive, which means reflecting theoretical diversity that makes room for all types of identities.

26 Smith, “Queer Theory and Native Studies,” 43; Driskill et al., Queer Indigenous Studies, 4.

What is more, there is too much good will to waste. Andrea Smith argues that alliances between indigenous and nonindigenous scholars and activists are necessary for bringing about transformation that leads to indigenous survival. She writes, “Native studies must be part of [the conversation about race, colonialism, capitalism, gender, and sexuality] because the logics of settler colonialism structure all of society, not just those who are indigenous.” Within this frame, fields of study such as LGBTQ studies are an ideal location for recruiting support for decolonization. This is of course easier said than done. LGBTQ studies scholars have answered the call to work against racism in their work, yet lip service to anti-racism or vague articulations of allyship are much more common than deep-seated investment in anti-racism. Settler colonial logics and Eurocentric logics are taught every day in college classrooms as legitimate academic knowledge, and the decolonial pedagogy I’m suggesting requires commitment to undoing settler colonial logics and teaching about gender and sexuality in a way that acknowledges the power dynamics that have produced the dominant (cis/heteronormative) gender system and that works to dismantle it. Doing so will benefit indigenous students and students of color and lead to better scholarship and theory.

**Historicizing Homophobia and Transphobia**

In the classroom, it is tempting to untangle homophobia and transphobia from their US contexts and list them alongside racism, sexism, classism, disability, etc. as more manageable individual systems of oppression. Cataloging systems of oppression is indeed useful, but attempting to isolate them contributes to oppression against those subject to multiple systems of

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28 Smith, “Queer Theory and Native Studies,” 43.

29 Smith, 44.
oppression.\textsuperscript{30} What is more, in a US context, homophobia and transphobia do not exist apart from racism, ethnocentrism, and colonization. They are intricately connected because of the history of colonization of the land and its original inhabitants as well as arrivants. Lugones argues that because of Eurocentric capitalism, the “modern/colonial gender system” has been imposed under colonialism as the only valid gender system and reduces gender to “the control of sex, its resources, and products.”\textsuperscript{31} In this system, there isn’t much room for gender and sexual diversity except as targets for elimination.\textsuperscript{32} Countless people groups from and in Africa, Asia, the Pacific, and the Americas have traditions of gender and sexual variance outside of traditional western understandings of cisgender heterosexuality.\textsuperscript{33} In many cases, some gender variant identities and roles were common, normal, and viewed in a positive or neutral light.\textsuperscript{34} European colonization attempted to eliminate those and other traditions through such measures as

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\item Sarah Lamble’s article addresses how isolating transphobia from racism and colonialism enables white and class privileged LGBT people and allies from recognizing shares responsibility for the very violence they decry in memorializing violence committed against trans people (“Retelling Racialized Violence, Remaking White Innocence”).\textsuperscript{30}
\item Lugones, “The Coloniality of Gender,” 12.\textsuperscript{31}
\item Lugones’s vision of the modern/colonial gender system is an overarching theme. But viewed more diversely, colonial gender systems do commodifying gender variance in some sectors (such as the porn industry, the medical industrial complex, the prison industrial complex, and even the selling of products like cosmetics, fashion, media, and even nationalism). As is discussed in this chapter, when failing to incorporate a decolonial critiques, queer and trans studies also become an arm of coloniality, thereby enforcing Eurocentric narratives of gender variance that support colonialism.\textsuperscript{32}
\item Some indigenous gender and sexual variant categories include hijra in South Asia, fa’fafine and māhū in the Pacific, Two Spirit categories such as nádleeh and winkte in the US, muxe in Mexico, kathoey and waria in Asia. Observations of indigenous African gender and sexual variance is well documented in the pre-colonial and early colonial era, but they are less commonly claimed today.\textsuperscript{33}
\item Of course many indigenous cultures have also treated sexual and gender variance as taboo or restricted such sexual activity to violent exchanges. But the fact that there was a great diversity of gender and sexual epistemologies before colonization in demonstrates the possibilities that could have existed had western colonization of the Americas, Africa, Asia, and the Pacific not been colonized by western forces bringing with them a great intolerance of gender and sexual variance.\textsuperscript{34}
\end{enumerate}
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forbidding native languages, banning religious and cultural gatherings, destroying cultural texts and artifacts, dictating what clothes could and could not be worn and by whom, to public beatings, genocide, attempted genocide, and seizing generations of children and subjecting them to abuse and “re-education” at boarding schools for the purpose of cultural assimilation. These measures have caused intergenerational trauma that affect many of our students today, and colonization’s impact continues to erase the history and possibility of traditional indigenous cultures, which includes gender and sexual variance.

In many cases, pre-colonial traditions about gender and sexual variance have been lost or become inaccessible to many, and it is through concerted effort, community building, and sometimes research, that indigenous people have done decolonizing work to reclaim gender and sexual identities that center their own cultural traditions even as they engage with other communities and influences. In many communities, gender and sexual variance have a normalized and respected place in those cultures, yet relationships outside of those communities are strained by the differences in knowledge systems and power dynamics. For example, fa’afafine are a Samoan-based group of gender and sexually variant people who are assigned male at birth. They assume many of the gendered roles of women, and often dress in the manner of women. Fa’aafafine are widely accepted as a normal part of gendered life in Samoa. American Samoan artist and poet Dan Taulapapa McMullin recalls moving to the US as a child and being

35 This last example refers to the Indian boarding school movement in Canada, the US, and Mexico. In the US, this practice lasted from 1860-1978. Famously, the motto of Richard Henry Pratt, founder of one of the Carlisle Indian School, was “Kill the Indian, save the man.” See Adams, Education for Extinction.

36 Samoa is an independent nation and American Samoa a neighboring US territory, but both locations share much in common culturally. McMullin is from American Samoa.
told to act like an “American boy because we were not in Sāmoa anymore.”

McMullin also notes that missionaries, churches, and televangelism—all former and current tools of colonization—play a role in shaping cultural attitudes and policy about fa’afafine. He says, “There was a recent movement among fundamentalists in Sāmoa, influenced by televangelism, to force fa’afafine to dress as men in church. But today fa’afafine still dress as women at church services, and at the workplace, and in the classroom, and in the home with the family, and at important social functions.” In McMullin’s writings, cultural acceptance of gender and sexual variance prevail, yet McMullin also notes the burden of colonial cultural impositions. In “Fa’Fafine Poem Number Six,” he quotes a colonial narrative from Figi in the 19th Century that discusses displays of military force as a tactic for intimidating native populations. The poem ends

“and if British guns were withdrawn both mission stations and trade factories would not long survive”

[...] The gunboats still police

Though McMullin’s work often demonstrates the successes of colonial resistance, here, he emphasizes that British and then American imperialism have enforced colonial systems that include gender and sexuality.

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38 McMullin, 118.

39 McMullin, Coconut Milk, 48.
Unlike the case of Samoa, for many indigenous cultures, gender and sexual variance was practically wiped out along with other cultural practices. Many of these communities have engaged in decolonial work regarding gender and sexuality, and Two-Spirit organizing has made a more visible space for many Native LGBTQ2s. Yet as Byrd has said regarding the unconquerable status of the Chickasaw Nation, “there is a difference between recovered and having never lost in the first place that stands in breach still for those of us attempting to theorize the legacies of colonialism within indigenous worlds.”

This loss and this continued suppression takes a toll that demands further attention by those who teach and write about gender and sexuality.

All this is not to say that all indigenous gender and sexuality systems are inherently affirming of multiple forms of gender and sexual variance or that indigenous communities and those most directly affected by colonization have no negative or violent histories toward sexual and gender variant people. Each indigenous nation and community has its own traditions to account for and evolve from. Precolonial tolerance and support for gender and sexual variance depend on the people group, but exploring the causes and ramifications of homophobia and transphobia in the Americas requires an account of colonization: it is through colonization that homophobia and transphobia became a pervasive feature of local gender and sexual systems. In Lugones’ terminology, the modern/colonial gender system developed and was enforced via

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40 Byrd, *The Transit of Empire*, xi.

41 Not every indigenous people group had affirming cultural systems for gender and sexually variant people before colonization, and even when there were accepted forms of gender and sexual variance, there were typically few culturally sanctioned options. Nevertheless, the amount of gender and sexual diversity in these regions was incredible in contrast to the assumed narrative of homophobia and transphobia everywhere but the “progressive West,” which enforced a much narrower brand of compulsory cisgender heterosexuality and even continues to do so.
colonization. As a result, I would argue, local gender and sexual systems changed due to the colonization of indigenous cultures.

In “Stolen From Our Bodies,” Qwo-Li Driskill says “While homophobia, transphobia, and sexism are problems in Native communities, in many of our tribal realities these forms of oppression are the result of colonization and genocide that cannot accept women as leaders, or people with extra-ordinary genders and sexualities.”42 Driskill acknowledges the contemporary presence of patriarchal cisgender heterosexism in Native communities but identifies colonization as a key force in how that heterosexism developed. In “Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System,” Lugones uses texts by Paula Gunn Allen and Oyéronké Oyewùmí to similarly critique Eurocentric gender systems that attempt to invalidate and replace indigenous gender systems in North American and Africa and ultimately do violence to colonial subjects. Lugones writes,

> Understanding the place of gender in precolonial societies is pivotal to understanding the nature and scope of changes in the social structure that the processes constituting colonial/modern Eurocentered capitalism imposed…. [and] is also essential to understanding the extent and importance of the gender system in disintegrating communal relations, egalitarian relations, ritual thinking, collective decision making and authority, and economies.43

For Lugones, historicizing gender systems is of utmost importance as she investigates how the racism and capitalism-infused “colonial/modern gender system” was a creation of colonial power itself and continues to affect systems of knowledge and opportunities for decolonial liberatory possibilities.44

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42 Driskill, “Stolen From Our Bodies,” 52.

43 Lugones, “Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System,” 201–2.

44 Lugones, 186–87.
Despite scholarly and literary work on the role of colonization in the development of intolerance of gender and sexual variance, common approaches to the teaching of sexual and gender variance don’t take into consideration indigenous and nonwestern forms of sexual and gender variance—let alone account for the role of colonization. The common narrative of historicizing gender and sexual variance or suppression of such variance is told in terms such as these: *society has always rejected and suppressed deviation from compulsory cisgender heterosexuality, but over time, progress has been made: opposition against queer and trans people created politicized identity categories, which caused queer and trans communities to advocate for acceptance.* In this narrative, cis heterosexuality is assumed normative, and queer and transgender are defined by their deviation from this norm. This common narrative is supported by gay and transgender histories and queer theory rooted in western definitions of gender and sexual variance such as works by Michel Foucault, Jonathan Katz, John D’Emilio, Susan Stryker, Judith Butler, Michael Warner, and Jack Halberstam. These works are incredible resources, but they are limited in the sense that they do not address colonization as a major factor relevant to the proliferation of homophobia and transphobia in American society today. I do not fault them for telling partial versions since Eurocentric intellectual traditions are so thoroughly enforced on the academy, and LGBTQ studies is so relatively new, but it is the persistent narrative of assumed investment in Eurocentric notions of normalcy and progress that gives me pause. And it is these narratives that are passed down to our students when we teach queer and trans studies content without intentional decolonial interventions.

The editors of the *Decolonizing the Transgender Imaginary* special issue of *Transgender Studies Quarterly* critique what they call “a progress narrative for transgender studies, which some of us have subscribed to: that trans studies began with ‘the basics’ and then evolved to
incorporate an intersectional and critical lens.”⁴⁵ In the US, academia has been and continues to be a colonizing institution, which requires that academic standards be met before it can be deemed legitimate knowledge. Of course, such a rationale upholds the goals of colonization and delegitimizes indigenous and non-Eurocentric epistemologies. Despite academia’s investment in colonization, large segments of academia are working to change it from the inside. The editors of the Decolonial Transgender Imaginary issue continue: “The insight we draw precisely from decolonial feminisms, Indigenous studies, and trans of color theory is to understand ‘theory’ differently: not as knowledge that issues from within the academy or that aspires to academic recognition but that invents itself on the fly, in the midst of a campaign, in the telling of stories.”⁴⁶ The editors want trans studies scholars to understand theory differently, to note its presence born of identity and necessity and its longstanding history among those outside of academia. The complexity of this kind of theory should not be underestimated and, like other theory, is best understood in context with other related theoretical texts. This means not only interdisciplinarity but engagement with epistemologies not often considered academic. Identity-positive teaching means taking account for a multiplicity of gender and sexual epistemologies and ontologies and adopting a necessarily decolonial approach that recognizes the role of colonization in suppressing them. This means talking about colonialism specifically and addressing how gender and sexual variance have been suppressed through colonialism and through non-decolonial queer and trans studies. And this means teaching multiple types of

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⁴⁶ Aizura et al., 312.
theoretical contexts—Eurocentric alongside Indigenous alongside Afrocentric, along Asian and more—and not just in a queer of color class.

Casting the study of gender and sexual variance as the theoretical grounds of European whiteness supports colonial enterprises and assumes that Eurocentric whiteness exists everywhere and should exist there for everyone. There’s nothing wrong with teaching Edelman, Butler, and Foucault. But there is something wrong with not talking about colonialism while teaching them. And there is something wrong with not teaching decolonial and non-Eurocentric texts alongside them. Just because we are living and teaching in what is considered the West does not mean the topics we teach should be centered in the white Eurocenteredness associated with it. This country is diverse, and the land it occupies is stolen. Our students are diverse and with varying personal experiences with colonialism. Gender and sexual gender systems in the US are diverse. So, if the topics you teach are based only in white Eurocentric gender and sexual theory, either change your curriculum or be more honest about the content of your course. Change your queer theory class title to “White Eurocentric Theories of Gender and Sexuality” and make sure your department hires several people capable of addressing all the other types of gender and sexual theory.

Of course it’s impossible to cram everything into a single syllabus, yet I’d argue colonialism should have a central place on a syllabus that addresses the violent imposition of gender and sexual norms. Questions teachers of gender and sexuality studies can ask are: What are the theoretical investments of the authors I’m teaching? How can I introduce decolonial reading into the interpretation of these texts? How can I frame colonialism as an organizing force in this course? How can I increase the number of gender and sexual epistemologies I introduce in this course? As college teachers, we are training students to participate in academia in their
papers and projects and also in their thinking and what they will do after graduation regardless of if that includes more participation in academia. Despite the longstanding theoretical production by non-Eurocentric gender and sexually variant people, access to that theory is not always easy. That’s why it’s especially disturbing that decolonial approaches to gender and sexuality are not more common in curriculum. Vimalassery, Pegues, and Goldstein describe a system of “colonial unknowing” that does not acknowledge the present’s relationship to colonialism. They write “this ignorance—this act of ignoring—is aggressively made and reproduced, affectively invested and effectively distributed in ways that conform the social relations and economies of the here and now.” Despite its allure, “not knowing” is not a good enough excuse for not incorporating indigenous and other non-Eurocentric gender and sexual epistemologies and ontologies in courses that deal with gender and sexual identity. “Not knowing” is the result of academia’s role as an arm of colonization, and “not knowing” is far too effective of a tool in supporting colonization’s goals to be allowed to continue.

Moving beyond not knowing is necessary for us as individual teachers because of our need and responsibility for working toward decolonization in the academy and for the sake of accuracy. Narratives of gender and sexual progress are as inaccurate as they are damaging. Following Driskill’s definition of decolonization that includes both resistance to colonialism and healing, decolonial pedagogy is also needed for the sake of the well-being of many of our students, who are the inheritors of displacement and trauma caused by past and present

47 Byrd references “historical aphasia” (*The Transit of Empire*, xxvi).


colonization. Classes taught as “White Eurocentric Theories of Gender and Sexuality” continue the colonial violence that confirm to indigenous and POC students that gender and sexual variance are for white Eurocentered people, and that if they accept their variant gender or sexuality, they will betray their ethnic or racial identity.

Who and Where We Teach

If we’re teaching in the US, our classrooms occupy indigenous lands. On my campus at the University of Illinois at Chicago, for example, the lands the school occupies were once hunting grounds and temporary settlements of Algonquin tribes such as the Miami, Kickapoo, and Potawatomi. These people groups had and have a diversity of ways of understanding gender and sexual variance. The Potawatomi, for example, have a tradition of m’netokwe, which is a person who might have been assigned male at birth adopting a female role. Ojibwe culture has traditions of those who might have been assigned male or female taking up other gender roles including as spiritual leaders or of widows fulfilling roles typically given to men. The Native peoples who lived and hunted in these areas were subject to wars, treaties, economic and political unrest, and forced removal from these lands to reservations in Oklahoma, Kansas, and Nebraska. Their traditional beliefs were suppressed, their children “re-educated” (through the violence of boarding schools), and some lost their status as federally recognized tribes. It’s easy to teach without thought to place, but decolonial pedagogy requires some sense of history, and incorporating decolonial approaches to the texts I choose, I recognize the cultural histories of the on which I teach and my students learn and build investment in indigenous sovereignty among nonindigenous students. At the same time, I increase the number of gender and sexual epistemologies my students are exposed to, which destabilizes the unquestioned default of
western notions of non-normative queer and trans identities, and I teach the colonial contexts that have led to the widespread enforcement of Eurocentric perspectives on gender and sexuality.

In my introduction to LGBTQIA studies course, one of the first sets of essays and films I teach gives information on indigenous West African, Native American, Zapotec, and Native Hawaiian gender and sexualities. In class, we discuss how colonization relates to the study of gender and sexuality in the US. These early lessons create a critical lens students apply to texts that take a Eurocentric view of gay and lesbian history. This lens also enhances critical discussion of texts that discuss race in powerful ways but without specifically considering colonization’s role. Our discussion of queer of color critiques and texts that discuss disability also make clear that the struggle against colonialism is wrapped up in struggles against homophobia, ableism, and racism. Conversation about decolonial work comes up naturally, and I also prod students to make connections among the texts. These pedagogical decisions about which texts, which order, and what points to emphasize and build discussion around determine students’ abilities to understand the narrow scope of LGBTQ studies as many of them have yet encountered it and the narrow scope that continues in many of the texts they encounter in their research. Making these decisions is on the one hand relatively simple, but for those who may be concerned about if they can do it, I’d say this: start. It’s a simple as that. The process will be ongoing. I am working to be more accountable to decolonial work and am certainly not there yet.

My classes have a high number of students of color dealing with the weight of colonial legacies. If indigenous students and students of color enter my classroom, hear about Eurocentric narratives of gender and sexuality, and do not hear about how European and US colonization have inhibited sexual and gender variance, I not only normalize colonialism, but I also withhold key knowledge that can aid them in decolonizing their own senses of identity and could in some
help them stay alive. If an indigenous student or student of color is gender or sexually variant, they may have experienced rejection by family and friends and possibly been told that in being gender or sexually variant, they are betraying their ethnicity, race, or cultural traditions. They may have been accused of being corrupted by white society because of the assumption that gender and sexual variance are white phenomena. In addition, models of progress encouraged by mainstream (white) LGBTQ politics are Eurocentric models that emphasize individual identity above community-based identities. When white LGBTQs believe their experience of sex and gender variance is universal, they view anything different from their brand of LGBTQ acceptance as hostile to gender and sexual variance.\textsuperscript{50} Such messages further perpetuate the assumptions that being indigenous or a person of color is incompatible with being gender and sexually variant, which causes shame, isolation, repression, distress, and even suicide.

Indigenous students and students of color are also likely to have experienced racism and xenophobia in larger LGBTQIA communities in the US, where whiteness is produced and protected even in supposedly “safe spaces”\textsuperscript{51} and where cruising and dating mechanisms are

\textsuperscript{50} Rasmussen states, “This view has caused the rhetoric in the US about coming out to come under fire in recent years. Some who are not from European backgrounds or religious traditions have criticized “the coming out imperative” because of its presumption that white experiences of being LGBTQ is the universal experience of being LGBTQ (“The Problem of Coming Out,” 145).

\textsuperscript{51} For instance, Boystown, a neighborhood in East Lakeview on the far north side of the city of Chicago gained attention in recent years for the overt targeting of black youth who come to the neighborhood to receive LGBTQ-specific services and to spend time with friends away from parts of the city where they are more likely to be harassed on the basis of their sexual and gender identities. Many of the youth do not have secure housing and reside permanently in the neighborhood. After a pride celebration in the neighborhood in 2011, a fight broke out among a group of black youth, several youth kicked and beat a person, who was also stabbed. Much of the incident was recorded by a white condo owner and uploaded to YouTube. The Alderman’s response was to request increased police presence, the local business association hired a private security team of armed officers in bullet proof vests to patrol the area, homeowners and residents organized neighborhood patrols with their dogs, and thousands of people joined a Facebook group called “Take Back Boystown” to voice their grievances, which included much criticism of service organizations for supposedly attracting youth and enabling criminal activity. Racist language such as “thugs,” “ghetto animals,” were used to describe black youth who didn’t belong in contrast to the image of white gays who did (“Take Back Boystown”).
overrun with racialized prejudice and objectification.\textsuperscript{52} Being able to define gender and sexual variance apart from whiteness can help students feel more insulated from the oppression they experience at the hands of white people—even their supposed fellow community members in queer and trans circles.

For many indigenous and POC students, the fear of betraying one’s background is strong, as is disidentification with white-dominated LGBTQ culture and identity, which is too often confused with internalized homophobia and transphobia. For instance, if a male who is sexually attracted to males disidentifies with being gay or trans or bi because he views it as outside of his ethnic or racial identity, many might accuse him of being too ashamed to come out. But he could also be expressing an “identity-in-difference” where disidentification enables an enacting of self that is something else.\textsuperscript{53} But the isolation of being something else is itself traumatic, and instructors contribute to that trauma when they hide the information that might enable connection with others with similar identities—such as the knowledge that precolonial West African gender and sexual norms included gender and sexual variance. Learning about these traditions alongside queer history in the West bolsters the legitimacy of indigenous knowledge systems, and learning about the role of colonization and displacement in suppressing gender and sexual variance gives information that helps build communities of healing and shared decolonial goals. In this way, making space on the syllabus and in the classroom for exploration of indigenous forms of identity rooted in indigenous and nonwestern epistemologies makes room for connection,

\textsuperscript{52} Cruising/dating apparatuses like OkCupid, Craigslist, Grindr, Surge, and PinkCupid. See Han, \textit{Geisha of a Different Kind}.

\textsuperscript{53} Muñoz, \textit{Disidentifications}, 6.
healing, and in some cases life. If white Eurocentric queer or trans identity is the only option outside of one’s culture, sometimes life seems and therefore is impossible.

In light of the incredibly high rates of suicide and emotional distress among indigenous people and among LGBTQs (that only increase with being marked as racially other), learning about gender and sexual variance in a decolonial framework can save the literal lives of gender and sexually variant indigenous students and students of color by making being gender and sexually variant seem less isolating. Learning about gender and sexuality in such a framework can be a lifeline for students facing the direct impact of colonization. This type of learning can become a catalyst for maintaining connection to or building alternative communities within their racialized, ethnic, and national groups, and it can provide opportunities for identification with gender and sexual variance and for accepting oneself in terms of all of one’s identities.

Decolonial pedagogy in gender and sexuality studies enables healing from trauma, tools for coping with isolation and loss, and opportunities for further study and connection with others like themselves. Anguksuar [Richard LaFortune] (Yup’ik) writes that when reclaiming indigenous forms of gender and sexual variance “we are remembering again who we are and that our identities can no longer be used as a weapon against us. It is once again a source of our


healing.”

It is humbling to think that instructors can play a role in creating pathways to such healing simply by making some intentional decisions around their pedagogy.

As much as I’d like to forget that I am a settler, the land I literally stand on when I teach is occupied. And I occupy it. I am not only the descendent of those who migrated here for a chance at the American (settler) Dream, but my role as an instructor means I am a colonial representative paid to further assimilate my students through the neoliberal enterprise of higher education and the US economic and political systems as they exist today. That’s my status and the status of most who teach in the US. Yet rather than merely accept our role and do our best to help students achieve dreams of success (i.e. settled success), we have the opportunity to engage in a decolonizing process that would transform education as colonization into education as tool for decolonization. The full view of what decolonization looks like is inaccessible at this point, but identity-positive work makes space for future possibilities that are yet unimaginable.

Inherited Epistemologies

For many of my students, the decentering of western conceptions of gender and sexuality is disorienting and unattractive. In their perspective, these are the epistemologies and ontologies we’ve inherited for better or for worse, so if gender variance is rejected as sin by the Eurocentric “West,” and we’re in the west, why bother considering how the “West” wrote over many other kinds of gender narratives? I can appreciate this view because regardless of what has survived and resisted colonialism, Eurocentric queer thought is dominant. I continue to teach it because it prepares them for the intellectual and political world they encounter in a settler colonial and

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imperial state, yet decolonial pedagogy is something I do out of responsibility but also out of love. I want to pass on the intellectual and activist responsibility of decolonial work because it is the right thing to do, and it contributes to knowledge production about gender and sexuality. But decolonial work also provides a freedom from being beholden to colonial gender and sexual systems. There is so much freedom outside of colonial limits that I want for myself and my students.

But for some students, it seems more beneficial to use Eurocentric theory for gender and sexual liberation rather than indigenous-based perspectives, which often seem inaccessible at best and appropriative at worst. These are real concerns. First of all, Eurocentric gender and sexual theory is incredibly useful and makes a lot of sense in the settler colonial and imperial state we live in. It offers pathways to liberation and necessary analytical tools we’d be fools to ignore. In addition, cultural appropriation is a real concern when teaching and learning about cultures other than one’s own, but learning about indigenous and nonwestern epistemologies and gender and sexual systems does not mean everyone should adopt them. Enabling everyone to learn about them, however, has the result of delegitimizing the assumption that Eurocentric epistemologies are primary. All gender and sexual systems are social constructs, so allowing students the opportunity to learn about a variety of such social constructs encourages critique of the colonial imposition of Eurocentric gender and sexual systems as universal, and encourages a loosened grip on the gender and sexual systems they’ve inherited. And for indigenous and POC students, this grants an opportunity to research and understand gender and sexual systems specific to their own cultural backgrounds, which helps them develop their own gender and sexual worlds and worldviews. For both groups of students, looking back creates necessary space
to be creative and explore ways of being in the world that make the most sense for their identities, experiences, and desires.

Teaching gender and sexuality in the US today completely isolated from white-dominated western thought would be counterproductive given the current power dynamics in both settler and indigenous communities. For instance, the term “queer” relies on understanding sexual and gender variance as nonnormative, yet the editors of the 2011 collection *Queer Indigenous Studies* use the term. Their use of the acronym GLBTQ2 also relies on western ontologies even if the “2” is also added to include Two-Spirit. By using terms with roots in western gender and sexual epistemology, the editors acknowledge the way indigenous and nonindigenous ontological systems are mixed, but they also point out, “Each of these terms [gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, and Two-Spirit] inevitably fails to reflect the complexities of indigenous constructions of gender and sexual diversity, both historically and as they are used in the present,” yet when “queer” is used in combination with “Two-Spirit,” this “invite[s] critiquing heteronormativity as a colonial project, and decolonizing Indigenous knowledges of gender as sexuality as one result of that critique.”

A decolonizing approach to gender and sexual variance therefore gives voice to Eurocentric, nonwestern, and indigenous perspectives on gender and sexuality, and it supports indigenous and nonwestern people in reclaiming the cultural history and political power colonialism suppresses. But focusing only on Eurocentric epistemologies just because they are the most accessible ignores colonialism as a system that makes certain bodies of knowledge more accessible and suppresses others.

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57 Driskill et al., *Queer Indigenous Studies*, 3.
These lessons may be difficult for non-indigenous and non-POC students to accept because they do not center whiteness—something that most students are accustomed to and that white students almost always benefit from. Yet white gender and sexual variant people happen to benefit from participating in decolonization because white colonization in America has inhibited the development of gender and sexual variance. And white investment in decolonization aids indigenous people and many non-indigenous people of color, and it contributes to the destabilization of narratives of gender and sexual variance as nonnormative. It may seem calloused to suggest white LGBTQIA students invest in decolonization because it benefits them in some way, but that potential benefit is a starting point for recognizing colonialism as oppressive and an opportunity for beginning coalitional work that can lead to a much greater support for decolonization in other contexts.

Indigenous Action Media, a collective of media makers and activists, is highly critical of various types of allies including those who just want to help or save others. Instead, the organization calls for accomplices. Allies are often recruited as such because their relative privilege can be effective in spaces where those without that privilege will not be heard, yet allyship implies exteriority—as if one’s participation in struggle is a gift, not a commitment to one’s own liberation being wrapped up with another’s liberation. For nonindigenous LGBTQIA students, the prospect of allyship with indigenous people may indeed be alluring, but commitment to fight against settler colonialism is likely to be weak if present at all for those who envision themselves merely as allies. Indigenous Action Media’s zine, entitled Accomplices, Not Allies: An Indigenous Perspective & Provocation, argues “The risks of an ally who provides support or solidarity (usually on a temporary basis) in a fight are much different than that of an accomplice. When we fight back or forward, together, becoming complicit in a struggle towards
liberation, we are accomplices.”58 If nonindigenous LGBTQIA students could see themselves as accomplices along with indigenous communities in the criminal activity of fighting against settler colonialism (in this sense, “crime” is resistance to colonial force), they could see their own experience with heterosexism, cissexism, racism, and economic vulnerability in a capitalistic society as wrapped up with the experience of indigenous people with colonialism. Such coali
tional work may last and grow from there, leading to more collective liberation for those facing oppression. The collective interests in coalitional work toward liberation is even stronger for nonindigenous gender and sexually variant people of color who also have vested interests in working toward liberation.

While accompliceship among settler and arrivant LGBTQIA and indigenous people is the goal, it is far too common for non-indigenous people to cite indigenous forms of gender variance as justification for dismantling compulsory (cis) heterosexuality without any real investment in decolonization. For instance, in her 1994 Gender Outlaw, Kate Bornstein briefly addresses indigenous forms of gender variance as a method of explaining how gender assignment is culturally determined. Bornstein includes three paragraphs dedicated to discussing gender in relation to Native Americans. The first tells how Kodiak Islanders in the early 1800s had alternative methods for assigning gender. Ze then writes: “The European umbrella term for this and any other type of Native American transgendered person is berdache” (24). While Bornstein is sure to identify the term as European, a somewhat progressive move for a non-Native in 1994,59 ze goes on to cite recent work by a white anthropologist and then quotes from narratives


59 Today “berdache” is viewed as a demeaning, inaccurate, and colonial term. At a gathering of indigenous LGBT people from the US and Canada in 1990, “Two-Spirit” was designated as an umbrella term for Native
by a white settler from 1702. Bornstein then gives another example of gender assignment from a Native culture: “When the gender of a child was in question in some Navajo tribes…. They set fire to the tipi, and whatever the child grabbed as he/she ran out determined the child’s gender. It was perfectly natural to these Navajo that the child had some say in determining its own gender.

Compare this method with the following modern example:” Bornstein then tells a story of a cross-cultural confusion about gender and names then asks a series of questions about gender assignment including “Is the determination of one another’s gender a “social responsibility?” and “Do we have the legal or moral right to decide and assign our own genders?” (24). In this section, Bornstein presents information about indigenous gender systems, yet colonization is never mentioned, hir narrative about indigenous people is distinctly anthropological, terminology for both the indigenous nations and forms of gender variance are invested in non-indigenous ontologies, the only quote about the topic is from a white settler, and perhaps most telling, all information is told in the past as if Native people no longer have a viable culture or presence.60

Obviously, solidarity with indigenous peoples against colonizing forces is not a priority for the work Bornstein does in the text, and engaging with information about indigeneity is for the benefit of hir presumably non-indigenous readers to think through questions of gender assignment so that they can apply them to their own experiences in a settled society. Bornstein’s narrative is not outstanding in its appropriation of indigenous forms of gender and sexual variance. Though less common today, such narratives are still very common. Yet the frequency of appropriation makes it all the more important for those teaching about gender and sexual American and First Nation forms of gender and sexual variance. It took some years for those outside these communities to recognize this significant change. See Morgensen, Spaces between Us, 55–87.

60 Bornstein, Gender Outlaw, 22–23.
variance to couch knowledge about indigenous forms of gender and sexual variance in a larger decolonial framework. Despite settler LGBTQIAs gaining something in their solidarity with indigenous people’s decolonial work, anything less than accompliceship in working against colonization reinforces colonial structures that mark gender and sexual variance as a white settler phenomenon.

Responding to POC and LGBTQIA Moves of Innocence

In a social justice landscape that focuses on minority rights, “decolonization” is an apt word for resisting majoritarian apparatuses of control, and given the history of white western colonization, it is also relevant for peoples across the globe to engage in decolonizing efforts to regain social, economic, and cultural self-determination even after formal political colonization has ended. But in a US context, such decolonizing efforts cannot be divorced from the immediacy of the suppression of indigenous sovereignty and ongoing US occupation of indigenous lands. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang take on this problem especially as it relates to education in their 2012 article “Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor.” They write:

In particular, describing all struggles against imperialism as ‘decolonizing’ creates a convenient ambiguity between decolonization and social justice work, especially among people of color, queer people, and other groups minoritized by the settler nation-state. ‘We are all colonized,’ may be a true statement but is deceptively embracive and vague, its inference: ‘None of us are settlers.’ Equivocation, or calling everything by the same name, is a move towards innocence that is especially in vogue in coalition politics among people of color.61 Tuck and Yang use the term “moves of innocence”62 to refer to the way settlers seek relief from the guilt of being a settler. I would add “arrivant” to this formulation in that settlers and arrivants


62 Tuck and Yang borrow the term “moves to innocence” from Janet Mawhinney’s work on anti-racism. Mawhinney had built on Mary Louise Fellows and Sherene Razack’s concept of “the race to innocence” in the context of women’s claims to primary status of subordination (Tuck and Yang, 9).
resist recognizing their status as such; the very recognition of ongoing colonialism of indigenous people can threaten their claims for recognition by the colonial state. On a personal level, those who have experienced one or more type of oppression on the basis of their identity often have a difficult time recognizing the ways they are invested in oppressive forces even if not done willfully.

In *Spaces Between Us*, Scott Lauria Morgensen states, “Regardless of whether non-Natives think they inherit the power of settler colonialism, all can ask how it produces them in roles that may sustain it and its naturalization.”\(^{63}\) Such questions are uncomfortable for individuals who see themselves as already marginalized by American society, in part because social justice communities in the US are often modeled on discourse about who does and does not experience oppression. Even in contexts that emphasize intersectionality, new dynamics can form that mark those who have experienced oppression as experts. In best case scenarios those who have experienced oppression develop “epistemic privilege,” which AnaLouise Keating says happens when “our previously unacknowledged perspectives and the additional insights we have obtained from these perspectives give us intellectual authority and new knowledge.”\(^{64}\)

Recognizing epistemic privilege is useful in determining one’s own positionality in relation to systems of oppression. But in less ideal circumstances, people can assume that POC and gender and sexually variant identities are themselves markers of rightness, goodness, and moral superiority. Once someone develops a consciousness that grants them this kind of moral superiority on the basis of their identity or personal experience of oppression, it can be incredibly

\(^{63}\) Morgensen, *Spaces between Us*, 22.

\(^{64}\) Keating, *Transformation Now!*, 90, emphasis in original.
difficult to recognize their investment in other forms of oppression. This will be a natural reaction for a good number of the students in our classes—especially sexual and gender variant people in a queer and/or trans studies course. And this is not just an issue of racial privilege, class privilege, or even settler privilege. All of those are indeed factors that need to be addressed as well, but at the heart of this issue is trauma.

Our students experience incredible trauma. They are survivors of abuse and sexual assault, people dealing with addiction, vets, formerly incarcerated people, people with disabilities and other medical and mental conditions, black, Latinx, indigenous, other people of color, immigrants—with and without documents, religious minorities, people coming from poor backgrounds, first-generation college students, those dealing with family rejection, and the list goes on. When gender and sexually variant students come into courses that deal with gender and sexual variance, they’re bringing experiences of trauma, and the same is true for many other types of students. They come into our classes seeking refuge from a world that does not accept them and searching for tools that can help them process their experiences of trauma. And this is something those of us who teach about gender and sexual variance ought to encourage. On our best days, it is the power and potential of queer and trans studies to be able to provide that refuge and supply those tools. But students can also come wanting to center their own identities and experiences of trauma at the expense of others, and they may think their experiences of oppression have earned them the right to do so. Such students welcome the language of decolonization when it helps them make sense of the trauma they’ve personally experienced but have a hard time allowing their experience of trauma not to take center stage. This may mean they are also resistant to indigenous epistemologies and acknowledging their own role in settler colonialism. This difficulty is a result of some kinds of privilege, and decolonial pedagogy
means helping students explore their role as both oppressor and oppressed in a decolonial framework. In this way, non-indigenous students become accountable for the ongoing suppression of indigenous epistemologies about gender and sexuality even when they are also healing from trauma of their own. After all, recognizing frameworks of citizenship that rely on settler colonial logics need not discount one’s experiences of trauma.

What I’m suggesting is difficult work that must also be done compassionately. Merely dismissing students because they can’t see beyond their own very real experiences of oppression aids no one. Non-indigenous POC and gender and sexually variant students are potentially more equipped than other non-indigenous students to grasp the need for accompliceship in resistance to ongoing colonialism, so helping them work through their relationship to colonialism is a worthwhile endeavor even when you encounter resistance to the material. Helping them clarify their relationship to colonialism will help them work toward mutual liberation rather than POC or LGBTQIA liberation at the expense of indigenous peoples.

**Decolonial Queer Possibilities**

As discussed above, decolonial pedagogy when teaching about gender and sexual variance requires attention to the history of homophobia and transphobia as well as commitment to teaching indigenous and nonwestern gender and sexual epistemologies and ontologies alongside those that are Eurocentric. Decolonial pedagogy also requires we engage in decolonization broadly speaking and address the types of colonial legacies relevant to the types of students we teach and the land on which we teach them. The development of decolonial pedagogy is easier said than done, and it takes time and commitment to continual learning. But the rewards of developing these strategies are too great to pass up. They aid students in gaining a more accurate understanding of the relationship between sexual variance and access to power,
and they help students explore their own relationships to colonialism and social justice in ways that promote coalition and collective liberation.

Learning about gender and sexuality in decolonial context also makes room for possibilities for identities that do not exist otherwise. In *Cruising Utopia*, José Esteban Muñoz defines queerness as longing for the gendered future we imagine and fight for: “Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing…. Queerness is essentially about the rejection of the here and now and an insistence on the potentiality or concrete possibility for another world.” An insistence on the potentiality of another more gender and sexuality-diverse world requires a reckoning with colonization and requires a recognition that the colonial/modern gender system suppresses gender and sexual variance, and efforts to overturn it without attention to ongoing colonialism only work to reinforce colonial power. Muñoz does not imagine a specifically decolonial future, but desiring a decolonial future is a queer enterprise where disidentification with coloniality and the imagination of decolonial futures propels decolonial work.

As faculty we’re used to assigning work, but granting students opportunities for imagination is rarer. The task of facilitating imagination is undoubtedly what every teacher does, but without intentional decolonial pedagogy, the future imagined will be a Eurocentric settler colonial project. Such a limited queer future is disappointing in its scope, especially its effect on indigenous and arrivant people. Imagining gender and sexuality otherwise is a necessarily decolonial project that reconciles the past to the future through motivating a coalitional present. As teachers of gender and sexuality, we have the opportunity and responsibility to help our

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students imagine decolonial queer futures. The possibilities for what gender and sexual identities could form in such a future are incredible—as are the more immediate decolonial queer worlds our students will form when we engage with them in such worldmaking.
CHAPTER 3

ADJACENT DESIRES: REJECTING A FRAME OF QUEER AND TRANS NONCONFORMITY AND EMBRACING CONFORMITY AS DECOLONIAL STRATEGY IN MICHELLE CLIFF’S NO TELEPHONE TO HEAVEN

The assumption that gender and sexual nonconformity is a radical act that fights against cis-heteronormativity is a staple in queer studies and especially early canonical queer theory such as that by Judith Butler, Lee Edelman, Michael Warner, and Jack Halberstam among many others. Queer studies’ obsession with terms like “resistance,” “deviance,” and “failure” indicate investment in how gender/sexual identity and expression indicate nonconformity with gender and sexual norms. Indeed, the term queer is itself highly political, indicating not merely difference but intentional difference that opposes the enforced normalization of cisgender heterosexuality. Queer theory’s early canonical texts importantly and usefully document the deconstruction of queerness and heterosexism, but they are also Eurocentric theoretical solutions to Eurocentric theoretical problems. For instance, Judith Butler’s Gender Trouble rethinks constructions of gender utilizing psychoanalytic theory, French philosophy, and Foucauldian theories of power rooted in European history and culture. She ultimately argues that failure to conform to gender norms helps dismantle gender systems that oppress women and queer people.¹ Edelman’s No Future reconsiders the value of queer difference by utilizing Lacanian

¹ Butler, Gender Trouble, 201.
psychoanalytic theory and US-European literary theory while exploring Victorian English novels and classic English-American films. He argues for the expansion of queer systems that resist reproductive futurity, a notion of the future embedded in normative visions of familial, political, and human life. Butler’s and Edelman’s works begin with a Eurocentric problem—the devaluation of queer people in “the west” and its textual objects—and both are supported by Eurocentric theoretical frameworks as they call for queer nonconformity as a solution to the devaluation of queer people. Nonconformity works as a strategy for dealing with cis-heterosexism, but such solutions do not consider cultures and geographical locations where cis-heterosexism is a colonial imposition and gender and sexual norms were/are formulated differently. Within a culture experiencing colonial domination, whose cultural norms should be resisted? Is even using the term “cis-heteronormativity” already implying that cis-heterosexism is a universal cultural norm?

Early canonical works in queer theory such as Butler’s and Edelman’s are the theoretical base for a great deal of work about gender and sexuality across numerous fields in and outside of the academy. Though what is known as queer theory has since evolved to include accounting for race, nation, and colonialism, it is still limited by its Eurocentric roots. As Michael Hames-García states, “To add race and colonialism to queer theory is to overlook the formation of queer theory as thoroughly grounded in the Eurocentric narratives of the coloniality of power. It is to take European thought as a starting point rather than to begin with practices of resistance to the sexual violence of colonialism.” What would it look like to stop taking colonial knowledge as a

3 Hames-García and Martínez, Gay Latino Studies, 42.
starting point for understanding gender and sexuality? Instead of focusing on the role of nonconformity to cultural norms, which emphasize the cultural norms of “the west,” certainly conforming to ancestral epistemologies about gender and sexuality would be a relevant point of interest because decolonization includes connection to and reconsideration of cultural norms suppressed under colonization. Where Eurocentric queer theory begins with the presumption of universal cis-heteronormativity and conflates conformity with cis-heteropatriarchy, decolonial epistemologies about gender and sexuality seek to begin with ancestral knowledge about gender and sexual norms. In many cases ancestral norms contain room for some gender and sexual variance; therefore, conformity to ancestral norms is a decolonial strategy that ultimately works to support gender and sexual diversity in those cases. Ancestral knowledge about gender and sexuality may not include space for all varieties of gender and sexual identities and expressions, but in some contexts there is much more space for gender and sexual diversity than under the “colonial/modern gender system”⁴ imposed under western colonization. Reclaiming access to ancestral gender and sexual systems, therefore, does work to resist/fail to conform to the colonial/modern gender system, but in some contexts, this resistance includes repositioning gender and sexual variance as normal and conforming to those norms as in the case of Two-Spirit identities among indigenous communities in the US and Canada and mati among working-class women of West African descent in the Caribbean. This chapter takes Michelle Cliff’s *No Telephone to Heaven* as a primary text for exploring the role of conformity as a decolonial strategy in contrast to the Eurocentric assumption that only nonconformity can support gender and sexual diversity. I will discuss why conformity to ancestral epistemologies is especially

⁴ Lugones, “Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System,” 187.
useful in analysis of Cliff’s novel and will then examine Clare’s, and to a lesser degree Harriet’s, conformity to ancestral epistemologies as a means of recognizing their whole selves—not just their gender and sexual variance.

I argue that Clare and Harriet conform to forms of gender and sexual variance rooted in West African cultural heritage and that their journeys to disrupt their investment in colonial epistemologies results in affirming their whole, complex identities. This chapter focuses primarily on Clare’s experience since she is so often misunderstood as hiding her queerness. Harriet is widely recognized as a queer character who boldly resists heteronormativity, and she certainly does resist Eurocentric gender and sexual norms. Yet because Clare is the central character of the novel, Harriet’s conformity to sexual and gender variance rooted in ancestral knowledge is less present in the text than Clare’s conformity is. In addition, Harry/Harriet’s journey to become Harriet in conformity with ancestral forms of gender variance common in West Africa is a fairly direct one since by the end of the novel it’s clear that “Harriet live and Harry be no more.” Clare’s journey, on the other hand, is less visibly direct, and her aversion to sexual association with some women in the text can easily be confused with internalized

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5 I make a distinction between gender variance (the variation of gender identities or roles) and sexual variance (the variation of same-gender eroticism), but I sometimes lump them together as “gender and sexual variance” to talk about both forms of variation and also to indicate that gender and sexuality are not always distinct in expected ways. There is a large variation in how gender and sexuality are made distinct. For instance, in the US, queer/homosexual/gay/lesbian/etc. became a more common term long before trans/transgender/transsexual/etc., and because of the varying types and degrees of stigma brought against queer and trans people, it has become very important in the past three decades to distinguish between the two categories of gender variance and sexual variance. Among native Samoans, there is a long history of some of those assumed male as infants growing up to be “as women,” adopting a gender role known as fa’afafine. Today, some fa’afafine also identify as women or trans women, and many others, to outsiders, might seem more like queer men, but Samoans do not generally emphasize the distinctions between gender and sexuality in the same ways as the US because there has traditionally been no stigma against fa’afafine, and as a concept, same-gender sexuality makes less sense in a three or four gender system.

homophobia. Focusing more on Clare for the purpose of this chapter provides an opportunity to untangle the significance of this less direct journey.

Before continuing, I want to make note of my language use when talking about Harriet. Early on Harry/Harriet says he is “sun and moon” (128), which indicates he contains elements of masculinity and femininity. The narrator uses “he” pronouns and “Harry/Harriet” in earlier parts of the novel then “she” pronouns and “woman” once the character changes her name exclusively to Harriet (Cliff 171). I follow the conventions of naming and pronoun use in the novel because I recognize that gendering elements—whether names, pronouns, gendered terms, or conventions for naming one’s self in the past—are all highly individual. Sometimes broad patterns or accepted conventions exist, but especially considering the decolonial gender conventions Harriet leans on, I will attempt to be consistent with the pattern established by the narrator. I do want to acknowledge that among gender variant people in the US today, the most commonly accepted convention for talking about a person before their name and/or pronoun change is to default to a

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7 I need to address what to call the character when I am referring to both the version of the character who is named Harry/Harriet (and uses he pronouns) and the version of the character who is named Harriet (and uses she pronouns and talks about “her boyhood”). I have decided to use “Harriet” and she pronouns to talk about this more encompassing version of the character. I make this decision with some hesitation because “Harry/Harriet” has become something distinct outside the novel—a character of significance who in a practical sense needs a name, and the name in the criticism has already been chosen as “Harry/Harriet.” Despite this fact, the character represents something significant that must be treated with care, and I have decided to deviate from the established naming tradition only because I cannot imagine that if Harriet were a real person sitting across the table from me, that she’d want to be known as Harry/Harriet when I’m talking about her holistically—not just limited to the past. That being said, that’s my imagined response about a fictional character who has no real agency apart from the power readers attribute to her. Quite frankly, after building an emotional connection with the character as Harry/Harriet for 167 out of 208 pages of Cliff’s novel and after further investing in the thousands of pages of extremely engaging content being discussed about Harry/Harriet in the criticism, it’s a quite difficult change to make. But it is one I imagine she’d approve of if she were here.

8 In addition, I follow the name and pronoun conventions of the narrator because the narrator seems to voice the perspective of a character in that moment or from an omniscient perspective. For example, Clare often calls Harry/Harriet “Harry” in early scenes when the narrator calls him “Harry/Harriet.” This seems to make the narrator reliable in terms of naming and pronoun usage. That being said, times change. If Harriet were a real person and alive today, she might have approved of the narrator’s naming and pronoun conventions in 1987 but disapprove of them today.
person’s current name and pronouns even when speaking about them in the past—unless the person uses another gendering convention to speak about themself. Harriet does not seem to follow that convention: the narrator refers to her childhood, for instance, as “her boyhood” (Cliff, 168). I will sometimes refer to eroticism with Harry/Harriet as attraction to women, female intimacy, or feminine intimacy. This is not to name Harry/Harriet exclusively as a woman before he claims that for himself, but it is a recognition that he uses gendered terms such as “girlfriends” when speaking of feminine intimacy between himself and Clare and makes reference to his femininity frequently before asserting an exclusive identity as Harriet. I also recognize that the novel traces Harry/Harriet’s journey to choosing to be seen as a woman. After renaming herself Harriet, she is still “sun and moon” (171) as she has always been, but instead of others assuming she is a man with feminine qualities, she adopts a role that encourages others to see her as a woman with feminine qualities. It is important to note, however, that adopting a role that others understand is not necessarily the same thing as one’s identity.

*Decolonial Caribbean Wholeness*

Addressing US and Canadian indigenous contexts, Qwo-Li Driskill’s defines decolonization as “ongoing, radical resistance against colonialism that includes struggles for land redress, self-determination, healing historical trauma, cultural continuance, and reconciliation.” Following hir inclusion of self-determination and cultural continuance, decolonial work includes the consideration of culturally specific ancestral knowledge systems when conceptualizing contemporary life and experience. Recasting sexual and gender variance as normative reclaims

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9 Kapitan, “The Radical Copyeditor’s Style Guide for Writing About Transgender People,” sec. 2.4.2.

cultural space for defining gender and sexuality instead of ceding that cultural space to queer conceptions of heterosexuality rooted in the west. Rather than taking the colonial/modern gender system as normative, decolonial gender and sexual epistemologies look to ancestral knowledge systems for models of gender and sexual norms outside western colonial frameworks and use them to define gender and sexuality on their own terms. Driskill’s focus on decolonial healing also indicates the need for reconsideration of ancestral epistemologies. S/he goes on to say:

While radical non-Native queer movements formulate queerness as oppositional and antinormative, Two-Spirit critiques locate Two-Spirit and queer Native identities as integrated into larger Indigenous worldviews and practices. Two-Spirit activism works to mend and transform the relationships Native communities have with Two-Spirit and queer people.

Driskill points out a difference in goals: Non-Native queer movement works actively to resist cultural norms. And Two-Spirit activism works to mend the relationships among groups within Native communities. While both can be useful strategies in their own rights, the role of healing from the wounds of colonization is not considered in Non-Native queer work to resist cultural norms while Two-Spirit critiques attend to the problems of colonization and the devaluation of gender and sexual variance. Focusing on the strategy of conformity to ancestral traditions of gender and sexual norms rather than nonconformity, therefore, offers an opportunity to explore movement toward healing and wholeness for characters who are not just gender and sexually

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11 Some readers will notice a relative lack of focus on land redress in this essay and therefore may assume my use of “decolonial” is metaphoric. Following Driskill’s definition of decolonization, I see land redress as one significant part of decolonization along with other factors such as self-determination and healing from colonial trauma. Though I acknowledge the point made by Tuck and Yang that decolonization is not a metaphor but refers specifically to the repatriation of indigenous land (Tuck and Yang, “Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor”). I am not creating a metaphor about colonization but instead seeing knowledge systems as critical to garnering support for the repatriation of land to indigenous people. In the Jamaican context of Cliff’s novel, this is an imperfect and complex project.

variant, but also the inheritors of the violence of colonial epistemologies that attempt to erase Native knowledge systems.

In feminist criticism, “wholeness” has sometimes been associated with an essentialized core self in contrast to constructed identity, but in my usage of the word, I gesture at intersectional analyses of multiple identities, expressions, and experiences that shape a person’s life and positionality. When I say Clare and Harriet work toward wholeness through ancestral knowledge, I mean their work benefits all of who they are—not just the part that is gender and sexually variant, but for the part of them that is also an inheritor of colonial trauma. I do not assume Clare’s or Harriet’s identities are fragmented or incomplete, for instance, but I do see how their anticolonial work makes epistemologies rooted in ancestral knowledge more available and then benefits their whole selves—as mixed-race gender and sexually variant Jamaicans living under ongoing colonial oppression. To attend only to their statuses as queer conceptualized in response to the colonial/modern gender system would risk leaving out their experience under colonization, which has made ancestral knowledge systems about gender and sexuality less accessible. Their movement toward affirming their whole selves is noteworthy because some readers have assumed that Clare’s lack of open lesbian identity is limited by her nationalist obligations, or that Harriet’s choice to pass as a woman rather than a multigendered person is a sacrifice she makes in order to continue her work among the poor. I argue that both characters make their choices to support their whole selves—not just the identities that make the most sense to scholars invested in queer theory. As gender and sexually variant people with

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English as well as West African (and for Clare, also Carib) ancestral roots, the forms of gender and sexual variance they express and ultimately choose are not easily recognizable to observers with conceptions of gender and sexuality rooted exclusively in colonially enforced Eurocentric epistemologies. Clare conforms to sexual traditions of anti-colonial positionality found in English archives, such as in her identification with Bertha from *Jane Eyre*, as well as in Carib ancestral knowledge. In addition, both she and Harriet conform to Afro-Caribbean forms of gender and sexual variance rooted in West African cultural heritage.

To combat the forced erasure of ancestral knowledge systems, we might consider attempting to make European thought irrelevant to theory about gender and sexual variance by investing exclusively in systems of thought more closely aligned with the cultural contexts we are studying. Certainly, considering culturally-relevant theoretical systems should be more common, yet completely ignoring the colonial enforcement of monolithic culture can serve to undermine anti-colonial movements and ignore the positionality of groups that are laboring to articulate decolonial perspectives in colonial systems. Addressing the violence of colonialism is unavoidable in our currently colonially dominated world, and even though LGBTQ studies, queer theory, and transgender studies are already subdisciplines that *resist* the larger cis-heteropatriarchy, decolonial work around gender and sexual variance *resists that resistance* because of its reliance on Eurocentered coloniality. Indeed, as is demonstrated in *No Telephone*, those fighting under colonization can celebrate resistance to the gender and sexual norms of colonial forces while also fighting to assert conformity to gender and sexual norms traditional to their cultural communities.

Driskill calls for attention to indigenous knowledge systems ignored by queer theory, but the textual examples I explore in this chapter are rooted in the Caribbean rather than in the
indigenous contexts of the US and Canada that Driskill describes. Still, a model of indigenous decolonization is especially useful in analyzing anglophone Caribbean literature because of the displacement of the indigenous/aboriginal/Amerindian in an “angolophone Caribbean indigenism” that “is characterized by the use of indigenous to describe people, cultural forms, popular practices, and ideas that emerged in the Caribbean but are of post-1492 diasporic origin.”

Such erasure of not only pre-colonial indigenous cultures in the Americas but also pre-slavery African cultures is too common. In a literary and critical oeuvre where indigenous history and knowledge systems are completely overwritten by the history of racialized cultural criticism, it is useful to explore not only the roles of black Caribbean knowledge systems created out of creolized culture but also ancestral connection to aboriginal American and African knowledge systems. It is unfortunate that No Telephone does not thoroughly explore the role of indigenous peoples in the Caribbean or create active alliances with living communities of indigenous peoples in the Caribbean or with communities in West Africa upholding the ancestral cultural practices Cliff alludes to. Yet Cliff’s work provides space to examine the shared stakes in decolonization among many communities. Reading Cliff’s work following a decolonial reading practice makes space for cross-cultural and anti-colonial alliances that highlight the shared stake in decolonization among indigenous peoples in the Caribbean, West African peoples, and creolized communities in the Caribbean.

Imposed History and Imposed Epistemologies

Cliff’s 1987 novel No Telephone to Heaven engages with the contradictions present in the rise of canonical queer theory. It was published as early canonical queer theory started to

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15 Newton, “Returns to a Native Land,” 118.
gain prominence with its focus on Freud, Lacan, Foucault, and Marx among other Eurocentric theoretical frames, yet Cliff’s writing decidedly rejects Eurocentric conceptions of gender and sexuality contemporary queer theorists were invested in at the time. The novel begins with an epigraph from Derek Walcott’s “Lavetille” about the lost connection to history and tradition due to slavery and colonization:

_Something inside is laid wide like a wound,

some open passage that has cleft the brain,
some deep amnesiac blow. We left
somewhere a life we never found

customs and gods that are not born again,
some crib, some grill of light
clanged shut on us in bondage, and withheld

us from that world below us and beyond,
and in its swaddling cerements we’re still bound_16

Amnesia and woundedness mark the cultural disconnection Walcott expresses, and the cultural and religious systems that have caused this dislocation are still ever present even “after” bondage. This excerpt from Walcott’s poem sets the stage for the novel’s main theme of choosing anti-colonial work, and the content surrounding gender and sexuality are compatible with the theme of searching for “the customs and gods that are not born again” and rejecting the western epistemologies about race, nation, community, kinship, and gender and sexuality that have led to their erasure.

In Cliff’s work, movement toward healing the woundedness caused by colonization requires reclaiming history made inaccessible by colonization. In his 1976 essay “The Quarrel with History,” Édouard Glissant writes: “History [with a capital H] is a highly functional

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16 Cliff, _No Telephone to Heaven_, ii italics in original.
fantasy of the West, originating at precisely the time when it alone ‘made’ the history of the
world.”

History about colonial subjects is a fantasy written by the colonizer and passed off as
universal truth, and the history of indigenous and African ethnic tradition in the Caribbean is
deleigitimized and made inaccessible by the enforcement of History through colonial systems
even after formal colonial control ends. Cliff’s novel speaks to connection with ancestral history
as a matter of one’s own survival. In No Telephone, connection to many ancestors is made
inaccessible by time, but the novel explores the movement to reclaim connection to those
ancestors and the land that holds their remains. As an extension of the colonially enforced
delusion in writing History, the connection available to indigenous and African gender and
sexual systems has also been delegitimized, forgotten, or made inaccessible. Just as indigenous
and African histories have been diminished, erased, and replaced with History written from the
perspective of the colonizer, so indigenous and African gender and sexual systems have been
replaced first by the imposition of the cis heteronormative colonial/modern gender system and
then by dominant views of Eurocentric conceptions of gender and sexuality imposed by the
Global North. Cliff critiques the enforcement of colonial History throughout the novel, such as
her attention to books, magazines, and film, and her concern with the on-going conflict over
narrative control extends to her portrayal of gender and sexuality rooted in the Global North.
Though any kind of gender and sexual variance deviates from the norms that are the
colonial/modern gender system, Cliff’s novel does not celebrate sexual and gender
nonconformity because she does not see gender and sexual norms as universal. Instead her

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17 Glissant, Caribbean Discourse, 64.
characters struggle against coloniality, and as part of their decolonial work, they conform to ancestral gender and sexual systems.

_No Telephone_’s main characters invest in anti-colonial community that strengthens healing and cultural identity, and this includes claiming gender and sexual variance rooted in ancestral knowledge. _No Telephone_ is ultimately an identity-positive narrative whose characters labor to make space for their whole identities amidst colonial systems that have delegitimized African and indigenous knowledge, rewritten history, and even colonized the narratives around acceptable gender and sexual variance. Clare and Harriet are not members of indigenous or African communities, tribes, or nations, but their ancestry is a focal point for their political and community identification—especially in the latter part of the novel where they work among the Jamaican poor and fight in armed struggle against colonial forces. Clare is descended from Ashanti, Carib, and English people.\(^\text{18}\) Cliff gives Clare a connection to specific ethnic groups—not just African or indigenous ancestry inferred from her or a relative’s skin or the sometimes vague stories passed down in families. The novel’s specification of ethnic groups rather than racial classification alone connects Clare to specific knowledge systems. Hybrid and creolized knowledge systems are certainly valid in Cliff’s imaginary (as is represented in Harriet’s less-specific ancestry), but regaining connection to creolized knowledge systems—such as that created in the Caribbean and in Clare’s ancestry alone—is only enriched by increased knowledge of the contributing cultural influences. The Ashanti are a people group native to a region in what is Ghana today. They are a matrilineal society, and historically, were known to have female

\(^\text{18}\) Cliff, _No Telephone to Heaven_, 5.
military leaders and to have fought fiercely against British colonization.\textsuperscript{19} The Caribs also have a history of fierce resistance to colonization, but in Caribbean History they have been erased, dismissed as savage, or written off as victims who have been totally wiped out.\textsuperscript{20} Carib people, some of whom call themselves Kalinago today, still exist in various parts of the Caribbean and continue to fight against colonial systems that erase their histories and put their communities and lives at risk.\textsuperscript{21} Melanie J. Newton argues the narrative of indigenous extinction is “a legacy of the racial taxonomies created by European colonial regimes in the Americas” where “unity between enslaved Africans and aboriginal Americans should be prevented at all costs.”\textsuperscript{22} Clare fails to acknowledge or connect to contemporary Carib/Kalinago culture, living communities, or contemporary struggles, yet through claiming direct ancestry from Caribs, she creates space for the possibility of further learning, connection, and solidarity with living indigenous communities. The novel provides a model of mixed communities in allied struggle against colonialism in the representation of Maroon forces in whose tradition Clare eventually follows.

In addition to Clare’s Ashanti and Carib ancestry and Harriet’s unspecified but most certainly West African ancestry, both characters have white ancestry,\textsuperscript{23} and Clare is especially

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{19} Akyeampong and Obeng, “Spirituality, Gender, and Power in Asante History.”
  \item \textsuperscript{20} Newton, “Returns to a Native Land.”
  \item \textsuperscript{21} Forte, “Carib Identity, Racial Politics, and the Problem of Indigenous Recognition in Trinidad and Tobago,” 189.
  \item \textsuperscript{22} Newton, “Returns to a Native Land,” 121.
  \item \textsuperscript{23} Harriet’s mother was a presumably dark-skinned maid raped by her father (Cliff, \textit{No Telephone to Heaven}, 124), and she is likely a descendent of West Africans enslaved and brought to Jamaica. Harriet’s father also has a son named Buster Said, a common Arabic name, which raises questions about what the father’s—and therefore Harriet’s specific ancestry is. Cliff likely imagined the Saids being part of the Lebanese Christian migration to Jamaica at the end of the nineteenth century. Unlike earlier migrant groups who had come to Jamaica as indentured servants, the Lebanese fled religious persecution against Christians and arrived seeking cultural similarity with British Christianity (Tortello, “Arrival of the Lebanese”). Because they were migrants who would have had at least some means to travel, and who would have been able to operate within the racial hierarchy in Jamaica as whites or at least as nonblacks, many moved quickly from peddlers to shop owners. At the pool party, Buster’s cousin Pedro is
\end{itemize}
light skinned. Their mixed ancestries and privileged class statuses might seem to indicate their investment in the colonial/modern gender system, but a major theme of the novel is the need to choose. Ultimately, both characters choose anti-colonial work in teaching, healing, and even guerrilla warfare. Reclaiming access to ancestral knowledge systems is a vital part of their choices to decolonize their understanding of history, gender, sexuality, class, and their own identities and experiences in general.

The bulk of this chapter focuses on scenes that discuss Europe and the Caribbean, which may have the appearance of exempting the US from colonial responsibility in the Caribbean, but there is no denying the US is represented as a colonial force in *No Telephone*, which puts particular emphasis on the US as distributor of colonial historical logic. Clare recalls being taken on a field trip to see *Gone With the Wind* by an American teacher known as “Miss America” who claimed the film was a documentary that would send a cautionary tale about Jamaican current events and the need for maintaining racial order. Most damning of course are the closing scenes of the novel that reveal that the motivation for the guerrilla’s journey up the mountain is to stop a film that is a joint venture between British and American filmmakers who rewrite the story of Nanny, “Coromantee warrior, leader of the Windward Maroons,” as an apolitical love story.

This colonization of history, culture, and epistemologies is such an ongoing threat, the guerrillas visiting from Caracas, and they are first introduced as being naked together in the pool, comparing penis sizes and dancing arm and arm (Cliff, *No Telephone to Heaven*, 20). In light of the representation of Buster’s father as a rapist and his similarity with the white man who raped Harry/Harriet (Cliff, 129), this scene seems more evocative of two will-be rapists glorying in their budding power, a representation of “postcolonial” neocolonial power. In addition, erotic scenes in or near the water have special meaning in *No Telephone*. In contrast to the others in the novel, this scene heavily evokes colonial exploitation. Harriet’s ancestry, therefore, is likely Lebanese on his father’s side but decidedly white and aligned with coloniality.

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24 Cliff, *No Telephone to Heaven*, 95.

25 Cliff, 206.
plan to risk their lives to stop it, and Clare dies in this battle. In this sense, the US, like England, maintains control over the narrative of African and indigenous revolt against British colonization in Jamaica. Cliff paraphrases Ghanian writer Ama Ata Aidoo: “to call the Third World ‘postcolonial’ is a sadistic joke. She used that exact expression, because there’s nothing post about the colonialists.” Like England, the US also exhibits ongoing political and economic control in Jamaica, about which the filmmakers discuss, citing American industrial and tourist money, the International Monetary Fund’s enforcement of economic reliance on American tourism, and, most damning, the words “MADE IN USA” printed on the Jamaican military helicopters at their disposal (the same helicopters from which gunfire would end Clare’s life)—all of which guarantee their ability to make their film and therefore continue narrative control of Jamaica. Some critics use terms like “neocolonial” to describe newer forms of political, economic, and cultural control, but I simply use “colonial” to emphasize that colonial control is ongoing and is based in the same mechanisms and motivations that created earlier forms of colonization. By discussing connection to ancestral knowledge systems as decolonial, I am not suggesting that precolonial knowledge systems are more appropriate for those living under colonization. Neither am I suggesting that Cliff’s work strives for indigenous or African or even Caribbean cultural purity. Rather I am suggesting that for those whose history, culture, and knowledge systems have been suppressed by colonization and replaced with colonial logics, looking to ancestral knowledge is a tool for developing decolonial knowledge systems that,


27 Cliff, No Telephone to Heaven, 202; “MADE IN USA” is also on the box of weapons for which the guerillas trade ganja (Cliff, 11). This fact further emphasizes the US’s indiscriminate pursuit of profit and reliance on war as a business strategy.
following Driskill’s definition of decolonization, aid in cultural continuance, self-determination, healing from colonial trauma, and redressing colonial harm.28

“Whatever You Want to Call It”

Clare’s sexual variance is comparatively overlooked by critics of No Telephone. Because Abeng, the prequel to No Telephone, contains perhaps more overt scenes of same-sex desire and sexuality, it has become a useful text for some critics examining Cliff’s exploration of female eroticism.29 Some critics focus on Harry/Harriet’s gender identity as the central image of queerness relevant to their work with No Telephone.30 And some even lament Clare’s lack of lesbian sexuality in No Telephone.31 Feng states that Cliff’s “resentment against and distrust of Jamaica’s homophobia perhaps explains why Cliff cannot allow her fictional alter ego Clare Savage the fulfillment of her lesbian desire and has to keep Clare’s desire in the closet.”32 Feng’s speculation points to the seemingly impossible reconciliation between colonial exploitation in England where queerness is made more safely available33 and homophobic/transphobic violence in Jamaica that poses such a threat to Harriet.34 Yet as the text unfolds, it turns out that Clare’s

30 Seymour, *Strange Natures*; Chin, “‘Bullers’ and ‘Battymen’”; Ilmonen, *Queer Rebellion in the Novels of Michelle Cliff*; King, “Re/Presenting Self & Other”; Elia, “A Man Who Wants to Be a Woman”; Pulitano, “‘I and Jamaica Is Who I Am.’”
33 Feng, 26.
34 Feng, 31.
decisions to fight colonial exploitation put her at more risk and ultimately mortal danger. In addition, though it seems Clare does not resist the Eurocentric cultural norms of compulsory heterosexuality because she does not “come out of the closet,” her sexual variance demonstrates conformity with more traditional forms of experiencing and articulating sexual variance in a decolonial context. This is more in line with Cliff’s vision of ancestral gender and sexual systems that make space for Clare’s whole identity as an English, Ashanti, and Carib-descended Jamaican woman whose sexual, romantic, and community desires include loving women. Clare’s sexual variance does not resist norms but instead conforms to gender and sexual systems rooted in ancestral knowledge.

After being born and raised in Jamaica, Clare moves to the US with her parents at age fourteen. As an adult, she moves to London where she lives for some time. One Christmas break, she returns to Jamaica, where she attends a pool party and meets Harry/Harriet, and upon returning to London, Clare forms a friendship with Liz, a white English school mate. In one scene, the two talk playfully, and Liz smiles at Clare and offers her a cigarette. In another scene, the two whisper together romantically and Liz tries to convince Clare to come with her on a trip to visit old school friends in Gravesend by saying it will be a pretty drive and that after the reunion, she’ll show Clare “the Secret Waters. . . they’re quite something.” Liz makes an effort to let Clare know she’s queer and interested in Clare romantically. Liz jokes about her looks, “saying she felt like the offspring of Virginia Woolf and Simone Weil,” two women rumored to

35 Cliff, *No Telephone to Heaven*, 133.
36 Cliff, 135.
37 Cliff, 134.
be lesbians.\textsuperscript{38} Clare notices Liz’s beauty and even contemplates her desire for “true love” while considering Liz’s offer.\textsuperscript{39} Clare does accompany Liz but once there wonders why she’d been invited to the reunion at all.\textsuperscript{40} Despite the apparent romantic attraction between the two, Clare’s lack of sureness about why she was invited seems odd. The text leaves ambiguous whether this lack of sureness is only related to the awkwardness of her being an outsider at a reunion or if she really doesn’t understand that the purpose of spending time with Liz in the car and after the reunion is to pursue a romantic and potentially sexual relationship. This textual moment of ambiguity is an opportunity on the part of the reader to reflect on whether Clare “gets it”—it being the role she’s been playing in a queer drama of sorts. Liz seems to outwardly demonstrate her association with queerness, but Clare’s actions and words do not make clear that she thinks of herself as a queer person despite her having accepted Liz’s invitation to Gravesend.

After wondering the town alone and visiting a memorial to Pocahantas, a scene clearly indicative of Clare’s disidentification with coloniality, Clare abruptly returns by train to London alone. Months later, Clare and Liz talk again in the school cafeteria. In this scene, Liz notices Clare is upset and attempts to comfort her. She touches Clare’s hand and speaks patiently as Clare seems to become more upset.\textsuperscript{41} In this scene, Liz again outwardly displays her romantic desire. But this time, Liz is the one not “getting it.” In addition to Liz outwardly expressing her romantic interest, she expresses political and racial views that anger Clare. Still, “Liz spoke in a

\textsuperscript{38} Woolf clearly had romantic attachments with women, but Weil seems more in line with asexuality than lesbianism. Weil’s gender expression being somewhat masculine align her with some kind of gender and sexual variance. Gregory sees Weil’s lack of sexual identity as neither lesbian nor asexual but more as an intellectual and spiritual choice toward becoming “nothingness” (Gregory, “A Letter to Simone Weil,” 377).

\textsuperscript{39} Cliff, \textit{No Telephone to Heaven}, 134.

\textsuperscript{40} Cliff, 136.

\textsuperscript{41} Cliff, 138–40.
patient tone, apparently unaware of the cold across the table."42 Finally, Clare is so annoyed, she
gets up to leave, and even then Liz expectantly asks if Clare will have tea with her.43 The scene
ends there, as does any mention of Liz in Clare’s life, but as readers, we might guess that Clare
declines the invitation to tea and Liz will assume Clare is either not a lesbian or not interested in
her. But the truth is that Clare’s sexual variance is more complex than what can be understood in
a Eurocentric context.

About the potential sexual relationship between Clare and Liz coming to an abrupt halt,
Cliff commented in an interview:

I don’t want [Clare] to embrace another woman or a lesbian relationship in a European
context. I want to show homosexuality or lesbianism or gayness, whatever you want to
call it, as a whole identity, not just a sexual preference.44

Cliff’s use of language in this quote is significant. Elvira Pulitano says “Cliff is very adamant in
locating homosexual relationships at the intersection of race, gender, and colonialism rather than
imposing Eurocentric notions of lesbianism or gayness on the island histories.”45 Cliff’s vision of
Clare in this interview indicates that Eurocentric terms for sexual variance do not necessarily
encompass all that Cliff wants to address, and she instead uses “homosexual or lesbianism or
gayness” as approximations so that her interviewer can understand what she is talking about, but
she also says “embracing another woman” and “whatever you want to call it” as neutral terms to
indicate Eurocentric terms are inadequate for the concepts she’s discussing. Clare spending time
contemplating her identity as a lesbian or bisexual would acknowledge the significance of

42 Cliff, 139.
43 Cliff, 140.
colonial gender systems that mark heterosexuality as normative and mark “bisexual” or “lesbian” as viable alternatives within a Eurocentric framework of queer acceptance. Clare, however, never outwardly expresses her sexual identity whether directly or indirectly as Liz does because she is not drawn to Eurocentric queer frameworks that require outwardly naming identities or alluding to those identities. Her failure to “get it” is not a failure at all. She implicitly does not adhere to that Eurocentric system. She merely accepts the invitation to Gravesend just as she will later accept Harry/Harriet’s invitation to the beach, but it just so happens the colonial distance that Clare notices at Gravesend make the relationship with Liz impossible—whether sexual, romantic, or otherwise. Her nonadherence to Eurocentric queer logics does not indicate she asserts a totally decolonial identity. In Cliff’s imaginary, Clare (and Harriet) have implicit connection to ancestral systems that they become more conscious of over time. They are not exceptional in the sense that they experience that implicit connection, but in contrast to the other characters they interact with (at Buster’s pool party for example), they are exceptional in that they actively work to strengthen that connection over time—initially, this is primarily through their relationship and their shared sexual variance.

Cliff’s statement about “a whole identity” also points to her desire not to isolate sexuality from other parts of one’s identity or experience. What is “sexual preference” or “sexual orientation” except a concept constructed from within the cultural contexts that gave rise to each specific term? What would it mean to explore sexual agency, desire, and behavior outside of such limiting terms and in a Caribbean-centric rather than a Eurocentric framework that puts so much emphasis on identity? After all, Eurocentric conceptions of sexual identity are related to oppression against variant sexuality. What of variant sexuality outside of cultural contexts that stigmatize sexual variance? And to extend this line of questioning to understand Harriet’s
positionality as well, what is variant gender outside of cultural contexts that stigmatize gender variance?

**West African Cultural Heritage**

To understand what “embracing another woman” means in a Caribbean context rather than a Eurocentric one, anthropological and historical records offer some compelling information. Anthropologist Gloria Wekker has written on the gender and sexual cosmologies of contemporary working-class Creole women in Suriname. In this population, (heterosexual) marriage can be desirable, but sexual activity and agency within several partnerships of any gender are also the norm. Women who engage in “the mati work,” sex between women, are called “mati,” which means “friend” in the Surinamese vernacular of Sranana Tongo, and the term can be used in other sexually neutral contexts. Mati is not a distinct identity like “lesbian” or “bisexual” is. The mati work is a behavior, and a woman having a sexual relationship with a woman does not exclude the possibility of sexual relationships past, present, or future, with men. Wekker estimates this kind of sexual variance is so widespread that as many as three fourths of working-class Creole women in Suriname engage in the mati work at some point in their lives, and their engagement in these activities and relationships are considered normal.

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46 Wekker makes a distinction between Creoles in Suriname, who are an urban population descended from those enslaved in Suriname and racially mixed with some European ancestry, and Maroons, those descended from the communities of escaped slaves that developed in the rain forests of Suriname and sometimes mixed with indigenous peoples. Both black populations are regionally understood as distinct ethnicities (“What’s Identity” 134-135).


48 Wekker, 178.


Wekker traces the cultural roots of the mati work to West African peoples brought to Suriname under slavery, including the Ashanti,\textsuperscript{51} a people Cliff says Clare comes from and who are part of the larger Akan meta-ethnic group in what is now Ghana. Continued practice of West African gender and sexual variance is well-represented among West-African-descended people in the Caribbean—particularly in Suriname, where Dutch slavery was particularly brutal and therefore had a unique impact. Dutch slavery emphasized cultural separation between the Dutch and those enslaved—in contrast to US and English slavery, which used linguistic, religious, and cultural suppression to attempt to produce social control among those enslaved. This relative cultural freedom meant those enslaved in Suriname were able to “elaborate and work out their own cultures,”\textsuperscript{52} which include a system of personal agency rooted in West African religious and cultural knowledge systems. Jamaica and Suriname have distinct colonial histories, yet they share a cultural heritage in West Africa that extends to Clare and Harriet, and this heritage includes a cultural universe that emphasizes sexual agency—especially among women—and a sense of kinship and community that makes space for multiple forms of sexuality and gender expression.

The history of gender and sexual variance in Africa has unfortunately been suppressed under European colonization there, but as noted by sociologist David F. Greenberg, German-born anthropologist Eva Meyerowitz observed, in the 1940s, that “lesbian affairs were virtually universal among unmarried Akan women of the Gold Coast (now Ghana), sometimes continuing

\textsuperscript{51} Wekker, 217.

\textsuperscript{52} Wekker, “Mati-Ism and Black Lesbianism,” 13.
after marriage." Meyerowitz also noted that group sex among women was common and "men who dressed as women and engaged in sexual relations with other men were not stigmatized at all, but accepted." If these practices were so common among the Akan, many enslaved women in Jamaica would have had experience with these practices or heard about them. Access to this and more complete information about African forms of gender and sexual variance has been stifled under colonial rule, but one old woman with whom Harriet learns healing practices in the country calls her “Mawu-Lisa,” a reference to another West African cultural group (the Fon and Ewe of the Dahomey Kingdom) whose belief systems make room for same-sex relationships among males and females as well as some limited types of gender variance in the form of eunuchs, given titles as “royal wives,” and lagredis, who serve the king. Given this historical and anthropological evidence, Clare’s and Harriet’s models for sexual variance are, therefore, much broader than a that of lesbianism, which deviates from cultural norms of cis heterosexuality enforced by Christianity and emphasizes sexual identity over sexual agency, behavior, and expression.

54 Greenberg, 67.
55 Greenberg, 87; Meyerowitz published widely on the Akan, yet she seems not to have published the observations she made about sexual or gender variance during her fieldwork among the Akan in the 1940s. Prior to her death in 1994, Greenberg was in personal communication with Meyerowitz about gender and sexual variance among the Akan, and in his 1990 book *The Construction of Homosexuality*, he includes two brief mentions of her. It is a shame so much information about cultural practice surrounding gender and sexual variance went unwritten by observers such as Meyerowitz because of homophobic attitudes among western readers, publishers, state entities, and often researchers themselves.
57 Today homophobia and transphobia are major problems in Ghana despite the Akan being the largest ethnic group (47.3%) (“2010 Population,” 34), and despite their cultural norms once including some forms of gender and sexual variance. Meyerowitz attributed the work of missionaries in the region as having a negative impact on both the presence of gender variance and the high status of women in Akan society (Greenberg, *The Construction of Homosexuality*, 87). Today 71.2% of the population of Ghana are Christian, 17.6% are Muslim, 5.2% practice traditional religions, and 5.3% are nonreligious (“2010 Population,” 40). Human Rights Watch reports that Ghana’s
colonial system, Clare and Harriet could also find lesbianism or bisexuality relevant as identity models. Yet they do not lean on those models and instead conform to forms of gender and sexual variance found in the mati work in the Caribbean and in Akan cultural norms that once included widespread same-gender eroticism among women and the acceptance of those assigned male at birth taking on female gender roles. Again, the fact that Clare and Harriet lean on West African models of sexuality and not Eurocentric ones does not make them exceptional in contrast to their Jamaican peers, but as gender and sexually variant people who are literally on the road to armed anti-colonial conflict throughout the novel, the stories of how they came to express their gender and sexual variance are a noteworthy part of their decolonial journey.

To some readers expecting sexual variance to include naming one’s desires and identities in resistance to the norm of compulsory heterosexuality, Clare’s interaction with Liz may seem to contain elements of internalized homophobia and an attempt to maintain heteronormativity. Clare not outwardly indicating her sexual interest or her association with lesbian culture when she is considering Liz as a romantic or sexual partner may actually be a sign of her conformity—not to heterosexism, but to ancestral forms of gender and sexual variance rooted in Creolized Caribbean communities and West African cultural heritage. At an event in the Netherlands in 1986, Afro-Surinamese-Dutch poet Astrid Roemer had this to say about lesbian identification:

I do not see why it is necessary to declare oneself a lesbian. In the community from which I come, there is not so much talk about the phenomenon of women having relations with other women. There are, after all, things which aren’t to be given names—

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current law criminalizing homosexual acts is a carryover from English colonial rule and that the existence of the law contributes to the public assumption that the state supports and even encourages discrimination and violence against LGBT Ghanaians. This discrimination and violence includes domestic abuse; discrimination in housing, education, and employment; psychological abuse; extortion; and physical violence—including sexual violence, mob violence, and murder (Isaack and Ghoshal, “No Choice but to Deny Who I Am,” 1–2). Police enforcement of this law is relatively rare, yet LGBT Ghanaians are forced to hide their sexual orientation and gender identity, and efforts to change the law have not been successful due to public assumptions of indecency rooted in religious belief (Isaack and Ghoshal, 4).
giving them names kills them. But we do have age-old rituals originating from Africa by which women can make quite clear that special relations exist between them. For instance, birthday rituals can be recognized by anyone and are quite obvious. Also, when two women are at a party and one hands the other a glass or a plate of food, from which she has first tasted herself, it is clear to everybody and their mother what that means. Why then is it necessary to declare oneself a lesbian? It is usual there. Surinamese women claim the right to do what they want to do. They can love women, go to bed with men, have children. We distinguish between the various levels of feeling and experiencing which life has to offer and allow ourselves the opportunity to enjoy these things in a creative manner. This is different from the situation in the Netherlands, where you are shoved into a pigeon-hole and find your opportunities restricted. My not wanting to declare myself a lesbian is certainly not prompted by fear. I also want to remain loyal to the ways in which expression has been given from of old in my community to special relationships between women. Simply doing things, without giving them a name, and preserving rituals and secrets between women are important to me.\(^{58}\)

When Clare rejects Liz, she has not spent time researching and learning from oral tradition about West African forms of sexual variance. In fact, she has spent years of her life learning Eurocentric forms of knowledge, yet her behavior in London and Gravesend with Liz is consistent with Roemer’s sense of sexuality, where sexual agency is more significant than identity. In addition, Roemer states, “There are, after all, things which aren’t to be given names—giving them names kills them”: even naming sexual bonds between women is unnecessary because “it is clear to everybody and their mother what that means” anyway. In addition, naming these bonds risks demeaning them. Clare’s short-lived interest in Liz, her lack of reflection about her sexual variance, her later relationship with Bobby, and her lack of sexual relationship with a cis woman do not indicate a lack of willingness to confront heterosexism. Instead, these distinct encounters represent her conformity to ancestral knowledge systems that consider sexual agency and sexual variance a normal part of life.

Of course, Clare does not live among the working-class Creole Afro-Surinamese or precolonial Akan. In England and in most scenes in Jamaica, she lives in a society similar to what Roemer says of the Netherlands, where people “are shoved into a pigeon-hole and find [their] opportunities restricted.” Even Harry/Harriet, who introduces Clare to a more purposefully decolonial sense of connection, says of those around him who have internalized Eurocentric gender and sexual norms under coloniality: “Our people kind of narrow, poor souls. Foolish sometimes. Cyaan understand the likes of me.” Yet even in these restricting societies, Clare conforms to forms of sexual variance rooted in West African ancestral knowledge systems, and according to Cliff’s narrative, this connection to ancestral knowledge is innate and also strengthened by her mother’s decolonial struggles and her grandmother’s ties to place. Others likely have the same connection, but the novel traces Clare’s (and Harriet’s) increasing attendance to that connection. Clare’s and Harriet’s sexual and gender variance are just one key element of their larger movement toward decolonization, a movement which they share with their fellow soldiers. Describing Clare’s journey, the narrator says: “The longing for tribe surfaces—unmistakable. To create if not to find. She cannot shake it off. She remembers the jungle. The contours of wildness. The skills are deep within her. Buried for so long, she fears they may have atrophied.” Reaching out to Harriet to create community is instinctual, as is rejecting Liz, and this instinct is tied to memory. The jungle and wildness could describe her childhood at her grandmother’s house, but the jungle and wildness are also something older—something rooted in West African ancestral knowledge that her later decolonial learning will


60 Cliff, 91.
confirm, not introduce. Clare is not marked as exceptional in her innate connection to ancestral knowledge, but the novel’s purpose is to draw a portrait of her journey toward increasing that connection.

Unlike Clare, Harry/Harriet is not low key about being aware of his difference from the norm or communicating about that fact. When he is wearing a bikini or eye shadow, people stare. Many critics have noted Harriet as a queer model in the novel and named her various terms such as homosexual, bisexual, queer, transgendered, transgender, trans, transsexual, transvestite, and crossdresser. These are all testaments to the shifting language in critical conversations about gender and sexuality in English, and they are also only approximations of Harriet’s identity and experience because her journey is also one moving toward the embrace of ancestral knowledge rooted in West African cultures before the colonial structures that also brought the English language. Some critics have noted that Harriet’s gender does not fit easily

61 Barnes, “Resisting Cultural Cannibalism.”
62 Elia, “A Man Who Wants to Be a Woman.”
63 Elia; Feng, “Narratives of Passing”; Pulitano, “‘I and Jamaica Is Who I Am’”; Ilmonen, Queer Rebellion in the Novels of Michelle Cliff; Zabus, “Cyaan Live Split.”
64 O’Driscoll, “Michelle Cliff and the Authority of Identity”; Elia, “A Man Who Wants to Be a Woman”; Stitt, “Gendered Legacies of Romantic Nationalism in the Works of Michelle Cliff”; Ilmonen, Queer Rebellion in the Novels of Michelle Cliff; Richards, “Nationalism and the Development of Identity in Postcolonial Fiction.”
66 Seymour, Strange Natures; King, “Re/Presenting Self & Other.”
67 Potocki, “‘Apocalypso.’”
69 Barnes, “Resisting Cultural Cannibalism”; Zabus, “Cyaan Live Split.”
within Eurocentric conceptions of gender and sexual variance. When Clare asks how Harry/Harriet was able “to question, so early?” it’s unclear if Clare is talking about Harry/Harriet questioning his gender or coloniality. His answer points to the colonial violence of his father raping his mother then firing her and keeping him. Clare asks if he knew this as a child. He answers, “Don’t know when I knew… but I knew soon enough that in that house I was an odd quantity… outside.” Harry/Harriet’s answer here is also ambiguous. Is he an odd quantity because of gender, sexuality, class, race, colonial history, or anti-colonial resistance? Is he odd inside the house or outside it or outside something else? This ambiguity shapes Cliff’s portrayal of Harriet as a figure representing decolonial commitment, but she is not a static figure of decoloniality. Her commitments gain momentum over the course of the novel as does her movement toward gender and sexuality rooted in West African knowledge systems.

In the pool party scene, Clare has come to Jamaica from London on her Christmas Break. Harry/Harriet is introduced in the novel from the perspective of the party guests, who are marked clearly as the rich, upper class, mixed-race and light-skinned, representatives of the ruling class of Jamaica:

Harry/Harriet, boy-girl, Buster’s brother-sister, half-brother-sister actually, who was always strange, since childhood, they say, but everyone tolerates him, as if measuring their normalness against his strangeness. He is only one, after all, one that nature did not claim. He is vastly outnumbered, will—unless they protect him, because he is also one of them, though apart from them, reminding them of their wholeness—he will end up in some back-o’-wall alley in Raetown, fucked to death. Him cyan help himself, him mother nuh maid?

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70 Chancy, *Searching for Safe Spaces*; King, “Re/Presenting Self & Other”; Tinsley, *Thieving Sugar*; Ilmonen, *Queer Rebellion in the Novels of Michelle Cliff*.


72 Cliff, 124.

73 Cliff, 21.
This narration fits quite well with Eurocentric conceptions of gender and sexual variance that mark (cis) heterosexuality as normal and anything else as abnormal and unnatural. The party goers judge him, but they tolerate him and even use him for their own self-confidence in normalcy. They see him like *their* freak and for this reason are able to protect him from the violence that would await him without the racial, class, and colonial privilege they offer him by association and with literal resources. Harry/Harriet needs them for this protection. Without this privilege, a poor, black (even light-skinned) son of a maid with Harry/Harriet’s feminine traits might indeed be a sex worker, subject to the violence of the street that poses such a threat to dark-skinned feminine gender variant people worldwide. He performs for them—not as a subject free to experiment with his identity and expression as much as a performer who knows his role on the stage, the only available space he knows for his femininity. And the only available role: *their* freak, who comforts them with his freakishness to their normalcy. The narration continues:

Harry/Harriet puts on a bikini—bra stretched across his hairy, delicately mounded chest, panties cradling his cock and balls—and starts to dance to “Hey Jude.” People laugh but nobody takes Harry/Harry to heart. “You won’t laugh so when I am appearing in London with the Royal Ballet and the Queen come fe see me.” Laughs and more laugh.

Here, Harry/Harriet performs the kind of femininity the party goers expect of him. Later he will tell Clare “is nuh what dem expect from me? Nuh jus’ give dem what dem expect? Battyman

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I do not claim Harry/Harriet’s manner of dress, outgoing personality, crude jokes, and the like make him an inherently colonial character. In fact, judgement against these expressions of femininity are part of larger systems of misogyny that put gender variant women and femmes at considerable risk of violence and discrimination (Serano, *Whipping Girl*; Blair and Hoskin, “Experiences of Femme Identity”). But the other details of the scene definitely communicate a colonial association to his performance.

Such a performance could certainly be read as a queer reclamation of the party goers’ expectations, but his performance is also weighed down with colonial imagery of him dancing to British pop music (in contrast to the Reggae the band is told to stop playing), and his joking about a visit to London and the Royal Ballet, with the Queen coming to see him dance. He plays up the Eurocentric elements, and their laughter too is ominous. Harry/Harriet’s need for their protection drives his performance at the pool party, but over the course of the novel, he comes closer to rejecting Eurocentric norms that mark gender variance as abnormal and therefore requiring the protection of the kind of people at the party. And he comes closer to internalizing a gender and sexual system rooted in West African cultural heritage and making his choice to conform to a form of gender quite like accounts of gender variance among the Akan before the success of Christian missionaries.

Years later, after Clare returns to London, visits Gravesend, and spends time in Europe with Bobby, Clare returns permanently to Jamaica. At that time, Harriet proclaims, “Harriet live and Harry be no more.” Most critics see this change as a movement from a hyphenated name and dual gender to a binary transgender identity. There is some truth is this interpretation, but again, this describes an approximation of creolized gender positionality rooted in West African ancestral knowledge. When Clare is still visiting Jamaica over her Christmas break, Harry/Harriet, then using “he” pronouns and answering to “Harry,” tells Clare he was born “not just sun, but sun and moon.” After Harry/Harriet became Harriet, she studied healing practices with old women in the Jamaican countryside, “Women who knew the properties of roots and

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76 Cliff, 126.
77 Cliff, 168.
78 Cliff, 128.
leaves and how to apply spells effectively…One old woman, one who kenned Harriet’s history, called her Mawu-Lisa, moon and sun, female-male deity of some of their ancestors.”

Even after identifying only as Harriet, the old woman recognizes Harriet as not just moon but sun and moon. To some, the old woman might be invalidating Harriet’s womanhood, but the old woman affirms Harriet within a creolized gender system tied directly to Fon and Ewe culture and religion from the Dahomey kingdom (now Benin) in which association with Mawu-Lisa, a good and powerful goddess, is favorable. Like some indigenous gender and sexually variant roles, such as the Native Hawaiian māhū, Samoan fa’afafine, Diné/Navajo nádleehi, and Zapotec muxes, Harriet’s gender contains elements of multiple genders defined through epistemologies rooted in ancestral knowledge passed from generation to generation. Certainly, she is in a more binary state as Harriet, but her performance as a woman is very unlike her introduction at the pool party. Harriet, the doctress, works in the hospital by day and afterward visits “the yards of downtown,” entering people’s homes and providing healing and medicine to the city’s poor.

In the novel’s glossary, Cliff makes note that yards are a “close grouping of houses…modeled on the groupings of slave huts, which were in turn modeled on the grouping of family dwellings in West African cultures.” In many indigenous cultures—including those recorded in parts of Africa—gender variant people are considered lucky, are given special honor, perform ceremonies, or are healers, all of which benefit the community. Harriet conforms to a healing

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79 Cliff, 171.
81 Cliff, No Telephone to Heaven, 171.
82 Cliff, 211.
83 Murray and Roscoe, Boy-Wives and Female Husbands, xx, 8–9, 148.
tradition that benefits the community with whom she now serves and identifies, but she also claims a gender role/identity/expression that affirms the West-African-descended and gender variant identities her Eurocentric associations had taught her were unnatural and deserving of scorn. Through reclaiming a gender rooted in West-African ancestral knowledge, Harriet reclaims association with a community with common ancestral investments.

By the end of the novel, when Harriet and Clare work as healers and teachers and fighters, their intended decolonial work invests in a future when homophobia and transphobia do not exist in Jamaica because access to colonially subjugated knowledge will be restored, but that decolonial future has not come yet since the risk of gender violence is still present. The narrator speaks of the dangers facing Harriet as she works to heal the communities in the yards downtown:

None of her people downtown let on if they knew [she had “male” biological features]…. Had they known about Harriet, they would have indulged in elaborate name-calling, possibly stoning, in the end harrying her to the harbor—perhaps. And still she was able to love them. How was that?984

The threat of gender violence still looms, but in investing in the ancestral knowledge systems that affirm her gender, racial, and ethnic identities, Harriet also aligns herself with “the poor, the sufferers”85: those who suffer under colonial systems they are forced to internalize. In the “Magnanimous Warrior” chapter, the narrator describes a female warrior whose feats begin in Africa and continue in Jamaica under slavery, fighting for survival, for healing, and against British rule. The warrior then is described as stripped of her dignity, “starved to death,”

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84 Cliff, *No Telephone to Heaven*, 171.

85 Cliff, 140.
forgotten: “They tell her she is senile. They have taken away her bag of magic. Her teeth. Her
goat’s horn. We have forgotten her. Now that we need her more than ever…. Can you remember
how to love her?” By turning to ancestral systems of knowledge and conforming to traditions
of healing, Harriet loves and invests in the sufferahs because they are the people with whom she
is allied to revive the tradition of colonial resistance.

_Closets Versus Cane Fields_

Cliff says she chose not to represent a relationship between Clare and Liz because she
doesn’t want Clare to “embrace another woman in a European context” in which Clare cannot be
her whole self—not just isolated to a sexual identity, but her whole identity. Cliff says in a
different interview:

> Clare's access to lesbianism in Europe would be . . . Eurocentric, eccentric, upper-class
behavior, for the most part. Decadent and exploitative of Third World women. Whereas
for Clare to claim her lesbianism in the Caribbean would be to become a complete
woman. That's the way I read it. If Clare had had an affair in Britain with Liz, which is
suggested very strongly in the novel, it wouldn't have led her back to herself. It would
have made her more foreign to the place she came from.
insight on more accurately understanding the sexual and romantic relationships between women in the Caribbean. For instance, she critiques the universalization of the metaphor of the closet regarding the relationship between public and private life for those who engage in homosexuality, and she notes the need to consider “field and yard cultures” where home life is lived outdoors.\textsuperscript{88} She offers other metaphors appropriate to Caribbean women who love women such as “thieving sugar,” which she says opens “discursive space for sexuality studies to engage historically specific, previously unmapped erotic geographies.”\textsuperscript{89} Clare’s decision to reject Liz is a matter of rejecting the colonial logics Clare is already entangled in but trying to leave. Loving Liz whether as a friend or lover would certainly cause her to move away from the parts of herself most under attack under colonialism. But what of Clare’s relationship with Harriet? Whether in England or Jamaica, Clare does not identify herself as queer or even as a woman who loves women. One might assume her failure to come out of the closet aligns her with heteronormativity, but rethinking Clare’s relationship from the closet to the cane field significantly changes the interpretation of Clare’s love of women in \textit{No Telephone}.

Clare is mixed-race, light-skinned, sometimes assumed to be white, and comes from a class background of landowners associated with Eurocentric culture. She may seem an unlikely candidate for belonging to “field and yard cultures,” but Cliff’s novel presents the challenge of Clare’s background as part of the novel’s imperative for her to choose with whom she’ll stand. Harry/Harriet warns her: “the time will come for both of us to choose. For we will have to make the choice. Cast our lot. Cyaan live split. Not in this world,”\textsuperscript{90} and though Clare’s and Harriet’s

\textsuperscript{88} Tinsley, \textit{Thieving Sugar}, 26–27.

\textsuperscript{89} Tinsley, 3.

\textsuperscript{90} Cliff, \textit{No Telephone to Heaven}, 131.
choices seem to be centered around identity, Cliff uses identity in conjunction with identification with a group—political stance that stems from one’s positionality. Clare recalls that her mother Kitty wanted to identify with the black poor of Jamaica but was unable to. Once while driving through Trench Town, she made Boy pull over while she gave money to a pregnant woman living in harsh conditions. Kitty “went to put her hand on the woman’s shoulder, then pulled back suddenly . . . as if a forcefield separated them.”\textsuperscript{91} Clare will later identify with the students she teaches who are among the sufferahs of Jamaica. Toward the end of the novel, her interrogator asks what type of history she teaches her students, and Clare answers “The history of their . . . our homeland.”\textsuperscript{92} Clare’s pause is the forcefield that had separated her mother from the pregnant woman, but through the history and ancestral knowledge Clare learns and then shares with her poor black students, she is able to break through that forcefield and identify with them. This is not to say Clare is unaware of her privilege. Instead she identifies with the sufferahs and recognizes her shared stake in fighting for what will benefit them. Clare, however, has a long period of time of standing on the fence between identifying with the white colonizers in “the west” and with the black poor sufferahs in Jamaica. Harry/Harriet seems at first to be the full figure of decoloniality, but even he also has a time of investing in coloniality—identifying with the young elite represented at the pool party, relying on their protection, and playing their fool. Harriet, like Clare, later invests in ancestral knowledge and uses her class privilege to help those sufferahs in need of healing. Both Clare’s choice to embrace her Jamaican-ness and Harriet’s to embrace her womanhood are representations of their choices to identify with those parts of their

\textsuperscript{91} Cliff, 124.

\textsuperscript{92} Cliff, 193.
identities under threat and the communities of people with whom they have a shared stake in decolonization. Not taking a stand on the colonial oppression that creates such threat is what is destructive.

The imperative to choose where and with whom Clare stands is not a matter of choosing to be poor versus upper class, black instead of white, Jamaican instead of English or American. Clare’s race, class, and location are relevant to how easy it is for her to internalize white European colonization and to further invest in western colonization to the detriment of “the sufferahs” especially and in some degree to her own detriment as well. For someone who is a light-skinned, land-owning, Jamaican with residency options in the US and UK and who has African, Carib, and white ancestry, she has options for where and with whom she stands. The novel traces her journey toward making a decision to stand with the “sufferahs” but that stance is also in support of her whole self—a complete self. Standing with colonizers and in support of colonization affirms her white, land-owning, upper class roots. But what of the rest of her? The person descended from dark-skinned people working cane fields and on plantations? The person descended from slaves who once lived free in Ashanti cities and villages? The person descended from colonial violence such as sexual violence between Europeans and those enslaved or forced into servitude? The person descended from Caribs who ate portions of the bodies of their enemies to absorb their power—not to have their power absorbed? By choosing decolonization, Clare stands with the sufferahs, and she moves toward her complete self—not just the part of her that is most privileged and most aligned with white coloniality. This whole self recognizes her privilege and entanglement in colonization and works to divest from colonization and to protect what she has in common with the sufferahs—what is most endangered under colonization. Her turn toward her decolonial self follows the tradition of the Maroons, who leave behind the
hierarchies of colonial logics and build a community of African, indigenous, and mixed-race people that together fights against colonization. To say that Clare can be read as a part of field or yard cultures rather than Eurocentric urban life is not to rewrite who she is, but it is to read her through a decolonial lens, one similar to what she works to see herself through.

The closet is a metaphor about having to live secretly but longing to do so openly. Coming out of the closet requires fighting against the current of cultural norms that code heterosexuality as the only acceptable option. If one reads Clare as belonging to field and yard cultures, it would be more significant to have the freedom to pursue sexual relationships and sexual and romantic thoughts and feelings privately without the violent surveillance and control of overseers and colonial religious authorities and the social control and curiosity of neighbors. Tinsley also adds, “The metaphoric phrase of *thieving sugar* calls upon the contested space of the cane field: a site of sexual violence and exploited labor, a Caribbean landscape that was never a natural topos but one constructed for colonial purposes.”

Interpreting Clare’s lack of disclosure of her sexual identity through the metaphor of *thieving sugar* puts into focus her self-knowledge, community, and joy—all while dismissing thoughts of those who would use her and her lovers’ bodies as commodities. This self-awareness, connection, and joy are the sweetness she steals for her own pleasure and healing. Allowing others in her life who are invested in Eurocentric gender logics (such as her aunt and uncle, the people she meets at the pool party, or Liz and her other schoolmates) to assume she is not queer does not mean she has invested in heteronormativity. “Thieving sugar” doesn’t require announcements of one’s identity or desires to others who aren’t involved, and since conformity to black Caribbean gender systems already makes room for some

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93 Tinsley, *Thieving Sugar*, 3.
forms of gender and sexual diversity, someone thinking she is heterosexual is their colonial logical assumptions. Not hers.

Clare’s story does not easily fit with the common Eurocentric imperative to link same-gender sexual desire to a person being in or out of “the closet.” In fact, identity as a sexually variant person seems almost insignificant to Clare and the larger novel. Tinsley points out that mati traditions of sexual relationships between women have been conducted openly with little linguistic signification between sexual female relationships and nonsexual female friendships. Consequently, kinship, intimacy, and sexuality shared among women are frequently verbalized "not as identity but as praxis, something constantly constructed and reconstructed through daily actions.”

Similar to Roemer’s refusal of lesbian identity, Clare’s (short-lived) interest in Liz, therefore, does not lead to “coming out” as a lesbian, bisexual, or queer woman. Clare’s actions—not her identity—speak to her sexual variance: she considers sexual possibility with Liz, accepts her invitation to Gravesend, but ultimately cuts ties with her. She does so not out of lack of desire to love women sexually, but out of desire to not love Liz. Even over her Christmas break in Jamaica when she does engage in more meaningfully “thieving sugar” on the beach and in the mangrove with Harry/Harriet, privacy of thought and action were more relevant than categorization of identity, articulation of that identity, or access to being public with that identity. This privacy is not indicative of their need to hide their experience of sexual variance because of shame, but the privacy they experienced was conducted outside, in a secluded portion of public space where they could keep “sweetness among themselves.”

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94 Tinsley, 7.
95 Tinsley, 4.
metaphor of the closet, shame keeps the sexual deviant in the closet until they’re able to fight back against restrictive norms and come out of the closet. In a Caribbean metaphor of women thiefing sugar, there is no implication sexual partners are sexually deviant or should be ashamed and hide. Sexual partners only seek privacy to share something sweet all to themselves.

Indeed, Tinsley’s excellent reading of the love scene between Clare and Harry/Harriet on the beach and in the mangrove makes clear that the couple’s sexual experience was a private scene that had more to do with decolonial communion with each other and the environment than any assertion of queer identity or concern over public perceptions. About this scene where Clare and Harry/Harriet “swim as girlfriends,” Tinsley states, “These two figures of racially, sexually complex Afro-Jamaican femininity wash together here like the sweet and saltwater of their bodies, different forms of a common element whose embrace seems to embody not only Caribbean women loving each other but the Caribbean loving itself and its own multiplicity.”

Their ongoing relationship after Clare’s return to England did not necessarily shape what Clare thought of herself in terms of sexual identity. Instead, the experience of their intimacy was the more significant fact, which later informed her decision to walk away from a relationship with Liz. For Clare, a queer identity articulated in opposition to gender and sexual norms was irrelevant. Instead, relationality among women was more significant for two reasons. First, it built the community, strength, and space for healing that is needed to survive under colonization, and, second, it conforms more clearly to traditional Caribbean contexts for sexual variance among women. Clare’s relationship with Harry/Harriet, as Cliff states, “is a step toward

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97 Tinsley, *Thieving Sugar*, 189.
herself.” And Clare’s ongoing relationship with Harriet brought her closer and closer to embracing herself as a woman descended from Carib, Ashanti, and English peoples and pursuing connection to her creolized Caribbean and West African ancestors who had their own tradition of sexual variance among women.

*Faithful to Whom?*

Clare faces the prospects of further aligning herself with white coloniality after returning to London from her Christmas break experiences at the pool party and at the beach and in the mangrove. Her time with Harry/Harriet had brought her closer to herself, but by the time she meets him, she had already begun “her life-alone. Choosing London with the logic of a creole.” As a creole compelled by colonial logic to identify with the white motherland of England, she had also begun studying Renaissance art, which further entangled her in the texts, images, myths, and knowledge systems of Europe. Shortly after returning to London, she accompanies Liz to Gravesend, and while walking alone, comes upon a monument where the remains of Pocahontas are laid to rest. Clare sees herself in Pocahontas, a young woman from the New World who has been forced to internalize the colonizer’s worldview and participate in colonial efforts. Like Pocahontas, whose sexual relationship with a white person further enmeshed her in white colonization, Clare, would become more closely connected to Liz, Gravesend, and with the myth of white English femininity she and her Jamaican classmates had learned as children to

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100 Cliff, 133.

101 Cliff, 137.
idealize.\textsuperscript{102} In addition, her relationship with Liz would take her further from the ancestral knowledge that would allow her to affirm her whole self.

Days earlier, when Liz first invites Clare to Gravesend, she notes the reason for the town’s morbid name: Gravesend is “literally where the graves end . . . anyone passing beyond that point is buried at sea.”\textsuperscript{103} At the church near the monument, Clare learns Pocahontas “had died on a ship leaving the rivermouth of the country, but close enough for England to claim her body.”\textsuperscript{104} The imagery of death at sea conjures images of the Middle Passage and the remains of enslaved Africans being discarded after not surviving the brutal conditions of the journey. One might also consider how some enslaved Africans chose to drown rather than endure slavery.

Years before Clare visits Gravesend, her mother Kitty stumbles across another grave in a Brooklyn church yard. This one memorializes Marcus, an enslaved man born in Jamaica who died “crossing the water” and was buried once his party came ashore. After feeling the raised letters “F A I T H F U L S E R V A N T” on the grave stone, Kitty “feared she would join him.”\textsuperscript{105} Kitty’s reaction to the grave written and paid for by those representing colonial power conveys her fear of being a faithful servant to colonization, and Clare’s response to Pocahontas’s memorialization as a friend and helper of the colonialists represents a similar fear.

The imagery surrounding burial location and death at sea also foreshadows Clare’s eventual choice to return to Jamaica and ultimately die in anti-colonial struggle leading to her joining with the black earth and her ancestors in Jamaica—a distinctly different fate from

\textsuperscript{102} Cliff, 134.
\textsuperscript{103} Cliff, 134.
\textsuperscript{104} Cliff, 136.
\textsuperscript{105} Cliff, 63.
Pocahontas or Marcus, who were neither buried in their homelands nor buried at sea but monumentalized in colonial seats of power as a help to British and US conquest. A romantic union with Liz would take her further away from Jamaica or even a colonially resistant burial at sea. In contrast, Clare’s love for Harry/Harriet is a step towards herself in the sense that she has experience investing in the ancestral systems that allow her to feel communion of place and people—so much so that as she travels up the mountain (before the guerrillas’ planned attack, their eventual ambush, and Clare’s consequential death), the narrator reflects on Clare’s time with Harry/Harriet in the mangrove and their sensual experience with the water and landscape: “Is this the sort of thing she thinks about? The beauty, the wildness of this New World—her point of origin?” Having shared such decolonial intimacy with Harrry/Harriet no doubt helped Clare understand the stakes at Gravesend and to realize that a romantic or political union with Liz would not be worth further investing herself in coloniality.

This decision proved accurate months later when, in the school cafeteria, Liz so disappointingly attempted to comfort Clare about racist xenophobia in London by claiming Clare was an exception to their hatred because her blood had “thinned, or thickened, or whatever it does.” In this conversation, Liz attempts to distance Clare from her ancestry by implying her light skin, class, and investment in Eurocentric culture makes her an exception to colonial oppression. To emphasize her point that she is not an exception, Clare tries to end all communication with Liz: “‘Some of my ancestors were Caribs . . . cannibals,’ Clare said, hoping to end the conversation then and there, using shock, again.” Clare’s invocation of cannibalism

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106 Cliff, 139.

107 Cliff, 139.
might have the appearance of legitimizing dehumanizing colonial stereotypes that were used to justify colonization, murder, and genocide, yet Clare brings up the stereotype and reclaims it. By naming connection to a part of her ancestry so feared and vilified, she shares Carib dismissal of European norms and identifies with Carib colonial resistance. Caribs gained reputations as fierce warriors, dangerous enemies, and in several early colonial reports were said to be a people who “prefer to die of hunger than live as [slaves]” Clare announces her connection with these ancestors as a method of asserting she comes from a fierceness that rejects respectability and conforms to a tradition of fighting for freedom no matter the costs. Many reports of the Caribs’ practice of cannibalism are consistent with war-related practices in South America in which a warrior consumes the preserved meat from an enemy’s body during a ritual that enables the warrior to absorb the enemy’s power in preparation for battle. The bodies of Clare’s enemies are the bodies of knowledge preserved in the Eurocentric art, books, films, magazines, and education she has been coerced into admiring. Clare’s invocation of cannibalism signals that even though she has consumed and internalized colonial knowledge systems, she intends to use the privilege she has gained as weapon against colonial power. Years later, after traveling in Europe with Bobby and having permanently returned to Jamaica for two years, she tells her interrogator she studied the Renaissance to “[show] them, [prove] I could do it,” but by then she had also moved on to using her privilege to fight more directly against coloniality by

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111 Cliff, No Telephone to Heaven, 194.
studying Jamaican history rooted in ancestral knowledge and teaching poor children to reclaim their history. At this earlier state of Clare’s journey, in the school cafeteria with Liz, Clare identifies with her Carib ancestry, embracing even its most stigmatized feature and conforming to a tradition of consuming one’s enemy for her own strength in battle. The battle of the moment is to end ties with Liz, whose answer to Clare’s invocation of her Carib ancestry is to dismiss the significance of ancestry at all. Liz answers: “That’s ancestors. Some of mine wore skins and worshipped fire.”

Liz of course has so internalized the superiority of Eurocentric knowledge that she overlooks the fact that the institute in which they stand is an institution devoted to her ancestral knowledge that begin with belief systems such as those she mentions.

It is significant that Liz is short for Elizabeth, one of the great monarchs of British history who through military might and religious and cultural oppression attempted to wipe out English Catholicism. The novel first introduces Liz as a woman recently down from Cambridge who studies hats in the battle scenes of Uccello. Though this small detail about hats that might seem to indicate Liz has accepted an odd and frivolous topic of study, it has a quite damning context for Clare’s potential relationship with her. Uccello’s most famous work, *The Battle of San Romano*, features a hero so reckless and legendary that he wears no helmet but only a hat that displays his wealth, status, and bravery. The triptych is a piece of propaganda highlighting the might of the Florentine forces over the Sienese and that of the hero in the hat in particular. Liz’s association with this representation mark her as like the hatted hero: being so brash she breaks with cultural norms in her efforts to conquer—through buying into colonial logics that

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112 Cliff, 139.

113 Harris and Zucker, *Uccello, The Battle of San Romano*. 
represent History from the perspective of military victors and accepting her inherited role to further invest in the signs and symbols that uphold military coloniality’s wealth, prestige, and power (in hats as well as art, history, and epistemological control). Clare’s invocation of Carib cannibalism meets Liz’s investment in battle, identifies Liz as an enemy in the guise of a beautiful woman,\(^{114}\) and reverses the status of the colonized loser of overconfident European military might to one of Carib power only made stronger by consumption of the enemy.

Clare rejecting Liz is an assertion that Clare’s whole identity as an Ashanti and Carib-descended Jamaican woman (not just a woman who loves other women) cannot be fully supported in a relationship with someone who doesn’t resist coloniality inherited from her people, let alone understand the value of decolonial intimacy. Liz started out as a potential source of intimacy for Clare, but after Gravesend and especially their conversation about ancestry in the cafeteria, it is clear Liz is an enemy and lives up to her association with Elizabeth I and Uccelo’s hats. It’s fitting their last conversation is in the cafeteria, where Clare consumes this experience and uses it to strengthen her decolonial movement. Though it will be some time before she returns to Jamaica for good, Clare’s experience in the cafeteria unseats her commitment to remaining in England.

Clare rejecting Liz in the school cafeteria in London and then almost immediately arriving in Europe with Bobby might seem like an abrupt shift from a potential queer

\(^{114}\) Clare studies rape scenes in Renaissance art. Immediately before ending her relationship with Liz, Clare is in the cafeteria studying “the myth of Callisto raped by Jupiter in the form of Diana.” François Boucher’s famous 1759 painting depicts the scene quite erotically between the two women. The Greek and Roman mythology states that Jupiter rapes Callisto quite brutally, and once the resulting pregnancy is discovered, the real Diana expels her from her company. The child that results from the pregnancy grows up to not recognize his mother, and he tries to kill her. Clare’s study of this scene when she encounters Liz for the last time sheds light on the risk she takes being close to someone who may just be another colonizer in the guise of a beautiful woman. Rather than a risk in pregnancy and expulsion from the company of Diana, however, Clare risks giving birth to cultural knowledge that is further invested in coloniality, and she risks losing connection to the ancestral knowledge she seeks.
relationship to a heterosexual one and, therefore, a sign that Clare has moved backwards in her movement toward embracing sexual variance in a Caribbean context. But the gender of her partner is much less significant than their stance on coloniality. Liz is invested in Eurocentric epistemologies and supports colonial logic, even if a more updated version, but Bobby, a male soldier, has no stance and does not connect to his rural African American roots. He rejects the logic of US militarism in Vietnam and is a deserter, yet, despite how haunted he is by his past, he supports nothing, stands with no one, fights against nothing. Clare’s relationship with Bobby records the consequences of refusing to take a stance and being unable to access ancestral connection that brings healing to colonial woundedness. While traveling in Europe, Clare experiences another love scene where the water meets the land. As Clare and Bobby move toward the cove where they would become “one with the water,” they “Descended, sending bits of rock, perhaps shards of pots, for this was a place of ruins, sliding below them, bouncing and flying, as they themselves gained speed.”

This landscape in a cove in the Adriatic does not contain the ghosts, stories, and ruins of her ancestors as the beach and mangrove had when she and Harry/Harriet “swam as girlfriends.” To Clare and Bobby, the ruins under foot have no meaning except as a tool for their own movement, and there Clare felt isolated, even ghostly. Like her father Boy, who ran away from his role in colonial oppression and whom Bobby defends for doing so, she and Bobby avoid their complicity with coloniality and move only for their own survival and comfort from one city to the next. As a result, their own colonial

115 Cliff, No Telephone to Heaven, 155.
116 Cliff, 154.
117 Cliff, 153.
wounds—some of Bobby’s quite literal—have no tie to history in this place, and, therefore, they will find no healing in the landscape or the knowledge systems available here.

Clare’s relationship with Bobby demonstrates that not making a decision to connect with ancestral knowledge and stand with those suffering under colonial domination results in a lack of healing intimacy and also further alienation. By the time Clare swims with Bobby in the Adriatic cove, she has already taken steps to stop standing with colonial power by leaving school, where she studied European classics in Renaissance art, and she had rejected Liz, who would have entangled her further in colonial epistemologies. But despite actively rejecting coloniality, she also has not yet chosen to stand with “the sufferahs” in Jamaica nor has she taken full stock of how she herself benefits under colonialism. Loving Harry/Harriet on the beach and in the mangrove and since has brought her closer to her whole self and begun to foster connection with those suffering most under colonial power, and being with Liz would have made her more distant from such people and her whole self. But being with Bobby allows her to run away from the decision to choose. Harry/Harriet had warned Clare that one can’t “live split. Not in this world”\(^\text{118}\)—a world comprised of those benefiting from colonialism and those suffering under its power. Running away from choosing with whom to stand leaves power in the hands of coloniality and does nothing to heal the complex wounds born of being the victim of colonial violence but also born of bearing responsibility for inflicting colonial violence on others. The result of Clare and Bobby’s union in the Adriatic cove is a miscarriage and then a dangerous infection Clare won’t even know the full extent of till she returns home to Jamaica and the care

\(^{118}\) Cliff, 131.
of Harriet. Not choosing to stand with those oppressed under colonization puts her at risk of further harm.

Clare would have experienced further woundedness and alienation had she remained with Bobby and refused to stand with those experiencing colonial oppression and connect to the ancestral knowledge that will bring healing. The love scene on the beach and in the mangrove with Harry/Harriet point to Clare’s ability to embrace all that she is—a sexually variant mixed-race woman carrying colonial wounds—and would eventually lead her to use that identity and experience to stand with “the sufferahs” in Jamaica through teaching, raising crops and funds, sharing food, taking account of the complex legacy of her land-owning family, and taking up arms against colonial power.

The special intimacy between Clare and Harriet over the course of the novel fosters healing and anti-colonial work, and it conforms with traditions of sexual variance developed among women during the Middle Passage. In her discussion of the need to divorce Eurocentric terminology and conceptualization of queerness from women loving women in the Caribbean, Tinsley discusses the significance of terms such as mati and zamni, that make no linguistic distinction between female friends or female lovers. Tinsley explains some of the background of the term mati:

Derived from the Dutch maaat or mate, mati also means "mate" as in "shipmate"; she who survived the Middle Passage with me. On these crossings captive African women created erotic bonds with other women in the sex-segregated holds, resisting the commodification of their bought and sold bodies by feeling and feeling for their co-occupants on these

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119 Cliff does not present sexual variance among women in the same way as among men. Ilomen notes that in Abeng, the prequel to No Telephone, “male-centered homophobia is naturalized under slavery and colonization” (Ilomen, Queer Rebellion in the Novels of Michelle Cliff, 209), while intimacy between women is presented as “a healing narrative to respond to the traumatic history of homophobia” (Tinsley, Thiefing Sugar, 212).

120 Tinsley, Thiefing Sugar, 7–8.
ships. Once arrived in the New World, women in some parts of the Caribbean continued relationships with *mati* in female friendship and kinship networks.\(^{121}\)

This conception of feminine love in the Caribbean sheds light on the female intimacy Clare longs for early on in the novel and part of her choice not to pursue a relationship with Liz. For Clare, it is not enough to find a woman with whom to share intimacy, but the bond between female survivors of colonial domination includes what can’t be found elsewhere. Empathy born of mutual experience makes way for remembering and creating together decolonial epistemologies, operating outside of colonial systems that mark bodies as unfeeling commodities.

In a similar fashion to “mati,” Harriet often uses the term “girlfriend” to describe the relationship between herself and Clare. Harry/Harriet first uses the term over Clare’s Christmas visit to Jamaica. At the night club made to look like a Spanish galleon, Harry/Harriet jokingly says, “If they were imaginative, girlfriend, they would hang some whips and chains on the walls, dress the waiters in loincloths, have the barmaid bare her breasts, and call the whole mess the Middle Passage.”\(^ {122}\) Though he jests, their being girlfriends is decolonial intimacy akin to the love and kinship of *mati* as shipmates during the Middle Passage. Their growing intimacy is first demonstrated in the club, a metaphoric Middle Passage, marking their shared history with colonial oppression and forming the emotional intimacy, communication, shared feeling, and shared memory that helps them each reach for each other in a shared bond that makes way for their whole selves as feminine mixed-race Jamaicans who love women and seek to challenge their investment in the colonial structures that oppress themselves and others.

\(^{121}\) Tinsley, 7.

\(^{122}\) Cliff, *No Telephone to Heaven*, 121.
At the club, Harry/Harriet reminds Clare that Jamaica is her homeland, they call into question history written by white colonizers, and together, in the tradition of Caribbean tricksters Afrekete and Anansimake, they trick a white tourist, an act that fights against European colonial narratives but also builds their own counternarrative of white European oppression and anti-colonial struggle. Afterward, “They laughed together, bitterly.” The club scene includes resistance to colonial oppression, but the couple’s intimacy also asserts identity and worth apart from colonization. The club scene as Middle Passage designates Clare and Harry/Harriet as mates/girlfriends also in their openness, empathy, and trust, which was unusual for them both. Clare openly shares her overidentification with white orphans, admitting her own internalization of colonial logic but also her feelings of alienation, and Harry/Harriet challenges her thinking but does so empathetically and nonjudgmentally. Harry/Harriet shares his experience of isolation, and though he fears asking too much of Clare, he shares his experience of intergenerational sexual colonial trauma, literally reaching out to her for comfort. And despite her previously stated feelings of alienation, Clare powerfully shows up for Harry/Harriet: “Harry/Harriet took Clare’s hand across the table. The palms were hot, but she held on and didn’t pull back.” This shared intimacy is not sexual, but it is sensual. The empathy and trust built between the two in this shared space of experience, memory, trauma, and resistance to internalized colonial logic allows them to—as Tinsley says of captive women during the Middle Passage—feel with and for

123 Cliff, 121.
124 Cliff, 122, 127.
125 Cliff, 126.
126 Cliff, 126.
127 Cliff, 128.
each other. After Harry/Harriet shares her experience of colonial violence, Clare says "‘Harry, you make me want to love you.’ She had never said that to anyone before this. She did not spoil her feeling by asking herself ‘Why?’” In the context of erotically connected mati as kinship groups formed during the Middle Passage, Clare’s love for Harriet represents conformity with kinship patterns stemming from embodied knowledge of her female ancestors’ shared experiences with love, intimacy, and erotic experience among women. Asking “why” was unnecessary because it was an instinctual reaction to their shared experience, shared intimacy, and shared investment in ancestral knowledge.

Clare and Harry/Harriet are not the only characters in the novel able to pursue decolonial forms of kinship. Clare’s mother struggles with her ties to her husband and ultimately feels forced to choose to return to Jamaica. Clare’s grandmother is in a privileged position as a landowner, but the harvest of that land is communal property and she holds services in her house. The guerrilla fighters are a community that seeks to divest from coloniality and fights to tear it down, and even Christopher’s violence against the family he works for and the woman he sometimes sleeps with represent the destruction of the accepted colonial domestic order. Cliff’s novel is full of decolonial forms of kinship that are based on instinct passed down through generations, but the close attention to Clare’s decolonial journey puts on emphasis on her increasingly conscious attention to ancestral epistemologies.

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128 Tinsley, Thiefing Sugar, 7.

129 Cliff, No Telephone to Heaven, 130.

130 In Cliff’s writings, the construction of the heterosexual nuclear family as an imposition of the colonial/modern capitalist system (Pulitano, “‘I and Jamaica Is Who I Am,’” 66). So a decolonial reading of No Telephone would indicate Clare’s sexual relationship with Bobby or anyone else need not disrupt the intimacy, kinship, or commitment shared between Clare and Harriet.
“A Simple Want Next to the Want She Felt”

The intimacy—both sexual and nonsexual—shared between Clare and Harriet over the course of the novel fulfills a longing Clare had much earlier in life and further explains why Clare’s rejection of Liz was so expected and not at all an indication of her failure to pursue sexual variance. After living in the US and before ever meeting Harry/Harriet or Liz, Clare had just arrived in London and was living alone in a bed-sitting room, spending her days exploring the city. One morning she found a brooch in a shop with the Cross of Lorraine and the word “Résistez,” but she hesitated and “did not want to pay the price” even though “There was something about the brooch which drew her to it, an absoluteness. The sense of cause.”131 She did return the following day to purchase it, but it had been sold.132 Some time later, she hears the noises of a black taxicab arriving outside her building:

The downstairs bell sounded, as she knew it would, and she was certain the visitor was for her, now ascending the stairs to her room, having been passed by the landlady. Perhaps carrying presents. Surely from a long way away. So certain was she, and so eager, she opened the door to her room and stood at the top of the flight, waiting to greet her visitor, someone who knew her…. [After realizing the visitor was not for her], Clare immediately retreated to her room and lay down on the bed. Frightened of her certainty.133

Clare is flushed, nervous, and puzzled about her momentary certainty and wonders who exactly she had expected. She considers if she had been waiting for the woman she met the day prior on the tube. They had chatted and then when the woman asked if Clare would be her guest at the ballet, “Clare fled.”134

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131 Cliff, *No Telephone to Heaven*, 112.
133 Cliff, 114–15.
134 Cliff, 115.
Clare ultimately rejects the possibility that she’d been expecting the woman on the tube because the woman would not have had presents, she would not have been coming from far away, and she did not even have Clare’s address. The woman on the tube represents a desire for sexual intimacy with a woman, and it is a longing shared while in transport.\textsuperscript{135} But unlike a shipmate from the Middle Passage, the woman on the tube has not experienced the trauma of colonial oppression or a shared cultural heritage now under threat. Clare disqualifies the woman on the tube as the person she was expecting because, in a practical sense, she does not have Clare’s address, but in light of Clare’s later rejection of Liz at Gravesend, the woman on the tube also does not understand Clare’s positionality as a woman from colonized Jamaica, descended from Carib, Ashanti, and English peoples and who desires to resist coloniality with the assuredness of Joan of Arc’s “I will dare.”\textsuperscript{136} The woman on the tube cannot give Clare the gifts of the support, trust, empathy and mentoring that her intimacy with Harriet later provides. The woman on the tube could offer physical and emotional intimacy, but Clare recognizes her desire for the woman on the tube as “a simple want next to the want she felt.”\textsuperscript{137} The intimacy possible with the woman on the tube would be a far cry from the intimacy of girlfriends with the shared comradery of shipmates surviving generational and personal colonial trauma together. Clare’s desire for intimacy with a woman is a shipmates/matis/girlfriends kind of intimacy, which, for her, only makes sense with someone who comes from far away, someone who shares the

\textsuperscript{135} Clare travels with Liz by car to Gravesend (Cliff, 134) but flees that experience alone by train (Cliff, 137). Clare also travels together with Bobby to Europe (Cliff 143) but travels by ship alone back to Jamaica (Cliff, 167). These repeated scenes of transport indicate intimacy and shared goals but only with Harriet is a scene of transport given any detail: first in the metaphoric Middle Passage in the night club and then in the truck with Harriet and the other guerillas climbing up the mountain to fight against the imposition of colonial history.

\textsuperscript{136} Cliff, \textit{No Telephone to Heaven}, 112.

\textsuperscript{137} Cliff, 115.
experience of oppression of coloniality. Clare’s longing for someone arriving from far away with gifts could also indicate her longing for an older woman, one who will guide her in traditional knowledge systems around gender and sexuality. Wekker notes that age-stratified relationships are a common (though not exclusive) feature of the mati-work in Suriname. Older women sometimes initiate girls as young as twelve and train them in “sexual as well as in other mati knowledge.”

If the older woman is in a good economic position, she can lavish gifts on the younger woman in the form of presents such as jewelry and clothes. Clare’s certainty that she would have a guest who would come from far away, bring her gifts, and know her address indicates her longing for this kind of mentorship rooted in West African cultural heritage.

Harry/Harriet’s offer at the night club to set Clare up with an “older woman with endless breasts” gives credence to some familiarity with a system of female eroticism that includes a tradition of age-stratification (Cliff, 122). Harriet is Clare’s peer in terms of age, but she does bring her gifts of drinks, food, and letters, and she mentors Clare into developing positionality rooted in ancestral knowledge.

This early in the novel, however, Clare has not yet met Harry/Harriet, and her exposure to decolonial perspectives are still based on instinct and Eurocentric texts and histories. When she first hears the black taxicab pulling up, she had been in bed reading Jane Eyre. The book’s description appears vaguely sexual: “pages bearing vague stains, fingered, smooth,” indicating this book is well worn but also hinting at it being source material for readers’ cultural understanding of romance and sexuality. The lines she had been reading were:


139 Wekker, 187.

140 Cliff, *No Telephone to Heaven*, 115.
“My daughter, flee temptation.”
“Mother, I will,” Jane responded, as the moon turned to woman.141

Clare had fled when the woman on the tube asked her to the ballet, but her adjacent desire manifests in her anticipation for a guest from whom she would not flee. These lines from Jane Eyre come after Jane leaves Rochester after learning he is still married to Bertha. Jane says goodbye to Rochester then returns to her room to wait till morning when she can leave. That night, Jane falls asleep and has a vision of the moon becoming “a white human form” who delivers the message to flee.142 After Clare realizes the black taxicab had not brought her anticipated guest, she returns to where she had left off in the novel and immediately recognizes that:

The fiction had tricked her. Drawn her in so that she became Jane…. Comforted for a time, she came to. Then with a sharpness, reprimanded herself. No, she told herself. No she could not be Jane…. Yes, Bertha was closer to the mark. Captive. Ragôut. Mixture. Confused. Jamaican. Caliban. Carib. Cannibal. Cimarron. All Bertha. All Claire.143

Clare is conflicted but ultimately sees herself in Bertha and notes the narrative trick that has her, who shares so much in common with Bertha, identifying with Jane and thereby coloniality. This is Clare’s first conscious assertion of colonial rejection. She falls asleep, her index finger closed in the book, a detail continuing the sexual imagery that would link Clare’s desires still to colonial perspectives that mark sexuality outside of marriage as fearful and requiring flight. But her index finger also points to the passage indicating she intends to flee the temptation that she has newly identified as fleeing from identifying with coloniality. Harry/Harriet later tells Clare, “We have

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141 Cliff, 115.
142 Brontë, Jane Eyre, 345.
143 Cliff, No Telephone to Heaven, 116.
taken the master’s past as our own. That is the danger,” but before ever meeting Harry/Harriet, Clare has already begun thinking critically about her own identification with colonality and longing for something else.

In the nightclub scene, Clare and Harry/Harriet first talk as girlfriends but also indicate they are still in process in a decolonial journey and have not yet fled the “temptation” of colonial logic. Harry/Harriet first suggested the name of the club should be Triangle Trade before joking it should be called the Middle Passage. The Triangle Trade transported slaves and gold from West Africa to the Caribbean. Enslaved people and gold were exchanged for sugar cane products, which were transported to Europe and exchanged for manufactured goods, which once taken to Africa would be exchanged for enslaved people and gold. This triangular trade carries cultural knowledge, ontologies, and values as well, and enslaved Africans were forced to adopt the ideas of the colonial forces that were exported from Europe and enforced on those who had also been transported as an extension of those European cultural values. As Clare and Harry/Harriet talk, they discuss colonial exploitation that established the triangular routes in the first place; they then reverse those routes by connecting to values rooted in ancestral knowledge. But despite the decolonial significance of their conversation and their tricking of the tourist, this scene also contains contradictions. Harry/Harriet asks Clare if she had ever been “tempted” by “pussy, sweetness... loving your own kind.” Harry/Harriet mocks the word “temptation” as being overly conservative, and Clare is ashamed of feeling uncomfortable with the question. Despite seeming to have investments in decolonial logic about gender and sexuality, the two

144 Cliff, 127.

145 Cliff, 120–21.
waver in expressing their identities, experiences, and desires. Clare denies longing for her own kind. In the same conversation, she jokes that Harry/Harriet is a woman, and he denies it and evades saying more.\textsuperscript{146} Clare’s hesitance to be open about her sexual variance and Harry/Harriet’s hesitance to be open about his gender variance are noteworthy.\textsuperscript{147} The club was obviously geared toward its white tourist patrons, but Harry/Harriet says he is more welcome there than a rumshop where only locals hang out. Harry/Harriet makes fun of the club and its patrons for being an extension of coloniality, yet he relies on it as a haven for someone assumed to be queer. Harry/Harriet’s and Clare’s conversation in the club operates much like a decolonial Triangle Trade in which colonial hierarchies are overturned and ancestral connections are rerouted from “the motherland” in Europe to ancestral knowledge in West Africa and the creolized Caribbean, yet in this scene, they are very much in process and being drawn in multiple directions. Their decolonial Middle Passage takes them from Eurocentric world views that either stigmatize gender and sexual variance or allow it only in upper class Eurocentric spaces. And it brings them to their West African cultural roots and their promise of community and culture that make space for gender and sexual variance outside the frame of Eurocentricity. Their use of the word “temptation” indicates their ambivalent investments in colonial and decolonial knowledge about gender and sexuality and relates directly to the ambivalence Clare experiences while reading \textit{Jane Eyre} so much earlier. Clare and Harriet will later be empowered to flee the temptation of colonial logic and more fully embrace conformity with gender and sexual variance rooted in ancestral knowledge, but in the club scene, they are not there yet. As a Middle Passage

\textsuperscript{146} Cliff, 122.

\textsuperscript{147} In this scene, Harry/Harriet makes jokes about his own perceived sexual variance but not about his gender variance.
scene that seeks to decolonize the routes of knowledge systems in which they will invest, Clare and Harry/Harriet are only at a midpoint.

After first arriving in London, Clare is only in the process of beginning to flee the temptation of colonial logic. Waiting alone in her room for the black taxicab, Clare longs for something familiar, something she can’t quite understand, something she will continue to look for. She will find the intimacy she is longing for in her relationship with Harriet, but how could she know so early that she longed for something that the woman on the tube could not provide? And how could it feel so visceral that she kept watch for days to the point of becoming terrified she had lost touch with reality? Years later, after her trip to the nightclub with Harry/Harriet, after her return to London and time in Gravesend, and after her time traveling in Europe, she returns permanently to Jamaica. There she dedicates herself more fully to decolonial learning and teaching and gains insight on her earlier longings. In conversation with her interrogator, she says, “I have educated myself since my return. Spoken with the old people . . . leafed through the archives downtown . . . spent time at the university library . . . one thing leads to another.” The interrogator asks her if there is evidence in this new kind of history. She answers “It’s not as simple as that. I am in it. It involves me . . . I am not outside this history—it’s a matter of recognition . . . memory . . . emotion.” Waiting for the black taxicab, Clare’s remembers models of intimacy that feel right, and on the tube and at Gravesend, she recognizes the ones that don’t. It would take years of questioning her investment in colonial narratives and working to invest in ancestral knowledge before Clare comes to the point of identifying with the sufferahs


149 Cliff, 193.

150 Cliff, 194.
and doing anti-colonial work, but one thing leads to another, and just listening to the ancestral knowledge already making itself known in her erotic desires brings her closer to herself and will eventually bring her to further decolonial learning and stronger commitments to anti-colonial work.

Clare hesitates buying the brooch and demonstrating she is willing to pay the price of joining the cause of resistance to colonial power, but she later becomes willing to pay. She only lacks the experience, community, and kinship structures that allows her to develop that decolonial assuredness and connect more to the ancestral knowledge cut off under colonization. Clare’s relationship with Harry/Harriet is Clare’s movement toward that assuredness that will help her come to terms with her complicity with coloniality, her healing from colonial harm, and the affirmation of her whole identity. As a colonial subject forced to accept the colonial logic that as a creole she must aspire after an exclusively white English identity, Clare’s dismissal of the woman on the tube, her rejection of Liz, and her longing for something more familiar to her ancestral memory allows her to attend to her whole person—not just her sexual variance, or just the black, indigenous, or white parts, but the whole self.

Clare’s early identification with Bertha while waiting for the black taxi cab demonstrates her conscious identification with being a victim of colonial manipulation. Like Pocahontas, Bertha was a sexual pawn in some English man’s attainment of wealth and power, but Bertha did not die in transport and was not remembered fondly as a faithful servant to coloniality. She was the mad woman hidden away, kept under lock and key, driven mad by colonial oppression, who stabs her captor, sets fire to his house, and rather than accept his “help” and walk away from the fire, she refuses to submit to his desires and leaps to her death from atop the flames she set. Bertha, like Christopher, whose anti-colonial rage turns to violence and madness, turns “the
damn thing upside down. Fight fire with fire. Burn. Yes, burn it down.”\textsuperscript{151} Clare seeing herself as Bertha rather than Jane demonstrates her attraction to resisting coloniality and her interest in conforming to a pattern rooted in some kind of ancestral knowledge. In the absence of the Jamaican libraries, archives, artifacts, and people who will later aid in the development of her decolonial learning, she finds access to a kind of ancestral knowledge found in resistant reading of Eurocentric texts. But her lack of access to community that can help her gain access to other forms of ancestral knowledge cannot be found in European archives. Her loneliness leads her to conform, too, to Bertha’s madness. After waiting for the black taxicab for days, she imagines someone in the street calling her name.\textsuperscript{152} Perhaps Bertha, who jumped from the roof of Rochester’s house,\textsuperscript{153} heard a visitor from home calling to her and jumped to finally be in the company of a friend. Clare does not jump. Her choice to identify as Bertha aligns with her dismissal of the woman on the tube and her disidentification with sexual desire that is not rooted in common colonial struggle. In addition, her short-lived madness demonstrates conformity to a strong model of decolonial resistance she has at her disposal even as she is entrenched in colonial forms of knowledge.

Identifying as Bertha and not Jane might seem like Clare rejects her white English ancestry, but her connection to her English identity and light-skinned racial status are not in danger under colonization. Her access to English ancestral knowledge is already clear, and colonial knowledge and epistemologies have been forced on her to the exclusion of all other information. It is only through decolonizing her identity, knowledge systems, and commitments,

\textsuperscript{151} Cliff, 50.
\textsuperscript{152} Cliff, 116.
\textsuperscript{153} Brontë, \textit{Jane Eyre}, 466.
that she gains access to what is lost under colonization. Following Driskill’s definition, decolonization includes reconciliation, and Clare works hard to reconcile her racial privilege, English ancestry, and the harm caused by her ancestors and herself. This reconciliation is dramatized in Clare’s experience in the river at her grandmother’s property after she had permanently returned to Jamaica: “She shut her eyes and let the cool of it wash over her naked body, reaching up into her as she opened her legs. Rebaptism.” Clare has many erotic experiences on or near the water: with Paul H. in the cabana by the pool, with Harry/Harriet on the beach and in the mangrove, Bobby in the Adriatic cove, and finally this experience at the river at her grandmother’s property. And of all these, her experience alone in the river at her grandmother’s house is called a rebaptism, but rather than a dove descending, a memory came to mind of her experience as a child having been covered in pig feces when the butcher’s wife cleaned out tripe in the river. Her amusement with the story quickly turns to shame as she recalls she screamed “at a dark woman older than her mother, ‘This is my grandmother’s river! You have no right . . .!’” This moment of rebaptism gives her the opportunity to reflect on her own actions, and to begin to form commitments to others who have been harmed because of the systems that gave her privilege. Her journey toward identifying with the likes of Bertha does not diminish her status as English-descended, and in fact, by standing with the sufferahs, she reconciles the harm that colonization has done to her as a mixed-race Jamaican but also the harm that colonization has done through her and her white and white-descended ancestors.


155 Cliff, No Telephone to Heaven, 172.

156 Cliff, 172–73.
Back in her room in London toward the beginning of her decolonial journey, Clare realizes she identifies with Bertha and not Jane and promptly falls asleep. Cliff rewrites Brontë’s scene, except, instead of the moon acting as a white celestial mother, Clare has a vision of her actual black mother: “If the dead speak to you in a dream it means you will soon be amongst them. Was this her grandmother’s wisdom? Her mother was standing next to the bed, looking down at her daughter. Making as if to speak. Then drawing her hand across her mouth as if to wipe away her words.” Clare’s experience brings further confusion and demonstrates the difficulty of ancestral knowledge. Clare’s grandmother’s logic claims that hearing directly from one’s ancestors can only happen in one’s death. Clare longs to know what message her mother, representing all her ancestors, will give, but the message does not come through because, presumably, it is not yet time for Clare to die. Years later, Clare’s efforts to listen to her mother’s message through the pursuit of ancestral knowledge will lead Clare to the day of her death: riding with the guerrillas up a mountain in a truck called No Telephone to Heaven. The truck’s name in conjunction with her mother’s muted message serves as a reminder that when there is no direct link with one’s ancestors because colonization has suppressed their voices, ancestral knowledge is intuited in visions and embodied memory, in research and community, in intimacy and healing, and even in joining a fight that brings direct communion with the earth that holds one’s ancestors.

Conclusion

Viewing Clare’s and Harriet’s gender and sexual variance through the lens of decolonial epistemologies rather than that of Eurocentric queer theory produces a deeper and more nuanced
understanding of Cliff’s novel. Through that lens, we see that Clare conforms with the gender and sexual epistemologies of her nonwhite ancestors by longing for sexual relationships rooted in anticolonial commitments and creolized West African heritage. In addition, her rejection of Liz, dismissal of the woman on the tube, and healing from her time with Bobby also demonstrate conformity with ancestral knowledge, knowledge that demands she take a stand with those whose identities and lives are threatened under colonization. Her actions follow the tradition of the Maroons, who fight against colonial oppression, and the tradition of the Carib, who eat their enemies in ways that strengthen rather than weaken their identities. Her journey is indirect at times since, as a victim of colonial oppression, her history and knowledge systems have not only been hidden, but she has been tricked into identifying with coloniality and identifying as a colonial agent. Her sexual variance would only be resistance to the norm if she internalized colonial epistemologies that require cultural norms that mark heterosexuality as normal. Instead of internalizing colonial logic, she reaches toward decolonial knowledge and conforms to ancestral epistemologies that contain gender and sexual variance as normal and expected features. She need not conform to precolonial forms of sexual variance just because they were once part of her ethnic history, but regaining access to knowledge systems suppressed under colonization shapes cultural practice and contributes to the cultural continuance, self-determination, healing, reconciliation, and land redress that Driskill uses to define decolonization.158

Part of this decolonial process is Clare’s affirmation of her whole identity, which is not possible in the colonial/modern gender system or in the queer-affirming Eurocentric theoretical

terms that make space for only some forms of gender and sexual variance that assume cultural norms enforced by coloniality. This chapter’s focus on Clare’s and to a lesser extent Harriet’s identities and experiences demonstrate that making space for all kinds of gender and sexual variance requires affirming all kinds of knowledge systems—including those suppressed under colonization. No Telephone reveals decolonial and anti-colonial struggle that begins with personal experience and moves quickly to institutional forms of colonial oppression. For those of us invested in queer and trans studies today, Cliff’s novel is a reminder to rethink our starting point for theorizing academic knowledge in general and gender and sexual variance in particular. Our training has no doubt included close attention to the power of resistance to cultural norms to make room for gender and sexual variance, community, and freedom, but re-examining the option to conform to cultural norms rooted in ancestral knowledge has power not only to make room for gender and sexual diversity but also to reconceptualize whose history and whose knowledge systems are significant to identity, experience, community, and freedom in the first place. Like Clare, whose investment in these questions spurs her on to increasing anti-colonial action, our disciplinary and personal journeys will lead us to new alliances, new accompliceships, and new dangers.
CHAPTER 4
“THAT’S RIGHT, A TRAIN”: TRANSGENDER EXCEPTIONALISM AND MENTAL DISTRESS IN CAMERON AWKWARD-RICH’S SYMPATHETIC LITTLE MONSTER

I don’t trust anyone
who has never learned the person can’t be separated
from the rot—he…
wants to dig it out. But what would be left of you?
…………………………………
When you say things like that people think
you’re just in love with sadness & it’s true
…………………………………
when you say things like that
people think there is some medicine or word
to save you.

Cameron Awkward Rich in Sympathetic Little Monster ¹

In the last sixty years of western public imagination, tropes about gender variant people as homicidal,² suicidal,³ self-harming,⁴ or tortured figures⁵ have abounded. These tropes stem from western cultural and scientific beliefs that have pathologized gender variance itself and

¹ Awkward-Rich, SLM, 56.
³ For example, Normal (2003), Dog Day Afternoon (1975), and The Crying Game (1992).
contributed to further marginalizing and pathologizing gender variant people. In recent decades, these persistent transphobic representations have been rightly criticized for portraying transfeminine people as innately insane, deceitful, and dangerous and for portraying gender variant lives as unlivable to the mournful delight of cis audiences. Today, pro-LGBTQIA advocates are being taken more seriously than ever, and not only have many of those who create and consume media advocated for more positive forms of transgender representation, but those in the psychology professions and in queer and transgender studies have worked to destigmatize gender variance and detach it from its longstanding association with mental pathology. These changes have helped increase the legitimacy of gender variance in the eyes of the public, yet they attempt to position gender variant people within the limits of social acceptability while simultaneously reinforcing the sanist systems that value ableist notions of respectability over the inherent value and rights of those who experience madness, mental distress, and/or mental disabilities. Respectability politics—though so often invoked by marginalized communities—does not support identity positivity. In this case, respectability politics normalizes gender variance while distancing it from the stigma of madness, but what of those who are mad,

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6 Gillig et al., “More than a Media Moment”; Arlene Istar Lev LCSW, “Disordering Gender Identity”; Norton, “‘Brain Says You’re a Girl, But I Think You’re a Sissy Boy.’”

7 Phillips, Transgender On Screen, 85–114; “Victims or Villains.”

8 Films featuring tragic transgender characters are award-nominating gold. Some examples are Dog Day Afternoon (1975), Kiss of the Spider Woman (1985), Boys Don’t Cry (1999), Albert Knobbs (2011), Dallas Buyer’s Club (2013), and The Danish Girl (2015).


mentally disabled, or experience distress—especially large segments of gender variant population? Rather than seeking to prove that gender variant people are “not crazy,” what would it mean to resist that urge and settle into the knowledge that “crazy” is a meaningful existence?

Though mental distress is experienced within all populations, among gender variant communities, it is extremely common. The 2015 US Transgender Survey found that 39% of respondents reported experiencing serious psychological distress in the last 30 days compared to 5% of the general US population.\textsuperscript{11} In addition, 40% reported having attempted suicide at some point in their lifetime compared to 4.6% of the US population, and 24% reported making plans to kill themselves in the past year compared to 1.1% of the general US population.\textsuperscript{12} These statistics are often cited (including by myself)\textsuperscript{13} to communicate the urgency of the problem: gender variant people find it difficult to live in the world as it is, so we have to change the cissexist and transphobic structures and attitudes that threaten gender variant lives. Research confirms the significance of this message by connecting access to trans affirmation and support with decreased experience of distress. The same survey finds the experience of psychological distress and lifetime suicide attempts correlates with less family support,\textsuperscript{14} and it also finds transgender respondents ten years after transition to have much lower rates of psychological distress than those early in their transition and especially those who wanted to transition but had not yet.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{11} James et al., “US Transgender Survey,” 105.

\textsuperscript{12} James et al., 112.

\textsuperscript{13} Chu, “‘The Least We Can Do,’” 162–63.

\textsuperscript{14} James et al., “US Transgender Survey,” 104, 114.

\textsuperscript{15} James et al., 107; “Transition” can be a weighted term. James, et al. describes gender transition as follows: “This is a process in which a person begins to live according to their gender identity, rather than the gender they were thought to be at birth. Not all transgender people have transitioned or intend to do so, but many do. Gender transition looks different for every person” (40-41).
These findings from the largest transgender survey in the US to date seem to clearly illustrate that mental distress occurs more frequently in the absence of gender-affirming support. In addition, other researchers have found that microaggressions based on gender identity dramatically increased the likelihood of respondents reporting depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation\(^\text{16}\) and that the use of chosen names significantly reduced such reports for transgender youth.\(^\text{17}\) One study indicates that LGBTQ youth who had at least one supportive adult in their lives were 40% less likely to report a suicide attempt in the past year.\(^\text{18}\) These newer studies build upon numerous studies in the last two decades that explore the relationship between external minority stress and suicidality in transgender people.\(^\text{19}\) All this research is used to focus on what the lack of cultural and material support for gender variance does to gender variant people. This is an important narrative that is used to call for structural change that can reduce the distress gender variant people experience, and this narrative shifts the source of mental distress from the individual (who fails to meet the standards of respectability) to society (which fails to be trans-affirming). But we gender variant advocates often fail to make room for people who are mad, mentally disabled, and those who experience distress regardless of the degree to which these conditions are tied to cissexism.

Using these statistics to point out how cissexism damages the quality of life and even the survivability of gender variant lives is indeed necessary in a cissexist society, but I have also

\(^{16}\) Parr and Howe, “Heterogeneity of Transgender Identity Nonaffirmation Microaggressions and Their Association with Depression Symptoms and Suicidality among Transgender Persons.”

\(^{17}\) Russell et al., “Chosen Name Use Is Linked to Reduced Depressive Symptoms, Suicidal Ideation, and Suicidal Behavior Among Transgender Youth,” 505.

\(^{18}\) “Research Brief.”

\(^{19}\) See Wolford-Clevenger et al., “Correlates of Suicide Ideation and Behaviors among Transgender People.”
come to see that focusing exclusively on minority stress risks oversimplifying the role of mental distress in the lives of gender variant people. Mental distress is undoubtedly a problem for gender variant people and indeed anyone who experiences it, but mental distress also coexists as a part of human variation (neurodiversity) and human vulnerability (vulnerability to the results of systemic oppression and trauma). In addition, the oppressive forces trans people experience that contribute to their experience of minority stress is not limited to cissexism or transphobia but also includes racism, sexism, ableism, economic exploitation, and sanism. The assumption that gender variant people experiencing mental distress just need gender-affirming support and they won’t be distressed anymore oversimplifies the experience of mental distress and the reality of sanist oppression as well as other forms of oppression and trauma. Ellen Samuels warns of the dangers of “methodological or symbolic distancing from disability,” which allows disability to be used to justify forms of identification that uphold oppressive power structures. 20 Though few people seriously argue that gender variant people are only acceptable if their experience of distress is caused by cissexism, the assumption underlies much of the advocacy for trans people, and it contributes to belief in an idealized and normative transgender bodymind unencumbered by mental variation and vulnerability. In the utopic worlds identity-positive advocates envision and fight to create, mental distress would certainly be reduced because we work to eradicate oppression of all kinds, including on the basis of gender identity, gender expression, race, ethnicity, economic status, religion, (non)belief, body type and condition, ability and disability, neurological status, and mental ability and disability. Minority stress reduces quality of life and

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20 Samuels, Fantasies of Identification, 214; Samuels focuses on ableist and racist biocertification processes that assume monolithic forms of identity based on narrow biological factors rather than on the systems of identification relevant to each affected population.
life expectancies for gender variant people as well as other minoritized populations and cannot exist in the absence of oppression. Eliminating oppression because it causes minority stress is a worthy goal, but seeking to eliminate mental distress because oppression/minority stress increases the occurrence of distress is a mistake. If we erase the possibility of mental distress, we also erase the existence of people who experience distress related to individual-based trauma and/or human variation,21 and if we seek to eliminate distress, we seek to eliminate people who experience distress. This may seem like a minute distinction, but to be more direct: sanism is a form of oppression many overlook, and when we fail to make room for madness, mental distress, mental disabilities, and neurodiversity in our formation of gender variant worlds, we participate in sanist oppression that further marginalizes those outside the normative experiences of mental “wellness.” It is certainly useful to imagine a world without multiple forms of oppression, but to imagine a world without distress is to imagine many people out of existence—and thereby participate in sanist oppression. Our current reality is that mental distress is a common feature of gender variant lives. What is more, oppression and experience of trauma does not end when one receives support, so in an identity-positive world where oppression no longer exists (including sanism) and support abounds, distress remains a feature of many cis and gender variant lives. Samuels calls for “developing new claims of justice and self-determination for racial, ethnic, and gender politics” that avoid reductive forms of identification contingent on distance from disability and that give “greater authority to the expert knowledge that individuals have about their own bodies—and by extension, that communities have about their members.”22

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22 Samuels, Fantasies of Identification, 214.
answering her call, gender variant advocates would do well to look more closely at the experiences of gender variant people who are mad, neurodivergent, mentally disabled, and/or experience mental distress to explore the meaning mental distress has in their lives and in their experience of gender variance.

Rejecting internalized (sanist, ableist) beliefs about the nature of distress is important for moving toward wellbeing in an identity-positive way that makes room for all that one is and can be (rather than all that is deemed mentally “healthy” by definitions socially constructed by the psychomedical complex and the wider public). This chapter focuses on making room for the experience of distress in the lives and futures of gender variant people by reviewing critical literature on distress and by reading Cameron Awkward-Rich’s *Sympathetic Little Monster*, a 2016 poetry collection that addresses themes of transgender identity, blackness, trauma, and mental distress. Few scholars have explored the large body of transgender and gender variant poetry—perhaps because it is perceived as too new or not more invested in formal conventions associated with “high art.” Maggie Nelson’s poetic narrative *The Argonauts*, in contrast has not only sold well, it has received wide acclaim, winning a National Book Critics Circle Award and contributing to Nelson becoming a MacArthur fellow—this in addition to her previously being named a Guggenheim and an NEA fellow. Though *The Argonauts* was only released in 2015, it has often been written about by literary critics exploring queer and trans poetic narrative because of its investments in classic forms, archives, and allusions as well as a classed and raced positionality that sells well among those invested in “high art.” Nelson is not transgender, and though the partner of a transgender person is a narrative position worth attention, her representation of gender variance shows that distant positionality and contributes to her marketability among cis white liberals who consume difference but are not invested enough in
gender variance to understand or appreciate gender variant poets who don’t write for cis audiences.

Awkward-Rich sometimes anticipates cis readers. Addressing himself in “Essay on the Theory of Motion,” the speaker says, “(Let’s get the obvious out of the / way—you were a girl & then you / weren’t...).”23 His anticipation, however, is also something like an inside joke to those who are already in the know. The topic of his work is not transgender identity or gender transition but rather the afterlife of girlhood for a transmasculine black man who survives multiple forms of trauma. Such a topic is less accessible to more mainstream white cis audiences. Awkward-Rich also started out in slam poetry, where literature archives and formal conventions are understood differently and often looked down upon by “high art” poetic literary audiences. The classed and raced nature of poetry markets as well as the tendency of literary critics to pay close attention to poetic “high art” have contributed to the lack of critical work about transgender poetry in general and Awkward-Rich’s multifaceted work in particular. Transgender poets have increasingly been creating identity-positive worlds through the spaces of their poems as well as journals,24 collectives,25 events, anthologies,26 podcasts,27 and resource pages.28 Awkward-Rich’s poetry in particular creates space for complex narratives of embodiment that take transgender

23 Awkward-Rich, SLM, 7.

24 “Vetch”; “#EnbyLife.”

25 “Our Mission.”

26 Peterson and Tolbert, Troubling the Line; Melt, Subject to Change.

27 “Waves Breaking.”

28 “Trans and Non-Binary Poetry Resources.”
identity and experiences of mental distress as givens. Neither are the main theme of the collection, but both are vital for understanding it.

Awkward-Rich is a poet and an assistant professor in gender and women’s studies whose poetic and scholarly work address the intersections of transmasculinity and disability studies. In *Sympathetic Little Monster*, a work written while he was in graduate school, mental distress is painful and even life-threatening, but unlike the distress found in many mainstream depictions of transgender stories presented for the consumption of primarily cis audiences, the speaker’s experience of distress is not just pain or loss. It is not just pain or loss that teaches someone else a valuable lesson. For Awkward-Rich, distress is pain and loss, but it is also neutral, a mundane feature of his life, and it also produces meaning, positionality and movement in the world. In “Ars Poetica,” from which the epigraph of this chapter comes, the speaker states he doesn’t “trust anyone / who has never learned the person can’t be separated / from the rot.”\(^{29}\) The rot in this sense is trauma, but also distress that results from trauma. If one seeks to dig out the rot, Awkward-Rich asks, “what would be left?” In this poem, he is aware of others’ desires to cure his ailment of being “in love with sadness,” but he resists pathologizing himself. He acknowledges he is sad and says he is indeed in love with sadness. Some might add additional psychomedical labels such as major depressive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, general anxiety disorder, lack of “insight” in not desiring to be “well,” etc. But the speaker rejects pathologizing narratives at the outset and says he doesn’t trust those who haven’t learned that rot is part of who he is—part of who people are. Distress, of course, is by definition undesirable, and in this collection, Awkward-Rich takes stock of the pain of distress experiences and uses

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\(^{29}\) Awkward-Rich, *SLM*, 56.
psychomedical treatments that he even says work to keep him alive. Yet he also criticizes psychomedical models that seek to erase distress as if it has no meaning but loss. Distress, conceived by many—including sometimes those who experience it—is considered waste, a feeling that should never have existed, that can have no meaning, that must necessarily be eliminated. But for Awkward-Rich, distress, like other experiences in his life, has meaning, and it shapes his experiences and contributes to his positionality. The “rot” is not waste, not a danger to be removed. Instead it is part of his identity, something of some value and meaning but also uncomfortable, dangerous, and even mundane. In his recent critical essay “Trans, Feminism: Or, Reading like a Depressed Transsexual,” Awkward-Rich asks,

What would it mean to do minoritarian studies without being driven by the desire to rehabilitate the subjects/objects of our knowledge? What kind of theories would we produce if we noticed pain and, rather than automatically seeking out its source in order to alleviate it, or mining it for resources for perverse or resistant pleasures, we instead took it as a fact of being embodied that is not necessarily loaded with moral weight?30

Following these suggestions, encountering Awkward-Rich’s poetry requires rethinking preconceived notions of what distress is. Its very presence is not a psychomedical emergency. It is not a mark of resistance against social conventions that grants those who experience it special powers or worth. It is simply a fact of many people’s lives—in particular a good number of gender variant lives.

Exploring the meaning and value of distress for gender variant people is a major change from understanding distress merely as a symptom of some psychopathology. Recognizing distress as neutral or even potentially useful can help make room for the varied identities and experiences within gender variant populations—and not in terms of inclusivity and public

recognition alone. In his 2014 study of LGBT people who experience distress in their everyday lives, Merrick Daniel Pilling argues, “the ways in which mental distress is understood has a profound impact on how we make sense of our experiences, but also our very sense of who we are. How mental distress is understood and addressed can sometimes mean the difference between life and death.”

By reframing mental distress as sometimes productive or neutral, Awkward-Rich’s collection participates in creating anti-sanist/mad-affirming/disability-affirming work that is literally saving the lives of those who have been taught to hate their distressed bodyminds.

For the existence of gender variant people in particular, the community and movement work that creates utopic worlds for the present and future must also work to make space for a diversity of other identities, experiences, and bodyminds. Otherwise, it will continue down a path that measures its success against disability: “Trans people aren’t crazy; they’re oppressed.” But what gender variant identities and experiences might be made able to assert themselves when space is also made for madness? What kind of mad futures could be made possible? The sad truth is sanist oppression functions so well even within gender variant communities and among their advocates, it is difficult for many to imagine the possibilities. Consequently, the gender variant futures so often imagined and built today continue the same sanist oppression that marked gender variance as pathological in the first place. This chapter attempts to strengthen solidarity work among those building and imagining gender variant futures so that we might make more space in our communities and the futures we build for mad others as well as our mad selves.

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Margaret Price has popularized the usage of the term “bodymind” to indicate the “body” and “mind” conceptualized as one unit despite them being separated in much of western thought.32 “The bodymind” joins the material, psychological, and social in recognition of their mutual constitution of self. The distressed bodymind experiences distress not just confined to the mind, but the whole self from mood to senses, to one’s digestive functions, physical pain, or ability to concentrate or move. “Mental distress” itself is a deviation from more pathologized terms such as “mental illness” or “disorder.” I avoid the word “symptoms” as a way of divesting from psychomedical models of human variation that view the meaningful experiences of mental difference, distress, or disability as a deficit in need of cure in comparison to the imagined and impossible norm of sanity. William J. Penson suggests mental distress could be articulated “as neurodiversity, or post-traumatic growth…. We could therefore alleviate distress through social and political means, without recourse to disease models that result in stigma and damaging treatments.”33 Penson’s recognition of what many label “mental illness” as psychological difference or growth (rather than pathology) includes attention to avoiding stigma and also alleviating distress through attending to one’s experiences of distress. This emphasis on experience over stigma recognizes the agency of the person experiencing distress to determine what is desirable, neutral, undesirable, and perhaps a mixture. Take for instance hearing voices or engaging in repetitive behaviors. Many would be quick to label these pathological, symptoms that must be resolved. Taking a mad/disability studies approach, however, recognizes that these

32 Price, “The Bodymind Problem and the Possibilities of Pain,” 270; Price, Mad at School, 240.

experiences may not be necessarily negative experiences or signs that something “must be fixed.” They may be negative, neutral, comforting, or even pleasant experiences; they may even be experiences one wants to treat or be rid of. But those who have these experiences determine their meaning—not psychomedical professionals consulting a predetermined list of symptoms and diagnoses who then attempt to enforce/produce mental statuses deemed normal. Using more neutral terminology makes space for the people who have these experiences to name for themselves what these experiences mean.

Jerry Tew draws on Foucault’s conception of docile subjects to critique the idea of normative mental health. Tew states that excluded groups seeking political recognition as citizens would have to demonstrate their commitment to construct themselves in the mould of the ‘modern subject’: living out the pretence of being at all times consistent, responsible, accountable and, above all, rational.

Whereas expressions of intuition, spontaneity or passion could be seen as part of everyday life in traditional societies, or even valued as sources of spiritual truth and inspiration, they came to be seen as threatening to a modern social order that required rational and coherent subjects.34

Sanity as a requirement for modern citizenship has motivated respectability as we see it today, and those who don’t fit the mold or fail to commit to the pretense of the mold are marked as deviant and/or mentally ill and therefore in need of “fixing.” Traditional societies’ expectations of mental variation were/are not necessarily identity-positive, but, as in the case of the colonial/modern gender system,35 sanist expectations rooted in Eurocentric coloniality universalize a very particular kind of exclusion that systematically targets and harms populations.

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35 Lugones, “Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System.”
with violent results. Forced “treatment,” incarceration, and capitalist hierarchies are just some of the difficulties those deemed “mad” must contend with under colonialism/modernity.

That which doesn’t fit the idealized norm of sanity is neutral, or as Awkward-Rich states, “a fact of being embodied,” but isn’t distress always a negative experience? The short answer is yes. Though nonnormative experiences like hearing voices or engaging in repetitive behaviors can be distressing to many, they are not necessarily so to all. Distress, however, is the undesirable part of experiences that don’t fit the normative experience of sanity. Self-harm and serious thoughts about death, for instance, are not neutral and are not likely to be considered desirable. But even distressing experiences like these can be examined using a social model that does not necessarily pathologize. According to Tew,

> For a person with mental distress, the journey may.… involve developing a relationship with their distress experiences that is respectful and even collaborative—working with their experiences to discover what may be their underlying social meaning—while at the same time, finding ways of developing a more assertive and equal power relationship with their distress experiences, no longer allowing them to dominate or take over their lives to the same extent. (Tew “Towards a…” 75)

Collaboration with one’s experiences of distress is a novel concept in our current culture of psychological and medical experts, diagnostic criteria, and standards of care. Though much success has been made in lessening the harms of these institutions and modifying them to provide care to those who use them, mainstream attempts to “destigmatize mental illness” are not enough. Resisting the wholesale authority of medical and psychological institutions (while still having access to their services when helpful) and advocating for individualized and community care requires destigmatizing distress to the point that, even though it may be an undesirable experience, it can also be valued in some way whether as useful for understanding one’s limits and needs, gaining comfort and relief in intolerable circumstances, or as information that helps
one understand how to manage one’s distress in new ways. This is NOT to say that “everything happens for a reason” or that distress must necessarily be useful. I am instead only arguing that distress can be useful and that destigmatizing its presence even when it negatively affects one’s life can grant agency more firmly to the person experiencing mental distress. This argument sharply contrasts the current psychomedical model (adopted by most institutions and much of the public) that considers distress to be so threatening that eradication of distress “symptoms” must be the primary goal, to the exclusion of the meaning distress can have for those who experience it.

The reigning medical models invested in ableism, sanism, homophobia, and transphobia result in internalized beliefs for all people—including disabled, mad, and gender and sexually variant people. Because of this, identity-positive advocates work to conceptualize bodyminds in ways that make space for all each individual is and needs to be. This means seeing distressed bodyminds not as pathological objects needing to be tamed, but as components of what and who people are. As Awkward-Rich’s speaker asks in “Ars Poetica,” one can try to dig out the rot, “But what would be left of you?” Even when bodyminds do what is undesirable, these distress experiences produce positionality and meaning that are significant to identities and experiences in the world.

Of course placing value on what is undesirable is an odd concept. In many cases, those who experience mental distress seek out psychomedical treatments to alleviate distress and to work toward wellbeing on their own terms. In other cases other resources or a combination of

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36 "Wellbeing" is a contested concept. For some, it put the onus on individuals to resolve disabling structures, but in my usage of the term, wellbeing is an individual’s self-determined state of capacity or existence that seems realistic for their bodymind at any given time. It focuses on the individual’s experience in the world as it is, but it does not take the onus off the environmental changes necessary to make worlds accessible and not disabling.
psychomedical treatments and other resources prove helpful. But despite efforts to reduce
distress on the part of those who experience it, rejecting internalized (sanist, ableist) beliefs about
the nature of distress aids in reconceptualizing bodyminds as diverse, not disordered, and even
aids in providing better support for those who experience distress. In “The Bodymind Problem
and the Possibilities of Pain,” an essay that discusses a "limit case" about mental pain and
violence that challenges thinking about the desirability of disability, Price argues that a feminist
disability studies ethic of care can only come about when subjects are “considered to be equally
valuable” and when the desires and needs of all parties are recognized.37 She then reflects on her
own experience:

To be “considered equally valuable” when I am in the midst of a violent break means to
be treated as someone who is having a meaningful experience, even if my actions are not
always safe (and thus sometimes need to be curtailed). That my experience is meaningful
does not imply that the person or people with me are able to understand it, but rather that
they take for granted it should be understood. Striking my head with a lamp may be
undesirable in the sense that it is physically dangerous (and frightening or triggering for
those who observe it); however, it is desirable in the sense that it is a meaningful form of
communication.38

Price’s application of a feminist disability studies ethics of care to mental distress is very
different from the reigning psychomedical models that treat those experiencing distress—
especially if inconsistent with prevailing standards of rationality—as objects that must be
controlled. For Price, exerting some control might be necessary to protect the desires and needs
of the person in distress, but divergent experiences of rationality do not mean the person in
distress ceases to have a viewpoint of significance. For Price, even violent distress has meaning
as an expression of mental pain and an attempt to resolve it, and that expression is worth


38 Price, 279, emphasis in original.
validation. Melanie Yergeau complains about the similar invalidation of distressed or neurodivergent experience on the part of the psychomedical establishment. When she was involuntarily bound, transported, and committed to a psych ward, “Suddenly, the experts claimed, I wasn't talking. God, no. ‘That's your depression talking,’ they explained. ‘That's your autism talking. That's your anxiety talking. Really, it's anything but you talking.’”\(^\text{39}\) Such comments only underline the standard disregard of the distressed individual’s perspective, difference, and will. Yergeau goes on to complain: “In order to claim an emotion, we need to have it empirically validated.”\(^\text{40}\) This is the mainstream world we live in: where people with atypical neurological, and mental experiences are not recognized as having valid interpretations of their own experiences, and they—and the public—are taught to doubt the validity of their feelings unless verified by a psychomedical authority.

According to Price, others demonstrate care for her when they recognize her agency and respect her view of her own distress experience regardless of if they understand it. She goes on to say that her periods of violent distress are often less intense and shorter in duration when those who are present witness and validate her feelings rather than exert rational control and authority over what she is experiencing.\(^\text{41}\) Of course, her personal experience and needs may not be the same as others’ experiences of distress or mental disability, but the systemic enforcement of psychomedical models that define some as sane and others as requiring “fixing” invalidates the real experiences people have of distress. The reign of the psychomedical model results in most of us being taught to internalize our and others’ distress as invalid, messed up, and regretful. The


\(^\text{40}\) Yergeau, pt. V.

\(^\text{41}\) Price, “The Bodymind Problem and the Possibilities of Pain,” 279.
pathologizing of gender variance was/is part of this same oppressive structure, and now that
gender variance is being depathologized, it is more important than ever to commit to the
destruction of the entire pathologizing system that marks some bodyminds as acceptable and
others as sick/mad/crazy/unwell. This chapter extends the ethic of care Price describes to reading
practices: to witness and validate the expression of distress experiences and to fight against the
cultural assumptions that mental distress has no meaning except as pathology. Through exploring
the potential meanings of distress in Awkward-Rich’s collection, I aim to recast distress as
potentially productive of meaning and positionality and to recast gender variant distress as
unexceptional to other kinds of distress. Doing so recognizes the agency of the person
experiencing distress in interpreting their own experiences and also recognizes the agency of the
bodymind itself to revolt, repair, rest, and recover on its own terms as it interacts with
environments, oppression, trauma, time, and community. Cissexism and other forms of
oppression certainly have an impact on the prevalence of distress among gender variant people,
but distress is also just a part of human diversity and human vulnerability. When gender variant
advocates recognize the value of distress (and of those who experience it) regardless of its cause
or whether it is temporary, they work to make identity-positive gender variant worlds—not just
futures dedicated to happy transgender people who never experience significant distress.

Sanist and ableist cultural structures preceded modernity, and their other victims have
been and often continue to be people with racial, cultural, gender, and sexual experience outside
the imagined norm. By focusing on mental distress, I hope to join with mad studies and disability
studies critics like Samuels and Pilling who recognize the way madness is set up as a category of
abnormality, from which other minoritized political communities have sought exception. As I
explore Awkward-Rich’s narratives of trans mental distress, I aim to dissolve the category of the
abnormal by making space for trans distress and thereby eliminating the need for gender variance to escape the category of the abnormal because distress is not deficit. Distress happens, and it is information that can have meaning for those who experience it so that they can move toward wellbeing in a way that makes room for all that they are (rather than all that is deemed mentally “healthy”).

*Mental Distress as Information*

In the autobiographical poetry collection, *Sympathetic Little Monster*, Awkward-Rich investigates the relationship he has with his girlhood, represented in the haunting, monstrous, and yet sympathetic figure of “the girl.” The speaker in the collection is mainly Awkward-Rich himself, a black man assigned female at birth, who is also a survivor of gendered sexual violence. He is an inheritor of intergenerational trauma steeped in sexism, racism, and ableism, and, in this collection, he explores his past, present, and complex relationships with others and himself. At times he addresses the girl, a version of himself he no longer is. At other times, the speaker shifts to the girl addressing him or to even part of his body speaking to him in “(Vagina Monologue).” As speaker, Awkward-Rich experiences a variety of forms of distress, and he mentions interaction with psychomedical resources in both critical and positive contexts.

Because Awkward-Rich’s poetic narrative directly addresses gender identity in the context of oppression, trauma, gender, race, and distress, it is rich ground for exploring how gender variant distress produces meaning and positionality. In this section, I will first argue that the speaker’s experience of distress demonstrates his human vulnerability to gendered oppression but also his bodymind’s communication of its gendered needs. I will then explore the role of distress in the transgender futures Awkward-Rich imagines.
Awkward-Rich uses the image of a train to explore distress in the poem “The Child Formerly Known As ____.” The speaker says that each time his father invokes the name he was assigned at birth and refuses to use his real name (and thus acknowledge his gender identity), a black pit opens and creates a tunnel with a girl on the other end. The girl is a repeated figure in this collection, the sympathetic little monster from which the collection gets its name. She is a ghostly presence of the girl Awkward-Rich once was, but she is now displaced and has taken on a life of her own, haunting him in unexpected and sometimes familiar ways such as when he is misgendered. Addressing himself, he says:

There are tracks laid in the tunnel in you & a train.
Yes that’s right, a train.
& on the other end, a little girl.

The train is where each thing made for her that happens in your life
goes to travel to her & sometimes
you think you will die—\(^{42}\)

For the speaker, the consequences of misgendering are severe, and the violent disruption of an entire train barrels through him, causing pain, alienation, and, here, thoughts of death. He emphatically repeats, “Yes that’s right, a train” as though the person he is talking to has not taken full account of the significance of his distress and the weight of his statement. He is talking to himself, a detail that further emphasizes his internalization of both cissexism and sanism, which lead to minimizing the misgendering and his distress and thus the need to repeat himself. A train, however, is not easily ignored. He reminds himself “Yes that’s right, a train” as a reminder perhaps too that the passing of this train will take some time, and it will not stop just because he wills it to.

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\(^{42}\) Awkward-Rich, *SLM*, 50.
The gender expectations of others separate him from his own life and experiences. When a man seems to catcall him on the subway, assuming him a straight woman, the speaker notes the irony since, as a queer man, he might have been interested had the man been queer and recognized the speaker’s gender as male. The speaker says of the catcalling man:

He boards the train
with your father & your first girlfriend & the state of Michigan
& they all want to see the girl

& you’re carrying a train full of people who want you gone
Or think you are gone

The train inside the speaker carries those who misgender him and carries them and their expectations through the tunnel to the girl, with his own experience numbed in the presence of these experiences meant for her. He is aware of the absurdity of the assumption he is the/a girl, yet it is the disconnect between what others see and what he knows himself to be that creates the tunnel that causes distress and thoughts of death. The “train full of people [want him] gone / Or think [he is] gone.” In this collection, the threat of suicide is a perpetually potential outcome being held at bay, and the image of the train full of people who attempt to wish or assume him out of existence exemplifies the common arguments made about transgender minority stress: that cissexism and transphobia have an impact on gender variant people’s ability to continue living. Whether a direct allusion to how misgendering contributes to suicidal ideation, a comment on how misgendering causes distress that seems like death, or both, Awkward-Rich describes misgendering as distressing in a very dangerous way.

43 Awkward-Rich, 50.
44 Awkward-Rich, 11–13, 44.
The invocation of gender variant distress in arguments to end cissexism can be overly reductive: misgendering causes distress experiences (such as depression, dissociation, suicidal ideation, etc.); distress is pathology that must be eliminated; thus misgendering must end. However, this equation does not fully describe the danger of misgendering. The catcalling man’s assumption that the speaker is a straight woman contributes to his invisibility as a queer man (both his maleness and his queerness), and this invisibility detracts from what is possible for the speaker to experience in terms of his queer masculinity. The speaker can’t experience trust and intimacy with his father when his father refuses to understand him or with a partner who does not recognize him as he is. In addition, he can’t move freely in many spaces without concerns about his state ID. The failure of others’ capacities to see his gender (and by extension sexuality and positionality) limits what he is able to experience in life, so even though misgendering causes distress, and distress itself is undesirable, distress is not the problem; distress is an assertion—sometimes vague, sometimes like an entire train that rips through the center of a person—that something more is necessary. The point of eliminating misgendering is not to eliminate distress—it is to make room for intimacy, relationships, and life experiences that create connection, community, belonging, self-confidence, and mutual respect. Experiencing these more positive relationalities often reduces distress, but it does not require distress to be absent.

Distress is a loud, at times violently uncomfortable alarm. Like hunger, thirst, or even anger, distress experiences are always uncomfortable, sometimes never fully go away, may ebb and flow, and often communicate something useful. When one is hungry, one must eat. When thirsty, one must drink. Audre Lorde asserts that despite anger being uncomfortable, “Anger is

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45 Awkward-Rich, 17.
loaded with information and energy.” The bodymind experiences distress as discomfort, but like anger, distress contains vital information about what is intolerable and what is needed. The meaning of distress that results from misgendering surely indicates the misgendering must stop, but distress can also be the form of communication the bodymind adopts to insist on its need for more than it currently has: perhaps more intimacy, more community more rest, perhaps the impossible, a world without oppression, or utopic identity-positive worlds.

The bodymind’s need for more does not have immediate or sometimes even feasible possibilities for resolution, but distress can contain information about the worlds the bodymind needs to survive and thrive. This information can be used to create more just worlds—whether through creating worlds where misgendering doesn’t happen or where families and communities are comprised of those with whom intimacy and trust are possible. Such worlds are built—whether through persistent investment in a utopic future that may never be possible but becomes ever closer to becoming reality or through investment in one’s own needs and one’s own communities. Distress contains information which often makes insight possible, and it even creates energy through its refusal to be overlooked. Insight about distress is of course difficult, and the lack of energy that distress experiences like depression represent make insight and action even more difficult, but without distress experiences of some variety—including depression—change is difficult, and utopic gender variant worlds impossible.

In the closing lines of “The Child Formerly Known As _____,” the speaker demonstrates how distress complicates but also motivates his transition and his life. He addresses himself:

you’d rather be her
or at least bury her, seal her shut
or shut her up

& in the end, isn’t that what we all want?

To not feel so
split?
To carry an image of ourselves
inside ourselves & know exactly what we mean
when we say $I—,$ $I—,$ $I—$?

The speaker is exasperated, worn down, acknowledging a willingness to do whatever it takes to relieve the disconnect between what others assume, expect, and enforce and what he sees himself to be. He’d rather be her to just end the disconnect, but he also considers burying her: erasing her lingering existence in his life, or perhaps even erasing his own life which coexists with her afterlife. To not be split would mean he would know what he means when he says I, but he includes three italicized “I”s. The first in the series of three is “$I—.$” ($I$ + em dash + spaces + period). The em dash indicates an introduction—to something more specific or something closely related. Awkward-Rich expresses the desire to know what we mean when we say “$I—$” ($I$ + em dash). He does not say “$I.$” ($I$ + period) which would indicate an end to that thought, but he says “$I—$” ($I$ + em dash), an introduction to something. This punctuation feature is true of all three of the “I”s that end the poem. But the first introduces space to indicate the girl. This is a very similar construction to “_____” (underscore) in the quote from the speaker’s father that is the poem’s title.

The speaker’s father misgenders him by calling him “The Child Formerly Known As _____.” Among gender variant advocates, names assigned at birth are often called “deadnames,”

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and misgendering through the use of names assigned at birth is “deadnaming.” This wording indicates that those names assigned at birth and often still lingering/haunting on state IDs, birth certificates, passports, school rosters, and other public and private records are not valid, are “dead” to the gender variant person in question. Rather than referring to these names as “birth names,” which indicates birth and life, these names have a connotation with death because misgendering puts the lives of gender variant people at risk—whether through the violence of the state, interpersonal violence, self-harm, or other forms of distress that affect one’s ability to live. The term “deadname” is also associated with the power of oppressive institutions to not only perpetuate transphobia that contributes to the deaths of gender variant people, but when gender variant people die, state IDs, police reports, media reports, and legal “next of kin” determine the names of those who are not respected enough in death to be allowed to name themselves. The underscores in the poem’s title of “The Child Formerly Known As ____” indicates the name the speaker received at birth, and through using underscores, Awkward-Rich refuses to fill in the blank with a deadname as his father does. Awkward-Rich’s assertion of underscored space forces the reader to confront the erasure of the deadname made visible in the underscored space. Like a deadname, the girl is closely aligned with death. The speaker’s desire to be the girl expresses a desire to end this split between who he is and who people think he is, yet he feels like he might die when others think he is her. The speaker also wants to bury her so that he doesn’t have to experience the nagging disconnect between her and himself.

While “____” (underscore) stands in for a deadname that he refuses to fill in, “” (space) is a refusal to deadname himself while also acknowledging the fact of the girl’s presence:

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she is displaced because he exists, but she is not absent. In “Essay on the Theory of Motion,” Awkward-Rich addresses himself: “You moved into a boy & the / girl moved into misplaced language, into photographs.”\textsuperscript{49} The girl he was in the past and might have been today is present now in the words of others who misgender him, in photographs, and the underscored blank of a deadname, and even though it might seem that the speaker’s refusal to erase the girl must mean he is still her, in “Essay on the Appearance of Ghosts,” he says, “Don’t sympathize with monsters, unless you want to become one. Even if we made them. Even if they are little girls.”\textsuperscript{50} The little girl may be a sympathetic character, she may just be a social construction that he has moved on from, but he refuses to sympathize with her because he emphatically is not her. Extending that lack of sympathy, he refuses to name the girl in “Child Formerly Known As ___” in the “_____” (underscore) as well as the “    ” (space), and he does so as an assertion of his male identity. But through the use of “    ” (space), he also refuses to make a point of underscoring the erasure of her name because even though she is dead to him, a remnant of the past, of displaced language, or of a person he never became, he refuses to erase the fact that her haunting/lingering presence is a significant part of his own positionality. In the opening lines of the first poem of this collection, “The Girl is Brought to Her Knees in a Field of Glass,” Awkward-Rich states, “I could give her a name / I could / cross out this story / cut the sentence short,”\textsuperscript{51} but he doesn’t. The girl is not given a name because she is dead to him. But her presence in his story is not cut out. The collection, \textit{Sympathetic Little Monster}, is Awkward-Rich’s poetic and narrative refusal to either give the girl full life or erase her significance to his identity. Referring to the first “I” in

\textsuperscript{49} Awkward-Rich, \textit{SLM}, 7.

\textsuperscript{50} Awkward-Rich, 69.

\textsuperscript{51} Awkward-Rich, 1.
“The Child Formerly Known As _____” as “   ” (space) indicates a simultaneous investment in asserting his identity as a man and acknowledging the existence of the past and would-be girl in his current life.

The second “I—” is the present speaker, split, caught between experiences, associations, relationships, positionalities, and even worlds. On one end of the tunnels is the girl, and on the other end is something else. This interstitial “I” is the speaker now as he is negotiating the specter of the girl in his life, in the assumptions of those around him, and in his view of himself in this moment. One can easily read the second “I” as the transitioning figure moving from girlhood to manhood, but Awkward-Rich troubles that reading through the second “I” already being a man, but it is significant that the space for the girl’s “I” and the space for the interstitial “I” share the same line because she is his history. The girl is first, a period marking her end after only a few spaces. The interstitial figure is second, and a period is placed by itself on the next line. This period draws attention to the space left open between the interstitial “I” and the end of the page. This large space signals the unlimited potential in that “I” to continually transform and perhaps even to leave the page of prescribed gender. But the edge of the paper also signals danger. Like text that doesn’t fit on a page, gender variant people and others who experience distress are at risk of not existing—often by suicide and other complications related to distress—because there is not room for them in their families, in their reality, in the social structures that make their world, and for many, in their own imaginations. To exist so close to the margins means there are dangers of falling off the page or never having been written in the first place. Unlike with the first “I”, punctuated with a period to mark the girl’s end when the speaker asserts a male identity, the punctuation of the second “I” asserts an indeterminant ending but an ending
nonetheless. Will he be murdered, will he die by suicide, will he die having been all he was and could be, or will he die having lived only what his world could imagine and make room for?

The third and last “I” is the not yet fully arrived. The last line of the poem reads simply “I—?” (I + em dash + space + question mark). This “I” ends in a question mark to complete a question posed earlier in the poem: Don’t we all want to not feel split and to know what we mean when we say I? The presence of three “I”s already calls into question whether coherence is possible since a multiplicity is at play. The question mark attached to the third “I” represents two kinds of ambivalence about transition from the first “I” to this one. The first is whether being completely separated from the girl is desirable.52 As was mentioned in the choice to name the “I” associated with the girl with spaces and not underscores, the girl is displaced, dead, but like a ghost, she haunts the speaker and holds meaning for his past but also current positionality in the world. If one views Awkward-Rich’s speaker as split between female and male identity, the interstitial “I” is a transgender figure transitioning from the “female” end of the tunnel to the “male” end. Sandy Stone’s 1991 essay “The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto” became a founding document for transgender studies because it made visible the theoretical divide between those who see gender as bound to simplistic notions of gendered bodies and use labels like “the wrong body” and those who more critically view gendered embodiment “in a manner which adequately describes the multiple contradictions of individual lived experience.”53 Awkward-Rich’s ambivalence about the girl signals his desire to keep the girl dead (and to assert

52 Some transmasculine people have known they were male all their lives. They may have been coerced into adopting a female identity as children or even into adulthood, but looking back, they see a boyhood—not a girlhood. They see the mistaken assumptions of others and potentially even themselves as part of what held them back from asserting the male identity they had all along. Awkward-Rich does not see his past in that way.

a distinctly male identity) but also to challenge the notion that trans identity is merely “switching genders.” His more critical frame follows Stone’s critique and acknowledges that even if the girl is dead, she has an afterlife in his distinctly trans masculinity. Thus an “I” completely divorced from the girl expresses a fantasy that devalues the complex lived experiences of gender variant people. The speaker’s ambivalence about the third “I” also speaks to a larger set of anxieties about transmasculinity in a world that devalues femininity. A form of masculinity completely removed from the needs and experiences of girls and women is toxic masculinity, which harms women and nonbinary people but also men. The speaker’s questioning of this third “I” represents his refusal to buy into a myth of transmasculinity, or masculinity in general, that is so far removed from the needs and experiences of girls and women that it fails to see and understand sexism and misogyny.

The second kind of ambivalence represented in the question mark after the third “I” addresses the nature of gender variant utopias. The speaker names three “I”s: the girl first, then the speaker presently split, then this third category toward which the speaker is moving: Something un-split, unfragmented, whole. Gender variant advocates fight for a utopic dream of gender variant lives without fragmentation, without cissexist oppression, and without the trauma and internalized conflicts created by cissexism. Intersectional gender variant advocates also fight against racism, classism, ableism and other forms of oppression, but if distress is seen only as a result of minority stress, the gender variant futures imagined, fought for, and ultimately created are futures where distress does not exist. The third “I” that ends “The Child Formerly Known As ____” is a trans person existing in such an imagined gender variant utopia where no train comes ripping through to send displaced messages to someone else. That utopic “I” does not experience mental distress because oppression has been eliminated and ample support for his gendered,
raced, classed, and other minoritized identities exist. This is the future gender variant people are supposed to want, right? The poem ends with this yet to be realized possibility of gender variant wholeness, an exciting prospect, but one which also pathologizes distress rather than focusing only on the elimination of cissexist and other kinds of oppression. The future created in this utopic vision is one that contains no room for distress, which unfortunately also means it contains no room for those who experience distress.

In an interview following the release of *Sympathetic Little Monster*, Awkward-Rich was asked what is possible for alleviating the feeling of being fragmented. He answers:

One of the most important things about being a part of “like” communities is that doing so can alleviate, at least temporarily, the feeling of being split. Or, at the very least, makes that feeling manageable because it becomes a shared feeling—a feeling that ties you to others rather than making you feel split off from them. So building these kinds of spaces and networks, formally or informally, is crucial.

But, also, I don’t think feeling fragmented is necessarily a thing to seek to eliminate! Feelings, even unpleasant ones, can be a source of knowledge and intelligence. Awkward-Rich sees being split as a difficult but sometimes useful occurrence that requires attention but not necessarily resolution.\(^{54}\) His response states that even when distress cannot be alleviated, community creates shared feelings and intimacy that are tools for managing distress. Seeking to personally *manage* distress is much different from seeking to *eliminate* distress from one’s imaginative horizons. When one eliminates distress from one’s utopic visions, one also eliminates the possibility of people who experience distress existing in that version of utopia.

Managing distress means taking distress experiences as a reality and learning to understand them

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\(^{54}\) Awkward Rich’s stance on being split is very unlike Harry/Harriet’s in *No Telephone to Heaven*. Harry/Harriet saw being split as a middle ground position that refuses to take a political stance for the wellbeing of those oppressed under colonial domination (Cliff, *No Telephone to Heaven*, 131). For Awkward-Rich, being split is the distress that results from being drawn in multiple directions. The two positions are not, however, opposed. Siding with those oppressed under colonial domination requires also standing with those oppressed under sanism, which results in making space for experiences of distress such as the feeling of being split Awkward-Rich describes.
and oneself so that one can reduce the impact of distress in one’s life. Of course people want to reduce their experience of distress; it is an uncomfortable and often dangerous experience. But one can seek to reduce distress for oneself or oppressed communities through eliminating oppression and managing distress. Eliminating distress from one’s vision of gender variant or any other kind of utopia is sanist exclusion that endangers the lives and wellbeing of the neurodivergent, mad, and those who experience distress. In this interview, Awkward-Rich values distress “as a source of knowledge and intelligence,” and in “The Child Formerly Known As ____,” the speaker experiences distress while being open to the knowledge and intelligence it can offer about identity, expression, desire, intimacy, community, support, etc. The third “I” signals desire for gender variant utopia without fragmentation, but the question mark that follows it and that ends the poem also cautions against a gender variant utopia that makes space for gender variance but fails to make space for those who experience mental distress.

Awkward-Rich’s “The Child Formerly Known As ____” demonstrates that the bodymind can communicate about what it needs through distress. Exploring distress grants insight for understanding power dynamics that must be altered to create space for all kinds of identities and experiences as well as insight into one’s needs for care and support—what works better and what does not for one’s own bodymind. Though people are classified in groups based on identities and experience, we are ultimately extremely diverse beings with extremely diverse needs related to power structures but also to sleep, chemical substances, sensory stimuli, movement, social interaction, etc. Distress is information about the bodymind that helps each person exist in this world as an individual and within larger communities. Reconceptualizing gender variant distress from a pathology caused by oppression to information that leads to insight and action about
personal and community needs is a radical shift, and one that better represents identity-positive views of gender variant lives.

Identity-positive frames seek to open up what is possible and not just what is. To make room for madness is to make room for ways of being that can be identities or can be expressions that have meaning to people. Wanting to be a gender one wasn’t assigned at birth once meant you were mad. At the same time, people could be so suppressed that few could recognize what their own longings were or meant or could be, and distress was unintelligible. Today, gender dysphoria is known as a form of mental distress that is indeed caused by a cissexist world (including access to resources) but also by material limits of what bodies can do (at least with current medical technologies). Forms of madness that come with clinical diagnoses like borderline personality disorder, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, etc. can be interrelated with forms of oppression such as sexism, racism, transphobia, ableism and of course sanism. But through mental distress, the bodymind can also communicate a longing for some identity that as of yet the psychomedical industry cannot understand or the individual or even the most progressive communities can’t recognize either. How can we know what bodies will communicate unless more space is created for that possibility? Given time and the building of more identity-positive worlds, how can the space given to the meaningful experiences of mental distress not produce more identities, forms of expression, and ways of being? Not to mention agency, insight, self-love, community connection, power, and quality of life?

Futures Worth Fighting For

In “The Child Formerly Known As ____,” Awkward-Rich sees distress as a result of cissexist oppression, yet he experiences distress as a source of knowledge and is suspicious of
the possibility or desirability of a future without it. In “Ars Poetica,” he universalizes those who experience trauma and distress. Following this poetic vision, distress as a significant part of positionality is not just relevant to those who are deemed mad but to those, like transgender people, who so often work to be understood as oppressed, not “crazy.” Awkward-Rich says the person cannot be separated from the rot because distress produces positionality and identity. Without rot, what is left is not you? Distress experiences shape who one is, and they can provide information about what one needs in terms of asserting an identity or learning further how to care for oneself.

Awkward-Rich’s vision of transgender distress is one that is unafraid of being associated with the rot, the trauma, the distress, the mad, the lack of respectability associated with “sanity.” Today, there is increasing (and warranted) pressure being put on all segments of American society to make space for transgender people and provide them the opportunities for life and connection that they need and desire. This pressure often involves citing gender variant experiences of mental distress as evidence that oppression is the cause and implying that distress will disappear. Like Awkward-Rich’s speaker in “The Child Formerly Known As ____,” people who experience distress experience further distress when suddenly “you’re carrying a train full of people who want you gone / Or think you are gone.” When gender variant advocates put forward the figure of the unequivocally sane, mentally undisturbed gender variant person as the goal of gender variant movements, they imagine a future where gender variant people have all they need. It is a nice thought, and a future without oppression is certainly one worth fighting for, but neurodiversity is a welcome fact of human existence, humans are vulnerable to trauma and distress that can exist outside of oppressive structures, and dealing with gendered ghosts may be an ongoing process. When people who experience mental distress—especially those who
experience it in “extreme” ways—are not considered in the utopic worlds we create, they are wished and assumed out of existence. When we who advocate for gender variant futures assume those who experience distress are not a part of those futures, we send violently disruptive trains through the bodyminds of our already distressed comrades. That’s right, trains. When we fail to make space for distress among gender variant people, we participate in sanist oppression and increase the distress of those who do not fit the standards of mental “wellness.” What is more, we often increase our own experience of distress because we even fail to make room for ourselves. The rot is part of us, and the utopic worlds we fight for today and for the future must make room for it.

My argument in this chapter is in many ways a call for the inclusion of madness into the consideration of gender variant distress and within transgender studies more broadly, but Pilling envisions disciplines like transgender studies to be subdisciplines of mad studies. He states, “These areas of study make significant contributions to mad studies, in no small part because the psy-sciences have long been heavily implicated in the social control and marginalization of LGBTQ and racialized groups.”55 Madness has long been used to measure respectability of groups of racialized people as well as sexual and gender variant people. The de-pathologization of these identities have had key moments of progress such as the discrediting of scientific racism, and the removal of homosexuality and transgender identity from the DSM and WHO diagnostic criteria. Still, depathologization continues as implicit racial bias remains a major problem in medical and psychological care and even in the work gender variant advocates do to make space for trans lives. As we continue the work of gender variant advocacy, it is useful to consider

Samuels’s call for claims to justice that do not rely on distance from disability and to work to reduce distress even while we make space for its presence and its value. Gender variant people are a diverse group of humans, and the identity positive futures we create by definition must make space for all of who gender variant people are and can become.
CONCLUSION

This project has explored what it means to make space for gender and sexual variance among LGBTQ people and their advocates. Gender and sexual diversity are often reduced to the individual letters in what is an expansive acronym now commonly seen with A, I, 2, +, * and/or a variety of other characters representing identities that are being newly articulated, more widely recognized, and continually reconceptualized. Identity positivity means opening oneself up to what is changing. This includes the entrance of asexuality into what counts as sexual variance and, as early online writing about asexuality reveals, within radical identity politics. Identity positivity is also about facing the impact of colonial logic on the field of queer and transgender studies. To ignore colonization is to internalize it and enforce it, and decolonial approaches to our thinking, teaching, and scholarship present the only way forward.

Much of queer and transgender studies has taken the modern/colonial gender system as a given and has, therefore, only allowed certain forms of identification that match Eurocentric theoretical ideals, but identity positivity insists that we let go of assumptions that only some identities are worth claiming. Gender and sexual diversity thrives in decolonial worlds, and the fields of queer and transgender studies would do well to form real and lasting theoretical bonds with indigenous studies and postcolonial studies. Doing so invests in utopic worlds free of colonial control of indigenous lands and free of Eurocentric impositions of what gender and sexual variance is and can be: nonconformity with dominant gender and sexual forms or, as is the case in Michelle Cliff’s imaginary, conformity.
This openness to gender and sexual possibility also includes a critical re-evaluation of
gender and sexually variant bodyminds. As analysis of Cameron Awkward-Rich’s work reminds
us, imagining a world without transgender distress means imagining a world without many
transgender people. What queer worlds or gender and sexually variant worlds we create for
ourselves directly translates into what others and even we ourselves are and may also become.
Will we exclude, or will we make space within our collectives for new ways of thinking and
ways of being that have been suppressed under colonialism, saneism, and other forms of
oppression?

It is easy to lift up Sylvia Rivera as a model of resistance considering her attempt to
destroy the front desk of the Center, an object that had come to represent the prioritization of
white middle-class respectability over the needs of street youth. This image of resistance recalls
her, in 1969, throwing Molotov cocktails during the Stonewall rebellion against the violent social
control of gender and sexually variant people. Yet the work I’d like to highlight in the closing of
this project is her work to build—not destroy. Rivera confronted, fought, and called people out,
but she also built relationships, community, housing collectives, advocacy networks, and support
services. In the context of work to abolish the prison industrial complex, Morgan Bassichis,
Alexander Lee, and Dean Spade remind us:

Abolition is not some distant future but something we create in every moment when we
say no to the traps of empire and yes to the nourishing possibilities dreamed of and
practiced by our ancestors and friends…. Abolition is about breaking down things that
oppress and building up things that nourish.¹ (Bassichis, Lee, and Spade 36-37)

¹ Bassichis, Lee, and Spade, “Building an Abolitionist Trans and Queer Movement with Everything We’ve
Got,” 36–37.
Rivera did abolitionist work that wreaked havoc on policing systems and institutions (including the Center) that put queer, trans, and cis straight populations at risk. But her abolition work also continued in her building of other structures that provided safety and self-determination for street youth, and all her children. Abolition is identity-positive work. Destroying oppressive ideas and institutions that make gender and sexually variant lives unlivable supports gender and sexual diversity, but such diversity also requires building support structures that make room for the lives and wellbeing of all gender and sexually variant people and that make space for forms of gender and sexuality that are unfamiliar to many. Rather than focusing on the differences between straight/cis and queer/trans populations or the exceptionalism of queer positionality as anti-relational queer theorists do, Rivera focused on building a movement and a future inclusive of all queer and trans people and anyone else facing oppression: including whites and people of color, youth and adults, people living with HIV, sex workers, incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people, and people living with addiction or mental disabilities.

As educators, scholars, students, gender and sexually variant people, and/or their allies, we have a stake in gender and sexual diversity. The future we envision and labor to create will inevitably be stunted by our own limitations, but identity positivity pushes us beyond our current limitations to continually build upon our capacity to make room for the full diversity of gender and sexually variant people that exist in our lives and on the horizon of possibility.
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Dr. Chu was an editorial contributor for Gay Chicago Magazine from 2009 to 2011 and the Social Networking Coordinator for the Gay Liberation Network 2008-2010. From 2010 to 2014, they were a youth worker and later creative expression facilitator at Youth Lounge Lakeview, a former service provider for LGBTQ+ youth on the north side of Chicago.

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