

**QUEER AMBIVALENCE: FANTASIES OF BELONGING IN THE
LESBIAN IMAGINARY**

HILARY THURSTON

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the representation of affective relations in theories and histories of attachment within lesbian cultures across 20th and 21st century Western contexts. Using critical discourse analysis through feminist affect studies and cultural studies frameworks at the intersection of psychoanalysis, attachment theory and trauma theory, it investigates widely disseminated representations of lesbians and queries the trope of ambivalent attachments in the lesbian imaginary. It asks, what are the affective dynamics that characterize the relationship between trauma, fantasy and attachment in the lesbian imaginary, and what are the personal, interpersonal and collective implications of this characterization? The author introduces a theory of systemic attachment trauma, *queer codependency*, and the concept of *lesbian rage-fantasy* to examine how affects produced by experiences of gender and sexual oppression can be managed by fantasies of belonging that facilitate collusion with hegemonic logics and promote political disavowal. Through interdisciplinary and intersectional analyses of lesbian life writing, novels, television series, and psychology literature, the author presents a genealogy of affective ambivalence in discourses and representations of lesbian attachments. The dissertation theorizes the affective transmission of gender and sexual oppression by analysing widespread lesbian tropes that circulate in the lesbian imaginary: the stories of lesbian u-hauling, lesbian longing, serial monogamy and lesbian processing, and lesbian figures like the codependent lesbian, the angry lesbian and the lesbian [love] addict. The chapters present a poststructuralist, decolonial, and critical deconstruction of the signifier lesbian that de-pathologizes lesbian feeling and makes intelligible the ways in which queer ambivalence can materialize in relation to systemic and interpersonal trauma.

For all the heartbroken lesbians left wondering why.

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Introduction

...two women together is a work nothing in civilization has made simple.

—Adrienne Rich, *The Dream of a Common Language: Poems 1974–1977*, 2013, 35.

This dissertation examines the representation of affective relations in theories and histories of attachment within lesbian cultures across 20th and 21st century Western contexts. Through critical frames at the intersection of psychoanalysis, queer studies and feminist affect theories, it investigates widely disseminated characterizations of lesbians and queries the storied ambivalence with which lesbian subjects attach to their love objects. Ambivalence appears as a central affective theme in the historical archives documenting queer and lesbian histories (Love, 2000a, 2000b, 2007; Amin, 2017; Munt, 2008; Halperin and Traub, 2009), and it is also employed in attachment psychology (an outgrowth of psychoanalysis) to characterize orientations and modes of interpersonal attachment in relation to psychological development (Bowlby, 1958, 1960, 1969, 1973, 1978, 1980a; Ainsworth, 1978). As an identity constructed by modern psychology, how does “the lesbian” and her cultural mythology reflect a subjectivity that is discursively prescribed in ambivalent terms? How has ambivalence been represented, perpetuated and historicized in discourses about love between women and lesbian attachments?

The following chapters conduct an inquiry from a trauma-informed perspective that aims to understand the interrelation of systemic trauma (Goldsmith et al., 2014) and lesbian attachments in personal and collective mythologies. What are the dynamics of attachment that characterize interpersonal relationships, addictive behaviours, historical methodologies and political

allegiances in the context of lesbian subjectivities? From the 19th century to the present in the UK and North America, ambivalence in queer relationships and love between women has been widely represented, theorized and discussed by critics and proponents of 2SLGBTQIA+ liberation alike, in forms ranging from medical literature (Socarides, 1968; Freud, 1905, cited in Strachey 1953) to life writing (Lorde, 1982; Nash, 1995), fiction (Hall, 1928; Bannon, 1962), and film and television (Cristofer, 1998; Chaiken et al., 2004-2009). Following Teresa Brennan's concept of the transmission of affect (2004), this dissertation is an inquiry into the ways in which the transmission of queer ambivalence has been articulated, expressed and represented to inform and critique the trope of addictive or otherwise dysfunctional attachments in what I refer to as *the lesbian imaginary*. Drawing broadly on the concept of the imaginary in the fields of psychology, sociology and anthropology (Strauss 2006), specifically in the works of Jacques Lacan (1977a, 1977b), Cornelius Castoriadis (1987, 1997), Benedict Anderson (1983) and Charles Taylor (2002, 2004), the treatment herein critically attends to the lesbian imaginary as a discursive, affective and psychological byproduct of western colonialism, enlisting it to refer to shared meanings around lesbian identity that influence subjects and their attachments. While the lesbian imaginary carries the specters of colonization and Freudian psychology, it is also continually expanding and adapting through new language, narratives and references. It carries the "unresolved grief of lesbian historical feeling" (Love, 2009, 267), as well as the "lost possibilities of unfinished and incomplete revolutions" (Warner, 2012, 150).

Through the analysis of lesbian life writing, novels, television series, and psychology literature, the dissertation presents a genealogy of affective ambivalence in discourses and representations of lesbian attachments. It focuses on representational analysis to examine how narrative constructs reflect and/or comprise a contemporary lesbian imaginary. For this reason, I analyze

popular and widely disseminated or publicized representations and characterizations of lesbian attachments, as well as those that have prompted extensive critical reflection or reproduction in queer studies. This focus does not intend to eclipse the possibility of multiple and intersectional lesbian imaginaries, nor to generalize the lesbian experience. Rather, through querying the relationship between mythology, representation, and materiality, it attempts to deconstruct widely accepted interpretations of lesbian attachments without denying continuities between discourse and experience. In other words, lesbian attachments may be informed by the stories that circulate about lesbians, even as they may also diverge from them. The following chapters focus mainly on the continuities and affective trends that construct the concept of a universal lesbian experience and that, in some cases, arguably inspire affective elements of this “lesbian experience” to materialize in and between lesbian subjects. By attending to the transmission of affect (Brennan, 2004) through concepts from psychology, cultural studies, feminist studies and queer studies, this dissertation theorizes the affective space between representation and materiality as it pertains to lesbian discourses.

The dissertation employs discursive and semiotic analysis in the sense that it identifies symbolic and representational themes as constitutive of social, cultural and political meaning. It also engages affect theory and psychoanalytic theory to draw conclusions about the representational constitution of emotional and psychological meaning. The representations I analyze do not necessarily represent a singular truth about lesbian identity, culture, or experience. Rather, by signifying specifically situated iterations of the figure of “the lesbian”, they produce and reproduce affective themes that materialize in social and cultural contexts. The following chapters attend to representation as constitutive (Hall, 1997), invoking post-structuralism and social constructivism to imply that language produces meaning and that representation is

motivated by political, social and emotional interests (hooks, 1994), while also constituting reality (McLuhan, 1966) and prescribing subjectivity (Foucault, 1969).

In the following chapters, I discuss the possibility of relational dysfunction in relationships between lesbians and queer women while intervening into the discourses that pathologize them. As a reflection of my subject matter, my project is itself ambivalent, as it articulates harmful features and functions of affective relations that exist amidst the trauma of systemic oppression while simultaneously calling for new frames of reference that resist reproducing the harm associated with 20th century Western psychopathology. It examines how the affects of systemic trauma are produced by and around lesbian representations, and how they circulate and stick to objects and environments. I discuss the possibility of the transmission of the affects of systemic trauma to influence the quality of relationships, the strength of communities, and the resilience of resistance movements. This project intentionally slips between empirical and discursive frameworks in a treatment that ultimately intervenes into clinical discourses as motivated representations (hooks, 1994), but that recognizes their affective and material influence on ideology, subjectivity and identity. This treatment acknowledges the material significance of the ways in which representations draw on imaginaries to invoke the circulation of affect and the affective relations between subjects and their environments.

By referring to queer and lesbian experiences with the possessive “our” I intend to make clear that this work has developed from my reflections as a queer lesbian, and that while it is positioned to communicate broadly to interdisciplinary scholars, clinicians, advocates, activists, students and community members, it specifically privileges and invites engagement from those who relate with the subject matter from a queer and/or lesbian social location.

Queer Affects

Broadly speaking, discourses attending to the historical trajectory of the 2SLGBTQIA+ rights movement in the West are commonly punctuated by the affective transmutation of shame to pride (Halperin and Traub, 2009), embedding ambivalent affective, relational and psychic processes in our shared narratives of queer resistance and liberation. For example, Jasbir Puar's (2007) concept of "homonationalism" speaks to one of the ways in which a queer or marginalized subject may navigate the shame of oppression while seeking liberation. The biopolitical reification of queer and marginalized subjects into agents of the nation state requires of the subject both the acceptance and disavowal of their sexual and gender non-normativity. Following the psychoanalytic theory of the unconscious, homonationalist lifestyles and modes of being may be assumed unconsciously, and the ambivalence produced at the paradoxical intersection of fighting for gay rights while otherwise upholding oppressive hierarchies and market capitalist values may find expression in a range of social, political and interpersonal contexts comprising intersectional social locations. Queer attachments and lesbian love stories are imbued with unconscious conflicts from the macro to the micro level, and in the chapters that follow, I aim to bring awareness to the ways in which this ambivalence may undermine well-being, while also paying due reverence to the relational histories of oppressed people, and the tenacity and resilience of lesbian love, in particular. This dissertation examines affective relations, like that of homonationalist ambivalence, through intersectional, interpersonal and systemic frames.

Lesbian Kinship

A central theoretical consideration for the study of lesbian attachments concerns the question of subjectivity in the context of hegemonic discourses about gender, sexuality and family. There is

a historical rift between feminist and queer theory that has existed in the arena of identity politics since the inception of the latter in the early 1990s (Wiegman, 2012). As Tyler Bradway and Elizabeth Freeman (2022) note in *Queer Kinship: Race, Sex, Belonging, Form*, post-structural political discourse and social theory have distanced the concept of queer family from the implications of state power and white supremacy that are bound up with the word *kinship* by employing terms like *relationality*, *belonging*, *intimacy* and *sodality*. Even still, Bradway and Freeman’s work invokes “the intractability of kinship as an ideology, a material relation, an affective structure, and a narrative frame for conceiving, organizing and living relationality in the contemporary moment” (2022, 2). Their invocation of the term kinship and all that sticks to it illustrates a focus on materiality in poststructuralist feminist thought. Likewise, Lynne Huffer (2013) attends to the divergences and convergences between feminist and queer theory in *Are the Lips a Grave?* arguing that lesbian specificity has been overshadowed by queer identity politics insofar as queer theory has implicitly centered a queer male figure even whilst idealistically seeking theoretical non-specificity and otherwise capacious engagements with subjectivity. In my view from a post-queer landscape writing in the tradition of poststructuralism as it is associated with thinkers like Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, lesbian identity has become a receptacle of queer ambivalence. In attending to the lost concept of lesbian kinship, I do not intend to negate the poststructuralist queer theoretical frames, but to locate lesbian specificity in a post-queer theoretical context that is shaped by the colonial definitions of gender and sexuality. With this approach, I am indebted to decolonial theories and indigenous onto-epistemologies of relation that center kinship (Dudgeon and Bray, 2019; Wilson, 2008; Campbell, 2007), specifically in considering how concepts of relationality and kinship are used in critical thinking and in discussion of feminist world-making (Wildcat and Voth, 2023).

It is my intention to redefine lesbian kinship in terms of affect, and in response to hegemonic notions/narratives of gender, sexuality and family because it is my observation, experience and belief that lesbian kinship is formulated by structures of feeling that are constituted within hegemonies, rather than distinct from them. Thus, lesbian kinship is taken up here as a post-queer concept that is responsive to critical discourse and attendant to post-structural possibilities that emerge in the analysis of affective relations. When used for the purposes of analysis, post queer framings of lesbian kinship can be understood to intuit, anticipate and imply new conceptual forms of embodiment and relationality. Using a revisionist approach to lesbian kinship, this work endeavours to be responsive to a discursive moment in feminist history that has shaped contemporary identity politics. Bradway and Freeman write, “Our goal is not to foreclose queer experiments in belonging beyond kinship, then, but rather to understand their complex relationships to the historical, ontological, and epistemological violence that kinship engenders” (2). I take a similar approach in my study of lesbian representations, referring to the lesbian as a signifier that invokes the violent histories within which it emerged and evolved, and from which lesbian and queer women have carved out diverse engagements with complex gender and sexual identities, expressions and relations at intersectional social locations.

The Signifier Lesbian

By centering “the lesbian” as an identity category in this project, I call upon ambivalent orientations to critical engagement with identity politics in the context of the colonality of gender and sexuality (Lugones, 2007, 2010). My treatment of the signifier lesbian is a poststructuralist, decolonial, and critical intervention that acknowledges the socio-historical and political contexts within which lesbian and queer identities commingle, and observes how they

coincide, interchange and negate one another. I invoke the terms lesbian and queer together to acknowledge the slippage between them that is marked by affective relations, a critical perspective accounting for the colonality of identity politics, and the interrelated histories of ‘queer’ and ‘lesbian’ as conceptual identity categories. As I examine the signifier lesbian in cultural texts throughout my dissertation, I observe interdependent possibilities in queer and lesbian communities, as well as between queer and lesbian signifiers. A post-queer lesbian theoretical lens points to the ways in which the lesbian is a shifting signifier, moving in and out of discursive frameworks, bestowed with the instability of a changing story - at times endowed with agency, and at times disempowered and disparaged.

As a shifting signifier that reproduces the colonality of gender, the lesbian figure does not speak in totality for the concept of love between women and the multiplicity of experiences engendered therein. The signifier lesbian carries the social and cultural implications of colonialism, white supremacy and Western imperialism, like the affects of complicity in undercutting decolonial possibilities for knowledge production that might otherwise be achieved through sapphic lore. In arguing that this signifier is constituted by and constitutive of the affects of oppression, I acknowledge the colonial origins of the dysfunctional dynamics that comprise its affective legacy. My argument rests on Lugones’ (2007) concept of the modern colonial gender system insofar as it engages the signifier lesbian as necessarily bound up with affective relations that impede on possibilities for solidarity, interdependence and collective transformation (shame, self-neglect, obsession, fantasy). In “Heterosexualism and the Colonial / Modern Gender System” Lugones writes, “I do not believe any solidarity or homoerotic loving is possible among females who affirm the colonial/modern gender system and the colonality of power” (2007, 188). Enlisting the work of feminist affect theorist, Ann Cvetkovich (2003) in *An Archive of*

Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality and Lesbian Public Cultures, the treatment herein endeavours to de-pathologize lesbian feeling as a method for enacting decolonial feminist politics.

Background – A Brief History of Lesbian Affect

The following chapters present analyses of lesbian tropes like the story of lesbian u-hauling, lesbian longing, serial monogamy and lesbian processing, and lesbian figures like the codependent lesbian, the angry lesbian and the lesbian [love] addict, that circulate in the lesbian imaginary through fiction, life writing and media representations: *The Well of Loneliness* by Radclyffe Hall (1928), *Zami: Another Spelling of My Name* by Audre Lorde (1982), “Take Care” by Sharee Nash (1995), the HBO drama series *The L Word* (2004- 2009), the memoir *In the Dream House* by Carmen Maria Machado (2019), the Netflix semi-autobiographical series’ *Feel Good* (2020), and the reality television series, *The Ultimatum: Queer Love* (2023). I analyze a range of sites produced from 1929 - 2023 to illustrate both convergences and divergences in the affective dimensions of the signifier lesbian that have occurred across historical and socio-political western contexts from the 1920s in the UK to the 2020s in North America.

In 1928, the publication of Radclyffe Hall’s controversial novel spurred heated social discourse and an obscenity trial, which established the modern image of the lesbian figure as a shameful and melancholy social outcast, mobilized to inspire sympathy for the reviled “invert” of early 20th century sexology (Newton, 1984). Following the second world war, the lesbian’s shame could no longer serve her liberation vis-a-vis public sympathy, as McCarthyism manifested in state policing of sexual and gender non-normativity (Faderman, 1991), and the Cold War influenced a political ideology equating morality, civility and normativity to solidify nationalist

commitments and promote the nuclear family unit across the Western world (Kinsman and Gentile, 2010).

The social movements that emerged from the 1960s including the civil rights movement, the gay and lesbian liberation movement, second wave feminism, The New Left and the antiwar movement inspired dreams of liberation and world-making beyond liberalism, evoking affects related to civil disobedience, like the exasperation that led to lesbian-feminist separatism in the 1970s (Thomas, 2024, 118). In this way, the shame that was cast onto the signifier lesbian by *The Well* became imbricated with the affective symbolics of righteousness, pride and rage. Feminist thought expanded through discussion and debate about sexual difference around issues ranging from housework to sexuality throughout the 1970s, fanning lesbian-feminist separatist sentiments and radicalism (McCammon et al., 2017; Thomas, 2024). The third wave of feminism was ushered in with the Combahee River Collective Statement (1977), intervening into the whiteness of the second wave as Black feminist thought entered institutional consciousness. Audre Lorde's *Zami* emerged after decades of activism, through which developments in theories and discourses about gender, sexuality, race and class influenced the affective landscape of the lesbian imaginary alongside reifying neoliberal influences.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the signifier lesbian continued to take shape across regional, cultural and political contexts, journeying through the sex wars (Duggan and Hunter 1995; MacKinnon and Hunter, 1985), the inception of the concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991) and the rising popularity of therapy as a form of political healing for lesbians that grew out of feminist critiques of psychological theories about lesbian sexuality (Henderson, 2001). It was during this time that feminist dialogues about the ethics of care troubled the pathologization of the gendered

construct of codependency (Meyers, 1987; Gilligan, 1989; Harper and Capdevila, 1990; Collins, 1993; Keller, 1997; Granello and Beamish, 1998) and psychology and social work literature discussed issues like merging, fusion, dependency, conflict and competition in lesbian relationships (Krestan and Bepko, 1980; Lindenbaum, 1985; Burch, 1987; Rotenberg, 1989; Causby et al., 1995).

Amidst growing nihilism and pessimism in western nations (Verhoef, 2023), arbiters of knowledge, discourse and subjectivity like doctors, teachers, psychologists, and media outlets merged ontology with enterprise by employing positive affective terminology to promote self-surveillance and self-responsibility as a means for achieving happiness (Rose, 1999; Verhoef, 2023). A cultural preoccupation with self-help in the 1980s and 1990s, together with technology and media innovation and heightened labour market pressures in the context of neoliberalism, produced social and cultural forms of anxiety, fatigue and burnout (Han, 2015).

During the AIDS crisis in North America, grief and rage were mobilized in the formation of activist groups like ACT UP, which “was forged out of the emotional crucible of anger and grief created by homophobic neglect and an escalating number of deaths” (Cvetkovich 2003, 157). ACT UP eased intergroup tensions between lesbians and gay men through coalition-building and the organized caretaking of palliative AIDS patients by lesbians (2003, 159), from which new engagements with *queer* emerged (Cvetkovich, 2003). Some have argued that the lesbian figure was absorbed by the queer figure with the introduction of queer theory in the early 1990s (Huffer, 2013). Queer theory developed through theoretical works by Gayle Rubin (1984), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1993b), and Judith Butler (1990) to query gender as distinct from sexuality (Wiegman, 2012), destabilizing the very categories of identity around which feminists and

lesbians had mobilized for decades. In *Object Lessons*, Robyn Wiegman (2012) writes on this transition in the history of feminist theory, “Disidentification no less than prohibition bec[a]me pivotal features for a critical project that...prioritize[d] the nonidentical, unassimilable, and anti-institutional as the means to rethink not only politics and identity but political subjectivity itself” (Wiegman, 2012, 96). Queer theory turned away from stable identity categories as both objects of critique and grounds for activism, and instead embraced the political potential of refusal.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s several feminist writers produced life writing that offered new affective structures for lesbian ontology (Bruce-Pratt, 1984; Gomez, 1997; Nestle, 1987; Hollibaugh and Moraga, 1981; Anzaldúa and Moraga, 1981). *Afrekete* was published in the wake of the AIDS crisis in the mid-1990s, when the influence of dialogues about feminist epistemology, queer theory and intersectionality inspired considerations about the limitations of theory in articulating the experiential materialities of subjectivities marked by oppression (e.g. Spelman, 1988; Harding, 1986, 1991, 1993; Haraway, 1991). In the early 2000s, the representation of lesbian life was folded into the neoliberal mainstream with the premiere of the first drama television series to focus exclusively on the lives of queer and lesbian women, HBO’s *The L word* (2004- 2009). *The L Word* made way for the reality tv spinoff, *The Real L Word* (2010- 2012), which presented a depiction of lesbian life that was responsive to the growing viewership of reality television in the 2010s, and arguably symbolized a paradigm shift showing a spectatorial preference for authenticity.

The texts that are analyzed in this dissertation reflect the socio-historical and political contexts within which they were produced. Machado’s (2019) memoir and Martin and Hampson’s (2020) Netflix series emerged during a time of growing political awareness and calls for processes of

political transparency that invoked the language of personal and collective trauma. At this time, public consciousness was rising around systemic dysfunction and structural violence, fueled by a focus on the social residue of colonization and patriarchy by social movements like Black Lives Matter and #MeToo (Miller, 2021). The articulation of trauma and personalized suffering in protest literature in the form of poetry on social media encapsulates this political moment: “Speaking to the insistence on the body characteristic of both Black Lives Matter and #MeToo protest poetry, the social media presentations... not only carve out a public space in and through which to voice discontent, anger, and loss, but also resist the idea that experiences of sexual violence ought to remain hidden and taboo” (Miller, 2021, 15).

Diverging from texts written and produced by lesbian and queer creators, *The Ultimatum: Queer Love* (2023) is a production that illustrates the mainstream appropriation of queer theory in the neoliberal performance of inclusivity politics. The title of this queer chapter of the reality dating franchise, *The Ultimatum: Marry or Move On*, resonates symbolically with the disavowal that animates contemporary mainstream engagements with the signifier lesbian. The reality dating show features queer and lesbian participants, notably including non-binary gender identities, but excluding trans women and cis men. This contemporary representation of lesbian culture by a commercial media franchise begs the question: has the lesbian receded into retirement, signifying generations past, like other political identities deemed outdated or problematic: *transsexual*, *trans exclusionary radical feminist* and even, *feminist*? As I observe affective orientations to the signifier lesbian across the above-mentioned sites, the ways in which affect interacts with structural forces shows the production of ambivalence in relationships between lesbians and the institutions, discourses, and ideologies that define and manage their identities, as well as the interpersonal relationships between lesbians and their object attachments.

Theoretical Framework

Psychoanalytic Feminism

In the history of debates between psychoanalysts, feminists, and psychoanalytic feminists, theorists have disagreed about the ways in which psychoanalysis theorizes the category of woman. Bio-essentialism and social constructivism emerged as oppositional epistemologies that have been used to explain sexual difference and to theorize subjectivity. Luce Irigaray (1977), a poststructuralist feminist theorist, disputes the historical determinants of woman's destiny as tied to anatomy and biology. She writes that "psychoanalysis needs to reconsider the very limits of its theoretical and practical field, needs to detour through an interpretation of the cultural background and the economy, especially the political economy, that have marked it, without its knowledge" (66). Juliet Mitchell theorizes that psychoanalysis acknowledges the ways in which society influences the concept of womanhood as inferior, and that Freud's theory of the unconscious presents sexual difference as something that cannot be taken for granted as inevitable: "only psychoanalysis can explain the global tenacity of male domination or patriarchy (and the difficulties of feminists trying to erode it), with its account of the unconscious construction of sexual difference" (Segal, 2007, 294).

In *Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, Teresa Brennan (1989) critiques Lacanian psychoanalysis when she writes about the tension between psychic and social realities in the theory of the symbolic order. She argues the "real problem" with Lacan's symbolic is that it makes patriarchy inevitable insofar as it supposes that sexual difference is not only the result of the symbolic order, but its foundation. Brennan writes that "the symbolic is the condition of sanity" and that because "the recognition of difference is the condition of logic...the idea that the phallus is represented by the penis implies... that men are more capable of differentiating

themselves.” She continues to underline the implication in this reasoning that “women are more likely to be undifferentiated... thus psychotic” (5). Irigaray, Mitchell, and Brennan point to the ways in which psychoanalytic theories both invite and require feminist theoretical interventions into gender, sexuality and sexual difference.

Differentiation is a developmental marker against which lesbians have historically been pathologized by psychoanalytic theorists. For example, feminist and critical theorists note that lesbian relations have been characterized as dysfunctional because of a lack of emotional boundaries between women (Burch, 1997; O’Connor and Ryan, 1993; Ahmed, 2006). They challenge the psychoanalytic construct of psychosexual development by critiquing the notion that differentiation denotes maturity (Warner, 1990; Ahmed, 2006; Irigaray, 1977). Hegemonic discourses like psychoanalytic theories uphold colonial hetero-patriarchy through codifying hetero-masculinist individualism into cultural ideologies about health and normativity. Ranjana Khanna (2003) argues that understanding psychoanalysis as a theory of nationalism rooted in colonial histories of anthropology and archaeology “allows us to see it as an exemplary document of the modern European moment that gave rise to narratives of nationhood and selfhood that are today so much a part of internal imaginaries that colonials and postcolonials alike cannot think of selfhood entirely independently of psychoanalysis” (100). The othering of women through individualist ideology to imply that they are unable to experience differentiation, and pathologizing lesbians as dysfunctional and lacking in emotional boundaries are examples of structural violence that are, arguably, gendered forms of trauma.

Trauma Theory

The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health defines trauma as, “the lasting emotional response that often results from living through a distressing event” (2021). Goldsmith, Martin and Smith define systemic trauma as, “the contextual features of environments and institutions that give rise to trauma, maintain it, and impact posttraumatic responses” (2014, 118). Working institutional definitions of trauma vary, and according to Maurice Stevens, “not all social actors are adequately understood within [trauma’s] boundaries. Trauma and even PTSD do not simply describe subjects and/or their experiences, they also, and perhaps more accurately, create them” (2009, 2). Critical and decolonial perspectives on trauma theory complicate a trauma-informed analysis as one which refutes the term as representative of any self-evident truths. For example, Natalie Clark explains how trauma theory can be conceptualized as a “colonial invader” (Clark, 2016), and Stevens (2009) argues that “trauma” is a catch-all term that lacks a universal definition. Systemic oppression produces affects of systemic trauma in the definition, diagnosis and treatment of trauma itself. Unbelonging can be felt in the normalization and perpetuation of traumatic experiences caused by this kind of systematic marginalization under neoliberal capitalism.

Over the last 30 years, theories like polyvagal theory (Porges, 2009) and treatment methods like Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) (Shapiro, 2014) and Somatic Experiencing (Levine and Frederick, 1997), as well as frameworks attributing trauma to macro-level influences like structural violence (Goldsmith et al., 2014) have deepened the conversation about the relationship between trauma and attachment, and changed the landscape of possibilities for healing modalities. Trauma theorists like Judith Herman (1992), Bessel van der Kolk (2014), Peter Levine and Ann Frederick (1997) are among those who advocate for the value of somatic

and social analyses of ‘maladaptive’ or harmful behaviours and attachments. The development of critical reading in trauma discourse and its systemic and affective implications inspires the theoretical framework for this dissertation in its aim to attend to lesbian trauma (and related affects) whilst troubling the ways in which pathological discourses can be seen as a form of trauma that itself undermines the well-being of lesbian subjects.

Trauma theory and discourse are herein taken up as politically and historically situated to facilitate discussion and analysis focused on the circulation of affects related to the structural violence of systemic oppression. Considering the history of feminist ambivalence towards psychoanalysis (Mitchell, 1975; Firestone, 1970; Greer, 1970; Millett, 1970; de Beauvoir, 1989; Irigaray, 1977) and intersectional and decolonial criticism of trauma discourse (Khanna, 2003; Tuck, 2009; Clark, 2016; Stevens, 2009), this study employs a theoretical approach that extends concepts from attachment theory, trauma theory, and psychoanalytic thought through the application of feminist affect theory to facilitate capacious analytical engagements that make room for ambivalence in the inquiry as well as in the sites and subjects of analysis therein. Given Shoshana Felman’s (1982) argument that psychoanalysis is “enfolded within” (1977, 9) literature, this treatment aims to identify value in the imbricated epistemological outputs of discourses from psychology to media representations, literature and popular culture.

Affect Theory

There are several feminist theorists whose work deconstructs the ways in which affective attachments can fuel the violent machinations of power (Ahmed, 2004, 2006, 2010; Amin, 2017; Berlant, 2011; Spivak and Butler, 2007; Cvetkovich, 2003; Gould, 2009; Puar, 2007). In *Moving Politics*, Deborah Gould (2009) writes,

A focus on affect retools our thinking about power. Power certainly operates through ideology and discourse, but it also operates through affect, perhaps more fundamentally so since ideologies and discourses emerge and take hold in part through the circulation of affect. Even more, affective states, unfixed in their directionality, can be molded and manipulated and then harnessed to the desired objectives of a leader, the state, capital, or a movement. (28)

Feminist theoretical formulations that address the affects of structural violence, including Lauren Berlant's concept of "cruel optimism" (2011), Sara Ahmed's discussion of "national love" (2004), and Jasbir Puar's theory of "homonationalism" (2007), explain the implications of affective investments in national forms of belonging for oppressed subjects and resistance movements. In Berlant's theory of "cruel optimism" (1), subjects are, arguably, fantasy bonded to the state in cycles of attachment fueled by self-neglect. They are bound by what Ahmed (2004) calls "national love" (130-131), an uneven power dynamic masked by the rhetoric of patriotism. Ahmed writes, "Indeed, the impossibility that love can reach its object may also be what makes love powerful as a narrative... Even though love is a demand for reciprocity, it is also an emotion that lives with the failure of that demand often through an intensification of its affect... So the failure of the nation to 'give back' the subject's love works to increase the investment in the nation" (130-131).

Jasbir Puar (2007) reflects on Ahmed's discussion of national love to explain the concept of homonationalism, stating that,

unrequited love keeps multicultural (and also homonormative) subjects in the folds of nationalism, while xenophobic and homophobic ideologies and policies fester... [w]hile the good (straight) ethnic has been... folded into life, for several decades now, the (white) homonormative is a more recent entrant of this benevolence (civil rights and market) that produces affective be/longing that never fully rewards its captives yet nonetheless fosters longing and yearning as affects of nationalism. (26-32)

Puar describes the fantasy of a benevolent state that fuels the abuse of a neoliberal agenda on

racialized and queer others. Ambivalent attachments that are related to the desire for belonging recur as an affective relation that underlies Puar, Berlant, and Ahmed's formulations. I enlist these critical and feminist perspectives throughout my analyses to illustrate how the trauma of oppression contributes to attachments that protect the persistent hope for "the good life" (Berlant, 2011, 27).

Throughout the dissertation, I query the affective relations that circulate around the signifier lesbian, and develop a theory of queer affect that responds to the questions: how does "the lesbian" and the cultural mythology that surrounds her reflect a subjectivity that is discursively prescribed in ambivalent terms? How might affect be transmitted (Brennan, 2004) from macro to micro level attachments through discourse and representations about lesbians? The objective of this study is to examine the affective relations that bind a subject to an object, behaviour, ideology or institution, and to articulate the affective slippages between these kinds of attachments as they may be represented and/or experienced in the lives of lesbians and queer women.

Queer Codependency

An interdisciplinary theoretical approach combining the fields of psychology, feminist studies and queer studies informs my critical attachment theory of systemic trauma, which I call *queer codependency*. Queer codependency hypothesizes that queer attachments are constituted in an atmosphere of affective ambivalence due to being situated in a tenuous relation to hegemonic power. Drawing from literature on attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1978, 1980a; Ainsworth, 1978; Liotti, 2004; Paetzold et al., 2015) that asserts that the relational experiences with a

primary attachment figure affect the attachment psychology of the individual and the quality of their adult relationships, queer codependency can be conceptualized as the affective continuities between queer object attachments and queer attachments to the state. When a subject's psychological development is affected by traumatic relational experiences (abandonment, neglect, abuse), attachment theory asserts that attachment insecurity is likely to manifest in a disorganized or fearful-avoidant attachment style (Liotti, 2004). For example, in an abusive family dynamic, a child will orient to their primary caregiver with ambivalence because the attachment figure is sought for safety, but also represents danger. The child will become an adult who seeks relational safety in relationships that fail to provide it (Paetzold et al., 2015). By employing a macro-level attachment analysis to the affective machinations of systemic trauma as they are symbolized in representations of lesbian relationships, the ongoing trauma of exclusion from (or conditional inclusion by) institutional forms of belonging can arguably be conceptualized as systemic abandonment, neglect and abuse. My theory of queer codependency observes the ways in which queer people and their relationships are impacted by the transmission of affects related to fantasy and attachment in the aftermath of systemic trauma. In my analysis of the signifier lesbian, the theory of queer codependency functions to motivate critical considerations of the systemic factors informing dysfunctional or harmful relations between queer people, while maintaining a critical understanding of the ways in which prominent discourses about lesbians are not representative of a universal lesbian experience. The theory aims to confront the possibility of dysfunction without asserting its inevitability for lesbian relations. It does so by enlisting feminist affect theory and the concept of systemic trauma to de-pathologize lesbian attachments and interrogate the systems that promote relational dysfunction between marginalized people.

Queer codependency theory critiques traditional formulations of codependency that rely on the nuclear family model and bio-essentialist ideas about gender and attachment. But importantly, it does not circumvent the possibility of harmful attachment behaviours, modes of care that are imbued with power dynamics, or dysfunctional relations in feminist care ethics, unlike previous critical perspectives on codependency (see Keller, 1997; Gilligan, 1989; Meyers, 1987; Collins, 1993; Granello and Beamish, 1998; Sloven, 1991; Malloy and Berkery, 1993; Weiss 2019).

Dodging the heterosexist accusation of pathology in lesbian relationships has sometimes meant neglecting to confront the possibility that lesbian relationships can be dysfunctional too, but I argue that this circumvention is laden with fantasy: the fantasy of u-hauling as a lesbian rite of passage (Chapter 1); the fantasy that an addictive attachment is “the greatest love story ever told” (Martin and Hampson, 2020, Chapter 2); the fantasy that ‘lesbian processing’ is an advanced form of intimacy (Chapter 3); the fantasy that love means sacrificing yourself by “splitting depths to love a decomposing soul” (Nash, 1995, 275; Chapter 3); the fantasy that this time will be different (Chapter 4); or the fantasy that interpersonal hardship is evidence of love (Chapter 4). Queer codependency theory is a theory of queer negativity that qualifies affective relations involved in the production and reproduction of unbelonging. Given the affective function of fantasy to secure and sustain attachments to that which does not necessarily satiate the need for belonging, the theory of queer codependency attends to fantasy affects, situates them in relation to intersectional oppressions, and draws affective parallels between interpersonal, systemic and ideological attachments. It is a theory that resists the forces that have undermined queer communities by inflicting shame on the collective queer psyche, as well as a love letter to inspire transmutation and transformation through confrontations with the affective residue of structural violence.

Affect and Attachment

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1993a) and Ann Cvetkovich (2003) are two of the leading theorists in the study of queer shame and negative affect. In *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality and Lesbian Public Cultures*, Cvetkovich asserts that negative affect is a rich and vital aspect of queer life and identity. Her book is “an exploration of cultural texts as repositories of feelings and emotions, which are encoded not only in the content of the texts themselves but in the practices that surround their production and reception” (7). Sedgwick’s work on the transformative possibilities of queer shame diverges from a tradition of liberation politics that focused on pride. In her early work on shame she writes, “at least for certain (‘queer’) people, shame is simply the first, and remains a permanent, structuring fact of identity: one that has its own, powerfully productive and powerfully social metamorphic possibilities” (1993, 14). This shift prompts a consideration of the dialectical constitution of the modern queer subject as a reactionary political act. Insofar as pride has been a call to arms for combatting structural violence against queer subjects, the roots of an LGBTQ rights movement that developed as a defense against gay shame might be thought of in psychoanalytic terms as the affective unconscious that harbors the conflicts of the ego and the super-ego.

This idea invokes Judith Butler’s concept of the “constitutive outside” (1993, xi) as a framework through which to understand how heteronormative discourses of love, psychology and attachment simultaneously construct and negate queer subjectivities. Butler writes on the constitution of gendered bodies, “[t]his latter domain is not the opposite of the former, for oppositions are, after all, part of intelligibility; the latter is the excluded and illegible domain that haunts the former domain as the specter of its own impossibility, the very limit to intelligibility, its constitutive outside” (Butler, 1993, xi). Throughout my dissertation, I approach the topic of

gay shame from a psychoanalytic lens as the spectral shadow that haunts the lesbian unconscious. Through histories of oppression and political resistance, queer attachments are constituted in an atmosphere of affective ambivalence, and this dissertation is an exercise in making intelligible the ways in which this ambivalence materializes in relation to systemic and interpersonal trauma.

I refer to Robert Firestone's (1993) theory of addictive attachments and fantasy bonds to trouble the intersection between the interpersonal and the hegemonic in considering the ways in which authenticity is performed to obscure intimacy. Firestone's theory describes a relationship that lacks substance and is upheld by fantasy. Seen through the work of Lacanian psychoanalytic feminist theorist, Julia Kristeva (1974), the substance can be understood as the emotional, bodily and instinctual qualities that are mitigated by the Law of the Father, which is a law that imposes social order on the instinctual affective experience. Kristeva refers to the tension between the Law and the substance to discuss the relationship between psychoanalysis and feminism. She asks if this tension will give way to a reconstruction of the Law, and if that reconstruction will ever produce conditions for the liberation of the "substance." In other words, can feminism ever overcome patriarchal rule, or will it adapt to accept reform that may alter, but will never dismantle the patriarchal system? In an essay titled "From Ithaca to New York," Kristeva asks,

At the moment, this is all there is, and that's not bad. But will there be more? A different relationship of the subject to discourse, to power? Will the eternal frustration of the hysteric in relation to discourse oblige the latter to reconstruct itself? Will it give rise to unrest in everybody, male or female? Or will it remain a cry outside time, like the great mass movements that break up the old system, but have no problem in submitting to the demands of order, as long as it is a new order? (qtd. in Moi, 1986)

Kristeva's semiotic theory takes subjectivity as its focus and speaks to a paradox of subjectivity wherein the subject is always in process, subversive of and dependent upon the Law at once.

Applying this line of thinking to my own subject matter, how do hegemonic discourses about gender and sexuality become imbricated with / produce affects that impede the radical potential of queer kinship? In Kristeva's words, "will the eternal frustration of the [queer] in relation to discourse oblige the Law to reconstruct itself?" Or, does the queer fantasy of codependency (Thurston, 2022) re-direct the affects related to this frustration, to the effect of veiling the role of systemic trauma in impeding the radical potential of lesbian love? In its widespread ideological influence, psychoanalysis marks queer subjectivity in psychopathological terms that psychically undermine the subject's ability to self-define. Following this logic, the Law of the Father (the super-ego in Freudian terms) influences the construction of queer fantasy bonds by imposing hetero-masculinist frames onto queer relations, and in the absence of alternative ontological and epistemological frameworks, the queer subject becomes reified into its own oppressor. How might a trauma-informed inquiry into the affects of queer kinship interrupt the oppressor that lives in the lesbian psyche?

Tyler Bradway and Elizabeth Freeman's (2022) work in queer kinship studies promotes a critical examination of the materiality, embodiment, and behavioural manifestations of relational affects and psychic dispositions in queer contexts, discourses and histories through a methodology combining the concepts of kinship, kinetics and aesthetics, which they refer to as kin-aesthetics. Kin-aesthetics, as a method for analysis, offers a framework that speaks to the affects of representation and embodiment that inform and animate relations of queer kinship. Bradway and Freeman write, "[i]n short, kinship needs form. Form ... makes the symbolics and phenomenology of kinship move" (4). My inquiry invokes Bradway and Freeman's concept of *kincoherence* by "[tracing], [theorizing], and [engaging] kinship's fraught and overdetermined nature: our desire to forget kinship and the apparent impossibility of doing so, queer kinship's

creative experimentation with relationality, and its ongoing imbrication with entrenched idioms of ancestry, descent, and family” (2022, 3). In moving beyond forms that historically prescribed kinship as an impossibility for queer subjects, including psychopathology, I ask what principles might provide structure for lesbian forms of kinship? In Kristeva’s terms, can a queer reconstruction of kinship produce conditions for queer liberation? Can queer resistance overcome the specters of colonial psychology that haunt the lesbian imaginary?

Lesbian Rage-Fantasy

My dissertation examines how the discursive reproduction of lesbian pathology structures psychical and social fantasies and how the affects of systemic trauma are transmitted to lesbian attachments. Combining theories and concepts from psychology and critical studies including trauma theory, attachment theory, fantasy bonds, queer shame, kincoherence and cruel optimism, I introduce a concept that locates the affects of oppression and fantasy in representations of lesbian relational experiences. The concept of the *lesbian rage-fantasy* aims to queer the commingling of rage and fantasy for use as a trauma-informed interpretive device for the analysis of lesbian affects, relations and representations. It speaks to affective cycles characterized and facilitated by the machinations of trauma, fantasy and attachment that hold, mediate, transmute, transport, collect, circulate and produce affects of oppression like shame, fear, self-loathing and rage, and that may materialize interpersonally across intersectional social locations. The lesbian rage-fantasy is an affective mechanism and addictive cycle that secures ambivalent attachments. For example, relations animated by queer codependency are upheld by the lesbian rage-fantasy when the rage of oppressed gender and sexual minorities is managed by a mythology of belonging that facilitates a collusion with hegemonic logics producing queer shame through the promotion of self-sabotage and political disavowal. Lesbian rage-fantasy is

present in attachments characterized by homonationalism, cruel optimism and national love, and relationships involving substance abuse, behavioural addictions and domestic dysfunction. The lesbian rage-fantasy speaks to the ways in which fantasy can be used to manage rage as a consequence of systemic oppression. When I refer to the lesbian rage-fantasy as specifically lesbian, I do not discount the possibility of rage-fantasy in other kinds of relations but aim to bring focus to lesbian specificity as a social location that has been shaped by homophobic, misogynistic violence and around object attachments, in particular.

Research Methods

Critical Discourse Analysis

The primary research method for this study is critical discourse analysis of queer life writing and media representations that is in line with the Foucauldian practice of genealogy, albeit a genealogy that is also informed by an onto-political kin-aesthetics methodological framework. I read representations as motivated (hooks, 1994) and mediated through layers of social, cultural and political meaning. The recognition that there are no self-evident truths in a representation, or any other discursive form, presents interpretive opportunities to discern new meaning and produce site-specific, intersectional forms of knowledge. This approach to critical deconstruction challenges positivistic modes of knowledge production by facilitating a queer revisioning of harmful historical discourses to make power dynamics evident. Rejecting positivism in my methodology is necessary to ensure that my analysis does not reinforce oppressive epistemological frames and that it aligns with intersectional and decolonizing approaches to knowledge production. Following feminist thinkers like Elizabeth Spelman (1988), Donna Haraway (1991) and Sandra Harding (1986, 1991, 1993), my methodology involves a feminist treatment of epistemology that validates experiential forms of knowledge. Foucault (1969)

regards discourse as something that is primary to experience and that is central to the production of power, wherein Foucauldian genealogy identifies and deconstructs power relations. The main object of critical discourse analysis is to expose hegemonic power dynamics that are realized through the “discursive reproduction of dominance” (Van Dijk, 1993, 259), and as such, this method pairs well with a framework combining feminist affect theory, attachment psychology, queer kinship theory and trauma theory. Together, these frameworks support my objective to affirm and attend to queer experiences of oppression and to think critically about the affects that are produced through power conflicts on micro and macro scales in the context of lesbian attachments.

Cultural Studies – Critical Studies

I will attend to my sites of analysis through cultural studies frameworks like bell hooks’ concept of “motivated representation” (1994) and Stuart Hall’s theory of representation (1997) which identify representations as constructed by temporal, political and cultural influences and as deeply implicated in structural power dynamics. My thinking on the relationship between representation and fantasy is informed by the perspectives of Laplanche and Pontalis (1968), Elizabeth Cowie (1984), and Teresa de Lauretis (1994) insofar as my analysis implies that representation structures psychical and social fantasies. I have selected historically diverse sites of analysis with the intention to gain historical perspective in tracing both continuities and transmutations of lesbian fantasies vis-a-vis structural oppressions. While much has changed since *The Well of Loneliness* was written, its resonance as well as its affective residue can be felt in subsequent queer and lesbian literature and media, especially where psychoanalytic influences inform ideological constructs of lesbian feeling. My analysis of representations of lesbian attachments will examine symbolic and narrative forms that characterize queer affective relations

to investigate the relationship between form and substance (Kristeva 1986) in framing our understanding of harmful or dysfunctional forms of relating between lesbian subjects.

Methods like kin-aesthetic analysis (Chapter Four), dialogism and multivocal reading (Chapter Two) are used as part of a critical methodology that aims to depathologize lesbian attachments. Kin-aesthetics is a core methodology for queer kinship theory that “concerns itself with how processes of figuration, whether they take place as social practice or in imaginative texts, de-form and re-form the categories and genres by which we experience our relationships. Kin-aesthetic activities make and unmake the social field. Kinship needs kin-aesthetics because kinship is a symbol system as well as a set of practices” (Bradway and Freeman 2022, 3-4). Dialogic and multivocal analysis (Bakhtin, 1981; Gilmore, 2001; Larrabee et al., 2003; Frank, 1995) is used to conceptualize and legitimize experiential forms of knowledge production about trauma, addiction and attachment. The ineffable quality of trauma (Herman and Harvey, 1997; Gilmore, 2001; Larrabee, 2003), as well as the history of western criticism of autobiography as an unstable source of knowledge production (Gilmore, 2001; Spivak, 1998) calls for dialogic and multivocal analysis (Bakhtin, 1981) that honours chaos narratives (Frank, 1995). Dialogism (Bakhtin, 1981) facilitates the imbrication of multiple meanings and ideological as well as affective interpretations of trauma, addiction and attachment in the construction of the signifier lesbian.

Across the range of affective sites that I examine in this dissertation, I am primarily interested in analyzing the connective discursive structures that house the negative affects of oppression where they are represented as characteristic of lesbian identities and relationships. These discursive structures include trauma, fantasy, and attachment where they can be seen to hold,

mediate, transmute, transport, collect, circulate, and produce negative affects like rage, shame, self-loathing and fear. Following Cvetkovich, I analyze cultural sites that bear not only “the traces of trauma but ways of thinking about trauma that do not pathologize it, that seize control over it from the medical experts, and that forge creative responses to it that far outstrip even the most utopian of therapeutic and political solutions” (2003, 3). Each chapter deconstructs a story about lesbian attachment that has taken shape in the context of hegemonic discourses found in clinical literature, Freudian psychoanalysis, neurobiology, neoliberal addiction recovery programming, mainstream media and/or popular culture. I analyze the affects that circulate and stick to sites of trauma, fantasy and attachment, and situate them in the context of structural violence. I do this to understand how hegemonic discourses inform the stories that are told about lesbians and queer women, and to reframe them through affective terms using a trauma-informed lens. My aim is to understand how the affects of trauma, fantasy and attachment are imbricated across iterations of the signifier lesbian, and to examine the implications of the discursive dissemination of this figure. All of the methods that I rely on involve a considerable element of deconstruction and reconstruction (critical discourse analysis, critical reading, Foucauldian genealogy, onto-political kinaesthetics), with attention to the ways in which affective relations are represented. I examine symbols that hold cultural meaning, like the U-haul (Chapter 1), relational dynamics that illustrate how affects materialize and transmute, like addictive attachments (Chapter 2), and fantasies that deflect from pained realities to sustain attachments, like the fantasy that ‘love is hard’ (Chapter 4).

Questions

Through deconstruction and reconstruction of the affective meanings of queer modes of attachment, my objective is to illustrate the relational affects of systemic oppression, and re-

frame pathologizing discourses surrounding lesbian subjects in terms that are experiential and trauma-informed to disrupt the bio-normative imperatives (Latchford, 2019) and heteronormative logics that have historically framed Western epistemologies about queer kinship. In this dissertation, I consider the ways in which systemic trauma promotes queer shame, and how that shame and its related affects circulate in queer and lesbian relationships. In my attempt to arrive at an empirical understanding of the impact of representation on lesbian subjects, the following questions have guided my cultural textual analysis of ambivalent affects:

How has the transmission of queer ambivalence been articulated, expressed and embodied to inform the trope of dysfunctional attachments in the Western lesbian imaginary?

What is the role of fantasy in systemic trauma, and how does it animate representations of queer and lesbian attachments?

What are the affective dynamics that characterize the relationship between trauma, fantasy and attachment in the lesbian imaginary, and what are the personal, interpersonal and collective implications of this characterization?

Chapters

Chapter one investigates the trope of lesbian u-hauling to understand the discursive factors underlying its historical influence and continued circulation within popular culture and on social media. I analyse the affects and desires that stick to the figure of the U-haul as a symbol of queer attachment, and observe the affective similarities between lesbian merger, fantasy bonds and

codependency that feature prominently in the story of lesbian u-hauling. Critical perspectives on the psychopathological construct of codependency are reviewed to interrogate its limitations through a trauma-informed and dialectical lens that theorizes queer codependencies in the context of systemic trauma. Using an interdisciplinary framework that draws from feminist theory, psychology and social work, I argue that the story of lesbian u-hauling represents a fantasy of belonging that is related to desires for nationalist forms of inclusion, and that is sustained through addictive attachments at both micro and macro levels.

Chapter two explores the neoliberalization of addiction recovery and its implications for queer subjects, their affects and attachments through an analysis of the figure of the lesbian [love] addict in a semi-autobiographical media depiction of addiction recovery. It examines the ways in which neoliberal ideology in addiction aetiology and treatment usurps the critical potential of trauma-informed theory and practice in the context of addiction recovery and offers a queer reading of the affects of addiction experienced as a negotiation of this tension by queer subjects in the Netflix mini-series, *Feel Good*. How do queer stories both challenge and reflect the neoliberal ethos informing contemporary frameworks for addiction recovery? Through a media analysis of *Feel Good*, which features an experience of queer addiction and codependency, this chapter illustrates how the figure of the lesbian [love] addict is discursively constructed as a lesbian signifier and mediated by neoliberal formulations of subjectivity, pathology and attachment. The chapter attends to the affective and ideological circulation of queer ambivalence that occurs at the intersection of biologically deterministic and onto-political understandings of addiction and recovery. A theoretical framework combining critical addiction studies and feminist affect studies is used to examine the challenges and possibilities for queer subjects

whose experiences at the intersection of systemic oppression and addictive attachment have the potential to disrupt the neoliberalization of addiction recovery.

Chapter three examines the constitution of the figure of the codependent lesbian through the discursive reproduction of tropes surrounding lesbian affects and attachments in psychology, literature, media and popular culture. It critically analyzes the affective construction of this figure through the representation of popular lesbian stereotypes: serial monogamy, lesbian processing, and lesbian longing. In a Foucauldian (1969) treatment that takes discourse as prescriptive of lesbian subjectivities, this chapter attends to these tropes as ambivalent fantasies that circulate in the lesbian imaginary, contributing to attachment dynamics at micro and macro levels. The ways in which the codependent lesbian is animated by ambivalent fantasies is identified through affective relations comprising codependent orientations to interpersonal attachment: self-neglect as a form of self-preservation, care as a form of control, and the romanticization of hopelessness. Using a trauma-informed theoretical framework that combines feminist affect theory (Berlant, 2011; Ahmed, 2004, 2010; Puar, 2007; Cvetkovich, 2003) and attachment psychology (Firestone, 1993; Breidenstine et al., 2016, Ainsworth et al., 2015), I illustrate how the ambivalent figure of the codependent lesbian materializes through affective relations that promote insecure attachments reflecting interpersonal and systemic forms of trauma, and that are sustained by the media and textual reproduction of codependent fantasies.

The final chapter focuses on the affective construction of the figure of the angry lesbian. The discursive reproduction of the angry lesbian in psychopathology (Freud 1905/ Strachey, 1953, 1920; Socarides, 1968), popular culture (Creed, 1995; Murphy, 2017), feminist history and queer studies (Siegel, 2007; Warner, 2012) constitutes its intelligibility as a signifier of lesbian affect

and reflects ambivalent orientations to its cultural imprint. What are the affective implications of this figure's legacy on the lives and love stories of lesbians and queer women? This chapter presents a treatment of the angry lesbian as a symbol of queer ambivalence with psycho-social implications related to the commingling of fantasy and disavowal. The concept of *lesbian rage-fantasy* is introduced to analyze the affective machinations embodied by the angry lesbian that animate lesbian attachments in Carmen Maria Machado's memoir, *In the Dream House*, and the reality television series, *The Ultimatum: Queer Love*. Drawing on concepts from queer kinship studies and feminist affect studies, "kincoherence" (Bradway and Freeman 2022) and "cruel optimism" (Berlant 2011), the chapter argues that ambivalent attachments form where queer fantasies of belonging become entangled with the affects of oppression, in the disparities between lesbian love stories and the affective experiences that they mask and mediate.

By lifting the veil of systemic trauma that can impede deeper intimacies, kinships and connections, each chapter reveals and intervenes in the affects of oppression that punctuate the narratives circulating in the lesbian imaginary. The following chapters observe affective relations to investigate the relationship between form and substance (Kristeva, 1986) in shaping a lesbian imaginary that has been constructed by representations of relationships between lesbian subjects. By layering theoretical approaches from feminist affect theory to attachment theory and introducing new theoretical and conceptual frames like *queer codependency* and *lesbian rage-fantasy*, this dissertation makes intelligible the ways in which queer ambivalence can materialize in relation to systemic and interpersonal trauma.

Chapter One - U-Hauling: A Fantasy of Queer Codependency?

...if shame will bring us together, it is also the case that it can, will, and does tear us apart

—Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, 2007, 14.

I began my exercise in *queering codependency* a few years ago, while steeped in the mixed feelings of my own recovery from codependency. I began questioning the romanticization of painful experiences of love and attachment represented in queer love stories, as in the story of lesbian u-hauling. Lesbian u-hauling invokes the signifier lesbian that I refer to in the introduction and operates as a trope that conveys both shame and pride through self-deprecating humour. This persistent narrative circulates in the form of an archetypal joke about lesbians bringing a U-haul to the second date (@bigdykecontent, 2019), which was allegedly written by Lea Delaria in the 1980s (Delaria, 2020). It refers to a romance that begins with rapid enmeshment, followed by an emotional whirlwind of infatuation that quickly deflates into disconnection, disappointment and separation. I discovered a number of meme accounts on Instagram that prominently feature the U-haul joke, which led me to the hashtag #uhaullesbians, which is used affectionately on posts of queer people pictured with a moving truck and a partner in tow. Further down the rabbit hole, I noticed that my own experience of codependent relationships was similarly characterized as a queer stereotype on social media (@sadbutchcollective, 2020). It became clear to me that what is called “merger” or “codependency” in psychology literature is part of a story about lesbian relationships, which is often told with an air of satirical reverence, and whose influence may be felt across a variety of subcategories of queer identities and queer relational configurations. I begin my critical analysis

of the signifier lesbian with the story of lesbian u-hauling because it encapsulates the way in which queer fantasies can become imbricated in hegemonic discourses, contributing to ambivalence in queer and lesbian communities.

The experience commonly referred to as lesbian merger is informed by the history of psychopathology (Freud, 1905/ Strachey, 1953; Socarides, 1968), which has perpetuated the problematic idea that love between women is dysfunctional because of the tendency to merge, and that this is due to a lack of emotional boundaries between women (Burch, 1997; O'Connor and Ryan, 1993; Ahmed, 2006). Codependency has also been theorized as a disorder that intensifies “the societal teachings of homophobia,” and that makes gays and lesbians more vulnerable to codependent relations (Finnegan and McNally, 1989, 122). Feminist and critical theorists have challenged the psychoanalytic construct of psychosexual development by critiquing psychoanalytic theories that impose a hetero-masculine ideal of individuation as an indicator of maturity (Warner, 1990; Ahmed, 2006; Irigaray, 1977). A 2018 sociological study by Taylor Orth and Michael Rosenfeld debunks the idea that same-sex female couples move in together faster than same-sex male couples or different-sex couples (Orth and Rosenfeld, 2018). Despite efforts like those of Orth and Rosenfeld to intervene into the myth of lesbian merger and related psychopathological theories that undermine queer and lesbian relationships, an attachment to the U-haul stereotype prevails in its influence on the lesbian imaginary.

Hegemonic discourses like psychoanalytic theories that are employed to uphold normativity through the pathologization of queerness arguably invoke shame around the experience of queer desires, expressions, and modes of identification. Feelings of shame promote self-sabotaging

behaviours, like those that accompany and sustain addictive attachments (Potter-Efron, 2002), because these kinds of coping methods tend to offset the felt experience of the negative affect (Wiechelt, 2007, 403). As such, queer codependencies may be informed by the shame that is produced by systemic forms of trauma, and that is enacted through the discursive violence of psychopathology. In the words of feminist theorist, Ann Cvetkovich, “It may be a necessity rather than a luxury to consider trauma’s impact on sexual life or how its effects are mediated through forms of oppression such as homophobia” (2003, 163).

A discussion about the possibility of dysfunction in lesbian relationships has mostly been avoided in the critical discourse, which is, perhaps, due to the shame that circulates around this history and debate. This chapter is a response to Kadji Amin’s call to confront “the rub” in writing and theorizing queer histories (2017). In *Disturbing Attachments*, Amin underlines the importance of “finding the rub” as a researcher of queer history, pointing to sites, subjects and materials that bring us discomfort, for the purpose of de-idealizing queer narratives and heroes. He writes, “[d]eidealization is not the wholesale destruction of cherished ideals, but a form of the reparative that acknowledges messiness and damage, refuses the repudiating operations of idealization, and acknowledges the ways in which complicity is sometimes necessary for survival” (2017, 11). Amin revisits the history of Jean Genet, the radical French writer, to confront the problematic aspects of his character and behaviours that are sometimes omitted from historical analyses in order to position him as a revered agent of queer liberation. Amin uses this analysis to highlight methodological issues within queer theory and suggests that queer historians and theorists should more fully acknowledge and interrogate the disturbing nature of their affective attachments to stories, subjects and frameworks. Arguably, therefore, there is a

rub in the history of psychoanalysis, feminism and lesbian merger: are we ashamed to admit that feminists, queers and lesbians might engage in dysfunctional relationships? What attachments are de-idealized when confronting the possibility of dysfunction, and what fantasies work to maintain them? I am interested in understanding the role of fantasy as a dissociative affect that helps to mitigate queer shame produced by systemic trauma, and that functions as a safeguard against disconnection by securing our attachments to ideas, behaviours, people and systems.

Codependency and merger are examined herein in relation to queer and/or lesbian affects; they are characterized by what Amin calls “commingled affects” of love and shame that comprise an affective lineage within queer histories and representations wherein love is consistently experienced in tandem with the sacrifice and disavowal of key aspects of one’s social identification with homophobic discourses, systems and people. My analysis of the story of lesbian codependency does not intend to imply codependent, dysfunctional or harmful relationships as a universal lesbian experience, but rather, to examine how discourse prescribes lesbian subjectivities and materializes affectively in and between lesbian relations and imaginaries.

In this chapter, I identify the commingled affects that stick to the story of lesbian u-hauling and analyse the queer desires that circulate around the figure of the U-haul as a lesbian signifier. I argue that the U-haul joke functions to uphold a fantasy of belonging that is related to desires for nationalist forms of inclusion, and that is sustained through addictive attachments at both micro and macro levels. I draw connections between psychology, social work, and feminist theory to illustrate how fantasies of belonging help to secure harmful attachments to people, ideologies

and systems. My approach here is consistent with an interdisciplinary framework adopted in this dissertation. Keeping with critical and feminist critiques of codependency as a psychopathological construct, I offer a critical intervention into hegemonic theories about lesbians being codependent while also acknowledging the possibility that queer attachments can be related to the effects and affects of trauma and that they can cause harm. I believe there is value in understanding interpersonal relations at the intersection of trauma and mental health within broader frames of political meaning, for theorists, clinicians and community members alike. Following Amin, what have we neglected to confront in the critical and feminist discourse deconstructing the psychopathological categorization of queer intimacies that might invite a more nuanced perspective on the ways in which relationships can do harm in queer communities? I think it is important to engage in this discussion because of the implications it presents for resistance movements and the quality of connection in our personal lives as queer people. Romanticizing something that is potentially harmful because it secures a “disturbing attachment”, whether to an historical figure, identity narrative, neoliberal state or romantic partner can keep us bound to thought and behavioural patterns that undermine our worth, well-being and access to emotional connection and political transformation.

State-sanctioned violence produces conditions of precarity for oppressed subjectivities, and as such, oppressed people may be particularly vulnerable to promises of belonging at both micro and macro levels in the context of interpersonal relationships and community connections to citizenship discourses and national identities. Queer interpersonal entanglements are necessarily imbricated with affects of oppression, and I am interested in the ways in which the story of lesbian merger may be informed by the trauma of oppression, its relationship to interpersonal

and national forms of belonging, and the psychopathological discourse around addictive attachments.

What Does a Lesbian Bring to the Second Date?

The U-Haul company was launched in 1945 in response to the postwar demand for “do-it-yourself moving equipment that would be available on a one-way, nationwide basis” (U-Haul.com). The company website positions the U-Haul concept as a “visionary approach” that was responsive to socio-economic conditions and that facilitated the post-war mobility of North American populations. In a similar vein, lesbian communities were growing in North American cities at this time, because many who returned from military deployment opted not to return home to a closeted life (Faderman, 1991, 128), instead embodying a “do-it-yourself” spirit as they continued their pursuit of economic independence.

I am interested in the affective symbolism of the figure of the U-haul as well as the affects that stick to it and circulate around it. The word, ‘U-haul’, implies a self-inflicted and arduous effort to mobilize one’s own weight. It symbolizes staunch individualism that rejects and/or lacks community, family or institutional support, as well as access to capital that might otherwise enable hiring movers or living separately. In this way, the symbol of the U-haul can be seen to encapsulate the romanticization of queer alienation as well as a resistance to being subsumed by oppressive systems. Moreover, as a symbol of lesbian relationships, it represents a relational disposition that works well as a defense mechanism that mitigates queer shame, rejection, and neglect.

The affective residue of this figure lingers in the lesbian imaginary in forms that range from dry jest to romantic fantasy. In its journey through the lesbian imaginary, the U-haul as an affective metaphor signifies a queer ambivalence that adheres to the story of lesbian relationships. In this story, shame and desire combine to produce affects of longing, waiting and yearning, as well as disdain, defiance and resentment. In its online circulation, the story of lesbian u-hauling is invoked in both romantic and sarcastic ways. It carries a homonormative sense of pride that is related to the accomplishment of monogamy (Fig. 2) as well as ruefulness in the critique of homonormativity or of those who embrace queer stereotypes (Fig. 1, 3). The U-haul contains liminality as it travels between spaces, at the same time that it symbolically exudes transience and impermanence. While the moving truck may be fuelled by visions of commitment, security and home, it also embodies the instability of transition and the insecurity of displacement. As a sign of lesbian coupling, it can be seen as a stand-in for a wedding ring, and yet, it does not carry the same sense of security - much like a queer commitment that does not garner the same institutional support as a heterosexual marriage. As a lesbian signifier, the U-haul represents the dialectic between proximity to heteronormative standards of monogamous commitment and the inevitable queer experience of falling short of them.

Affects of longing surround the figure of the U-haul. Desires for connection, support and belonging circulate around this symbol of togetherness and queer commitment. Desires for emancipation from past traumas, failed attachments and oppressive systems can be felt in the mobility of the moving truck, which can be interpreted as a representation of a flight from negative experiences of loss, lack of support, and marginalization. The story of lesbian u-hauling offers an escape route from one's current oppressive reality, loneliness and material insecurity

because it offers an invitation to ride off into the sunset and into the embrace of a new lover with whom we can split the rent. This escapism harbours a denial that the pain of the past might not simply disappear onto the rearview horizon. In short, the U-haul represents a fantasy of belonging that serves to disguise the personal and political baggage that a lesbian brings to the second date.

The Emotional Baggage of Nationalism

The invocation of the second date through the iconography of the U-Haul imbues an impulsive fantasy of “love at first sight” in the lesbian signifier. The symbolism of a moving truck filled with housewares and personal items speaks to our domestic attachments or that which is worth holding onto in terms of our identity stories. Combining these symbolic interpretations, bringing a U-Haul to the second date tells a story about the commingling of romantic fantasy and domestic attachments in the discursive and affective construction of lesbian identity. The U-Haul brings with it a yearning for domestic stability, the comfort of home, and the emotional and material security that may be structurally inaccessible to marginalized queer people. The implied liminality of a moving truck invokes uncertainty about the U-haul’s relationship to its destination. It symbolizes a moment, bridging past experience and a future destination, in which the sense of queer yearning produces an attachment to the promise of a better life on the horizon; almost there, but just out of reach.

Lauren Berlant’s concept of “cruel optimism” (1) informs this reading of the U-haul, in which the fantasy of the good life exists within queer desires for nationalist forms of belonging. Berlant identifies the existence of cruel optimism in relations that impede on a subject’s flourishing, and

wherein subjects remain attached to objects, behaviours, systems and institutions despite the evident cost of their attachment (2011, 1-2). Following Berlant, I wonder if the fantasy of the good life that is imbued in the story of lesbian u-hauling has a homonationalist (Puar, 2007) implication. Does the U-Haul as a lesbian signifier continue in circulation because it functions discursively as a homonationalist projection that resonates with queer and lesbian subjects who seek the benefits of state-sanctioned forms of intimacy? As a homonationalist fantasy, does this lesbian signifier promote forms of inclusion that masquerade as belonging, fuelling a capitalist system that benefits from misplaced desires and missed connections? The story of lesbian u-hauling encapsulates nationalist desires for coupledness, the autonomy of individual households, social and relational mobility, and a willingness to engage with the capitalist enterprise to acquire commodities that represent domesticity and family life.

Just Joking?

Lotta Linge's study about the function of humour in relation to shame illustrates how humour balances out the negative affects associated with shame (disgust, dissmell and humiliation) as a safeguard against low self-esteem (2006, 168). Linge cites the research of affect theorist, Silvan Tomkins, to argue that humour functions as a "moderator" of other affects (168). She refers to Tomkins' (1991, 1963) theorization of negative affects in two clusters, which indicates that "shame-humiliation" is organized under the second cluster. The second cluster concerns object relations and involves the regulation of intimacy and autonomy. Linge's study illustrates that humour may be used to secure connection and combat shame, and that the intrapsychic and interpersonal functions of humour support togetherness through the exchange and attunement of inner affectual states (176). From this perspective, the U-haul joke can be seen to support

intimacy by neutralizing queer shame and related negative affects, in that, it uses humour to repair the damage of disconnection that is produced by experiences of systemic trauma. In this case, humour may serve a reparative purpose, but research into the functions of humor in romantic relationships has shown that humor can also be used to withdraw from connection through the deflection of conflict (De Koning and Weiss, 2002; Heavy, Christensen, and Malamuth, 1995). The joke about ‘U-haul lesbians’ functions in both reparative and detrimental ways, by transmuting queer shame, whilst also avoiding a direct confrontation with the potentially harmful effects of merger.

What is Codependency?

The term “codependency” is used interchangeably as a didactic tool, a psychological concept, and a feature of mental illness (Morgan, 1991, 722). It has been contested as unscientific and as lacking in “any systematic research basis” (McGrath and Oakley, 2012, 53). Jeane Harper and Connie Capdevila (1990, 289) suggest that “[c]odependency is so conceptually complex . . . that it would require four separate DSM categories to contain it, combining characteristics found in Alcoholism, and the Dependent, Borderline, and Histrionic Personality Disorders, as well as an additional category made up of ‘associated features’” (1990, 289). Nevertheless, the working definition that I employ is akin to that of Michael McGrath and Barbara Ann Oakley, who suggest that, “it might be better to conceptualize codependency as dysfunctional behaviors to identify, rather than [as] a disorder to diagnose” (2012, 54). For the purposes of this discussion, I am interested in the affective factors that influence maladaptive behaviours that contribute to relational dysfunction that can be categorized as codependent.

Codependency, Addiction and Fantasy

Codependency has long been characterized in self-help literature as a kind of love addiction or interpersonal addiction (Wright and Wright, 1991). On this view, codependent relations can be understood to be in line with Robert Firestone's formulation of addictive attachments and fantasy bonds, and particularly in relation to what he outlines as the second category of fantasy involvement, which includes individuals who:

utilize real events as a means of reinforcing or 'feeding' their most prized fantasies, and value form over substance in interpersonal relationships. For example, in a destructive, addictive attachment, fantasy-bonded individuals place a strong emphasis on ritual or role-determined responses, such as the Saturday-night date, sleeping together, routine sex, and formalities such as remembering birthdays and anniversaries, etc. At the same time, they may treat each other indifferently or disrespectfully. Indeed, a fantasy bond is a destructive type of relationship in which elements of self-parenting are projected and reciprocated to the detriment of both participants. There is a desperate holding on to the other person, with a corresponding lack of genuine relatedness (1993, 341-342).

Codependency is not necessarily experienced as an addiction to a person. Rather, a codependent relation hinges on addiction to affects in the service of self-neglect, as in mechanisms of fantasy, denial and projection. Codependency comprises a set of relational conditions, including self-neglect, caregiving and power struggles, that affectively produce emotional disconnection.

Nicole LePera's definition of codependency points to the theme of self-neglect directly, stating that, "codependency is the chronic neglect of self in order to gain approval, love, validation, or self identity through another person" (2020). LePera's definition builds on an earlier body of psychology literature proposing a set of diagnostic criteria for codependency, in which self-neglect is featured as the core concept around which related characteristics are organized (Hughes-Hammer, Martsolf and Zeller, 1998).

Likening codependency to pathological altruism, McGrath and Oakley (2012) write, “[t]he self-sacrificing individual accepts the psychological and/or physical pain he endures as a necessary part of the ‘helping- others’ equation. For the pathological altruist, perhaps the pain and suffering is the goal” (59). In my view, pain and suffering may be the unconscious goal of a codependent attachment in the sense that codependency operates around a belief that love requires self-neglect through the eradication of boundaries between partners. It is this commingling of love and pain that is captured in the symbol of the U-haul, reflecting a dialectical fantasy that allows the simultaneous romanticization and derision of merger.

Combining the theories of Firestone, McGrath & Oakley, Wright & Wright and Hughes-Hammer et. al., the central function of codependency is the prevention of emotional connection through mutual self-denial in a sacrifice of individual experience for an image of togetherness. The problem is not necessarily the sacrifice or the caregiving, but the chronic self-neglect with which self-sacrifice and care are performed. Maintenance of a codependent bond requires at least one party who prioritizes the needs of others over their own, which produces a psychic merger wherein individual needs are misrecognized. This relation is explained by Martin Weegmann (2006), drawing from John Bowlby (1980a), who uses the example of ““a compulsive caregiver [who] seems to be attributing to the cared-for all the sadness and neediness that he is unable or unwilling to recognise in himself, the cared-for person can be regarded as standing vicariously for the one giving the care”” (36). In other words, codependency is a case of projective identification that hinges on relations of caregiving that attend to negative affects.

Partners in a codependent relation are co-conspirators in the construction of a façade of intimacy. In this dynamic of relating we escape together, projecting our hopes and fears on to our love object in a vain attempt at connection fuelled by fantasy. This act of projection is a boundary violation that ignores the possibility of differences of opinion, values, ideals, goals, and even personality traits between partners. Boundaries enable emotional connection, and without them, we may be dating our own fantasies. Writing on psychoanalytic views of lesbian and bisexual women, Beverly Burch (1997) writes that “[t]he theme of merger is related to the theme of attachment and intimacy but has another dimension to it, the loss of individual boundaries. Attachment and autonomy are not mutually exclusive, but merger and autonomy sometimes are” (91).

Boundaries and Differentiation

How do we talk about boundaries and queer relationships without redeploying the oppressive function of psychoanalysis? Burch speaks to the history of the pathologization of lesbian relationships by citing the writing of mid-century psychoanalyst, Charles Socarides:

By the 1960s psychoanalysis had firmly fixed lesbian relationships in one stage or another of dire pathology... . Charles Socarides (1968) wrote that lesbian relationships are characterized by ‘hate, destructiveness, mutual defeat, exploitation of the partner and the self, oral-sadistic incorporation, aggressive onslaughts, attempts to alleviate anxiety and a pseudo-solution to the aggressive and libidinal urges which dominate and torment the individual. (1997, 89)

A central feature of the psychoanalytic symptomology of lesbian merger that has effectively been used to delegitimize “same-sex” love is a lack of boundaries between partners.

Traditionally, psychoanalysts have suggested that the recognition of difference is a condition for “real” desire, whereas same-sex relationships are deemed narcissistic and lacking in self/other

boundaries on account of gender sameness (Burch, 1997, 93; Warner, 1990; O'Connor and Ryan, 1993, 190). The dialectical fantasy of u-hauling that appeals to ambitions of heteronormativity while also embracing queer failure draws on this discursive history in that it incorporates *and* rejects the psychoanalytic claim that lesbian “sameness” is a sign of the failure to achieve heterosexuality.

The psychoanalytic tendency to employ the language of sameness and difference to pathologize queer desire has been scrutinized by queer and feminist thinkers. Sara Ahmed (2006) discusses the “fantasy of lesbian merger” in *Queer Phenomenology*. She writes that “[t]he very idea of women desiring women because of ‘sameness’ relies on a fantasy that women are ‘the same.’ Such a fantasy is also played out in the psychoanalytic approaches to ‘lesbian merger’ - in the idea that women, when they tend toward each other as objects of desire, tend to lose any sense of difference” (95). Maggie Nelson (2015), in her autobiographical text, *The Argonauts*, comments in a similar vein:

One of the most annoying things about hearing the refrain “same-sex marriage” over and over again is that I don’t know many—if any—queers who think of their desire’s main feature as being “same-sex.” It’s true that a lot of lesbian sex writing from the ’70s was about being turned on, and even politically transformed, by an encounter with sameness. This encounter was, is, can be, important, as it has to do with seeing reflected that which has been reviled, with exchanging alienation or internalized revulsion for desire and care. To devote yourself to someone else’s pussy can be a means of devoting yourself to your own. But whatever sameness I’ve noted in my relationships with women is not the sameness of Woman, and certainly not the sameness of parts. Rather, it is the shared, crushing understanding of what it means to live in a patriarchy (44-45).

The psychoanalytic rubric of desire that employs sameness and difference relies on an essentialist gender binary that falls apart when confronted with the countless possible expressions and experiences of queer identities, relations and desires. In “Homo-Narcissism; or, Heterosexuality?” Michael Warner (1990) critiques Freud’s assertion that homosexuality is a

form of narcissism by interrogating the absurdity of the psychoanalytic claim that a subject has failed to distinguish self from other when they desire a member of the “same sex”. His critique identifies and problematizes Freud’s commitment to maintaining a categorical binary between identification and attachment that corresponds to subject and object, male and female (197).

Warner’s analysis illustrates how the psychoanalytic record enforces the gender binary to pathologize queerness and uphold heterosexism. Ahmed (2006) further suggests that the psychoanalytic formulation of lesbian relationships as lacking by virtue of gender sameness serves to elevate “the concepts of separation and autonomy that secure the masculine and heteronormative subject as a social and bodily ideal” (95-96). It also secures interpersonal boundaries within the domain of normativity, which implies that functional relationships for women require a cis-masculine counterpart.

Psychoanalysis as a regulatory device might be understood as a vehicle through which autonomy, self-sovereignty (and by association, individual boundaries) are weaponized to uphold neoliberal societal values, with the effect of undercutting collectivist community building and feminist calls to widen the social safety net. Ranjana Khanna (2003) asserts the importance of understanding psychoanalysis as a theory of nationalism rooted in colonial histories of anthropology and archaeology. Doing so “allows us to see it as an exemplary document of the modern European moment that gave rise to narratives of nationhood and selfhood that are today so much a part of internal imaginaries that colonials and postcolonials alike cannot think of selfhood entirely independently of psychoanalysis” (100). Following Khanna, in keeping with the colonial metrics of sovereignty, the discursive interfacing of psychoanalysis and selfhood imbues the concept of interpersonal boundaries with social value and political power. In this

sense, boundaries are also, arguably, representative of whiteness and ability, as they are wielded against collectivism and horizontality. A firm boundary between white, heteronormative, able-bodied subjects and racialized, queer, disabled others maintains hegemonic white supremacy, individualism and heteronormativity. To divide and separate is the work of inflexible boundaries. However, a complete lack of boundaries may also present barriers to liberation for queer, disabled and racialized subjects, insofar as affects of self-neglect are produced in the absence of boundaries. We cannot be free if we are entangled in bonds requiring self-neglect disguised as love and care. Part of the problem with the psychoanalytic understanding of lesbian desire is that it genders autonomy, and thus boundaries, as masculine and closeness, or merger, as feminine. If we are to refute the ways in which psychoanalysis maintains white, heteromasculine ideals, it is important to avoid any essentialist assumptions that conflate dysfunctional relations with the feminine or the lesbian. In other words, autonomy and closeness are not mutually exclusive, and boundaries can be used to disrupt connection as often as they may be tools that enhance connection. In the symbol of the U-haul, we can see the disruption of the possibility of interdependence in the implications of both rugged individualism and merger, producing affects that may cast the appearance of connection, but that functionally facilitate escapism.

Depathologizing Codependency

Some theorists writing about feminist care ethics have espoused the values of interdependence by problematizing the dichotomy of individuation versus relationality and refuting the traditional definitions of autonomy and care as mutually exclusive or oppositional (Keller, 1997; Gilligan, 1989; Meyers, 1987). Jean Keller has advocated for the utility of dialogical thinking around this binary, explaining that autonomy depends on the development of self-respect, which emerges

from positive social connections (1997, 161). Other theorists have refuted the pathologization of codependency by defending emotional intimacy as a strength and an indicator of well-being (Collins, 1993; Granello and Beamish, 1998; Sloven, 1991; Malloy and Berkery, 1993). These arguments attempt to construe codependency as a relation of emotional connection that has been needlessly pathologized and are meant to rebut the misogynous implications of literature that blames women as the enablers of addicted spouses or that pathologizes their care as symptomatic, but no less essential to the nature, of femininity. Gail Malloy and Ann Berkery (1993) cite a paradigm of connectedness to argue for the Growth in Connection model, which emphasizes healing relational dysfunction through relationship, rather than by denouncing empathy and self-sacrifice as pathological traits of codependency. Similarly, Barbara Collins (1993) uses self-in-relation theory to critique the concept of codependency, suggesting that this construct does not provide a useful framework for intervention because it is disempowering to women. Robert Weiss (2019) offers a critique of codependency as a deficit-based model for recovery for the partners of sex addicts, suggesting a strengths-based model, which he calls, prodependence. He writes that, “Prodependence, as a strength-based attachment-driven model, views loved ones of addicts as heroes for continuing to love and continuing to remain attached despite the debilitating presence of addiction” (179). Weiss re-frames the behavioural characteristics associated with codependency as virtues rather than deficits. These formulations intervene into earlier psychoanalytic theories, like Freud’s theory of sexuality, which shame women for the attributes that they acquire due to socialization (1905/ 1953). These are important interventions, and yet they may also, inadvertently, contribute to denial about the possibility of dysfunction in the ways connection can sometimes be pursued. In other words, a fantasy of belonging can be seen in arguments that frame codependency as intimacy, and self-neglect as

heroic or virtuous. When advocating for the value of mutuality it is important to distinguish interdependence from codependency, lest our advocacy be leveraged in the service of denial and the perpetuation of harm. Codependency may be conceptually problematic as a diagnostic category, but we are gaslighting ourselves and others when implying that relations built on shame, fantasy and martyrdom are akin to interdependence in any functional sense.

Fantasy and Systemic Oppression

Relations that are upheld by escapist fantasy and self-neglect highlight a relation of what Berlant (2011) calls “cruel optimism” in the story of lesbian merger. Berlant suggests that the fantasy of ‘the good life’ perpetuates an attachment to an oppressive state by distracting subjects from the ongoing crisis of attrition produced through neoliberal policies and ideologies. There is an addictive quality in relations of cruel optimism, which can be seen in the pursuit of a harmful attachment despite the ways in which it impedes our “flourishing” (Berlant 2011, 1). Following Berlant, subjects, arguably, are fantasy-bonded to the state in cycles of attachment fueled by self-neglect. They are bound by what Ahmed (2004) calls “national love”, an uneven power dynamic masked by the rhetoric of patriotism. Ahmed writes, “Indeed, the impossibility that love can reach its object may also be what makes love powerful as a narrative...Even though love is a demand for reciprocity, it is also an emotion that lives with the failure of that demand often through an intensification of its affect... So the failure of the nation to ‘give back’ the subject’s love works to increase the investment in the nation” (130-131). In the case of lesbian merger and codependency, attachment is intensified by systemic neglect, producing desires for state-sanctioned forms of intimacy. We may participate in the romance of homonormativity, as in, the act of u-hauling, while internalizing the neglect of family and institutional systems, and this produces ambivalence in our attachments at both interpersonal and systemic levels.

Jasbir Puar's (2007) reflection on Ahmed's discussion of national love explains how homonationalism is produced through the "unrequited love" of racialized and queer others for a nation state "that produces affective be/longing that never fully rewards its captives yet nonetheless fosters longing and yearning as affects of nationalism" (32). Puar is describing the fantasy of state benevolence that fuels the abuse of marginalized people by neoliberal policies and institutions. Perhaps, resistance mobilization is not unlike recovery from addiction and codependency in the sense that the ability to identify and interrogate our fantasies may have far-reaching political implications for resistance movements, as much as it may support interpersonal wellness. Moreover, the trauma of oppression produces affects proximal to self-neglect, like shame and worthlessness, in and between oppressed subjects as an affective safeguard that protects the hope for a better life.

U-hauling as a Queer Fantasy

Seen through the theory of *queer codependency*, which employs affect theory and social theory to critically deconstruct gender essentialism in traditional psychoanalytic treatments of lesbian sexuality, the story of u-hauling carries the affective residue of a tenuous relation to hegemonic power. It operates as a fantasy of queer escape that is animated by the affects of systemic oppression. The figure of the U-haul operates as a thinly veiled metaphor for codependency that contributes to undermining connection and well-being, interpersonally and collectively. Sara Ahmed (2010) writes, "[t]he obstacle to desire...performs a psychic function in preserving the fantasy that getting what you want would make you happy" (32). In the case of codependency, love is misrecognized as both happiness and self-neglect. In codependent relations, we think we

desire the obstacle to our desire, and a relation of cruel optimism is the result. When u-hauling, we may be projecting a fantasy of belonging without the awareness that it is, in fact, a fantasy. This fantasy of belonging has become both the obstacle to desire and the desire itself, producing an experience of love commingled with relational trauma that reinforces a familiar experience for oppressed subjects, a lived reality of crisis as ordinary (Berlant, 2011).

For oppressed subjects, the crisis of attrition and state-sanctioned violence is a routine occurrence from which fantasies of belonging may provide a welcome distraction. Arguably, this fantasy extends from the macro into the micro, resulting in affects of interpersonal codependencies that produce emotional disconnection. The ways in which oppression can impact relationships between oppressed subjects has serious and far-reaching implications for collective struggles for liberation. Interrogating our personal and collective fantasies of belonging is necessary for both personal recovery and collective resistance. Fantasy can be adaptive, supportive and creative, but it can also be a dissociative mechanism that keeps us attached to dysfunctional systems and relationships that perpetuate disempowerment and compromise our well-being.

Fantasies of Belonging

The stories of u-hauling, codependency and lesbian merger continue to affect our relationships, communities and resistance struggles. In some ways, these stories affirm experiences of love at intersections of trauma, addiction and oppression. In other ways, they may undermine these very experiences. In my view, the story of lesbian u-hauling represents a queer fantasy of belonging that encourages affects of self-neglect and contributes to experiences of codependency. The

fantasy is queered by its reproduction as a lesbian trope and its application to sexual minority women in a patriarchal context, but fantasies of belonging that promote codependencies are symptomatic of a colonial capitalist system that promotes and provokes affects of self-neglect among marginalized social positions more broadly. Codependency produces affects related to fantasy, like projection and denial, as defenses against negative affects, like shame and worthlessness, with potentially detrimental outcomes. The affective complexity produced by systemic trauma that is woven into our queer love stories works to normalize the romanticization of painful attachments. Lesbian relationality should be theorized in a manner that attends to a dialectic between emotional attachments born out of resilience, and the residual trauma these kinds of attachments may affect.

The psychoanalytic fantasy of lesbian merger and the psychopathology of codependency has been resisted by queer, feminist and critical theorists. Critical approaches that interrogate the oppressive function of psychoanalysis often fail to adequately validate the potential detriments of fantasy bonds and addictive relationships, circumventing an important conversation about the impacts of systemic trauma on the quality of connection between oppressed people. A critique of psychoanalysis should acknowledge its contributions to queer trauma, while not discounting the effects of trauma on relational dysfunction and mental health outcomes. Those working to improve the lives of queer and marginalized communities in resistance, including theorists, clinicians and community workers, must resist the violence of hegemonic oppression that is realized through psychopathology, *and* work to address the affective reverberations of this oppression within our interpersonal relationships and communities. Wherever possible, we need to emotionally divest from that which impedes our flourishing as individuals and communities

and recognize that emotional awareness can function as a foundation from which to organize, mobilize and resist oppressive systems.

Chapter Two- Constant Craving: Queering Addiction Recovery in Neoliberal Times

...we're just swapping one addiction for another..."

—*Feel Good*, 2020, season 1, episode 2.

It is, perhaps, unsurprising that the construction of the signifier lesbian as codependent parallels the relationship between lesbian identity and addiction discourse. “Love addiction” is a pop psychology concept that emerged in the 1970s (Peele and Brodsky, 1975; Costa et al., 2019), and it has been theorized in relation to codependency (Wright and Wright, 1991). It continues to generate clinical discourse, which can be seen in recent studies designed to identify its psychometric characteristics by invoking the components model of behavioural addiction, and to establish diagnostic frameworks in response to such addictions (Earp et al., 2017, Costa et al., 2019). Conceptually, love addiction reproduces psychoanalytic themes related to attachment theory and codependency etiology in the way that it situates addiction in relational and affective frames, often through trauma-informed logics. For example, the love addict is theorized as suffering from “attachment hunger” and “childhood deprivation”, often specifically located in the relationship with the mother (Peabody, 1994; Halpern, 1982).

The construct of love addiction illustrates addiction attribution in critical addictions studies. Addiction attribution refers to the application of the clinical designation of addiction to various forms of psychic and behavioural attachment. Drawing on Sedgwick’s discussion of addiction attribution in “Epidemics of the Will” (1993), Suzanne Fraser, David Moore and Helen Keane (2014) frame addiction attribution from a new materialist perspective as “an epidemic of addicting” (236). Discussing the making of addiction, Fraser et al. write that, “[s]ubstances,

persons, brains and behaviours; the *DSM* and its lists; neuroscience and its scans and receptors, its endogenous opioids and cannabinoids; bread, chips and biscuits... they are all being brought into, or reinscribed in, particular overlapping but not identical ideas of addiction” (Ibid).

Love addiction has been tied to lesbians specifically insofar as it relates to stereotypical lesbian tropes like, “serial relationship junkies” who have an “urge to merge” (Costine, 2015). Studies published in the 1980s and 1990s reporting higher rates of addiction and alcoholism in lesbians relative to heterosexual women (e.g. Abbott, 1998; Bux, 1996; Cabaj, 1996; McKirnan and Peterson, 1989) arguably contributed to this characterization of lesbians. Discourses of addiction, codependency, trauma and lesbian identity are interrelated across clinical, pop cultural and critical archives. As such, they represent a rich site for affect analysis of the storied ambivalence in representations of lesbian attachments.

The Lesbian [Love] Addict

This chapter examines the discursive construction of the figure of the lesbian addict and/or the lesbian love addict, who figure in the logic of addiction as differing only in their object choices. By combining these figures into the singular lesbian [love] addict, the analysis highlights the affective construction of the signifier lesbian in addiction attribution discourse as a figure that is marked by obsession, fixation and dysfunctional attachment tendencies. Keeping with critical and feminist critiques of addiction attribution (Fomiatti et al., 2017, 2019; Keane, 2002; Sedgwick, 1993), the discussion herein is intended as an intervention in the biomedical and neoliberal logics that can undergird addiction attribution discourse. Specifically, this chapter traces the discourse around the attribution of trauma in addiction etiology in the construction of

the lesbian [love] addict through a dialogic analysis of the semi-autobiographical Netflix mini-series, *Feel Good*.

Addiction attribution discourse has been criticized in part because the biomedicalization of affective relations (e.g. object attachments) circumvents meaningful interventions into broader environmental and systemic factors that contribute to addiction challenges (Fraser et al., 2014). Trauma-informed care (TIC) has become “a necessary paradigm” in social work practice (Rad et al., 2025) and reflects an increasing awareness about the systemic factors that influence traumatic experiences (Levenson, 2020) — it is recognized across most western health and human service systems (Yatchmenoff et al., 2017). However, the way in which the biomedical model of addiction enacts tenets of neoliberal individualism through trauma attribution prevents structural forms of accountability that would, arguably, contribute to the rehabilitation processes of “addicts” whose social marginalization makes them vulnerable to “systemic trauma” (Goldsmith et al., 2014). In other words, while the acknowledgment that some addictive behavioural patterns can be attributed to trauma might validate the experiences of some addicted subjects, the foundational concept that addiction is a brain disease undercuts intervention into structural forms of trauma through a focus on the rehabilitation of the individual’s voluntariness and/or compulsion to engage in addictive behaviour. This chapter explores the way in which neoliberal individualism, the biological disease model of addiction (BDMA) and the role of trauma in addiction attribution intersect in the discursive construction of the figure of the lesbian [love] addict.

The following analysis treats the figure of the lesbian [love] addict as a figure that is related to

the obsessive lesbian (Black, 1994), the predatory lesbian (Murphy, 2017), the codependent lesbian (Thurston, 2022) and the criminal lesbian (Hart, 2005). It examines the ways in which the lesbian's psychic profile is construed as an outcome of the affective intersection of compulsion and voluntariness (Sedgwick, 1994). It considers the lesbian's emergence as a psychopathological inference that delineates normative versus non-normative affects and behaviours in and through the ambivalent understandings of "addicts" as both victims and criminals. This chapter's analysis of *Feel Good* observes a 21st century iteration of the trope of the lesbian [love] addict and situates it at the intersection of trauma-informed and neurobiological frameworks of addiction. It argues that neoliberal individualism undergirds the ideological tenets of addiction recovery in institutional recovery programs (e.g., Narcotics Anonymous (NA), Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), strong-arm rehab) which effectively circumvents ideological, etiological and treatment interventions that recognize systemic forms of trauma like structural violence. In these recovery settings, the application of trauma attribution in addiction theory has limited value to queer and otherwise marginalized subjects whose addiction challenges may intersect with experiences of oppression. This chapter asks, how is the construction of the lesbian [love] addict as both victim and criminal sustained by trauma attribution theory in *Feel Good*? Does trauma attribution theory have value for queer addicted subjects? What does a queer politics of addiction recovery look like in neoliberal times?

Employing a theoretical framework combining feminist affect theory and critical addictions theory to analyze the discursive construction of the figure of the lesbian [love] addict, this chapter examines the ideological hegemony of neoliberalism that employs both trauma-informed and neurobiological logics to uphold the status quo in recovery programming. It advocates for

the potential of a queer politics of addiction recovery as an intervention in addiction discourse that attends to experiential knowledge production and affect theory. In reference to the figure of the lesbian [love] addict, this chapter offers a dialogic analysis of a contemporary semi-autobiographical portrait of queer addiction recovery and codependency in the Netflix mini-series, *Feel Good* (2020). It refers to the work of Helen Keane (2004, 2014), Suzanne Fraser (2008, 2014) and Matilda Hellman (2021) in critical addictions studies, who are new materialists, posthumanists, and affect theorists. It also enlists the work of queer and lesbian studies scholars, Ann Cvetkovich (2003), and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1994) to conceptualize queer ontologies of recovery in neoliberal times.

A growing body of literature and discourse citing trauma-informed theories and practices in the aetiology and treatment of addiction marks the period of the early 21st century in the history of addiction (Covington, 2008; Brown, 2021; Jordan-Cox, 2018). Addiction continues to be diagnosed and treated as a neurobiological disease in clinical settings, but the trauma-informed paradigm has expanded the conceptual category of addiction in its account of social, political and environmental factors (Dobischok et al., 2024; Mills, 2015; Rosenberg, 2011). In this way, the trauma-informed framework has critical potential to deconstruct existing neoliberal tenets like individualism in institutional recovery programs through formulations of systemic oppression and structural violence as forms of trauma. However, as the analysis herein will show, neoliberal ideology maintains a structural stronghold on the ways in which trauma-informed thinking can be operationalized in recovery settings, inhibiting the ability to hold oppressive systems to account for the violence inflicted on marginalized subjects through systemic forms of oppression. This chapter discusses how the ways in which trauma-informed frameworks can be

employed within neoliberal systems (e.g. health care, education, law and social services) are limited by the implicit reproduction of neoliberal ideological principles (e.g. individualism) through invocations of self-care, self-surveillance and personal responsibility.

Trauma attribution has been folded into the BDMA vis a vis psychopathology and neurobiology, but a trauma-informed theory of addiction that is informed by feminist affect theory may hold value in keeping with a theoretical tradition attending to the intersection of state regulation, social location, and affective experience that engages the psychological and emotional impacts of oppression (see Fanon, 1952, trans. Markmann, 2002; Hill Collins, 1990; Cheng, 2000; Cvetkovich, 2003; Ahmed, 2004, 2010; Puar, 2007; Berlant, 2011). Arguably, trauma-informed formulations of addiction have the potential to normalize addiction from a strengths-based perspective as an adaptive strategy for managing the affective aftermath of traumatic events. However, in settings that utilize institutionalized recovery programs, a combination of psychopathological and neurobiological logics are employed to characterize addiction as a psychic and physiological maladaptation. Trauma may refigure the addicted subject, or the figure of the lesbian [love] addict, in ways that could be experienced as less pathologizing than 'addiction', but both 'trauma' and 'addiction' exist within neoliberal notions of individual responsibility that prevent a manifestation of accountability by and within normative systems of marginalization and oppression.

Neoliberalism and the BDMA

Neoliberalism refers to an imbrication of economic and cultural projects characterized by the fusion of market and state imperatives, individual responsibility as a cultural ideal, and a shift

from the welfare state to the privatized, carceral state (Jakobson and Bernstein, 2013; Harvey, 2007; Saad-Filho and Johnson, 2005; Rose, 1999). Institutions that uphold neoliberalism like health care and the carceral system have employed the BDMA to the effect of absolving institutions of responsibility for addictive behaviours by focusing on individual neurobiology (Granfield and Reinarman, 2014; Levine, 2014; Gowan and Whetstone, 2012). Critical addiction theory considers how neoliberal discourses, values and systems equate health with normativity and productivity, locate disease in the individual, and hold the individual to account for their moral failings as a deflection from the failure of the social safety net. The work of critical addiction theorists like Harry Levine (2014), Robert Granfield and Craig Reinarman (2014) illustrates how the BDMA locates the problem of addiction in the brain of the individual through the employment of neurobiological explanations for a lack of self-discipline. The BDMA developed out of a history of puritan temperance advocacy that identified addiction as a malady of moral deficiency, which emphasized self-responsibility and the ability to contribute to society as markers of recovery, both of which remain prominent principles of recovery programming today (Granfield and Reinarman, 2014). The neoliberalization of addiction recovery simultaneously requires the admission of personal responsibility and deference to a governing authority.

In “Making the Criminal Addict: Subjectivity and Social Control in a Strong-Arm Rehab” Teresa Gowan and Sarah Whetstone (2012) situate addiction recovery programming in the context of American strategies for crime control in the contemporary neoliberal era of “hyper-incarceration” (2012, 69). Through an ethnographic analysis of interviews held with participants at a “strong-arm rehabilitation program”, which refers to a publicly funded drug treatment

program that serves the criminal justice system as an alternative to incarceration, the authors illustrate how these programs draw on the BDMA to enforce a morally imbued biologization of poverty and race. The authors' findings reveal that neurobiology is referenced in diagnostic literature and rehab eligibility protocols, but seldom does it inform the therapeutic techniques in the rehabilitation process:

Although vital for the court 'diagnosis' (Whetstone and Gowan 2011), bio-chemical etiology lay very lightly on the [rehabilitation] process. The central determinant of both the client's past and his future was his moral orientation. Just as pathological 'pathways in the brain' had been created by the deviant practices of the past, the key to a drug-free future lay not on the level of brain chemistry but via a radical modification of 'behaviors' and 'criminal thinking.' (Gowan and Whetstone, 2012, 78)

In the effort to address "criminal thinking", participants were cautioned against blaming their addiction challenges on their experiences of poverty, racialization or any other form of oppression because this was perceived as deflecting from one's sense of personal responsibility. Gowan and Whetstone's study shows how the BDMA neutralizes experiences of oppression through the neoliberal mandate of self-responsibility that works to deflect accountability for structural violence. It also illustrates Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's argument in "Epidemics of the Will", in which she discusses how addiction attribution discourse fixates on the "metaphysical absolutes" (1993, 183) of voluntariness and compulsion. Subjects undergoing institutional forms of addiction recovery are implicated in the roles of both 'criminal' and 'victim'.

Depathologizing Addiction

Critical treatments of addiction have disrupted the hegemony of the BDMA (e.g. Gomart, 2002; Fraser and valentine, 2008; Vitellone, 2010; Weinberg, 2011), troubled how addiction discourses (e.g. recovery programming, self-help literature) promote self-responsibility as a moral

imperative (Keane, 2002; Fomiatti et al., 2019; Race, 2009), and interrogate the metaphysical absolutism inherent in “addiction attribution” (Sedgwick, 1993, 183), which isolates consumption from its determining factors and delineates normal from abnormal behaviours (Keane, 2004). Critical interventions into trauma theory and discourse (Khanna, 2003; Tuck, 2009; Clark, 2016; Stevens, 2009) conceive of trauma theory as a “colonial invader” (Clark, 2016), a catch-all term that lacks a universal definition and a construct that produces traumatized subjectivities (Stevens, 2009). Given these critical treatments of trauma and addiction, the following analysis queries the way in which trauma attribution has been shaped by the BDMA through colonial/clinical frameworks.

Critical addictions theorists like Suzanne Fraser (2008, 2014), Helen Keane (2004, 2014), kylie valentine (2008), Emilie Gomart (2002), Nicole Vitellone (2010) and Matilda Hellman (2021) think beyond the neoliberal paradigm through a posthumanist lens that draws on the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987). They take up assemblage theory to destabilize the centrality of the individual subject in the conceptualization of the causes of addiction. The posthumanist approach to addiction highlights the importance of reframing the role of the environment in addiction theory. Fraser et al. (2014) write, “[r]eifying the human as the source of all action and meaning is particularly problematic in relation to addiction discourse, which draws its power and influence in part from its invocation of the self as the site of disorder and health” (13). Through an affect lens, macro-level applications of trauma attribution in addiction discourse can disrupt moralizing binaries by resisting absolutism insofar as a focus on the affects of structural violence endows systems of oppression with an influence that is both diffuse and agentic, and that can be seen to shape and even supersede individual agency. However, the way

in which the biomedicalization of addiction functions through trauma theory is to isolate the individual from their environment. In institutionalized recovery settings, the neoliberal mandate of self-responsibility as a panacea ensures the circumvention of meaningful interventions into systemic forms of trauma. While conversations in support groups may address the impact of trauma on behaviour (in fact, they are often unavoidable due to the common invocation of testimonial methods in recovery spaces (Meiners and Sanabria, 2004)), they seldom stray from a focus on trauma at the micro-social level, as related to individual experiences. Even in spaces that claim anti-oppressive politics explicitly, the attention to participants' experiences of systemic trauma can only be performative when solutions remain limited by institutional parameters enforcing self-disciplinary processes of reification as best practice.

Depathologizing Trauma

Depathologizing marginalized subject positions is central to the work of critically intervening in neoliberal discourses about addiction and trauma. In *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*, Ann Cvetkovich (2003) takes up the concept of trauma beyond the confines of pathology. She seeks new language for lesbian experiences of trauma that combats the pathologization of queer subjectivities and that creates space for complicated queer affects.

Cvetkovich writes,

As a name for experiences of socially situated political violence, trauma forges overt connections between politics and emotion. Sexual acts, butch-femme discourse, queer transnational publics, incest, aids and aids activism, grassroots archives—these are some of the sites of lesbian public culture where I have not only found the traces of trauma but ways of thinking about trauma that do not pathologize it, that seize control over it from the medical experts, and that forge creative responses to it that far outstrip even the most utopian of therapeutic and political solutions. (2003, 3)

Cvetkovich's work intervenes in the structural violence of pathology in clinical discourses about trauma while asserting the value of trauma-informed analysis and queer forms of knowledge production. Her work attends to the importance of seeking new language through which to describe experiences of witnessing, caregiving and grieving in the wake of traumatic events.

Following Cvetkovich, as a site that is queered by the imbrication of trauma, politics and emotion, the recovery meeting holds the potential for queer interventions in the pathologization of trauma. However, it may also be a space wherein existing mythologies and psychopathologies are reproduced, and where trauma-informed thinking invokes the symptomization of experiences of abuse and political violence. Some feminist theorists have raised criticism about the ways in which trauma discourse works within the western medical model of addiction to reinforce gender bioessentialism (Muzak, 2009; Haaken, 1996; Marecek, 1999; Lamb, 1999). Jeanne Marecek (1999) argues that “[trauma talk] subsumes the particularities of a woman's experience into abstractions (e.g., ‘trauma,’ ‘abuse’) and reduces experience into discrete, encapsulated symptoms (flashbacks, revictimization)” (165). Likewise, queer interventions that apply trauma theory to existing addiction recovery tenets and discourses may be appropriated by the individualist abstractions implicit in neoliberal ideology. Institutional recovery contexts operate through processes of definition and surveillance through the terms of a pathology born of neoliberal capitalist values and heterosexist moral standards. Queer affects can subvert these standards in the way that they evade categorical or clinical definition, but representations centering queer affective experiences may still be susceptible to the ideological imperative of neoliberalism, as we will see.

Feel Good

The Netflix series, *Feel Good* (2020), produced by Mae Martin and Joe Hampson, resonates as a testimonial of the ambivalence experienced by queer people undergoing addiction recovery. As a semi-autobiographical portrayal, it represents both a re-telling and a re-visioning of a queer life experience that queers addiction discourse through the representation of entanglements of queer desire and longing coupled with the affects of substance use. Martin and Hampson's depiction of addiction reflects a clear position in the discourse of "addiction attribution" (Sedgwick, 1994), and functions as a motivated representation (hooks, 1994), whose aim is to challenge traditional thinking about substance-specific addictions with a trauma-informed perspective. The concept of addiction as an affective relation that can influence various objects and modes of attachment materializes through the testimonial depiction of the commonalities and interrelations between the protagonist's experiences of trauma, addiction, recovery, gender identity and interpersonal attachments. In *Feel Good*, the trope of the lesbian [love] addict is depicted in the representation of both main characters, Mae and George. The depiction of their codependent relationship and Mae's addiction presents a familiar trope in the history of queer film and television, which includes previous representations of [love] addicts, like Gia and Linda in *Gia* (1998), Kit and Ivan in *The L Word* (2004) and Finley and Sophie in *The L Word: Generation Q* (2019). The hardships faced by the figure of the lesbian [love] addict commonly imply a history of trauma, and *Feel Good* replicates this theme. In *Feel Good*, addiction is presented as being related to the main character's traumatic history of sexual assault, and as an affective relation that is transmissible to a codependent attachment.

Analysis

In season one, episode 2, Mae attends an NA meeting wherein the question of the definition of addiction is raised, provoking an inflammatory response from the group. Mae points to the maladaptive behaviours of other participants, “I just feel like, Kevin, how much sex do you have? And Karen, how much do you compulsively lie? Whatever it is, cigarettes, our phones, we have habits so how can we say that we’re not addicted?” The frame shifts around the circle of participants who sit in folding chairs set up in the middle of a community centre gym. Grey and beige tones filter their panicked, confused, and angry expressions as the frame manically captures overlapping protestations and confessions. The facilitator attempts to intervene, “I don’t think this is a helpful conversation,” but another participant reacts defensively, “I think it’s fucking bullshit, because I’ve been clean for 54 months!” Mae continues, “My girlfriend... went away for one night and I lost my mind. And it was all the same feelings: craving and withdrawal and relief and obsession. We’re just swapping one addiction for another.” A participant protests, “Does anyone else think she’s talking grade ‘A’ baloney?” Another participant exclaims, “I was told this was a safe space” (00:18:52).

In this scene, the idea that the affects of addiction are transmissible between habitual behaviours implies that abstinence from substance use may not solve the afflictions of the “addict”. From within the Anonymous culture, this position is perceived to undermine the recovery progress of other members. One member angrily classifies Mae’s theory as false and deceitful, while another nervously perceives it to undermine their immediate safety. Their affective processes determine diverse responses to the ideological threat that illustrates the ways in which the NA ethos of addiction recovery is secured to a member’s sense of self, worthiness and security. The commitment to pathology embedded in NA discourse becomes embodied by members,

effectively upholding the structural stronghold that institutional recovery programming has on the conceptualization of addiction.

Mae's realization that they are addicted to their girlfriend can be explained by a trauma-informed model of addiction attribution that suggests that substance use is one of many possible methods of emotional regulation employed in the aftermath of trauma. At the same time, it invokes a trauma-informed framework to validate the concept of addiction as an individual pathology. *Feel Good* frames addiction with a trauma-informed lens, but effectively reproduces the vitiating quality of pathologization. This is underscored in the last line of the meeting scene, by an impassioned proclamation from one of the meeting's participants, Maggie. Maggie shares a woeful story of hopelessness and longing in her relationship with her estranged daughter. She agrees with Mae that she, too, experiences affects related to addiction that implore her to engage in stalking behaviour. She concludes her share with an admission that is ambivalently defeatist and triumphant, "I can't help it, I am an addict!" (00:19:50). The affects of addiction are depicted here as amorphous and adaptable, they are even re-framed as habits, yet the pathological formulation of addiction and its embodiment in the figure of the addict remain intact.

The protagonist's attempt to intervene into the ideological imperative of NA culture sparks the heated exchange between participants in the recovery meeting. The integration of the BDMA in NA culture is evident in Maggie's interpretation of this intervention. Rather than challenging the way in which the affects of addiction are pathologized through the label of 'the addict', Maggie interprets her impulsive and obsessive behaviour as evidence of the validity of the label. Her testimony commands the space of the recovery meeting, effectively de-escalating the conflict

between members and captivating their attention with the intensity of her emotional expression and the desperate pitch of her voice. Her concluding remarks are presented as a resolution to the group's conflict, as much for the content of her proclamation as for the affect with which it is delivered.

Discussion

Cultural studies theorists and semiologists whose work calls for dialogic and multivocal readings of autobiographical life writing and self-representation (Bakhtin, 1981; Gilmore, 2001; Larrabee, 2003; Frank, 1995) offer poststructuralist frameworks through which to conceptualize and legitimize experiential forms of knowledge production about trauma that can be applied to related themes of addiction and attachment. *Feel Good* offers a compelling site for analysis through the lens of dialogism (Bakhtin, 1981) because of its semi-autobiographical framing and its treatment of trauma, addiction, codependency and queer experience in the context of NA recovery meetings, which combines clinical and colloquial interpretations of addiction ethos. The ineffable quality of trauma (Herman, 1997; Gilmore, 2001; Larrabee, 2003), as well as the history of western criticism of autobiography as an unstable source of knowledge production (Gilmore, 2001; Spivak, 1998) facilitates the dialogic and multivocal analysis (Bakhtin, 1981) of *Feel Good* that honours the chaos narratives (Frank, 1995) it platforms, and that treats language as “nonunitary, internally stratified, and riddled with alterity from within” (Karpinski, 2015, 202). From a dialogic perspective, the NA meeting scene offers a pointed framing of addiction discourse, but it also presents the imbrication of multiple meanings, and ideological as well as affective interpretations of addictive behaviour and experience that occur within the NA culture.

Critical perspectives on the language used to describe trauma trouble the medicalization of suffering through the centering of colonial biomedicine and the diagnostic category of PTSD (Larrabee, 2003; Kleinman, 1995; Bracken and Petty, 1998). Writing on the ambivalent function of language in the culture of testimony, Gilmore (2001) argues that “[l]anguage is asserted as that which can realize trauma even as it is theorized as that which fails in the face of trauma. This apparent contradiction in trauma studies represents a constitutive ambivalence. For the survivor of trauma such an ambivalence can amount to an impossible injunction to tell what cannot, in this view, be spoken” (7). A semi-autobiographical dramedy that shares the dialogues taking place at an NA recovery meeting invites ambivalent engagements and interpretations that both reflect and challenge the constitutive ambivalence to which Gilmore refers. The recovery meeting is a space wherein the ambivalent affects of the aftermath of trauma and/or addiction coalesce and circulate, animating challenges and possibilities for conceptualizing addiction in the context of trauma.

The series is itself a testimonial that, at times, diverges from clinical descriptions of addiction and codependency, while also representing the tensions produced by this divergence in the subjective experiences of the protagonist and other participants in the recovery meeting. Participants are situated at various social locations relative to the ideology that frames their participation in the space and so also, their identification with the biological disease model of addiction. Moreover, the entanglement of participant testimonials in the recovery meeting is an intuitive site for dialogic analysis, and the provocation of the shared ideological commitment that marks their participation in this space offers a moment of narrative chaos as participants clamour to maintain their ontological security in a way of thinking that offers them stability, self-worth

and community. The way in which the subjects of Anonymous culture flee from an underlying ontological *insecurity* can arguably be seen as self-neglect, or self-sabotage, because it prevents introspective possibilities that might lead to personal and collective forms of healing and liberation.

Queer Self-Sabotage

The symbolism of self-sabotage is a recurring visual motif in *Feel Good*. The series presents a queer reading of recovery that employs a framework of addiction attribution to signal a relationship between the affects of addiction and the characters' queer experiences. It does so within neoliberal standards of subjectivity that situate the individual as perpetually at war with themselves. In *Feel Good*, while the queer protagonist connects their personal trauma to their addiction challenges, their maladaptive behaviours are depicted as the direct result of self-sabotage at the intersection of voluntariness and compulsion.

Mae's discovery that their attachment to their new girlfriend, George, reproduces the affects of their addiction to cocaine is portrayed as running parallel to the processes of queer self-discovery and self-disclosure that both parties undergo throughout the series. Mae and George are shown forming a codependent bond while coming to terms with their queer identities, heightening anxieties about their connection to each other and exposing their vulnerabilities as queer people in queerphobic contexts. Mae struggles with internalized transphobia as they come to terms with their gender identity and expression, while George faces her own struggles with internalized homophobia as she grapples with the pressures and anxieties of coming out.

In episode 3, both characters' insecurities come to a head when George brings Mae to a party but refuses to introduce them as her partner. The tension culminates when Mae pressures George to come out, and George responds defensively, accusing Mae of being neurotic, "just be confident, why don't you dance? There's nothing less attractive than someone who is too neurotic to dance at a party..." Mae responds, "Of course I don't want to dance in front of people who would have bullied me in high school, and you're too ashamed to touch me. If you want me to feel confident, hold my hand!" (00:17:00) In this scene, the mutual projection of queer shame provokes a flight response in both parties, prompting Mae to leave, and George to drink to the point of blacking out. The emotional connection they are both seeking is derailed, as their fears of rejection manifest in escapism and defeatism. The ways in which the main characters navigate experiences of oppression serve to queer their codependent attachment and inform their addictive behaviour. Alienation and emotional disconnection become pronounced in the aftermath of addiction, and for the figure of the lesbian [love] addict, internalized homophobia and transphobia exacerbate this experience of self-sabotage.

Throughout the series, the recurring narrative theme of self-sabotage is highlighted by visual motifs. In episode 1, Mae is shown attempting to secure an attachment to George within days of their first meeting. Mae dramatically burns all of the items from their stay in rehab to prove to George that they have moved on from that time in their life. The frame focuses on the dark, cool tones of their tear-streaked face, underlit by orange flames leaping from a garbage can filled with their burning belongings. Their effort to prove that they have outgrown their chaotic past is visually negated by the alarming display of arson as George exclaims with exasperation, "why do you have to be so intense?" The scene closes on Mae's anxious expression, unflinching with

conviction as they insist, “I am *not* intense” (00:20:38). The comedic tone of the scene emphasizes the dissonance it represents as Mae betrays their own objective in their effort to secure an attachment to George.

Another symbol of self-sabotage occurs in episode 2, when Mae embraces a mannequin in a retail store while they attempt to convince a reluctant George to bring them as her plus one to a friend's wedding. George evades Mae's protests by dismissing the importance of weddings, “I never cry at weddings... I think the whole thing's bizarre, it's so archaic, I *hate* the rings, and the symbolism of becoming one person as if you were half a person to begin with.” Mae counters with a bid for fusion, “you mean the transcendent experience of putting somebody else's needs above your own, therefore destroying your own ego and connecting to your sense of universal oneness...?” (00:01:20) As they pass the mannequin, Mae rests their head on its chest, creating a visual metaphor of self-sabotage that reflects their perpetually unfulfilled desire for closeness and simultaneous avoidance of it. The symbolic device is employed as comic relief, but it may also be read as a nod to the non-human forms that are sought to stand in for the protagonist's unmet desires for belonging. While the series presents novel frames through which to consider queer identity, addiction and codependency, it reproduces the figure of the lesbian [love] addict that operates as an ambivalent affirmation of queer hardship, and a symbol of self-sabotage in the pursuit of belonging. This reproduction reifies the signifier lesbian as a neoliberal subject, at once isolated and consumed by a non-normative subjectivity.

Queering Recovery through New Materialism

Attachments to non-human forms is a central theme that emerges at the intersection of critical addiction studies and feminist affect studies through new materialist theories of addiction and recovery (Sedgwick, 1993; Fraser et al., 2014; Keane, 2004; Weinberg, 2011; Hellman, 2021). New materialism offers expansive possibilities for theorizing addiction from the standpoint of marginalized experiences. In “Understanding Addiction: The Shift From Epistemology to Ontology” Matilda Hellman (2021) observes the current paradigm shift from late modernist epistemology to “assemblage-like ontology” in addiction discourse. She argues that the anthropocene-conscious approach (ACA) interrupts modernist ways of knowing that are organized through binary schemas like “nature/culture” and “mind/matter”, advocating instead that we focus on processes of being and becoming, and the affective relations between “bodies, things, ideas and social institutions” (Hellman, 2). Trauma-informed theory and practice aligns with this approach in acknowledging how traumatic events can animate a subject’s interpersonal, systemic and ideological orientations, producing affective relations between subjects and their attachments. It is also conducive to conceptualizations of addiction as intimacy (Keane, 2004), as assemblage of interacting entities (Fraser and valentine, 2008), and as affective attachments (Vitellone, 2010) that intervene in limiting and marginalizing formulations of addiction.

It should also be noted that the cognitive dissonance produced by trauma-informed recovery programming within neoliberal institutions may persist even as new materialist epistemology gains influence in the field of addiction studies. Queer narratives and representations of addiction hold the potential to bridge trauma-informed theory and praxis through the mobilization of critical and affective orientations to addictive attachments, but the extent to which addiction

recovery can be ‘queered’ within the dominant systems offering rehabilitation programming will be limited by hegemonic discourses and neoliberal logics. When seen through a queer framing of addiction that imbricates substance dependency and codependency with interpersonal and systemic trauma, the revisionist work of new materialist thought in addiction theory lays a foundation for a queer politics of addiction recovery that reckons with the embodiment and representation of an enduring legacy of neurobiology in addiction attribution, and the affects it continues to inflict on and between addicted subjects. As a semi-autobiography that narrates the affective relations of addiction through queer embodiment, *Feel Good* illustrates the neoliberal subjectivization of queer subjects in addiction recovery using trauma attribution as an access point to queer ontology and as a throughline that connects affective experiences. It may leave something to be desired as a critical reading of recovery, but it is an accurate portrayal of the tension produced by the implication of the queer subject in the reifying and regulatory processes of neoliberal recovery programming.

Recovery as Perceptual Reconstruction

Arguably, addiction is not a disease or a set of behaviours, and it is more than a metric of voluntariness and compulsion (Sedgwick, 1993), loss of control, or suffering (Vitellone, 2010). The conceptualization of addiction through registers of affect as intimacy (Keane, 2004), habit (Sedgwick, 1993; Fraser et al., 2014), and/or assemblage (Gomart, 2002; Fraser and valentine, 2008; Fraser et al., 2014), facilitates the possibility of orienting to recovery as a matter of representation. Seen through critical and affective frames, recovery might be understood as a process of ontological reconstruction. In “Epidemics of the Will”, Sedgwick (1993) intervenes into ‘addiction attribution’ discourse by referring to Proust’s treatment of habit as “a banal

opiate” and “a perceptual matter” (137) that binds us to our environment, self-image and worldview. Breaking a habit involves a transformation of the affects and relations that make it, move it, and circulate around it that necessitates a re-visioning of the affective attachment of which it is composed. Institutional treatment programs reinforce the status quo through the neoliberal reproduction of individualism and personal responsibility as virtues of subjectivity. Posthumanist and new materialist formulations together with trauma-informed and queer narrative interventions have the potential to highlight the affective mechanisms by which the individual holds the tension of an oppressive system that refuses accountability by mandating individualized forms of responsibility. They also serve to expand our understanding of addiction in its many forms, while revealing the inadequacy of neoliberal frames to support marginalized people through the on-going machinations of systemic trauma.

Chapter Three- Ambivalent Fantasies: The Affective Construction of the Codependent Lesbian

Lesbians love to lean into a good stereotype.

—Vanessa Friedman, *Autostraddle*, Nov 26 2019, para 2

The Figure of the Codependent Lesbian

The affects embodied by the lesbian [love] addict also compose the related figure of the codependent lesbian. The codependent lesbian a pervasive lesbian archetype whose discursive constitution in 20th century psychology and social work clinical literature (e.g. Bruss and Glickauf-Hughes, 1997; Burch, 1982; Kaufman, Harrison and Hyde, 1984; Pearlman, 1988; Vargo, 1987) maintains an influence on contemporary popular culture and subcultural discourses, as in the circulation of the story of ‘lesbian u-hauling’ discussed in chapter one. This iteration of the signifier lesbian is further engendered by representations of lesbian characters suffering for love (Murphy, 2017), the circulation of gender essentialist ideas in the service of pathologizing women and maintaining the cultural status quo (Krestan and Bepko, 1992; Collins, 1993), and queer desires for social inclusion and state-sanctioned forms of intimacy (Puar, 2007; Ahmed, 2004, 2010; Berlant, 2011). The affective relations that are reflected in this figure’s discursive reproduction can also be seen in various representations of lesbians in film and television (e.g. Chaiken et al., 2004-2009), fiction (e.g. Hall, 1928) and life writing (e.g. Lorde, 1982; Nash, 1995; Machado, 2020). Using a theoretical framework that combines feminist affect theory (Berlant, 2011; Ahmed, 2004, 2010; Puar, 2007) and concepts from attachment psychology (Firestone, 1993; Bowlby, 1973, 1978, 1980a; Ainsworth et al., 2015; Mayseless, 1991), this chapter critically examines the ways in which the figure of the codependent lesbian is

codified through this reproduction by deconstructing affective relations that animate three popular lesbian tropes: *lesbian longing*, *lesbian processing* and *serial monogamy*. By engaging with critical perspectives on lesbian codependency and examining diverse examples of lesbian representations across mediums, genres, and socio-historical contexts in the 20th and 21st centuries, I delineate three affective contradictions that constitute the lesbian as codependent: self-neglect as a form of self-preservation, care as a form of control and the romanticization of hopelessness. This chapter locates these ambivalent affective themes in HBO's drama series *The L Word*, the biomythography, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* by Audre Lorde, the personal essay, "Take Care" by Sharee Nash and the novel, *The Well of Loneliness* by Radclyffe Hall. The analysis does not intend to compare the texts, but to analyze the affective throughline of ambivalent attachments that appears to defy socio-historical context, medium and genre. My analysis illustrates the ways in which the figure of the codependent lesbian is discursively constituted through the logics of attachment psychology, and how this constitution both reflects and produces systemic forms of trauma. The chapter concludes by theorizing that the media and the textual reproduction of codependent lesbian fantasies sustains this figure's enduring circulation in the lesbian imaginary.

Queer historians and critics frequently take up the theme of ambivalence in the context of queer histories and theories, in terms of narrative affects, attachments and representations (e.g. Halperin and Traub, 2009; Amin, 2017; Love, 2007). I invoke this critical tradition by combining feminist affect theory and attachment psychology to think through the ambivalent affects that characterize discourses about lesbian attachment. Employing a poststructuralist theoretical framework encompassing concepts like fantasy bonds (Firestone, 1993) and systemic trauma

(Goldsmith et al., 2014), I conceptualize the construct of lesbian codependency through my theory of structural attachment trauma, *queer codependency*, as a discursive form of trauma that prescribes codependent subjectivities in the lesbian imaginary. My argument enlists Maria Lugones' (2007) concept of the modern colonial gender system by engaging the signifier lesbian as necessarily bound up in affective relations that impede on possibilities for solidarity, interdependence and collective transformation (e.g. shame, self-neglect, obsession, and fantasy). In "Heterosexualism and the Colonial / Modern Gender System" Lugones writes, "I do not believe any solidarity or homoerotic loving is possible among females who affirm the colonial/modern gender system and the colonality of power" (2007, 188). Following lesbian historian, Ann Cvetkovich (2003), the treatment herein endeavours to de-pathologize lesbian feeling as a method for enacting trauma-informed, decolonial feminist politics.

Codependency as Heteronormative Fantasy

The invocation of the codependent lesbian figure in this analysis does not intend to pathologize all lesbians as codependent, nor to suggest that codependent dynamics lack representation across various non-lesbian relations. Instead, it asks, why and how has the figure of the codependent lesbian emerged and what does that emergence have to do with its continued circulation as a story about lesbians that is regarded with ambivalence - sometimes loved and sometimes loathed? Codependency is herein understood as a normative relational disposition inherited by a colonial ideology of heterosexist romanticism playing out in a western socio-political context within which the nuclear family maintains a social and cultural stronghold as the predominant form of kinship. As Joanne Krestan and Claudia Bepko (1992) argue in "Codependency: The Social Reconstruction of Female Experience," hetero-patriarchal family dynamics implicate

women generally in relations of codependency. The authors explain that codependency is a relational framework that emerged out of family systems theory and that reflects bio-essentialist, heteronormative fantasies of belonging like that of the “mythical ‘normal’ family” (Ibid, 222). Feminist criticism of the construct of codependency is well documented, with several feminist theorists arguing that discourse on codependency has traditionally pathologized the caregiving of women, blaming them for enabling addictive behaviour, while neglecting to acknowledge that care is a cultural expectation of womanhood (Krestan and Bepko, 1992; Collins, 1993; Granello and Beamish, 1998; Sloven, 1992; Malloy and Berkery, 1993). Considering this critical archive, my own reading of codependency reflects a recognition that the self-neglect around which relations of codependency are organized (Hughes-Hammer, Martsolf and Zeller, 1998) functions as a form of self-preservation for women in contexts that enforce their subservience.

Codependency is both normalized and reviled in women. Discussing gendered socialization in reference to a case study of codependency in a heterosexual couple, Krestan and Bepko argue that the pathologization of codependent dynamics relies on cognitive dissonance around the distribution of responsibility in the nuclear family unit. They write that “socialization...trains men and women to assume one set of behaviors while displaying another. So Nancy is socialized to actually manage many if not most of the details of her life with Mike but she is also to show dependence. And Mike is socialized to rely on Nancy for his total emotional life, but to display autonomy” (226-227). The authors suggest that this dynamic follows a rule of heterosexual coupledness: “she should function as overresponsible for him but in a way that lets him save face” (1992, 226). Unequal dynamics of care are pathologized when a woman’s “overresponsibility” (ibid) appears overbearing and impedes on her male partner’s fantasy of independence. Krestan

and Bepko's critique shows how the construct of codependency reflects a heteronormative (patriarchal) fantasy that normalizes non-reciprocal care dynamics through affective relations like fantasy, self-sacrifice and loyalty.

How might codependencies in and between women be understood as affective relations that are related to, and/or are produced by hegemonic heteronormativity? In reference to heterosexual relationships, codependency is typically described as being comprised of enabling, overbearing and controlling behaviour (Krestan and Bepko, 1992), but in reference to lesbian relationships, it is typically described as lacking differentiation, in terms of boundary violations and enmeshment (Burch, 1997; Ahmed, 2006). While each of these features are associated with the clinical construct of codependency that is organized around "*Other Focus/ Self-Neglect*" (Hughes-Hammer, Martsof and Zeller, 1998), unequal dynamics of care in terms of overperformance and underperformance are seldom the focus of discourse about lesbian codependency. The pathologization of lesbian codependency is related to an early psychoanalytic formulation of same-sex desire (Freud, 1905/ Strachey, 1953) that framed same-sex relationships as narcissistic, citing the subject's inability to differentiate the self from the other in object selection (Burch, 1997; Warner, 1990; O'Connor and Ryan, 1993). This Freudian theory of same-sex desire implies that queer people are narcissistic and dependent, thus anticipating codependency and related attachment issues in lesbians. The differences between heterosexual and lesbian definitions of codependency, as well as the ambiguity with which the psychoanalytic formulation of lesbian codependency hinges on self-neglect as a form of narcissism, reveals the slippery and "mythical" (Krestan and Bepko, 1992, 217, 222) terms upon which the construct of codependency relies.

Ambivalent Archetypal Origins

Discursively and archetypally, both codependency and lesbianism exist in the shadow of heteronormative womanhood. I use the term “shadow” to refer to what Judith Butler calls the “constitutive outside” (1993, xi), which denotes that which constitutes normativity through its exclusion *from* normativity. For example, the traditional feminine archetype has played a central role in establishing the dominance of patriarchal Christian morality by delineating good from evil in narrative characterizations of women (von Franz, 1972). The shadow of the *good feminine* has been traced to the biblical figure of Lilith, who is characterized as a dangerously ambivalent, demonic, and vampiric enchantress (Hurwitz, 2009; Koltuv, 1986): “the seductive witch, the death dealing succubus, and the strangling mother” (Koltuv, 1986). As a descendant of Lilith, the figure of the codependent lesbian is a constitutive outsider (Butler, 1993, xi) constructed in the shadow of the good feminine, in that her existence is premised on the negation, rejection and disavowal of traditional social markers of womanhood.

The psychoanalytic figure of the codependent caregiver entails ambivalence, because it embodies the shadow of maternal care (e.g. “the strangling mother” (Koltuv, 1986)), which can be characterized by a tendency to control and manipulate through overbearing care. The shadow of the archetypal feminine animates this maternal figure, whose coercive control and manipulative people-pleasing get entangled with and mistaken for the virtues of feminine care – self-sacrifice, nurture and unconditional love. In her psychoanalytic study of shadow maternal subjectivities, Brooke Laufner (2024) outlines eight archetypal complexes to illustrate how shadow maternal subjectivities manifest relationally. Of Laufner’s categorizations of the maternal shadow, The Disappearing Mother, the Vampire Mother, the Martyr Mother, the Mama Bear, the Munchausen Mother and the Devouring Mother each comprise qualities of destructive mothering that qualify

the construct of codependency as including “madness, dissolution, deprivation, devouring, [and] fixating...” (351). Laufner describes the maternal shadow as dissociated, obsessive, addicted, enmeshed, self-sacrificing, traumatized and codependent. Her descriptions of the shadow mother are affectively similar to mid-century psychopathological descriptions of lesbians. For example, psychoanalyst Charles Socarides (1968) wrote that lesbian relationships were characterized by, “hate, destructiveness, mutual defeat, exploitation of the partner and the self, oral-sadistic incorporation, aggressive onslaughts, attempts to alleviate anxiety and a pseudo-solution to the aggressive and libidinal urges which dominate and torment the individual” (89).

In “Lesbian Bodies: Tribades, Tomboys and Tarts” Barbara Creed (1995) examines lesbian stereotypes that have been constituted in the shadow of normative womanhood through visual representation in film including, the “man-eating monster (*Basic Instinct*)”, the “child-woman (*The Killing of Sister George*)”, the “narcissistic double (*Single White Female*)” and the “suicidal depressive (*The Children’s Hour*)” (87). Creed examines how the lesbian becomes culturally intelligible in various forms exemplifying marginality, exceptionalism, or a threat to the safety of the status quo. The lesbian as feminine shadow is both overbearing and self-involved, simultaneously too much and not enough when measured against heteronormative standards. From a trauma-informed perspective, the figures of the codependent caregiver and the codependent lesbian can arguably be seen as products and functions of structural forms of violence that leverage the affects (e.g., shame, contempt, rage) and effects (e.g., mental health, addictions, and co-dependencies) of that violence to further isolate, destabilize and marginalize women and lesbians.

Codependency as a Queer Fantasy

As a term loaded with socio-historical and political baggage, codependency (and the affects it signifies) interfaces with queer attachments as both an internalized form of structural violence and a rite of passage. At the intersection of feminist affect theory, attachment psychology and the concept of systemic trauma, this chapter theorizes codependency as an ambivalent queer fantasy by developing the concept of *structural attachment trauma*. The analysis and discussion herein aims to de-pathologize relations of codependency by examining the affective reproduction of codependent relations in lesbian literature, media and popular culture. It recalls Michael McGrath and Barbara Ann Oakley's discussion about the utility of the construct of codependency in which they suggest that "it might be better to conceptualize codependency as dysfunctional behaviors to identify, rather than [as] a disorder to diagnose" (2012, 54). My conceptualization of codependency as a queer fantasy implicates discursive violence as a structural form of attachment trauma and it queries the ways in which this kind of trauma is related to representations of ambivalence in lesbian relationships. A treatment of codependency as a queer fantasy expands on formulations of the construct of codependency (Hughes-Hammer, Martsof and Zeller, 1998; McGrath and Oakley, 2012) and attachment psychology (Firestone, 1993; Breidenstine et al., 2016) through the invocation of a theoretical tradition that attends to the intersection of state regulation, social location, and affective experience that engages the psychological and emotional impacts of oppression, as in the work of Franz Fanon (1952, trans. Markmann, 2002), Patricia Hill Collins (1990), Ann Anlin Cheng (2000), Sara Ahmed (2004, 2010), Jasbir Puar (2007), and Lauren Berlant (2011).

Systemic trauma refers to “the contextual features of environments and institutions that give rise to trauma, maintain it, and impact posttraumatic responses” (Goldsmith et al., 2014, 118).

Structural attachment trauma locates systemic trauma in the affective relations through which marginalized people secure their attachments to objects, behaviours, ideologies and institutions. Fantasy is one such affective relation that functions to secure attachments in micro-social (e.g. Firestone, 1993) and macro-social (e.g. Berlant, 2011) contexts. The popular tropes of *serial monogamy*, *lesbian processing* and *lesbian longing* are herein understood to represent ambivalent queer fantasies insofar as they are reproduced with ambivalent affects that adhere to the signifier lesbian and her tenuous object attachments. This formulation invokes Foucauldian poststructuralism (Foucault, 1969) to infer that the textual reproduction of these tropes in media and popular culture discourses is prescriptive of lesbian subjectivity. Drawing on seminal works in cultural studies by Stuart Hall (1997) and Marshall McLuhan (1966), lesbian representations are understood to play a constitutive role in the ways in which social and cultural realities materialize. In other words, discourses and representations about lesbians are both products and functions of structural attachment trauma.

My conceptualization of codependency as queer fantasy considers how the figure of the codependent lesbian and the affects that she inspires can develop as an unconscious strategy for mitigating interpersonal and structural threats to belonging. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Ahmed (2004) illustrates how queer subjects are vulnerable to homonationalist political dispositions by virtue of the concept of national love, which works to secure the queer and/or marginalized subject’s loyalty to the state.

Indeed, the impossibility that love can reach its object may also be what makes love powerful as a narrative. At one level, love comes into being as a form of reciprocity; the

lover wants to be loved back, wants their love returned (Singer 1984: 6). At another, love survives the absence of reciprocity in the sense that the pain of not being loved in return – if the emotion ‘stays with’ the object to which it has been directed – confirms the negation that would follow from the loss of the object. Even though love is a demand for reciprocity, it is also an emotion that lives with the failure of that demand often through an intensification of its affect” (Ahmed, 2004, 130-131).

In relations of “homonationalism” (Puar, 2007), national love is mobilized by queer subjects to foster attachments to an abusive state by maintaining hope that they will be saved or protected by it. Similarly, Berlant’s fantasy of “the good life” (2011, 27) generates hope in the service of sustaining “cruelly optimistic” attachments to the state. Ahmed, Puar and Berlant each describe a relation that is affectively akin to codependency in that the affective intensity, loyalty and fantasy that are produced by the negation of reciprocal care function to secure a fraught bond. Codependency as queer fantasy is a theory of systemic trauma that accounts for structural forms of attachment trauma like those described in Sara Ahmed’s (2004) “national love”, Jasbir Puar’s (2007) “homonationalism”, and Lauren Berlant’s (2011) “cruel optimism.” From micro to macro-level relations, oppressed subjects utilize attachment mechanisms (e.g, fantasy, romanticization) to simulate control over the stressful and uncontrollable, albeit predictable, conditions of their environment (emotional dysregulation, relational dysfunction/ attrition, oppression).

Following Robert Firestone’s theory of fantasy bonds (1993), codependency is a kind of fantasy bond insofar as it is characterized by affective features like self-neglect, mutual emotional unavailability, and denial. In these kinds of relations, fantasy performs an attaching function to an object of desire by way of projective identification, promoting an emotionally avoidant dynamic of relating that is, fundamentally, misrecognized as emotional intimacy (Firestone

1993). What are the fantasies that secure and sustain codependent attachments? This question is necessarily complicated by the dialectical terms through which relations of codependency are realized. Reporting on the work of Timmen L. Cermak (1986, 1991), Cyrilla Hughes-Hammer, Donna Martsolf and Richard Zeller (1998) identify one of the core features of codependency as “the compulsion to help or control events or people through manipulation or advice-giving” (265). The codependent figure is characterized by self-sacrificial care, but their altruism is a mechanism by which they manage negative affect (McGrath and Oakley, 2012) and exercise control of their object attachments and environment (Hughes-Hammer, Martsolf and Zeller, 1998). McGrath and Oakley describe codependency as a pathological form of altruism that causes predictable harm to self or others (2012). In my view, the fantasy of codependency combines altruism with self-neglect to produce a kind of selflessness that maintains anticipation of a care that is desired, as well as a belief that such care is undeserved. As Sara Ahmed (2010) argues in *The Promise of Happiness*, “[t]he obstacle to desire...performs a psychic function in preserving the fantasy that getting what you want would make you happy” (32).

Following Ahmed (2010) and Firestone (1993), from micro to macro-level attachments, the queer fantasy of codependency arguably fuels the misrecognition of love and suffering, giving rise to ambivalent affective relations that prevent the fulfillment of desires for belonging: self-neglect as a form of self-preservation, care as a form of control and the romanticization of hopelessness. In the following analysis, I deconstruct these ambivalent features of codependency in the pervasive tropes of *serial monogamy*, *lesbian processing*, and *lesbian longing*, which represent ambivalent fantasies about lesbian attachments that circulate in the lesbian imaginary and that contribute to the construction of the figure of the codependent lesbian. These

stereotypical tropes carry the affects of codependency that can function to sustain dysfunctional attachments. They are fantasies about lesbian-specific forms of relating that normalize and generalize ambivalent bonds between lesbians, effectively prescribing shared notions of cultural identity and simultaneously erasing complexity, nuance and intersectionality in the relational experiences of lesbians and queer women.

Serial Monogamy - Self-Neglect as a form of Self-Preservation

According to a study by Ryan Schacht and Karen L. Kramer (2019), serial monogamy is the most common form of pair-bonding among humans. Critically reflecting on its pervasive influence, Serena Petrella (2005) asserts that monogamy is a governing mandate when she writes that “we live under a hegemonic regime of serial monogamy” (170). Although serial monogamy is common among both heterosexual and homosexual groups (Petrella, 2005), it has been specifically described as a manifestation of lesbian love addiction (Costine, 2015), as well as a socio-historical phenomenon in American lesbian culture dating back to the 1930s (Davis and Kennedy, 1994; Faderman, 1991). I analyze serial monogamy as a trope that helps to constitute the codependent lesbian figure because it is regarded as an indicator of codependency, and a maladaptive mechanism for coping with low self-esteem (Ferguson, 2021), which is a precursor to self-neglect.

Madeline Davis and Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy’s (1994) study of a working-class lesbian community in Buffalo, New York from the 1930s –1950s highlights relational experiences of socialization, romance and marginalization through the analysis of oral histories. They explain how serial monogamy was common in this American lesbian community, as lesbians held onto

their partners until they found a replacement. The authors present this as being related to the centrality of bar culture to the social organization of the community. Insofar as lesbian couples did not tend to separate until a new partner was found, socializing in the community was considered to be a threat to relationships, even as it was also necessary for social survival. Discussing the function of break-ups in the community, Davis and Kennedy write that, “[i]n the context of their heightened sensibility to romance, participants in this community held a dual consciousness about relationships. They expected them to last forever, and at the same time knew that they wouldn’t” (652). The testimonials speak to ambivalent affective relations in the ways that lesbians oriented to romantic and community attachments while navigating threats of police brutality and homophobic discrimination. They also illustrate the ways in which fantasies of enduring monogamy informed attitudes and beliefs about relationships in the face of evidence that patterns of serial monogamy were more likely to play out in romantic connections. Fantasies of belonging co-existed with realities of relational precarity, informing the ambivalence with which lesbians oriented themselves within relationships and the sacrifices enacted in the service of self-preservation in this socio-historical context.

In *Afrekete: An Anthology of Black Lesbian Writing*, the personal essay, “Take Care” by Sharee Nash (1995) describes a relationship between serial monogamy and self-sacrificial care to characterize the author’s tenuous and ambivalent relationship history: “I would run from one [relationship] to another in need of contact, but always expecting indifference... I would leave, sometimes at the very height of distress, because bliss had spun wildly out of control” (275). Nash relates her interpersonal experiences as a Black lesbian to being “raised on the fruit of divestment” (ibid), presenting an imbrication of affective relations experienced at the intersection

of attachment and divestment. She describes her life as the life of a fugitive and suggests that her experiences of displacement coloured her intimate relationships.

There had been too many bizarrely twisted instances when I allowed myself to be led to some sultry sea of despair. Duped by beauty and convinced that my only true pleasure and my only great purpose was that of retrieving some fatal lover from the abyss of self-loathing, down I would go, splitting depths to love a decomposing soul. (Nash, 275)

A relation of serial monogamy develops in Nash's essay in affective terms that fit the construct of codependency at the ambivalent intersection of the protagonist's need for contact and her expectation of indifference. Bliss is transmuted into distress as she enacts self-neglect as a form of self-preservation, seeking pleasure and purpose in the act of rescuing self-loathing lovers. The trope of the serial monogamist appears commonly in queer and lesbian media, like in the Canadian film, *Portrait of a Serial Monogamist* (2015), the Netflix reality show, *The Ultimatum: Queer Love* (2023), and the HBO drama, *The L Word* (2004-2009).

In *The L Word*, androgynous heartthrob, Shane McCutchen, encapsulates this traditional lesbian trope while invoking a fantasy of heteronormativity that provokes and perpetuates self-neglect as a form of self-preservation. Shane simultaneously seeks connection and avoids it to protect herself from her fears of unworthiness. Her character arc is centered around her fear of reproducing the emotional damage inflicted by her absentee father that prompts her routine retreat from the endless rotation of romantic connections that she seeks out as a salve for her loneliness and distress.

In season 4, episode 12, "The Parenting Perspective", Shane fantasizes about a homonormative family life set in the suburbs with her new girlfriend, Paige. The mid-century aesthetic montage representing Shane's fantasy presents a vision of Shane inhabiting the normative masculine role

in the family, dressed like a businessman and acting as a father figure to Paige's young son. She uses the fantasy of the mid-century nuclear family to secure her attachment to her new partner and to run from her precarious and traumatic history of dispossession, neglect and substance use. An ambivalent relation of self-neglect enacted in the spirit of self-sabotage and as a form of self-preservation dissolves her vision of wedded bliss when Paige returns to their new home to find Shane and another woman in a compromising position on the couple's bedroom floor. In the disparity between her fantasy of heteronormative belonging and her reality of relational dysfunction, Shane is seen navigating the shame of not only causing pain to the person she loves, but of the inability to live up to the normative standards of family that she vainly hopes to meet in the pursuit of belonging.

A relation of cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011) can be seen in Shane's experience of shame that is related to the cycles of fantasy and disillusionment that she endures in her interpersonal life, which are provoked by heteronormative narratives and standards. Throughout the series, Shane internalizes her interpersonal failures, which promotes affective cycles of attachment and divestment. She uses the heteronormative fantasy wherein she is a provider and a role model to sustain a desire for monogamy that is inevitably overcome by her compulsion toward multiple romantic and sexual pursuits. The homonormative motives of the HBO production are apparent in the depiction of Shane's character as troubled, misguided and child-like in her inability to achieve the monogamous standards of her own fantasy, that of her romantic partners, as well as that which is modeled by her more successful, monogamous neighbours, Bette and Tina.

The affective features of the figure of the codependent lesbian can be seen in HBO's *The L Word*, Nash's personal essay, and Davis and Kennedy's study, all of which are animated by histories of trauma and oppression that motivate self-neglect in the form of self-sacrificial attachments, and self-sabotaging behaviours within patterns of serial monogamy. In each of these examples, ambivalent orientations to self-preservation illustrate Ahmed's description of a relation of desire wherein the desire becomes the obstacle to desire (2010). The figure of the codependent lesbian represents an ambivalent kind of attachment that is formed at the intersection of love and suffering. This attachment occurs where suffering is misrecognized as love to safeguard a fantasy that is conjured in an effort to mitigate shame and secure social safety. It is a figure that may resonate with the experiences of some lesbians and queer women, but it also imposes a lack of differentiation onto lesbians while itself failing to differentiate between lesbian experiences at intersectional social locations.

Lesbian Processing – Care as a Form of Control

The misrecognition of love and suffering animates the figure of the codependent lesbian, wherein the line between care and control is obscured by affective relations that mirror intimacy, like obsession, enmeshment and martyrdom. Indeed, caregiving can take violent (Vanheule, 2002) and debilitating (Puar, 2017) forms. Care can simulate emotional availability but can simultaneously operate as a mechanism of control. Lesbian processing is a story about lesbian attachment that depicts a misrecognition of care and control. It is affirmed and reproduced in discourses for and by lesbians in an ambivalent fashion that is similar to that of the figure of the U-haul - at times it is considered to be an indicator of relationship satisfaction (Frost, 2018, para 5), and at other times it garners ridicule, invoking the insider insult, "[s]top being such a lesbian"

(Rault and Cowan, 2025, para 3). The following discussion will examine how discourses on lesbian processing show the hegemonic underpinnings of psychology in the cultural characterization of lesbians as codependent, the slippery terms through which processing is defined, as well as the ways in which this lesbian stereotype reflects a fantasy bond (Firestone, 1993) that is secured and sustained through the performance of care as a form of control.

The term *lesbian processing* may be used to refer to a form of conflict resolution and healthy communication, but it may also, arguably, signify covert forms of aggression, deflection of accountability and the performance of emotional intimacy in relationships. Recent commentary about lesbian processing reveals mixed reviews about whether or not processing is conducive to healthy or effective relationship-building. In a post published on the lesbian blog, *Autostraddle*, “Unfortunately, There is Such a Thing as Too Much Processing - Here’s How Not To,” Vanessa Friedman (2019) argues that processing can be detrimental to a functional relationship. Friedman presents “a counterpoint to the deeply held belief of Our People that Processing Everything With Everyone All The Time Is Good” (para 1). She argues that “despite what gay media and your codependent BFF may tell you, queer women are actually capable of not over-processing every tiny detail of our lives 24/7” (para 3). She presents lesbian processing as being potentially harmful, and as related to an inability to respect boundaries. In another blog post, “Processing: The Real Truth Behind Lesbian Stereotypes”, Karen Frost (2018) defines lesbian processing as “the lesbian version of fighting in a relationship”. She cites a study by John Gottman and Robert Levenson (2003) asserting that in conflict, lesbian couples use fewer “controlling, hostile emotional tactics” like “belligerence” and “domineering” (Frost, 2018, para 5) than straight, married couples. Even still, she describes processing as “seemingly unending conversations in

which the couple overthinks, overanalyzes, and over discusses the relationship well past the point of usefulness” (Ibid).

Presenting a more neutral definition of processing in “Heavy Processing for Digital Materials (More Than a Feeling)”, Jas Rault and T.L. Cowan propose processing as a maximalist research method that prioritizes accountability, relationship-building, and trust as markers of rigorous scholarship. They lament that processing is “seen to be weak, vulnerable and inefficient, overly concerned with what is equitable, overly considerate in relationships, overly sensitive, overly concerned with fairness, respect, not hurting each other’s feelings, apologizing if you do, being accountable for your actions and learning from mistakes” (Rault and Cowan, 2025, para. 3).

Drawing on the history of feminist political discourse, Rault and Cowan suggest a revisionist treatment of processing as “a lesbian-leaning trans-feminist and queer method of being together (and not always doing it well)” (para 4).

Across a range of discourses on lesbian processing, the trope is characterized by features like, vulnerability and inefficiency (Rault and Cowan, 2025), disregard for personal boundaries (Friedman, 2019, para 3), overthinking and overanalyzing, and discussion “well past the point of usefulness” (Frost, 2018, para 5). This story of lesbian processing assumes that lesbians are emotionally underdeveloped or dysregulated, ineffective communicators, or worse, enacting harm with unhealthy behaviours. From a trauma-informed perspective, discourse on lesbian processing may ring true for some lesbians, but it is important to note the ways in which the lesbian signifier is affectively codified by ambivalent attachment in a way that not only classifies lesbians as uniformly emotionally immature, but that systematically enacts a discursive form of

trauma through this classification and its repeated circulation in various mediums and contexts.

Friedman's point that there is a deeply held lesbian belief that "processing is good" (para 1) highlights the function of fantasy in lesbian attachments to perpetuate the story, and arguably, the practice of lesbians enacting self-neglect in relationships, among other forms of relating that may do more harm than good. Seen through Firestone's (1993) formulation of fantasy bonds and the concept of systemic trauma (Goldsmith et al., 2014), lesbian processing represents a fantasy of belonging that works to both obfuscate and sustain dysfunctional attachments. For gender and sexual minorities, fantasies of belonging, which have been reinforced in heteronormative terms by patriarchal family values, can betray non-normative subjects by securing and sustaining attachments to people, behaviors, systems and ideologies that cannot deliver on desires for intimacy, care and connection. The performance of care and emotional labour (e.g., overanalyzing and over discussing feelings) that constitutes these kinds of attachments masks the harm to which it contributes.

Processing is another lesbian trope that contributes to the pathologization of lesbian affects, and from a poststructuralist perspective on the constitutive function of representation and discourse (McLuhan, 1966; Foucault, 1969; Hall, 1997), it can be read as prescribing dysfunctional lesbian subjectivities. In its somewhat paradoxical definition as dysfunctional, yet emotionally intelligent (at least more so than "belligerent" heterosexuals (Frost, 2018, para 5), lesbian processing is an ambivalent fantasy of belonging whose continued mainstream and in-group circulation may even contribute to preventing substantive intimacies by deflecting from the lack of reparative effects (or affects) that it engenders. Lesbian processing is a cruelly optimistic (Berlant, 2011) trope

insofar as it functions as a component of the fantasy of “the good life” (Ibid, 27) to sustain queer attachments in a heterosexist society that withholds belonging at a systemic level. Following Berlant and Ahmed, the fantasy that secures a fraught bond is intensified by the attachment object’s inability to reciprocate it (Ahmed, 2004, 130-131; Berlant, 2011, 1). Berlant explains the cruelty of such fantasy-fuelled attachments when she writes that “whatever the content of the attachment is, the continuity of its form provides something of the continuity of the subject’s sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world” (24). Arguably, the fantasy of lesbian processing supports the lesbian subject’s sense of purpose for being in a world that rejects them insofar as it encapsulates a sense of belonging to a mythical unified lesbian community – what Bonnie Zimmerman (1983) would call the “Lesbian Nation” or “the cumulative product of each lesbian journey toward selfhood” (Zimmerman, 257). This fantasy of belonging veils the possibility of relational dysfunction and dissatisfaction with a pursuit of shared subjectivity and an optimistic conviction that lesbian relationships are more emotionally connected than heterosexual relationships.

Lesbian Longing - The Romanticization of Hopelessness

Another way in which the affective mechanisms of self-neglect and fantasy secure queer attachments is through the romanticization of hopelessness, which is related to the fantasy of refusal (Phillips, 2021) and the promise of happiness (Ahmed, 2010), and which can be seen in the trope of *lesbian longing*. As a figure who is anxiously and ambivalently attached to their love object, the codependent lesbian embodies the affective relation of lesbian longing, effectively romanticizing their hopelessness to deflect from acute experiences of shame and disappointment.

The well-travelled story of lesbian longing is another ambivalent feature of the affective construction of the figure of the codependent lesbian.

The textual emergence of the story of lesbian longing can be traced to the recovered poetry collection of Sappho, the Greek poet from the Isle of Lesbos. Unlike popular writing of her time that focused on domestic labour, motherhood or women's social roles, Sappho's poetry dealt in themes of affection between women, memory and yearning (du Bois, 1995, 145).

Contemporarily, Sappho's writing lives on in the continued circulation of the story of lesbian longing in colloquial, clinical and literary discourses alike. A number of online discussion forums on Reddit, including *actuallesbians*, *LesbiansActually* and *latebloomerlesbians*, provide examples of popular and colloquial interpretations of lesbian longing in discussions about the meaning of Sappho's poetry and users' experiences of it. On the lesbian news and media blog, *Autostraddle*, Kayla Kumari Upadhyaya writes, "the meaning of sapphic yearning is an oft-sought query". She asks, "how does one describe a vibe as specific, nuanced, and occasionally contradictory like sapphic yearning? Is it a good feeling or a bad feeling? Both and also neither..." Upadhyaya defines sapphic yearning as "an intense feeling of desire tinged with obstacle, often directed at an ex, a crush, a friend, or a fickle or chaotic lover." Lesbian desire and its impossibility is a central narrative theme in lesbian films like *Water Lilies* (2007) and *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019), which depict the romanticization of hopelessness through the trope of lesbian longing (Barton, 2020). The romanticization of hopelessness resonates with Ahmed's (2010) "obstacle to desire" in that it works to sustain disappointment while reinforcing a belief that getting what you want will make you happy (32).

In *A Cinema of Hopelessness: The Rhetoric of Rage in 21st Century Popular Culture*, Kendall Phillips (2021) explains how a fantasy of refusal mediates queer disappointments. Phillips attributes the western cultural romanticization of figures like the drop out, the hermit and the wanderer to the fantasy of refusal insofar as it is imbricated with “the dream of new frontiers, the chance to leave everything behind and start anew” (2021, 8). Phillips writes that, “[t]he fantasy of an outside of the system provides a compensation for the disappointments and limitations of the failed promises of the system that is, in the end, inescapable. Refusal, then, can be seen as a more radical side of the fantasy of the outside. Where the dream of open seas and new frontiers promises a new start, the fantasy of refusal simply says no” (8). As a constitutive outsider (Butler, 1993, xi), the codependent lesbian employs longing as a lesbian affect to embody the fantasy of refusal insofar as it is a figure that is hegemonically contrived to intuit self-defeat. It represents the repudiation necessitated by betrayal and systemic neglect - the queerly ambivalent entanglement of pride and despair. Through the romanticization of hopelessness, this tragic figure refuses to be defined by a system that denies and degrades her, remaining attached to that which disappears her to avoid shame, redefining codependency through feminist frames (Collins, 1993; Granello and Beamish, 1998; Sloven, 1991; Malloy and Berkery, 1993), doubling down on the myth of lesbian utopia (Machado, 2020; Shapiro, 1991; Girshick, 2001; McDonald, 1987) or buying into neoliberal promises of state protection (Berlant, 2011; Puar, 2007; Ahmed, 2004). This romanticization of hopelessness can be seen in revisionist strategies to redeem the codependent from its constitution in shame and pathology (e.g. Weiss, 2019), as well as in the melancholy story of lesbian longing, wherein the fantasy of refusal mediates the impossibility of queer stability.

Perhaps the protagonist who is best known for their shameful display of lesbian longing is Stephen Gordon, from the aptly named and prominent lesbian novel, *The Well of Loneliness* by Radclyffe Hall (1928). In *The Well*, the figure of the codependent lesbian appears in the description of what amounts to lesbian merger between Stephen and her love interest, Mary. Hall writes, “[Stephen] seemed to be striving to obliterate, not only herself, but the whole hostile world through some strange and agonized merging with Mary” (430). In *Queer Attachments*, Sally Munt (2008) points to Hall’s description of merger as an affective transmutation of gay shame into object love: “Crucially, it is Mary who transmutes Stephen’s shame, thus reforming the bonds of shame as love” (88). In the novel, as intimacy erodes between Stephen and Mary, and the maternal mentor figure, Lady Massey, rejects their relationship, shame overcomes Stephen. The trauma of interpersonal rejection, abandonment, disavowal, and disconnection cannot be separated from Stephen’s queerness. As Heather Love (2008) notes, “it is remarkable how frequently ‘the whole hostile world’ ends up in these lovers’ beds” (124).

During the sex reform movement in the United Kingdom, *The Well of Loneliness* invoked the sexological theory of Havelock Ellis and functioned as a political text at the time of its publication in 1928 (Whitlock, 1987). It is what bell hooks (1994) calls a motivated representation, intent on leveraging psychology literature to propel the “born this way” ethos of the gay and lesbian rights movement that was gaining momentum across the western world. While codependency had yet to be developed as a psychopathological concept, Hall’s description of Stephen’s affective disposition arguably predicted subsequent psychopathological characterizations of lesbians as codependent. Stephen’s romantic attachment to Mary can even be classified as codependent in the way that it facilitates her own self-neglect. Any romance that

occurs in *The Well of Loneliness* is at once recast as hopelessness as the plot is underpinned by a sweeping portrayal of the protagonist as both victim and failure. Moreover, a reiteration of, or return to, heteronormativity, via the representation of the failure, was one of a few strategies that queer authors had to enlist to have their work published in the early to mid-20th century. The trope of “Dead Lesbian Syndrome” (Hulan, 2017) signifies this history, within which *The Well* offers a prelude to subsequent lesbian tragedies (Rizzuto, 2022). The enduring resonance of *The Well* as a lesbian urtext embeds an unconscious longing for belonging in the lesbian imaginary, and the idea that relational trauma, including systemic trauma, psychically disconnects queer people from themselves, their loved ones and their communities finds expression in the hopeless romanticism that animates the figure of the codependent lesbian.

Reimagining Queer Belonging

The stereotype of codependency in lesbians is textually reproduced, and arguably, constitutive of some relational dynamics by willful or unconscious adaptations. Yet the misrecognition of love and suffering that animates this figure can be read beyond pathologizing frames through the concept of systemic trauma and the theory of queer codependency (structural attachment trauma). Relational dynamics characterized by care as a form of control that are also an inheritance of intergenerational oppression can be seen in Audre Lorde’s *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982). Care as a form of control is evident in the description of the ways in which the characters, Zami and Muriel, navigate and define love under the influence of their maternal relationships. In *Zami*, love and suffering are not necessarily misrecognized but experienced together. For example, Lorde writes, “Muriel and I talked about love as a voluntary commitment, while we each struggled through the steps of an old dance, not consciously learned, but

desperately followed. We had learned well in the kitchens of our mothers, both powerful women who did not let go easily. In those warm places of survival, love was another name for control, however openly given” (214). Both parties intellectualize a fantasy of “love as a voluntary commitment” while unconsciously reproducing their mothers’ interpersonal patterns. Lorde illustrates how the affects of oppression can infiltrate interpersonal connections by identifying control as a residual feature of racialized, gendered, sexual and socio-economic experiences of oppression. In *Zami*, ambivalent affects circulate from macro to micro-level relations, wavering between attachment and divestment. Love and tragedy are intergenerationally commingled in this narrative of enduring affective lineages.

Stella Bolaki’s (2011) essay, “‘New living the old in a new way’: Home and Queer Migrations in Audre Lorde’s *Zami*” revisits Lorde’s biomythography through the lens of queer diaspora. Bolaki discusses the way in which *Zami* reimagines home through an ongoing process of attachment and detachment shaped by race, migration, gender, and sexuality. The essay explains how Lorde’s depiction of her Caribbean immigrant mother’s rigid household reveals the emotional costs of racial assimilation and heteronormativity, and how *Zami*’s departure from this space becomes an act of both self-assertion and transformation. Her “coming out” coincides with her “moving out,” but instead of severing familial bonds, it initiates a reworking of diasporic and maternal inheritances. Bolaki argues that through the metaphor of the “house of difference,” Lorde conceptualizes a queer home built from ethnic, erotic and communal affiliations that enables Black lesbian subjectivity to emerge in dialogue with intergenerational memory and desires for belonging. Bolaki shows how *Zami* challenges linear narratives of queer exile and offers a vision of queer diasporic home-making rooted in refigured and intergenerational kinship.

The ambivalence between care and control extends to *Zami*'s broader exploration of home and belonging as fraught inheritances shaped by intergenerational affect. *Zami* complicates the notion of home as a site to be escaped by depicting home as both a source of repression and a site of longing and affective entanglement. Lorde narrates the protagonist's movement away from her mother's household as a necessary act of self-making, yet one that is deeply tethered to maternal legacies. The maternal home is reprocessed through a queer diasporic lens that acknowledges the affective residues of racialized and gendered experiences of oppression, rather than being repudiated or nostalgically reclaimed. In Lorde's rendering, fantasies of belonging persist even as the definition of home is being reconfigured. What begins as exile transforms into a tentative, iterative practice of home-making through chosen kinship, queer love, and diasporic memory. This process is steeped in the spectres of the past, as the emotional architectures of earlier generations reappear in the protagonist's relational patterns. In this way, *Zami* traces how fantasies of love, care, attachment and home are personal longings as well as the psychic sediments of intergenerational oppression.

The circulation of stories like lesbian longing, lesbian processing and serial monogamy in the lesbian imaginary are fueled by unrequited desires for belonging in the wake of familial rejection and displacement, producing and reproducing the affective experience of perpetual seeking. In *Zami*, Lorde writes, "[w]ould it be possible – was it ever possible – for two women to share the fire we felt that night without entrapping or smothering each other? I longed for that as I longed for her body, doubting both, eager for both" (1982, 246). Lorde describes a relation of lesbian longing through an affective paradox of doubt and eagerness to express the desire for connection

without mutual destruction. In *Zami*, longing can be seen as a response to shame and a byproduct of intergenerational ambivalence in the way that it mobilizes a fantasy of refusal in pursuit of the elusive objective of belonging.

Firestone's psychology of fantasy bonds and Berlant's theory of cruel optimism resonate in Zami's ambivalent sentiment, "[a]n old dream of us together forever in a landscape blinded me" (234). The relationship between Zami and Muriel exemplifies the ways in which the trauma of oppression, specifically racialization, gendered sexualization, poverty and homophobic discrimination, can inform the psychic function of fantasy to manage the commingled affects that comprise attachment and divestment in lesbian relationships. Lorde's narrative captures the transmission of relational affects produced through intersecting experiences of oppression. When read through my theory of structural attachment trauma, which combines concepts like systemic trauma (Goldsmith et al., 2014), fantasy bonds (Firestone, 1993) and cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011), the experience of codependent affects in lesbian attachments can be examined beyond the "single-axis analysis" (Crenshaw, 1989) that is produced by the hegemonic terms of psychopathology, coloniality and heteronormativity.

The Interpersonal is Political

Is the figure of the codependent lesbian a blameless victim, a selfless hero or a hopeless romantic with an insecure attachment style? I have argued that it is an ambivalent representation of a gendered, pathologized and marginalized subject that appears in the stories of *lesbian longing*, *lesbian processing* and *serial monogamy*. The figure of the codependent lesbian is constructed through the discursive reproduction of the coloniality of gender and sexuality (Lugones, 2007),

like bio-essentialist womanhood and the nuclear family. It is animated by cruelly optimistic relations wherein self-preservation resembles self-neglect, care is a form of control and hopelessness is romanticized. The tropes of *serial monogamy*, *lesbian processing*, and *lesbian longing* circulate in the lesbian imaginary, fuelled by cultural beliefs that are inherited from 20th century psychoanalysis and popular culture, and that have been re-appropriated by queer media, which reproduces the widespread, albeit largely unconscious, idea that lesbian attachments are codependent.

Tropes about the ways in which lesbians relate to one another in their intimate lives reflect a cultural belief about lesbians being desperately attached to their love objects without the skills to regulate their emotions or to establish lasting intimacies. They developed out of historical, political and socio-economic conditions, and can be understood as forms of structural violence. The ways in which each of these stereotypes reflect the logics of object relations (e.g., mommy issues) through the affects of attachment insecurity illustrate their alignment with Freudian theoretical assumptions about lesbians. Not only do they represent social ideas about lesbians that are informed by biological essentialism and psychopathology among other homophobic epistemologies and discourses, but importantly, they reflect our ideas, stories and fantasies about ourselves. The commingling of hegemonic logics with experiential knowledge in lesbian tropes prescribes the ambivalence with which the signifier lesbian travels through the lesbian imaginary. The ambivalence that persists in descriptions of lesbian relationships informs the mythologies through which we identify with each other, as lesbians and queer women.

Is the reading pathological or is the lesbian?

Given the poststructuralist framing of this analysis in asserting the constitutive influence of representation and discourse to prescribe subjectivities and construct reality, I have shown how the codependent lesbian emerged as a pathological figure, the ways in which it continues to be theorized, represented and narrated, and moreover, the potential of this figure to materialize in lesbian cultures vis a vis the affective relations that its discursive constitution engenders. The pathologization of lesbians as codependent continues to influence related stories about lesbian attachments and to contribute to the reproduction of ambivalent fantasies that can be used to secure and sustain dysfunctional attachments between lesbians. Codependency is a narrow framework through which to understand the complexities of lesbian desires, identities and attachments. It is a lens that overrides the nuance of intersectional experiences of intimacy and belonging in lesbian identities and attachments. The pathologizing framework of codependency imposes an interpretation onto lesbian relations that eclipses more expansive modes of experiential re-telling. In short, the continued circulation of the pathological reading influences material challenges in and between lesbian subjects. Lesbian codependency is a valid concern for queer communities insofar as lesbians and queer women continue to identify with it and arguably reproduce its related affects in their relationships.

The affects of codependency and the stories of codependent others serve the neoliberal reification of homonationalist subjects who are loyal servants to the nation state. The construct of codependency represents the imbrication of contradictory fantasies that intersect as a dialectic of hegemony and its disavowal: heteronormative fantasies, feminist fantasies and queer fantasies. The figure of the codependent lesbian carries the colonial weight of institutionalized misogyny and lesbophobia and serves as a reminder that the interpersonal is political. Discourses,

archetypes and stereotypes ranging from figures like the Munchausen mother and the narcissistic double to concepts like serial monogamy, lesbian processing and lesbian longing materialize in the circulation of socio-historical, affective residue in and between lesbian subjects and their objects of desire.

Chapter Four- Rage-Fantasy: Queer Affects, Ambivalent Attachments and the Figure of the Angry Lesbian

A lesbian is the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion.

—Radicalesbians. *The Woman Identified Woman*, 1970, 1.

Ambivalence has been woven into the discursive lineage of the signifier lesbian, whose modern constitution at the intersection of fears and fantasies about women's sexuality spans a discursive shift from the language of Victorian romance to the psychoanalytic symptomology of 20th century sexology (Rupp, 2009; Faderman, 1981, 1991). This figure is a symbolic receptacle of hegemonic projections that represents both promises and perils in its implications for queer kinship. This chapter discusses a version of the signifier lesbian that discursively circulates in contemporary lesbian imaginaries, and that is characterized by the commingling of rage and fantasy: the figure of the angry lesbian. The mechanisms of psychic disavowal that can manifest in lesbian relationships are analyzed as affective contingencies of this ambivalent discursive tradition. I query the relationship between rage and fantasy in representations of lesbian relationships and theorize how fantasies of belonging are responsive to the circulation and expression of lesbian rage. I argue that the figure of the angry lesbian is reproduced through hegemonic frames and upheld by psychoanalytic fantasies about gender and sexuality, and that the commingling of rage and fantasy that is represented in lesbian relationships animates what Tyler Bradway and Elizabeth Freeman (2022) call *kincoherence*:

[K]incoherence fuses the mutually constituting and complicating forces, desires, practices, relations, institutions, and forms that render kinship a horizon of violence and possibility... Kincoherence traces, theorizes, and engages kinship's fraught and overdetermined nature: our desire to forget kinship and the apparent impossibility of

doing so, queer kinship's creative experimentation with relationality, and its ongoing imbrication with entrenched idioms of ancestry, descent, and family. (2022, 3)

Using a trauma-informed theoretical framework comprising psychoanalytic theory and feminist affect theory, which includes conceptual throughlines from trauma theory, queer studies and psychoanalytic feminist thought, I analyze representations wherein the violence and possibility of lesbian kinship is enacted through the commingling of rage and fantasy. I observe the ways in which lesbian rage can be masked and mediated by shared fantasies circulating in a lesbian imaginary that is constructed through intersecting discourses and representations of lesbian relationships. My analysis illustrates how rage interfaces with romantic attachment and subsequent disillusionment in an affective cycle that characterizes discourses about lesbian relationships. I refer to this discursively produced and affectively perpetuated relational dynamic as *lesbian rage-fantasy*. Cycles of lesbian rage-fantasy provide an affective structure for kincoherent arrangements that involve relations of "cruel optimism" (Berlant, 2011) in lesbian attachments. I refer to examples of lesbian rage-fantasy in Carmen Maria Machado's memoir, *In the Dream House*, and in the reality television series, *The Ultimatum: Queer Love* to analyze kincoherence in the relationship between rage and romantic fantasy in contemporary lesbian lore.

Throughout this dissertation, the slippage that occurs between clinical rubrics and in-group narratives is intended to illustrate the embeddedness of contradictory meanings that are framed by discourses of lesbian identity, relationships and queer affective lineages as ambivalent. Likewise, a poststructuralist, cultural studies perspective is used to critically attend to the problematics of hegemonic prescriptions of lesbians and their continued influence on in-group discourses and representations that treats discourse as prescriptive of (lesbian) subjectivities

(Foucault, 1969) and engages with the possibilities of representation to constitute (affective) realities (Hall, 1997). In other words, this chapter continues an ambivalent inquiry into the ways in which theories, stereotypes and stories about lesbians represent fantasies of belonging that materialize in and between queer and lesbian subjects.

Given Bradway and Freeman's work on queer kinship, this chapter continues a treatment of lesbian kinship as formulated by structures of feeling that are constituted within hegemonies, rather than being distinct from them. Thus, lesbian kinship is taken up herein as a post-queer concept that is responsive to critical discourse, one that is attendant to post-structural possibilities that emerge in the analysis of affective relations. This analysis acknowledges the endless possibilities of queer and lesbian affects and attachments beyond those that are hegemonically prescribed. It has a share in Bradway and Freeman's goal, which is "not to foreclose queer experiments in belonging beyond kinship... but rather to understand their complex relationships to the historical, ontological, and epistemological violence that kinship engenders" (2022, 2). Relationships between lesbians cannot be said to be universally fuelled by cycles of rage and fantasy, but the reproduction of this affective theme across diverse discourses and representations by and about lesbians warrants an examination of the material, interpersonal possibilities of its influence on queer and lesbian lives. Relatedly, while it is true that non-lesbian relationships may also exhibit affective cycles of rage and fantasy, this reading focuses on the nuances of lesbian specificity in the affective construction of non-normative sexuality between women.

Situating Lesbian Rage

The signifier lesbian has taken on the affective residue of a tenuous political history and her narrative reproduction continues a representational and affective tradition of ambivalence. In the context of the history of western sexology the emergence of the modern lesbian subject occurred between 1890 and 1920, when the cultural intelligibility of love between women crossed a discursive threshold between the language of Victorian romance and the science of psychopathology (Faderman, 1981; Rupp, 2009). An affective migration took place between social and political frames of reference as the characterization of love between women shifted from “romantic” and “spiritual” (Cott, 1978; Smith-Rosenberg, 1975; Faderman, 1991), to “mentally ill” and “criminal” (Freud, 1920; Faderman, 1981). In “The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman”, Freud (1920) uses the term, *l'armend*, to refer to homosexuality in women, which translates to “riotous or unruly”, “an assault upon the senses, a blinding and deafening spectacle” (Fuss, 1999, 58). In 1932, building on Freud’s theory that homosexuality in women is related to regression of the ability to differentiate subject from object (1921), Jacques Lacan conflates paranoid psychosis with homosexuality in women. Lacan theorizes that female paranoiacs’ lack of differentiation from other women “constitutes the very source of their paranoia” (Fuss, 1999, 56).

Lesbian stereotypes emerged in the context of the cultural intelligibility of sexual inversion as a psychopathological diagnosis: “the lesbian predator”, as seen in lesbian vampire films (The Vampire Lovers (Baker, 1970) and The Hunger (Scott, 1983)) and mid-century pulp fiction (Murphy, 2017), “the codependent lesbian”, as seen in psychology and social work clinical literature (Bruss and Glickauf-Hughes, 1997; Burch, 1982; Krestan and Bepko, 1980), and “the

man-eating lesbian”, as seen in popular culture and film (Creed, 1995). The characterization of the signifier lesbian as angry, dependent, self-loathing and obsessive emerged from the use of negative affective terminology in psychopathology and popular culture alike.

The residual specters of the discursive past linger in contemporary colloquial references to lesbian rage. For example, a relationship between lesbianism and rage can be seen in a number of in-group references discussed in online forums hosted by Reddit from 2011 to 2024 ranging from topics like rage comics (gomoonshinemolotov, 2011) to user experiences of transphobia in lesbian forums (surrealistgal, 2024). On Reddit, the term *raging lesbian* describes a lesbian who overtly exudes queerness and is open with their expressions of queer desire, while *jealous lesbian rage* is used to describe the emotional distress of a lesbian whose love object leaves them for a man. The *man-hating lesbian* is another concept discussed on Reddit, where it is referred to as a lesbophobic accusation that erroneously implicates feelings about men in relations that are definitively about women’s feelings for each other. Of relevance to the discussion about trauma and lesbian affect is the way in which the concept of *lesbian rage* is discussed to refer to a flight response that occurs upon receiving sexual advances from a man. On a forum called *actuallesbians* a user writes:

“In past experiences with guys, I've always had this weird underlying feeling of anger — not necessarily directed at the guy, but more myself or the situation. Basically a gnawing desire to shove him off and run out the nearest door. My friend dubbed this "lesbian rage," which I find hilarious. Now I'm wondering — is this something most of you've experienced, or am I just a hyper-aggressive queer?” (nous-verrons, 2014)

Responses to this user’s question suggest that their experience is shared among other users:

“I have when I tried to have sex with a guy but I was more mad at myself for not accepting myself. I just really wanted to fit in so bad and not be lesbian.” (7 upvotes)

(rainbowbunny56, 2014)

“Yeaaaaahhhhh. That was me too. My disgust turned to anger turned back into disgust and guilt.” (5 upvotes) (SoMuchSelfConfidence, 2014)

“I would be instantly filled with regret and disgust mostly. A lot of self hate going on but I don't think it was all on the surface enough for me to know that I was so enraged with myself. That knowledge came with much soul searching.” (1 upvote) (wheelerdealer, 2014)

The shared affective experience of lesbian rage is characterized by users on Reddit as regret and disgust turned inward and transmuted into anger and self-loathing.

Arguably, the contemporary conceptualizations and characterizations of lesbian rage as an emotional reaction related to the sexual rejection of men can be traced to psychoanalytic concepts like *penis envy* (Freud, 1905/ Strachey, 1953) and the *masculinity complex* (Freud, 1931), which were derived from Freud's formulations of psychosexual development. In Freud's (1905) oedipus complex, he theorizes that unresolved “penis envy” (195) leads to an arrested development or a masculinity complex, which is described by psychoanalytic feminist Karen Horney as an unreconciled desire to be male that is at odds with normal psychosexual development (Horney, 1927/ 2000). Freud's theory of psychosexual development emerged in a sociopolitical context that conflated feminism and lesbianism. For example, Lillian Faderman (1981) describes how the term *viragint* was used to refer to a combination of feminism and lesbianism around the turn of the 20th century, noting its use in William Lee Howard's novel, *The Perverts* (1901) to describe a PhD feminist as a degenerate (Faderman, 1981, 47). A rejection of male dominance is commonly conflated with lesbian sexuality in patriarchal terms.

The accusation of a fundamental rejection of men was a key factor in the pathologization of lesbian sexuality in the 20th century (Faderman, 1991), as well as in the discursive construction of the figure of the angry lesbian.

Feminist Politics x Lesbian Rage

Affective transmutation or conversion is a recurrent theme in discourses on lesbian rage that is used to describe and address interpersonal, political and psychic conflicts. The angry lesbian is related to the tropes of the feminist killjoy (Ahmed, 2009, 2023) and the angry Black woman (hooks, 2000; Lorde, 1984) in its affective dissent against hegemonic power. In *The Feminist Killjoy Handbook: The Radical Potential of Getting in the Way*, Sara Ahmed (2023) writes on the history of the term *killjoy*, citing the work of mid-century psychoanalyst Edmund Bergler, who asserted that the term refers to a pathology as well as a type of person (Ahmed, 2023, 6). She writes that “[e]ven to give a brief history of the term killjoy teaches us how it was used to create a picture of those who are ‘not us’ and who have the power to take from us what we want for ourselves” (2023, 7). In “Embodying Diversity: Problems and Paradoxes for Black Feminists,” Ahmed (2009) describes the angry Black woman as a killjoy whose ability to evoke “affective conversion” in white spaces can be wielded as a political force. Ahmed cites the work of Audre Lorde (1984) to describe anger as a world-making affect that enables new visions for the future and transmutes pain into knowledge: “My fear of anger taught me nothing... Anger expressed and translated into action in the service of our vision and our future is a liberating and strengthening act of clarification” (Lorde, 1984, 127, quoted in Ahmed, 2009, 51). While the angry lesbian is broadly figured in the treatment herein, it should be noted that this figure and its constitutive affects cannot be separated from figures like the feminist killjoy and the angry Black

woman insofar as they overlap in both the hegemonic discourses that characterize and pathologize them, and the subjects who identify with them. The angry lesbian may or may not also be a feminist killjoy and an angry Black woman.

The figure of the angry lesbian is invoked for activist causes and taken up as a site for analysis in queer studies. The historical disavowal of lesbianism in the American feminist movement sparked the mobilization of lesbian rage for activist causes in the 1970s. In 1969, Betty Friedan notoriously coined the term *lavender menace* to segregate lesbian activists from the movement by referring to them as “man-haters” and “anti-family” feminists (Siegel, 2007). In response, Rita Mae Brown led the re-appropriation of the term *lavender menace* to empower a group of lesbian activists to protest lesbian exclusion at the National Organization for Women’s Second Congress to Unite Women in May 1970 (Siegel, 2007).

In the early 1990s, Diana DiMassa satirized the angry lesbian in a feminist comic, *Hothead Paisan: Homicidal Lesbian Terrorist*. DiMassa created the comic during a stint in rehab, responding to her therapist’s recommendation to find an outlet for the expression of her anger (Warner, 2012, 149). Hothead Paisan is a parodic representation of the angry lesbian who brings the figure to life to trouble political discourses around LGBTQ rights mobilization in the early nineties. Specifically, the comic offers a critique of advocacy employed to leverage either heteronormative propriety over queers or lesbian-feminist radicalism to fight for LGBTQ rights. Dana Heller (1993) writes about the political motivation of Hothead Paisan, “in an age when much feminist energy has been channeled into protesting pornography and images of violence against women, Hothead Paisan self-consciously challenges feminist proponents of ‘politically

correct' representation, by asking whether it is wise, or for that matter even healthy, to organize our fantasies as we would organize our behaviors" (30-31). *Hothead Paisan* is a satire of the figure of the angry lesbian that both validates legitimate anger over lesbian oppressions and troubles revenge fantasies as modes of violence by making them explicit.

In "Terrorist Acts: The Maladapted *Hothead Paisan*, A Lesbian Comedy of Terrors", Sara Warner (2012) explores "the affective economy of terrorism, the theatrics of revolutionary violence, and the efficacy of militant forms of LGBT protest" (142). She argues that the comic presents a relationship between queerness, terrorism, and resistance that makes it "a potentially powerful and effective antidote to homonationalism" (152). Warner analyzes the musical reproduction of *Hothead Paisan* by Animal Prufrock at the 29th annual Michigan Womyn's Music Festival in 2004, situating it in comparison to DiMassa's original work and noting how the post 9/11 political climate influenced its reception in discourse. In the neoliberal context of a shifting discourse (for some) around homosexual identity from terrorist to citizen, within which Prufrock inadequately attended to intersectionality and espoused anti-trans radicalism, Prufrock's reproduction of the angry lesbian relays a different message from that of DiMassa. Warner argues that Prufrock's iteration "lacks the crucial element of self-parody" and as such, "risks collusion with the staid, self-serving agendas of homoliberalism and American exceptionalism" (158). In Warner's discussion, the political efficacy of radical feminist revenge fantasies is mediated by the context and medium through which they are told. In Prufrock's rendition, the revenge fantasy covertly colludes with a climate of post-9/11 homoliberalism, which is associated with a desire for assimilation in mainstream culture. Warner's treatment of Prufrock's reproduction illustrates the ways in which the commingling of rage and fantasy can be seen to

contribute to political violence in the form of homoliberalism masquerading as resistance. Her analysis prompts an interesting question for my own analysis of relations of rage and fantasy in the lesbian imaginary: what are the political ends to our fantasies of belonging? What are the affective machinations that function at the intersection of the personal and political? Not unlike bell hooks, who asks “what do we do as feminists with our rage?” (1994, 249) we might also ask “what do we do as lesbians with our rage?”

Lesbian Kinship - Affect Theory

For Bradway and Freeman, “kincoherence” responds to the wish for social and political legitimization that complicates queer forms of relationality, sodality or family. It is a concept that encompasses the nuance, complexity and ambivalence inherent in queer orientations to kinship. They write, “the trouble with kinship is that we do not always know where we stand in relation to it. This is because the idioms of kinship are not simply riven with ideological ruses waiting to be exposed; they are also invested and bound up with desire, fantasy, and affect” (Bradway and Freeman, 2022, 3). Lauren Berlant’s (2011) theory of cruel optimism together with Robert Firestone’s (1993) theory of fantasy bonds are invoked herein to examine kincoherence in the figure of the angry lesbian and the affective relations that she inspires. *Lesbian rage-fantasy* animates kincoherent relations as a psycho-affective mechanism that secures and sustains dysfunctional attachments. It is a theory of lesbian affect that explains the influence of discursive and structural violence on the interpersonal lives of queer and lesbian women through a conceptual framework that attends to fantasy bonds as relations of cruel optimism. Berlant writes that “[a] relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing... These kinds of optimistic relations are not inherently cruel. They become

cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially” (2011, 1). Cruel optimism enables the conceptualization of affective attachments to the state as relations implicating oppressed subjects in the neoliberal politics of inclusion through the preservation of the fantasy of “the good life” (Ibid, 27). Fantasy bonds are relations of cruel optimism insofar as they employ kinship forms, ritual responses and formalities to maintain an image of connection that disguises an affective reality of indifference between a subject and their attachment object. Firestone writes that fantasy-bonded individuals:

[U]tilize real events as a means of reinforcing or ‘feeding’ their most prized fantasies, and value form over substance in interpersonal relationships. For example, in a destructive, addictive attachment, fantasy-bonded individuals place a strong emphasis on ritual or role-determined responses, such as the Saturday-night date, sleeping together, routine sex, and formalities such as remembering birthdays and anniversaries, etc. At the same time, they may treat each other indifferently or disrespectfully. (1993, 341)

Seen through the concept of kincoherence, queer fantasies that employ the symbolics of kinship implicate queer and marginalized subjects in cruelly optimistic attachments to objects, behaviours, ideologies and institutions, producing cognitive dissonance that is then mediated by affective relations. What happens when the rituals of heteronormativity filter the shame-fuelled forms of psychic disavowal and affective divestment that undergird the love stories of angry lesbians? I argue that queer and lesbian fantasy bonds are secured through the affective byproducts of systemic trauma (Goldsmith et al., 2014), animating a lesbian-specific kind of kincoherence that is depicted in diverse representations of queer and lesbian relationships.

Commingled Affects

Trauma theory, as formulated in the western medical model, has historically failed to center

analyses of subjects that are oppressed at the intersections of race, class, ability, gender and sexuality. It has also effectively marginalized certain subject positions through their very constitution in discourse (Stevens, 2009; Clark, 2016). Critical formulations of trauma, like systemic trauma and racialized trauma, as well as postcolonial and feminist treatments of the intergenerational effects of oppression (Collins, 1990; Fanon, 1952, trans. Markmann, 2002; Gandhi 1998), situate trauma beyond psychopathology's "single-axis analysis" (Crenshaw, 1989). Similarly, de-pathologizing lesbian trauma has been underlined in queer studies (e.g. Cvetkovich, 2003; Prasad, 2020; Thurston, 2022) where theory and advocacy have been leveraged towards reframing trauma and its associated affects in ways that divest from hegemonic discourses.

From a critical trauma-informed perspective that attends to themes of embodiment, affect and materiality in theorizing systemic oppression, the crux of the marginalization of queer women by homophobic and misogynistic discourses is the way in which it persistently and systematically undermines social, physical and psychological safety. Queer attachments and lesbian love stories are imbued with unconscious conflicts from the macro to the micro level because they are "constituted by historical injury" (Love, 2007, abstract). Queer studies archives are punctuated by the ambivalent commingling of shame and pride (Halperin and Traub, 2009), embedding ambivalent affective, relational and psychic processes in our shared narratives of queer resistance and liberation. For example, Jasbir Puar's (2007) concept of "homonationalism" speaks to one of the ways in which a queer or racialized subject may navigate the shame of oppression while seeking liberation. Her work illustrates the idea that the reification of queer subjects into agents of the nation state requires both the subject's acceptance and disavowal of their sexual and

gender non-normativity.

Social and structural stigma contributes to the disparities in experiences of trauma between 2SLGBTQIA+ and heterosexual groups (Roberts et al., 2010), and shame can stem from the perception of transgressing social norms (Saraiya and Lopez-Castro, 2016). According to H.B. Lewis's (1971) shame-rage theory, shame functions to establish hostility, also referred to as "humiliated fury" (Hejdenberg and Andrews 2011, 1278). Fantasy secures and sustains attachments to objects, behaviours, institutions and ideologies by distracting from the felt reality of negative affects that provoke distress and characterize emotional disconnection, like shame, contempt, regret and despair. Fantasy proneness is a maladaptive coping mechanism that supports distress regulation (Bacon and Charlesford, 2018), and that may be invoked (consciously or unconsciously) through the psychic function of attachment (Firestone, 1993). If lesbian rage is rooted in an internalization of shame and loathing that is related to the experience of gender and sexual oppression among other intersections of oppression, it can arguably be managed, mitigated or mediated by the invocation of cruelly optimistic fantasies to secure one's attachments to perceived sources of relational safety. Kinship symbols and idioms present readily available structures of social meaning upon which to project fantasies of belonging while simultaneously, and perhaps subconsciously, stoking the shame of queer failure (Halberstam, 2011) that is inherent in the colonial endeavour of homonormativity.

Shame and fantasy interact in specifically lesbian modes throughout 20th century western history. Sally Munt (2008) examines the employment of dissociative fantasy as a response to shame in Radclyffe Hall's urtextual lesbian novel *The Well of Loneliness* by pointing to the

correlative relationship between the shame of protagonist, Stephen Gordon, and her rejection by a homophobic society:

This scenario of Stephen's shame is a distillation of common experiences of homophobic rejection, even today. In Silvan Tomkins' typology of the 'total affect-shame bind' (Tomkins 1995, 163), and in Helen Block Lewis' description of the 'feedback loops' of shame, Stephen is in a state of near-ontological shame – shame is her being, and hence also, her non-being (Lewis 1971). Hall's oppressive layering of shame has the effect of finally reducing Stephen to nothing. From here, she can only disconnect, in order to survive. Her psychological environment is toxic, and she is displaying the symptoms of those shame binds. Her only chance is an enforced renunciation of the love object; she must leave behind both the bad mother (Anna) and the good mother (Morton), mourn, and then become the fantasy parent herself. (Munt, 2008, 86)

Munt identifies how the shame of homophobic rejection induces disconnection and disappears the queer subject, imploring Stephen to become her own fantasy parent. In Munt's analysis, fantasy is employed as a last resort to survive the aftermath of the insufferable shame of social rejection.

Seen through the logics of attachment theory (Ainsworth, 1978) together with Firestone's (1993) theory of fantasy bonds and Berlant's (2011) theory of cruel optimism, insecure attachment dynamics can be understood to develop as unconscious forms of self-sabotage, secured and sustained by fantasies of belonging. In these kinds of fantasy bonds, the reality of connection can consist of mutual projection, dismissiveness, contempt, enabling and controlling or manipulative behaviours (Firestone, 1993). In queer attachments, fantasies of romance may work to obscure the underlying workings of queer shame and its sister affects, which promote psychic and emotional mechanisms of disconnection (at least). In a 1987 issue of the feminist periodical, *Off Our Backs*, which was published in the U.S. from 1970 to 2008, Tracy McDonald reviews *Behind the Curtains*, a play about lesbian domestic violence written by Margaret Nash:

[M]ost lesbians, at one time or another deny difficulties in their relationships as they try to hold onto the preciousness of their love for another woman... As the play progresses, Beth grows to understand that the ‘good stuff’ can neither replace nor excuse emotional and/or physical abuse where one partner systematically controls, manipulates, hits, yells, criticizes or otherwise forces the other partner into fear, complicity — submission. (McDonald, 1987, 19).

McDonald commends Nash for lifting the veil on lesbian relationships by rejecting the “reflex assumption that lesbians have surpassed the society from which we were born and, having come out, now exist in some mystical utopia” (19). Nash’s representation illustrates that discourse about the feminist politics of the manifestation of lesbian rage has circulated in lesbian archives for decades. It makes notable how an affective relation that is animated by rage can be denied by a simultaneously self-protective and self-effacing fantasy that is specific to a lesbian worldview.

The Lesbian Rage-Fantasy

The following analysis identifies this affective relation, which I call *lesbian rage-fantasy*, in contemporary lesbian representations, *In the Dream House* and *The Ultimatum: Queer Love*. While these sites of analysis differ in genre, the continued discursive circulation of *lesbian rage-fantasy* in various representational forms calls for its delineation as a theory of lesbian affect. I would suggest that this affective relation is a psychic mechanism for the management of queer shame. Lesbian rage-fantasy locates the affects of oppression in the relational experiences of queer and lesbian women and speaks to affective cycles that are invoked by trauma, fantasy and attachment. It refers to an affective relation that is characterized by kincoherence insofar as it attends to “kinship’s fraught and overdetermined nature... its ongoing imbrication with entrenched idioms of ancestry, descent and family” (Bradway and Freeman, 2022, 3). The concept of lesbian rage-fantasy encapsulates the ambivalence of queer orientations towards

attachment and signifies a defense strategy that is produced in part by systemic trauma and historical injury. Lesbian rage-fantasy is motivated by an unconscious drive for love and belonging that is systematically denied to queer women. Relations of lesbian rage-fantasy employ and respond to the symbolics of kinship through the embodiment of affects related to the trauma of systemic oppression. At its ambivalent foundation, it is a cycle of “affective conversion” (Ahmed, 2009) that is animated by kincoherence and cruel optimism, and that may materialize in cognitive dissonance, insecure attachment dynamics and dysregulated emotional states. While it cannot be said to describe a universal experience, the concept can be seen in the figures of the U-haul lesbian, the lesbian [love] addict, the codependent lesbian, and the angry lesbian. This affective conversion is a product and a function of the colonial/modern gender system (Lugones, 2007, 2010) that constitutes lesbian identity in ambivalence, at the intersection of marginality, pathology, coloniality, and exceptionalism.

In the rage-fantasy cycle, rage acts as a defense against queer shame, which may be mitigated or diffused by fantasies of belonging that reflect bio-essentialist ideals and homonormative family values (lesbian utopia, monogamy, marriage, true love, u-hauling, “women are more emotional”, etc.). Fantasy serves to promote subsequent disillusionment, and rage returns at the confrontation with the reality of the material, interpersonal and political manifestations of oppression. This confrontation works to reinforce a fragmented self-concept that anticipates social failure, rejection and disconnection. When the U-haul loses its shine and the anxious thrill of a processing session turns into a repeated misunderstanding that leaves a lingering sense of resentment, the fantasy of belonging wanes, revealing the self-fulfilling (albeit unconscious) prophecy of emotional disconnection. Psychic fantasy and the attachments that it sustains are

then re-employed as a salve for the affective brutality of lesbian life, and thus, the rage-fantasy cycle begins again.

In the Dream House

In her memoir, *In the Dream House*, Carmen Maria Machado writes about her experience in an abusive, queer relationship that takes place in the domestic space of a house in Illinois that she calls the “Dream House”. The Dream House is both a metaphor representing home, love and belonging, and “not a metaphor”, in the sense that the author locates her affective experience of abuse as something that is entangled in the materiality of the house that she shared with her abuser. In Machado’s queer tragedy, rage and interpersonal trauma are housed in the domestic sphere, highlighting the affective ambivalence of abuse cycles characterized by rage and fantasy, and as necessarily tied up with the discursive construction of a cultural lesbian imaginary:

Fantasy is, I think, the defining cliché of female queerness. No wonder we joke about U-Hauls on the second date. To find desire, love, everyday joy without men’s accompanying bullshit is a pretty decent definition of paradise.

The literature of queer domestic abuse is lousy with references to this punctured dream, which proves to be as much a violation as a black eye, a sprained wrist... . Acknowledging the insufficiency of this idealism is nearly as painful as acknowledging that we’re the same as straight folks in this regard: we’re in the muck like everyone else. All of this fantasy is an act of supreme optimism, or, if you’re feeling less charitable, arrogance. (109)

Seen through the concepts of kincoherence and cruel optimism, Machado’s ambivalent construction of a lesbian imaginary discursively cleaves lesbian relationships to a mythology of martyrdom and suffering for love. Lesbian rage-fantasy can be seen in the acknowledgment of the “insufficiency of this idealism”, which at once encompasses the “desire to forget kinship, and

the apparent impossibility of doing so” (Bradway and Freeman, 2022, 3). The idealism Machado speaks to is constituted in opposition to heteronormative modes of kinship, while also invoking their escapist romanticism. Machado’s “supreme optimism” illustrates the cruelty of fantasy as an affective mechanism employed to mitigate a painful reality — queer love is not a ticket to paradise, after all. The lesbian imaginary remains haunted by what Machado describes as the “punctured dream” in the literature about queer domestic abuse, as well as the collective trauma and psychic defenses that proliferate and circulate in its wake. Machado’s memoir illustrates lesbian rage-fantasy as an affective manifestation of kincoherence in her personal account of the consequences of idealism, revealing how cracks in the Dream House deepen under the weight of her romantic and domestic fantasy, imploding in an internalization of abusive behaviors, self-denial and resentment.

Machado speaks to the difficulty of acknowledging interpersonal abuse, dysfunction and mental health issues in the context of queer, lesbian love, and in light of a cultural history wherein “[h]ysteria and inversion, [are] compounded like interest; an eternally growing debt” (126). Her story tells of a willful kind of denial that grows into fantasy, following the narrative framework of a “gothic romance,” combining a woman, a home and a stranger (76). She reflects on how the perceived impossibility of same-sex domestic violence, combined with a refusal to concede to the homophobic and misogynistic implications of the “lunatic lesbian” trope contributed to the fantasy construction of the Dream House, which intensified her queer desire for love, acceptance and belonging. “I haven’t been closeted in almost a decade. Even so, I am unaccountably haunted by the specter of the lunatic lesbian. I did not want my lover to be dogged by mental illness or a personality disorder or rage issues... if I could say anything to her, I’d say, “For

Fucks’ sake, stop making us look bad” (126). Queer kinship requires an emotional authenticity in the face of heteronormative mythologies and bio-essentialist theories about queerness, but when that authenticity makes us “look bad,” cognitive dissonance works to uphold a sense of pride, and to secure our identities and attachments in the face of oppression.

Denying the oppressor in your intimate life can be an intoxicating feeling of emotional comfort and safety, especially when you occupy a social position from which such privileges have been systematically denied. To acknowledge the possibility of manipulation or abuse penetrating this experience of social salvation is to re-open the perpetually unhealed wounds of oppression. A uniquely queer kind of shame emerges with the realization that the effects (affects) of oppression that you have resisted as a queer person have infiltrated your intimate life despite your defenses against them: your best efforts at communication and compromise, your conviction that women aren’t abusive or that enmeshment is a superior form of relating, and hours spent providing emotional labour, performing accountability and processing. The supreme optimism, or arrogance, that Machado speaks to is a cruel kind of optimism and a form of kincoherence that is upheld by lesbian rage-fantasy, and that sentences one to a relationship lacking emotional presence and connection.

The Ultimatum: Queer Love

Another representation of lesbian rage-fantasy can be seen on Netflix’s reality television series and social experiment, *The Ultimatum: Queer Love* (Coelen, 2023), which is a queer chapter of the original series, *The Ultimatum: Marry or Move On* (Coelen, 2022). In the series, couples are filmed navigating a marriage ultimatum in their relationships. Each couple consists of one

partner who gives an ultimatum, and one partner who receives it. Upon arrival, the couples are split up and given the opportunity to temporarily date a contestant from another couple in a 21-day “trial marriage” to determine if they wish to marry their original partner, or to explore their options.

Lesbian rage-fantasy characterizes the attachment between participants Tiff and Mildred throughout the series. The couple is seen riding a roller coaster of emotions, oscillating from the heights of lust, passion and hopefulness to the depths of rage, longing and despair. Their expressions of anger are so routine and overt that they employ an explicit fantasy narrative around the volatility in the relationship to explain and dismiss their dysfunction and distress. The couple expresses the sentiment, “love is hard”, which is related to the oft-repeated marital advice that “relationships take work,” to simultaneously acknowledge the stress that they experience in relationship with one another and secure their attachment.

At the conclusion of the social experiment, in the final episode, “Ultimatum Day”, the couple is shown standing on a windy cliff overlooking the ocean, a location that was presumably chosen for its romantic symbolism. Mildred stumbles on a rocky path and Tiff jokes, “you can fall in love but don’t fall down this damn cliff,” which reads as a self-fulfilling prophecy foretelling the tragedy that awaits in the next episode, and arguably, revealing Tiff’s unconscious fears and/or desires. Tiff acknowledges the conflict and “roller coaster” of emotions that has challenged the couple’s connection in the past, but re-frames her perspective on these distressing experiences by invoking an image of Mildred as the person with whom she desires to spend her life.

In the final episode, Tiff's voiceover narrates the couple's cliff-side reunion, "I know that we still fight, I know that that's gonna continue to happen, but I have to see it through the lens of, is this someone I want to spend the rest of my life with?" (episode 9, 00:12:20) Inserting Mildred into a fantasy of monogamous security and wedded bliss justifies and regulates Tiff's current experiences of unresolved negative affect in their relationship, and the residual fear and anxiety left over from the couple's past challenges. The earnest voiceover paired with images of the couple holding hands and gazing intently into each other's eyes competes with strong gusts of wind that muffle the background audio. The turbulent atmosphere is punctuated by a sequence of frames in which hair is seen blowing across Mildred's face, and waves crash aggressively onto the shore, animating an element of pathetic fallacy and creating an intense visual medium through which they both declare their final marriage decision. The couple's lengthy vows, which are laden with promises, and bids for care and understanding that concretize their attachment in a romantic mythology invoking the popular idea that "love is hard," encapsulate their seaside proposal:

Mildred: You know sometimes when we meet someone and we're so crazy about them we think that everything should be fine and everything should be just perfect and easy... but I think that in reality, it's the hard things, it's the hardships that we go through and it's all the challenges along the way, and that is what, like, has brought us together... being on this experience with you has taught me so much about our relationship, and where we're at and how friggin crazy we are.

Tiff: We already knew that, though.

Mildred: But we're crazy for each other. (00:13:29)

The story that "love is hard" not only serves to maintain the fantasy that Tiff and Mildred are soul mates navigating a karmic love story, but it also explains the acute experience of dysfunction without threatening detachment. The invocation of this fantasy works to cloak the couple's rage, fear and attachment distress when they commit to wedding plans. Moreover, the

cognitive dissonance or, kincoherence, created by the fantasy of true love that functions to disguise relational dysfunction is compounded by Mildred's appeal to reality to affirm her fantasy of belonging, which she expresses through the conviction that, "in reality," connection is achieved through facing hardships together. This statement performs emotional authenticity while upholding a romance fantasy that secures the couple's attachment. Tiff and Mildred commit to the mutual belief that the "craziness" they experience in their relationship is evidence of its strength and authenticity. The ideas that stimulate their shared fantasy are not necessarily false or untrue - love can be hard, and people can develop intimacy through mutual experiences of hardship. It is the generalizable and poetic qualities of these ideas that make them ideal narrative structures through which to project a fantasy whose aim is to uphold the integrity of the relationship amidst affective turmoil.

Mildred elaborates on the couple's shared fantasy by expounding on the virtues of imperfection and unconditional love:

I don't think you're perfect, but your perfectness is not what made me fall in love with you, it's all your flaws... I love you unconditionally, I want you to love me in that same way that I love you... I'm afraid that you might not love me unconditionally. So I'm bringing to you my fears and insecurities, and telling you how much I love you and how much I believe in us. (00:14:37)

Mildred's unconditional acceptance of Tiff's flaws is one of the ways in which ambivalence and kincoherence manifest psycho-affectively in their relational dynamic. Defining love in terms of hardship and the acceptance of fallibility re-positions interpersonal harm, failure or disappointment through a smokescreen of belonging facilitated by differentiation. Mildred's vows articulate an ambivalent orientation by framing Tiff as both a threshold and a barrier to her own salvation, "happily ever after", and sense of belonging. The idealism with which they secure

their fraught bond is a cruel kind of optimism that supports an enduring sense of kincoherence and masks their dissatisfaction and disconnection.

The mutual commitment to the romantic narrative that “love is hard” secures Tiff and Mildred’s commitment to their relationship until it buckles under the weight of heightened distress and acute injury. Following the reunion special, filmed a year after the series aired, the audience learns that the couple broke up amidst domestic violence charges following one of their characteristic blowouts. In the reunion special, Mildred controls the narrative, casting her position in innocence while simultaneously admitting to physically assaulting Tiff. During their exchange, Tiff is made to look hysterical in her reasonable reaction to being manipulated, as she prematurely exits the stage in visible distress while a co-actor offers emotional support to her abuser. Tiff and Mildred’s shared fantasy of a love whose passionate chaos is evidence of its greatness, misrecognizes passion and longing for emotional connection. In relations animated by lesbian rage-fantasy, this affective ambivalence is more likely evidence of dynamics akin to insecure attachment and codependency than it is evidence of intimacy.

Lesbian rage-fantasy operates at micro and macro levels in *The Ultimatum: Queer Love*. The production is a queer chapter in an otherwise heteronormative series produced by a major corporate broadcasting company that, arguably, exploits participants for profitable viewership. Kincoherence is built into the LGBTQ spin-off wherein queer experiences are overlaid onto a blueprint of heteronormativity. Moreover, the series operates as a “motivated representation” (hooks 1994) by using LGBTQ participants to virtue-signal LGBTQ allyship in exchange for LGBTQ viewership. *The Ultimatum* evades any responsibility for its crude depiction of domestic

violence, glazing over its severity while stoking and dramatizing the emotional reactions of the participants involved. It represents the neoliberalization of queer ontology, illustrating the equal right of queer people to be exploited by reality tv production companies. A relation of cruel optimism can be seen in the use of relatable imagery to sell queer audiences a (rage-)fantasy of belonging for \$19.99/month.

Cruel optimism characterizes the neoliberal progress narrative that is implied in the inclusion of diverse representation in the mainstream production. At the micro level, the fantasy of belonging masks and mediates rage and resentment to sustain a dysfunctional attachment between participants on the reality show. At the macro level, the queer chapter responds to a fantasy of belonging that is marketed to queer audiences and encapsulates homonormative desires for mainstream media-sanctioned inclusion. This fantasy works to sustain viewership and generate profit through the exploitation of queer participants. Micro and macro-level fantasies of belonging function in affectively similar ways, managing and mitigating the rage, dissent, and detachment of both participants and audience members. Moreover, they distract and deflect from emotional realities that might otherwise be explored and expressed toward personal and political transformation. Ambivalence is produced through representations of lesbian relationships as drama-fuelled emotional roller coasters that are simultaneously mediated through heteronormative romanticism, contributing to the production of cruelly optimistic relations.

Historically, cruel optimism has been baked into lesbian affective relations vis a vis colonial and hegemonic discourses about gender and sexuality. The lesbian and feminist theory archives harbour numerous political, cultural and interpersonal fantasies that, in my view, function like

life rafts against the relentless and intersecting currents of oppression. Continuing a Victorian tradition that is rooted in gendered forms of morality and feminine purity (Cott, 1978; Smith-Rosenberg, 1975), bio essentialist fantasies about lesbian relationships can masquerade as feminist, veiling the tragedy of dysfunction, and even promoting a kind of dysfunction that is cultivated by the devaluation of interpersonal boundaries (Chapter 1) and overvaluation of the performance of care as a form of control (Chapter 3). For example, between the 1980s and early 2000s, a number of references to “lesbian paradise” or “lesbian utopia” appear in commentaries, reviews and articles in the feminist periodical, *Off Our Backs* (Shapiro, 1991; Girshick, 2001; McDonald, 1987) to refer to denial in the lesbian community about the realities of domestic violence:

The power and control inherent in sexism is used to define and describe male violence toward women. The easy assumption drawn from this perspective, and the assumption which all too often fuels the ideal of lesbian utopia, is that women without men are naturally non-violent. (Shapiro, 1991, 16)

To say ‘my rapist was a woman’ is not easy. It runs contrary to everything we are taught about who sexual perpetrators are... and it does not resonate with our ideas of lesbian utopia. Lesbian or bisexual female relationships are assumed to be egalitarian, non-violent, and empowering. Once having constructed womanspace as safe space, we are reluctant to give that illusion up. If we cannot truly be safe around women... then nowhere is safe. (Girshick, 2001, 31)

Ambivalent affects are produced through representational practices that stereotype lesbian relationships through a romantic gaze (e.g., lesbian utopia) informed by gender essentialism that vainly employs the name of feminism in the production of cruelly optimistic relations. This brand of bio-essentialist feminism recalls the work of Karen Horney (1926), which employs gender essentialist logics to argue that psychoanalytic views of women do not reflect, what she asserts is, the singular *truth* of womanhood. The reclamation of stereotypes about lesbians in the

name of gender essentialism, feminism or lesbian rights betrays this political aim by overlooking a crucial consideration that was raised by psychoanalytic feminists in the 1970s. As Juliet Mitchell (1975) writes in her critique of Horney's essentialist position, "there is nothing neither true nor fake but thinking makes it so, and if patriarchal thought is dominant then femininity will reflect that system: 'nature' is not exempt from its representation in mental life" (Mitchell, 128). As much as we might prefer to imagine that lesbian utopia is just a u-haul away beyond patriarchy's predatory reach, lesbian relations arguably reflect the systems of oppression (and the affects of systemic trauma) within which they are formed.

Representational practices are framed by social, cultural and political influences (Hall, 1997, hooks, 1994) while also producing meaning, constituting reality (McLuhan, 1966) and prescribing subjectivity (Foucault, 1969). Lesbian representation is produced by and reproduces affective realities that are informed by imbricating factors: the coloniality of gender and sexuality, the romanticization of the nature of women, the pathologization of same-sex desire and experiential queer ontologies. In its ambivalent construction at the intersection of desire and disavowal, the figure of the angry lesbian has come to signify kincoherent affective relations such as those characterized by lesbian rage-fantasy.

In the Shadows of the Lesbian Imaginary

Stephen Gordon's shame haunts the lesbian imaginary, and as lesbians, we dodge its spectral presence in our collective consciousness by u-hauling our way into queer fantasy worlds of our own design. The transmutation of shame to rage promotes fantasy as a strategy for distress management, which mitigates shame and enables the attaching function. But fantasy is not a

perfect defence strategy, and rage may seep through the affective foundation as contempt and resentment. Queer and lesbian people can fantasize that a relational safety net will protect them from the interpersonal violences of heteronormativity, while simultaneously and unconsciously reproducing and projecting the violence, shame, disconnection, and isolation that they have internalized as constitutive outsiders (Butler, 1993, xi) within their own relationships. As the recipients of an inherited legacy of silence and secrecy, lesbian culture and identity have developed in subtext, and lesbian love stories arguably reflect this history. Fantasies of belonging may be deeply entangled with these painful roots, and dissonance emerges from the disparity between lesbian stories and the affective experiences that they mask and mediate.

Sara Warner speaks to the importance of relational and affective accountability in queer representation when she writes that “we must compose our histories of LGBT art and activism not simply to archive the exploits of heroes and saints, icons and idols, but also to record acts of insult and injury, carelessness, complicity and cowardice, exclusion and injustice...” (161). Although the figure of the angry lesbian endures in mainstream representations, reflecting its utility within hegemony as a political apparatus, its endurance in in-group narratives also reflects this figure’s continued social relevance and dissident potentiality. As Warner writes about *Hothead Paisan*, the failures of the queer past serve “as ways for Hothead to think beyond the pragmatic present and to imagine different structures of being and belonging. They also serve as reminders that Hothead is the successor to spirited radicals whose democratic and egalitarian desires devolved into despotism” (150). Queer failures, from u-hauling (Thurston, 2022) to homonationalism (Puar, 2007), are responses to utopian demands (Berlant, 1994) for belonging. They are responsive to histories of oppression that generate affective relations of disavowal and

fantasy.

Following Warner, the act of imagining new structures of being and belonging offers reparation and transformation, both personally and politically. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003) reminds us about the psychoanalytic theory of Melanie Klein (1964), “among Klein’s names for the reparative process is love” (128), which involves using “one’s own resources to assemble or ‘repair’ the murderous part-objects into something like a whole... Once assembled to one’s own specifications, the more satisfying object is available both to be identified with and to offer one nourishment and comfort in turn” (128). For lesbians, as gender and sexual minorities, political transformation and world-making in the affective commons arguably requires reckoning with intimacies that are entangled with the affects of oppression, like queer shame, and that are animated by intersectional experiences of social failure, rejection and regret. This reckoning necessitates a confrontation and deconstruction of fantasies that secure and sustain our attachments, such as those characterized by the concept of lesbian rage-fantasy, which mitigates and deflects attention away from affective experiences that otherwise expose the politics of our interpersonal lives.

In Closing

...it takes two women, not one, to make a lesbian.

—Teresa de Lauretis, *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire*, 1994, 123

There is a rich archive of queer histories imbricating the pain and trauma of queer shame with the euphoric experience of romantic attachment and emotional connection. As a queer lesbian with a history of addiction and codependency, I relate to this historical record and find a sense of belonging in what seems to be a queer tradition of love that is commingled with pain and hardship. My recovery process led me to therapy and attachment theory, but my education in feminist criticism equipped me with a critical perspective on psychoanalytic frameworks. Having found value in psychological theories about attachment and trauma, I endeavored to uncover dialectical possibilities in a critical approach to attachment theory as an analytic framework for queer knowledge production. This pursuit resulted in an ambivalent project that attempts to speak to the complicated process of queer healing in neoliberal times.

In the chapter, “*Dream House* as Lesbian Pulp Novel”, Carmen Maria Machado uses metaphor to describe the discursive and affective impact of the political history of lesbian literature on her queer relationship. “The cover tells you what you need to know. Depraved inversion. Seduction. Lascivious butches and big-breasted seductresses. Love that dare not speak its name. There are censors to get past, so tragedy is a foregone conclusion. It was written into the DNA of the *Dream House*...” (69). Machado’s memoir speaks to a felt experience of historical injury that circulates through narrative reproduction and is mediated by the historical and cultural symbolics of the lesbian imaginary. The lesbian imaginary is constituted through the discourses that describe lesbian identity and experience at the intersection of fantasy and rage, pride and shame,

and love and loathing, as I have shown in examples from clinical literature, life writing, film and tv, activist zines, theatre productions, stand-up comedy routines and codependency memes.

Stories about queer attachment reflect fantasies about connection and belonging - queer fantasies, feminist fantasies, homonormative fantasies and neoliberal fantasies. This dissertation is an exploration of these fantasies and the discourses that describe, produce and perpetuate them. It queries the discursive and affective construction of a lesbian imaginary through the analysis of lesbian attachments across diverse sites, genres, and historical contexts. The lesbian imaginary has been shown to reflect a western colonial ethos, collective fantasy and psychological schema that is comprised of ambivalent tropes like the lesbian predator, the codependent lesbian and the man-hating lesbian - lesbian figures who are obsessive in their pursuit of their attachment objects. This dissertation broadly examined a rub (Amin, 2017) in the literature on lesbian kinship, where addictive attachments develop in oppressive conditions, and where affective relations are animated by both escapism and belonging. I have argued that the historical transmission of queer relational ambivalence in 20th century North American stories, representations and discourses about lesbians is related to a queer fantasy of belonging that safeguards affective processes of idealization and attachment that parallel the affects of systemic trauma. Affects produced through experiences of trauma are transmitted to relational, behavioural and political attachments, and they have been represented, theorized and historicized through psychopathology, literature and popular culture in ways that illustrate the ambivalence with which western culture has historically defined, discussed and disparaged lesbian feeling.

Through a series of critical discourse analyses of representations of the signifier lesbian, this dissertation illustrates how lesbian narratives of attachment speak to the ways in which the politics of oppression inform queer modes of embodiment and intimacy, affectively and relationally. I have examined the signifier lesbian as a figure that has been constituted by psychoanalytic fantasy, and that is also invested in its reproduction. The signifier lesbian simultaneously represents and employs a psychoanalytic fantasy. In its many iterations, this figure houses the projections of colonial heterosexism (Lugones, 2007, 2010), as well as the cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011) of queer subjects navigating structural violence. The affective relations characterizing the signifier lesbian are related to fantasy insofar as they represent defense strategies (projection, denial, obsession, and cathexis) that contribute to the cognitive dissonance that secures and sustains dysfunctional attachments (Firestone, 1993). Cognitive dissonance can also be seen to secure and sustain the attachments of audience members, queer critics and lesbians to the fantasies that the signifier lesbian signifies.

I pursued this inquiry as an obsessive, codependent lesbian and an addict in recovery who has often wondered how I became a lesbian stereotype. In tracing thematic trends across lesbian mythologies, I have observed how u-hauling veils insecurities about belonging, how gender bio-essentialism makes belonging affectively unintelligible for queer bodies, how neoliberalism exacerbates and mystifies queer modes of belonging, how lesbian tropes perform belonging while invoking self-defeat, and how rage lingers around fantasies of belonging, replacing intentions for mutual care with relational dysfunction. In an effort to depathologize and decolonize lesbian relations, I have deconstructed the ways in which affects are mobilized by representation to contribute to the constitution and maintenance of the colonial modern system of

gender and sexuality (Lugones, 2007). I have argued that pathologizing, colonial and hegemonic discourses produce the misrecognition of affects related to fantasy and belonging that can manifest in self-betrayal in queer pursuits for sustainable attachments.. This dissertation presents a deconstruction of this misrecognition, theorizes the relationship between fantasy, belonging and addictive attachments in the affective construction of the lesbian imaginary, and advocates for experiential, narrative and revisionist interventions into formulations of lesbian feeling.

Queer Codependency

My focus on the intersection between lesbian identity and attachment is inspired by the construction of lesbian identity in psychoanalytic terms, specifically through the theory of object relations. The trope of lesbian codependency is baked into the discursive construction of the signifier lesbian by virtue of the constitution of lesbian identity in the language of attachment and its politicization in identity discourse. The signifier lesbian is a failed subject of modernity insofar as she is defined by her desires and object attachments; she does not exist as independent from them. The subconscious and affective residue of the discursive construction of the signifier lesbian is thus necessarily oriented around shame that is related to unintelligibility as a constitutive outsider of heteronormativity, individualism and hegemonic standards of subjectivity. The figures of the U-haul lesbian, the lesbian [love] addict, the codependent lesbian and the angry lesbian are constructed upon a cultural landscape wherein lesbian subjects do not exist independently or as free from fixations on object attachments. Moreover, lesbians who occupy social locations at the intersections of race, class, gender identity, and ability are discursively situated farther from the category of the ideal modern subject that is upheld by the

ideology of individualism within colonial hetero-capitalist patriarchal white supremacist hegemonies.

This dissertation began as a series of questions about the origins and popularity of the trope of codependent lesbians. I asked, what is it that differentiates codependency from *lesbian* codependency? Why do lesbians and queer women remain plagued by accusations of codependency, and arguably, the affective relations that codependency engenders, even as they have divested from heteronormative attachments? As I pursued answers to these questions, I developed the concepts of *queer codependency* and *lesbian rage-fantasy* as critical attachment theories that speak to micro and macro level affective relations comprising lesbian attachments and informing lesbian representations.

Queer codependency is akin to critical formulations like *queer time* (Freeman, 2010) and *queer kinship* (Bradway and Freeman, 2022). It refers to critical considerations of relations deemed codependent by hegemonic discourses, like psychoanalysis, and circulated by mainstream media, which accounts for the ways in which such discourse contributes to the production of codependencies in and between queer and marginalized people as a form of systemic trauma. The fantasy of queer codependency refers to both the psychoanalytic fantasy imposed on queer attachments and the fantasy of belonging that is adopted by queer and lesbian subjects through the symbolic reproduction of the romanticization of relational dysfunction. The concept of queer codependency elicits critical considerations of the systemic factors that inform relational dysfunction between queer people, while simultaneously invoking processes of collective accountability for effective (and affective) change.

What is the fantasy of queer codependency?

In this dissertation, I have engaged with the concept of fantasy as a psychic mechanism through which attachments are secured, and as a structure of feeling, or an affective vehicle through which shame and desire are circulated. In attending to lesbian kinship through the theory of queer codependency/systemic attachment trauma, I have argued that fantasy is employed to sustain an otherwise unsustainable affect. The fantasy of queer codependency functions as a form of *kinship idealism* (Butler, 2022) that represses shame generated by experiences of gender and sexual oppression and replaces it with affects that are conducive to securing attachments. The fantasy of queer codependency secures relations of cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011) and impedes queer forms of social, political and interpersonal flourishing.

My concept of the fantasy of queer codependency has invoked Berlant's theory of cruel optimism (2011) insofar as it refers to relations that are secured through fantasy, like the fantasy of "the good life" (2011, 27), and that effectively prevent one's flourishing. The fantasy of queer codependency can be seen as an ambivalent trauma response that manifests in self-protective mechanisms resulting in relational forms of self-sabotage. This fantasy re-imagines psychoanalytic constructs of codependency by resisting the colonial, neoliberal and heteronormative logics inherent in modern psychology. It has an impervious quality that validates the possibility of dysfunctional queer enmeshments and can also be used to resist the pursuit of queer utopianism as an achievable relational objective. For example, an interpretation of lesbian u-hauling as a queer rite of passage reflects the fantasy of queer codependency insofar

as it circumvents the possibilities of codependency, or otherwise harmful kinds of merger, that unhauling can symbolize (Chapter One).

In “Kinship Beyond the Bloodline”, Butler (2022) discusses the ambivalence of relations of dependency, pointing to several social and psychoanalytic reasons that explain the fraught quality of kin relations. She writes, “[i]ndeed, one can find oneself inhabited by someone who is kin in the way that one is inhabited by a ghost... One can feel profound, even unmanageable, dependency on someone who is kin, and that feeling can be alternately blissful and absolutely enraging, causing one to resolve never to feel that sort of dependency again for fear of never being able to reassume an upright posture of independence” (40). She asks, “Is the idea of participation in another’s being itself a fantasy, one that dates at least back to Plato’s mathesis?” (40). For a subject whose social and cultural identity is defined and politicized by their affective attachments, participation in another’s being might comprise the foundation of their self-image as well as a fantasy of belonging. While identification involves participation in another’s being in a general sense, the lesbian imaginary is particularly haunted by the effects and affects of codependency. In the western language of psychology and identity, lesbian is synonymous with codependent. As Teresa de Lauretis puts it in *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire*, “it takes two women, not one, to make a lesbian” (1994, 123).

Poststructuralist Framing of Lesbian Codependency

This project is a poststructuralist treatment of lesbian representation that has invoked critical discourse analysis and Foucauldian genealogy to analyze the affective lineages that punctuate the discursive construction of lesbian codependency. It is important to note that in proposing a

theory of queer codependency, I do not disregard the incommensurables inherent in a comparison between systemic and interpersonal trauma. Rather, I juxtaposed them to find affective similarities that contextualize relational experiences at intersections of oppression and that inspire creative approaches to trauma-informed queer politics and collective transformation. Following Foucault (1970), affective correlations between micro and macro relations are produced not by “factual successions or sequences as they may have occurred” (236). The logic of the 20th century western episteme within which they are described, represented, “affirmed, posited, arranged and distributed in the space of knowledge” (236) determines their correlation. In Foucault’s terms, if codependency in relations between lesbians, and codependency in relations between marginalized others and the state apparatus “happen to be adjacent to one another, on account of a particularly high density of analogies, it is not because they occupy proximate places within an area of classification; it is because they have both been formed at the same time, and the one immediately after the other in the emergence of the successions” (236-237). As Butler writes on “kinship idealism” (2022, 26), “any effort to disembody a study of kinship from social, legal, and economic powers and institutions usually ends in obfuscation or idealization” (ibid).

Following Foucault (1970), in positing that there are affective continuities between systemic oppression and attachment trauma, my theory of queer codependency considers the problematics of invoking psychoanalytic logics as self-evident. Through this framing, I intended to highlight the discursive influence of psychoanalysis as a hegemonic tool, while acknowledging its cultural inevitability as an epistemological and ontological starting point of contemporary culture. The application of attachment theory to theories of oppression like intersectionality has political

utility in speaking through institutionalized, broadly disseminated, represented, and felt affective registers. Queering codependency as I understand it requires a critical employment of the term in its original context and a reconsideration of its subsequent uses and its cumulative socio-historical discursive development. Codependency is real insofar as it has materialized discursively, but an analysis of its affects must be situated in historical specificity as well.

By employing psychoanalysis through critical frames, I invoked Julia Kristeva's (1974) query about the possibility of the "substance" to alter the "form" through which it is produced. In Audre Lorde's (2012, 110) terms, can the master's tools dismantle the master's house? Juliet Mitchell (1975) might argue that *only* the tools that constructed the master's house can dismantle it. Those whose constitution in the shadows of intelligibility privileges a critical standpoint might, indeed, be positioned to wield the substance that emerges from the tensions produced by oppressive forms to dismantle hegemonic power (the Law of the Father). In attending to the circulation of affect throughout this work, I have put my faith in Kristeva's "substance" because I believe in the power of feminist rage and lesbian love to change the world.

The Queer Critic's Shadow Work

Queer thinkers like Valerie Traub (2001, 2009), Kadji Amin (2017) and Heather Love (2009) raise methodological questions about documenting queer histories in affective terms, and advocate for a shift away from a focus on the identities of historical figures to the attachments that may form between them and queer critics. In *Gay Shame*, Valerie Traub and David Halperin (2009) write that some practitioners of queer studies "fear that unencumbered inquiry into the inner life of homosexuality will disclose elements they don't like. Others worry, with good

reason, that the results of free and uncensored analysis will be used against lesbians and gay men” (11). These authors argue that this fear influenced an unofficial ban on examining the less favorable aspects of queer life. They point specifically to the avoidance of emotional aspects, questions of affect, disrepute, dissidence and humiliation in historical inquiry. Likewise, in *Disturbing Attachments*, Kadji Amin underlines the importance of de-idealizing queer narratives and heroes and urges queer historians to interrogate the disturbing nature of their affective attachments to stories, subjects, and frameworks that idealize historical figures. Amin argues that de-idealization is reparative in the way that it confronts affective and political “messiness and damage” in queer histories (2017, 11). Sally Munt (2008) specifically points to a relation of gay shame in the function of idealization when she writes,

Idealisation is a problem for shamed identities; it functions compensatorily to reassure by providing aspirational figures and states, but paradoxically it also cruelly and simultaneously secures their own denigration. All lesbians, like all gay men, suffer to a greater or lesser degree from homophobia, the category and the experience of homosexuality is inescapably permeated with it. This is the ‘double-bind’ of identity that we are damned to repeat – in order to call upon pride and presence we also invoke the corollary of shame and annihilation – claiming of self entails loss of self, as making a self is predicated upon disavowal, even in its earliest, crudest forms. (Munt, 113)

In *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England*, Valerie Traub (2001) asks why “looking at ourselves in the mirror” is the dominant methodology in gay and lesbian studies, and especially in lesbian studies. She urges queer historians to see historical figures not as subject to our identifications, but as objects of our desire. Traub argues that the queer historian’s search for likeness or identification in the past is a response to being erased from history. She suggests that the melancholy of the queer historian’s own queer shame obscures the view of the past, and that this should be interrupted because it makes methodology personal rather than procedural.

Heather Love (2009) argues that contemporary critics tend to use idealizing terms when

discussing the past, and that the “unresolved grief of lesbian historical feeling” has value. In *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, she reasons that we should live with these bad attachments to historical figures because “identifying through loss” and “allowing ourselves to be haunted” is to reckon with the negative affects implicit in these attachments (267).

Love positions the queer historian in terms that, from my perspective, are characteristic of the affective relations of codependency. She argues that the queer historian has been positioned as a rescuer of the “bad gay past” (267). Love presents historical rescue as the queer critic’s fantasy, and as a relation that ignores “the resistance of queer historical figures to our own advances toward them.” She argues that historical rescue has been presented as a one-way street, but that we shouldn’t think of the work of historical affirmation as a lifeline thrown to figures in “the bad gay past” (267), but as a means of restoring stability and positivity in the identity of the present. Theorists like Ann Cvetkovich, Heather Love, Kadji Amin, and Valerie Traub have shifted the discourse in gay and lesbian history from a focus on the stability of sexual categories over time to the relationships between queer historians and the subjects they study, challenging queer historians and theorists to ask themselves, which kinds of relations do we wish to establish with these figures? (Love 2009, 31-52) If we are to rehabilitate an insecure attachment to lesbian historical figures and narratives, we may not necessarily have to abandon the tendency to look at the past as though we are looking in the mirror, as Traub argues. Instead, like Love suggests, we can incorporate this reflection reflexively by analyzing our projections toward theorizing our own affective investments in this work. After all, to return to LaRetis’ argument, desire and identity cannot be so easily differentiated.

In a description that reads like a diagnosis of a codependent relationship, Love writes,

You will be mine; you could be mine – but you probably won't be mine. This combination of demand and desperation, I want to argue, characterizes the relationship to the gay past. But queer critics tend to disavow their need for the past, focusing instead on the heroic aspect of their designs on the past. Like many demanding lovers, queer critics promise to rescue the past when in fact they dream of being rescued themselves. (259)

As is the case in codependent relating, queer critics may be neglecting themselves in an effort to rescue the past, while fantasizing that these efforts will ensure their own salvation. In my view, idealization is a form of fantasy that works to regulate shame by securing attachments to objects, behaviours, ideologies and institutions that offer the illusion of belonging. The focus on reflexive de-idealization presented in the work of Love, Amin, Munt and Traub highlights the value of introspection and reflexivity to inform historical analysis and stabilize the queer critic's insecure attachment to figures of the past and present alike.

In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler explains that the limit to intelligibility haunts the domain of intelligibility, implicating that which is forgotten, neglected, abject in the very substance that denies it (1993, xi). It follows that we are no further constituted as intelligible bodies in conceding such a negation. To confront the negation at once stabilizes and destabilizes the domain of intelligibility, outing it as constituted through constructionism. We can only understand ourselves, and our affective attachments, through a reckoning with the unthinkable specters that haunt our constitution. As Sally Munt (2008) writes, "claiming the self entails the loss of self." She argues that the dynamics of shame produced through its institutionalization are akin to Butler's concept of the constitutive outside (105). The unconscious movement of shame implies "a free-floating culpability that is attached to shame, that individuals become complicit

in reproducing damaging behaviour as though the shame that was ‘outside’, communicated to the group, becomes ‘inside’” (Munt, 2008, 105). Insofar as the affective relation between the queer critic and their historical subject is animated by ambivalence (shame/pride, love/hate), dialectical engagements with queer shame that acknowledge its constitutive function relative to queer identity may work to exorcize its spectral presence on our collective queer consciousness. The queer critic, theorist, historian, and discursive mediators of all kinds play a critical role in this therapeutic exorcism. Our denial of and projective identification with that which causes us harm perpetuates the dissemination of the affective residue of that harm. Queer audiences can benefit from orienting to their favourite queer and lesbian characters, from Stephen Gordon to Shane McCutchen, with critical reflexivity. There may be therapeutic and political value in considering how our attachments to characters that mirror our shame by embodying insecure attachment tendencies and emotional unavailability may be stimulated by an unconscious fantasy that is both codependent and heteronormative.

Reflexivity and De-idealization

The enduring degree to which figures like Stephen Gordon and Shane McCutchen resonate with lesbian audiences illustrates how collective trauma commingles with the desire to form attachments to queer characters that mirror queer shame by embodying insecure attachment tendencies and emotional unavailability. The popularity of Shane’s character might be attributed to her affective disposition as an emotionally chaotic and inaccessible masculine figure that begs to be saved by her femme lovers, which appeals to a familiar kind of codependent fantasy that is embedded in heteronormativity. In Shane’s homonormative fantasy, she sees herself as a provider, but her character reads as troubled, misguided and child-like. The attraction to and

tendency to save characters like Shane and Stephen through idealization speaks to the ways in which sexual orientation and attachment orientation can be imbricated in queer viewership, in the relation between the lesbian consumer and that which is consumed.

The curse of idealization is that of fantasy and subsequent disillusionment, a relation of cruel optimism that keeps a subject bound to that which prevents their flourishing. My affect analysis of the discursive construction of the signifier lesbian through psychoanalytic logics considering the theme of de-idealization in the work of queer critics and historians prompts a consideration about detachment and reparation in the relations between lesbians and queer women and their intimate objects.

The Reparative Labour of Lesbian Kinship

Critical addictions theorist, Helen Keane, writing on dependency in the context of addiction compares Berlant's description of intimacy to the idea of addiction as "the reliance on external factors to regulate internal states...but without its pejorative meaning or attribution of abnormality. Addictions, in all their variety, are connections which impact and transform, and like all intimate bonds, they can become frozen and destructive of other relations" (204). To speak of non-normative forms of intimacy in terms of ailment and treatment, as has been the task of trauma-informed psychopathology, is to attribute abnormality to intimacies formed in oppressive conditions, and furthers a tradition of paranoid reading (Sedgwick, 2003) that negates queer possibility.

The dogged, defensive narrative stiffness of a paranoid temporality, after all, in which yesterday can't be allowed to have differed from today and tomorrow must be even more so, takes its shape from a generational narrative that's characterized by a distinctly

Oedipal regularity and repetitiveness: it happened to my father's father, it happened to my father, it is happening to me, it will happen to my son, and it will happen to my son's son. But isn't it a feature of queer possibility—only a contingent feature, but a real one, and one that in turn strengthens the force of contingency itself—that our generational relations don't always proceed in this lockstep? (Sedgwick, 2003, 147)

Unfortunately, queer possibilities can generate depressing contingencies. As Heather Love writes in “A Gentle Angry People: The Lesbian Culture Wars”,

love between women is not necessarily better or different, it must bear an extra burden—the depressing effects of stigma and social violence. Our thirty-year habit of idealization is a response to this history—our pride is tied very closely to our shame. While celebrating our victories may offer consolation of a sort, it can't do much to protect us from the vagaries of desire, or the continuing rejection of a hostile world. (2000a, 113)

While lesbian tropes may inform affective relations that materialize in dysfunction, harm or distress, they also reflect an affective lineage characterized by motivations that are both personal and political. Without taking responsibility for the structural violence inflicted upon us, how do we take responsibility for the affects of that trauma as it informs the quality of our relationships, and in turn, the emotional security of our communities? My conclusion is that this requires a critical dialectical framework through which to think around ambivalent attachments between marginalized people that emerges through the acknowledgment of the impact of oppression on interpersonal life. It is the kind of self-development work that is not promoted in traditional psychotherapy, but that attends to significant psychic conflicts that can hinder personal and collective liberation.

On Fantasy

For lesbians, the lines between fantasy and reality, hegemony and community, conformity and belonging or performance and performativity might be blurred in distinctly queer ways.

Assuming a shared identity narrative and donning its related signifiers (aesthetic, gait, social and cultural cues) can garner a sense of belonging in a hostile world. Through an affect lens, signification shapes the process of becoming through affective embodiment. In a poststructuralist treatment of discursive constructs as products of social, cultural and political influences (Hall, 1997; hooks, 1994) whose reproduction also constitutes reality (McLuhan, 1966) and prescribes subjectivity (Foucault, 1969), the conscious reconstruction of queer identities represents political, emotional and aesthetic disavowal and serves a politics of world-making. However, in the same way that Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity might be misinterpreted to suggest that subjects willfully choose their genders, the myth of lesbian utopia should not be misunderstood as a material option by virtue of its narrative construction. In other words, healthy relationships, like identities, are not built on conviction alone. Belonging is a process of social construction, affective transmission, and personal, interpersonal and collective reckoning.

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