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QUEERING GIRLHOOD: SAPPHIC AND TRANS GIRLHOODS IN CONTEMPORARY ANGLOPHONE FICTION[1]

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Abstract: In an era where girlhood is increasingly commodified in postfeminist and digital cultures, queer girlhood, particularly sapphic and trans forms, remains contested, underrepresented, and structurally silenced. This paper examines the complex literary representation of intersectional queer girlhoods in two contemporary Anglophone novels: Emily M. Danforth's *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* (2012) and Akwaeke Emezi's *Pet* (2019). Drawing on the frameworks of queer temporality (Halberstam 2005), intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991), and affect theory (Ahmed 2004; Muñoz 2009), the paper interrogates how these texts disrupt normative paradigms of development, innocence, and heteronormativity that often define girlhood in literature. In *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, the repression of sapphic desire under Christian moralism is juxtaposed with moments of subversive agency, silence, and queer kinship. In *Pet*, Emezi constructs a speculative future where a Black trans girl protagonist must confront concealed structural violence despite narratives of supposed safety. By analysing how both novels deploy genre (realism and speculative fiction), voice, and affect to articulate queer resistance, this study foregrounds girlhood not as a universal or stable category, but as a site of becoming, inflected by race, sexuality, gender identity, and sociocultural power.
Keywords: African literature; Contemporary Anglophone fiction; Queer girlhood; Sapphic identities; Sexual diversity; Trans girlhood.

QUEERING LA ADOLESCENCIA FEMENINA: ADOLESCENCIAS SÁFICAS Y TRANS EN LA FICCIÓN ANGLÓFONA CONTEMPORÁNEA

Resumen: En una era en la que la infancia y adolescencia femeninas están cada vez más comodificadas en las culturas postfeminista y digital, la adolescencia *queer*, especialmente en sus formas sáfica y trans, continúa siendo cuestionada,

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insuficientemente representada y estructuralmente silenciada. Este artículo examina la compleja representación literaria de las adolescencias femeninas *queer* en dos novelas anglófonas contemporáneas: *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* (2012) de Emily M. Danforth y *Pet* (2019) de Akwaeke Emezi. Basándose en los marcos de temporalidad *queer* (Halberstam 2005), interseccionalidad (Crenshaw 1991), y la teoría del afecto (Ahmed 2004; Muñoz 2004), este artículo interroga como estas novelas alteran los paradigmas normativos de desarrollo, la inocencia, y la heteronormatividad que a menudo definen la adolescencia femenina en la literatura. En *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, la represión del deseo sáfico bajo el moralismo cristiano se yuxtapone con momentos de insurgencia, el silencio, y la colectividad *queer*. En *Pet*, Emezi construye un futuro especulativo donde la protagonista, una chica trans y negra, debe enfrentarse a la violencia estructural encubierta a pesar de las narrativas de presunta seguridad. A través del análisis de como ambas novelas utilizan el género literario (realismo y ficción especulativa), la voz, y el afecto para articular la resistencia *queer*, este estudio lleva al frente la adolescencia femenina no como una categoría universal y estable, sino como un punto de transformación, alterado por la raza, la sexualidad, la identidad de género, y el poder sociocultural.
Palabras clave: literatura africana; literatura anglófona contemporánea; adolescencia femenina queer; identidades sáficas; diversidad sexual; adolescencia trans.

1. INTRODUCTION

Multiple media outlets declared 2023 "the year of the girl," highlighting viral trends such as "girl dinner" and the cultural phenomenon of *Barbie* (2023) (Adamczyk and Hinchliffe 2024). However, these narratives of girlhood are often filtered through a lens of postfeminist consumerism, where the idealised girl is white, cisgender, able-bodied, middle-class, and apolitical. Against this backdrop of hypervisibility lies a paradox: while girlhood is now omnipresent in the cultural imagination, queer girlhood (particularly sapphic and trans girlhoods) remains persistently misrepresented, sidelined, or flattened into stereotypes. In this paper, I explore how contemporary literature offers counter-narratives that visibilise the multiplicities of girlhood through deeply intersectional and queer lenses.

This paper focuses on two young adult novels that challenge and reconfigure normative representations of girlhood: *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* (2012) by Emily M. Danforth and *Pet* (2019) by Akwaeke Emezi. Both novels present adolescent protagonists who grapple with systems of control that seek to suppress their queerness – whether religious, familial, or sociopolitical. Yet they also locate sites of resistance, imagination, and redefinition through alternative kinships, silence, and speculative futures. These texts are not simply about coming out or claiming identity; they are about surviving and reshaping the world as queer girls navigating hostile structures.

This paper draws on a set of overlapping critical frameworks. First is Kimberlé Crenshaw's definition of intersectionality (1991), which emphasises how multiple social identities (race, gender, sexuality, class), intersect to shape unique forms of marginalisation. Second is Jack Halberstam's notion of queer temporality (2005), which contests linear developmental models (birth–childhood–adolescence–adulthood) that underpin normative understandings of girlhood. These models often position girlhood as a preparatory stage for heterosexual womanhood, which queer girls disrupt through desires and trajectories that do not lead toward heteronormative maturity. Third is Sara Ahmed's affect theory, which helps trace how emotions such as shame, guilt, rage, and joy circulate through queer girlhoods, often revealing the fault lines of power.

In *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, Danforth offers a sapphic coming-of-age narrative set in a conservative Christian town in Montana during the 1990s. Cameron's desires for other girls are framed as deviant, and her eventual institutionalisation in a conversion therapy centre reflects the brutal attempts to realign queer girlhood with heteronormative expectations. However, Danforth also provides moments of resistance and solidarity through Cameron's queer friendships and interiority. Rather than resolving with redemption, the novel centres queer survival as its political project.

In contrast, *Pet* by Emezi envisions a speculative Black utopia where "monsters" (figures of state and systemic violence) have ostensibly been eradicated. Jam, the novel's protagonist, is a Black trans girl who must confront the uncomfortable truth that evil still exists, even in a society that claims safety and equality. Emezi's decision to centre a trans girl protagonist, without making her gender the site of trauma, disrupts dominant narratives of trans girlhood. Jam's confrontation with violence and complicity in a supposedly just society reflects a broader critique of liberal tolerance and the erasures that come with conditional acceptance.

By placing these two texts in conversation, the paper foregrounds the ways in which sapphic and trans girlhoods unsettle hegemonic notions of innocence, purity, safety, and normativity. It explores how literary representations can offer a reparative mode of reading queer girlhood not as a marginalised subset of youth but as a primary site where cultural anxieties around gender, sexuality, race, and futurity converge. The novels analysed here do not offer tidy resolutions or progressive trajectories; instead, they imagine queer girlhood as a state of becoming otherwise disruptive, unfinished, and full of radical potential.

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature review: situating Queer Girlhood in contemporary Scholarship

The past two decades have seen significant scholarly attention to the figure of the girl in cultural theory, feminist critique, and literary studies. As early as the 1990s, scholars like Angela McRobbie (1991), Marnina Gonick (2006), and Catherine Driscoll (2002) began interrogating how girlhood was being shaped through media, education, and neoliberal ideology. These interventions helped catalyse the emergence of *Girlhood Studies*, a field that explores the diversity of girlhood as experienced and represented across global contexts. However, while girlhood has become a productive critical category, queer girlhood (particularly sapphic and trans forms) has often been treated as a subtheme rather than a constitutive part of what girlhood is or can be. This literature review explores how contemporary scholarship across Girlhood Studies, Queer Theory, and Postfeminist Critique informs and complicates the representation of sapphic and trans girlhoods in fiction.

2.1. Girlhood, Power, and Visibility

One of the dominant themes in Girlhood Studies is the paradox of visibility. As Harris (2004) argues, neoliberal discourses have created the figure of the "can-do" girl or "future girl," who is self-regulating, ambitious, and adaptable, a subject hailed by late modernity. Yet this girl is also often white, cisgender, middle-class, and heterosexual. This construct marginalises those whose gender, sexuality, race, or ability do not align with the normative expectations of girlhood. In particular, Black, queer, disabled, and working-class girls are frequently represented as "at risk" or "out of place," if they are represented at all (Brown 2009).

Moreover, as Anita Harris and Yasmin Jiwani (2005) note, dominant representations of girls often reproduce a binary logic: girls are either celebrated as innocent and virtuous or pathologised as deviant and hypersexual. Sapphic and trans girlhoods often become legible only through these frameworks, where the former is fetishised and the latter is framed through trauma or tragedy. In literary terms, this produces what Trites (2000) calls a "bildungsroman logic," in which girlhood is merely a phase toward adult womanhood. For queer girls, however, that trajectory is often nonlinear, fragmented, or rejected altogether.

2.2. QUEERING GIRLHOOD

Queer theorists have long argued for the need to disrupt linear developmental narratives. Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place* (2005) offers a foundational critique of "chrononormativity", the idea that time unfolds in ordered stages leading toward heteronormative adulthood. For Halberstam, queer adolescence may involve forms of stasis, delay, or failure that resist traditional teleologies. This has significant implications for understanding queer girlhood, which often refuses to "mature" into heterosexual femininity.

José Esteban Muñoz expands on this in *Cruising Utopia* (2009), where he frames queerness not as an identity but as a horizon, a potentiality that critiques the here and now. The queer girl, then, is not simply marginalised within the dominant order; she is already gesturing toward alternative ways of being and relating. When we read sapphic or trans girlhood through this lens, their narratives become not just stories of struggle, but acts of world-making.

This reorientation is particularly important in the analysis of trans girlhoods, which have historically been medicalised, sensationalised, or erased. Julia Serano's *Whipping Girl* (2007) critiques the persistent framing of trans women and girls through the lens of "deceptiveness," where femininity is treated as artificial or suspect. Serano calls for affirming trans femininity as authentic, varied, and embodied. Emezi's *Pet* reflects this shift, presenting Jam, a trans girl, as emotionally intelligent and morally grounded, not despite her gender identity, but through it.

However, some critics caution against overly idealised literary representation. As Valerie Rohy (2010) warns, even "positive" portrayals can be complicit in what she calls "homonormativity", a domesticated form of queerness that seeks assimilation rather than disruption. This concern is echoed in critiques of postfeminist media culture, which co-opts diversity for market appeal while erasing structural critique. Rosalind Gill (2007) argues that postfeminism operates through a logic of choice and empowerment, which makes it difficult to articulate the constraints faced by queer, racialised, or trans girls. Thus, literature that engages with queer girlhood must be careful not to replace one form of erasure with another, turning lived complexity into easily consumed representation.

2.3. INTERSECTIONALITY AND THE PLURALITY OF GIRLHOODS

Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality (1991) provides a vital corrective to these debates by foregrounding how systems of power interact. Intersectionality insists that race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and other categories are not additive but co-constitutive. This has major implications for understanding queer girlhoods. For instance, the experiences of a white lesbian girl in a rural American town (as in *Cameron Post*) differ markedly from those of a Black trans girl navigating a supposedly utopian city (*Pet*). Each girl must contend with overlapping forms of visibility and violence, whether through institutional repression, familial silence, or cultural denial.

In Black feminist thought, scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins (2000) and bell hooks (2000) argue that girlhood cannot be universalised without reproducing dominant ideologies. The "matrix of domination," as Collins terms it, configures how multiple systems of oppression work together to shape subjectivity. Importantly, both *Cameron Post* and *Pet* foreground these complexities: Cameron's whiteness does not exempt her from queerphobia, but it does insulate her from certain racialised forms of state violence. Jam, by contrast, is a Black trans girl who lives in a community that professes safety but harbours secrets, suggesting that violence is often hidden behind rhetorical commitments to equality.

Emezi's speculative setting in *Pet* can also be read through a decolonial lens. As scholars such as decolonial feminist María Lugones (2007) and Minna Salami (2020) argue, the coloniality of power persists in how gender and sexuality are constructed. Jam's story, situated outside Western timelines and binaries, offers an alternative ontology, one rooted in community, embodiment, and spiritual knowing.

2.4. Literature as a Site of Queer World-Building

Literature has long served as a site where marginalised voices reimagine identity, kinship, and belonging. In queer theory, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990) emphasised the importance of "queer reading," a mode of attending to subtext, silences, and disruptions in normative narratives. This approach is useful in analysing how both Danforth and Emezi deploy form, genre, and voice. For instance, Cameron's narrative is filled with gaps, quiet resistances, and affective tension that reward close reading. Emezi, by contrast, creates a world that is structurally dissonant, a utopia that requires disruption to become truly safe for queer subjects.

Both texts participate in what Ahmed (2004) calls "affective economies," where emotions like fear, shame, or hope do not reside solely in individuals but circulate across texts and readers. The shame Cameron experiences is socially induced and policed, while Jam's intuition and discomfort reveal a different emotional map, one where silence is both protective and political**.**

3. Sapphic Resistance and Religious Repression in *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*

Emily M. Danforth's *The Miseducation of Cameron Pos*t (2012) presents a raw, immersive, and emotionally layered portrait of sapphic girlhood in a conservative American setting. Set in rural Montana in the early 1990s, the novel follows *Cameron Post*, a teenage girl who navigates the loss of her parents, the shame imposed by her evangelical Christian community, and her own emerging desire for girls. The novel unfolds across an expansive timespan, allowing for a slow-burning depiction of Cameron's interior life, rich with self-questioning, secrecy, resistance, and subtle but vital acts of queer world-building. Through a queer theoretical and intersectional lens, this section explores how Danforth's novel stages sapphic girlhood as a contested and liminal identity, shaped by surveillance, affective repression, and tactical disobedience.

3.1. Girlhood and the Problem of Innocence

A key tension in *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* lies in how it frames girlhood in relation to innocence. In postfeminist discourse, girlhood is often presented as a site of purity, sentimentality, or emotional resilience (Gonick 2006; Driscoll 2002). For queer girls, this normative framing becomes a trap: the moment a girl desires another girl, her innocence is perceived as compromised. Danforth's narrative begins with this very paradox, where Cameron shares her first kiss with a girl, Irene, just hours before learning of her parents' death. The trauma of that moment intertwines desire and shame, establishing an affective baseline that shadows most part of the novel.

What is striking, however, is how Cameron internalises her guilt not through fear of divine retribution per se, but through the cultural script that girlhood and queerness are incompatible. Cameron does not articulate her feelings as "sinful" in theological terms; instead, she associates them with social rupture, unspoken disapproval, and loss. This distinction reflects a broader cultural formation in which religion serves less as an

internalised belief system and more as a regulatory apparatus, one that governs affect, appearance, and speech.

As Gonick argues, "the production of innocence in girlhood is a disciplinary project that enables the regulation of desire" (10). Cameron's struggle is not with her sexuality but with her community's inability to conceive of girlhood outside heteronormative and religiously sanctioned scripts. Her queerness thus becomes not just a private orientation but a public threat, requiring correction, containment, or erasure.

3.2. The Family as Surveillance Apparatus

The role of family in the novel operates as both a potential site of care and a vehicle of disciplinary power. Following the death of her parents, Cameron is raised by her conservative aunt Ruth and her grandmother. Ruth, in particular, becomes a symbolic figure of Christian moralism, aligning closely with what Michel Foucault (1977) terms "pastoral power," a form of regulation that operates not through force but through intimate supervision and moral judgment. Ruth's concern for Cameron is genuine, but her love is conditional, structured around Cameron's compliance with religious gender and sexual norms.

The turning point comes when Cameron's relationship with Coley, a popular and conventionally feminine girl, is discovered. This moment catalyses her admission into God's Promise, a Christian conversion therapy centre. Ruth's decision to send Cameron to the facility is framed as an act of salvation, not punishment, a logic that renders care indistinguishable from control. As Ahmed notes in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, "the circulation of emotions such as love or fear is often used to justify violence in the name of protection" (66). In this context, Ruth's act of "protecting" Cameron reinforces the idea that non-normative girlhoods must be fixed for their own good.

Cameron's experience at God's Promise reinforces this dynamic of surveillance and correction. The centre presents itself as a place of healing and self-discovery, but its pedagogical practices mirror carceral logic: the participants must confess, account for, and renounce their desires. The programme functions as what Halberstam (2005) might call a temporal reorientation device, one that aims to return queer youth to the "proper" timeline of heteronormative maturation. Cameron resists this reorientation not through

outright rebellion but through a calculated performance of compliance, revealing the performative dimensions of both gender and ideology.

3.3. Silence as Tactic, Not Trauma

Unlike many queer narratives that centre on vocal resistance or coming out, Cameron's resistance is often marked by silence, withdrawal, and opacity. These are not signs of defeat, but modes of survival and self-preservation. In a community where language is weaponised against her, where to name her desires is to risk further pathologisation, Cameron learns to withhold, to code, and to redirect. This strategic silence aligns with what José Esteban Muñoz describes as "disidentification": a practice by which queer subjects neither assimilate to nor reject dominant cultural norms, but negotiate with them in ways that allow for subversive agency (Muñoz 1999).

Cameron's narration itself is marked by a flattened affect, one that registers emotion through sensory detail rather than overt declaration. Her interiority is rich, but guarded. This stylistic choice reflects what Ann Cvetkovich (2003) terms "public feelings", emotions that do not resolve into clear catharsis but instead linger, circulate, and form the basis for political consciousness. Cameron's numbness, her self-containment, and her ambivalence become a form of queer affect, a refusal to perform either victimhood or redemption.

3.4. Queer Kinship and the Limits of Redemption

While much of the novel centres on repression and constraint, Danforth also opens up space for alternative kinships, particularly among the queer youth at God's Promise. Other teenagers like Jane Fonda and Adam become Cameron's closest companions, forming a microcosm of queer solidarity within the institution. They share secrets, rituals, and critiques of the programme in ways that foster intimacy without romanticisation. This model of kinship, built not on blood ties or romantic attraction, but on shared precarity and recognition, offers a counterpoint to the moralised family structure that initially displaced Cameron.

These friendships are especially vital given the novel's refusal to offer redemption through romantic love. Unlike many YA novels that end with a resolved romantic arc, *Cameron Post* leaves its protagonist unpaired, geographically and emotionally adrift. The final scenes show her leaving the centre and driving into the unknown, an act of departure

rather than arrival. This open ending resists narrative closure and aligns with queer temporalities that refuse "growing up" as the endpoint of development. As Halberstam argues, "queer time . . . steps outside the logic of reproductive temporality and tries to envision life as a series of modes of living that are not subsumed by capital or reproduction" (10).

Cameron's departure, then, is not a triumphant escape but a continuation of refusal. She is not fixed, not cured, not even healed, but she is *uncontainable*. This affective and spatial uncontainability becomes a metaphor for queer girlhood itself: a category that is always in flux, always at odds with the cultural scripts imposed upon it.

4. Black Trans Girlhood, Speculative Justice, and Radical Knowing in *Pet*

Emezi's *Pet* offers a rich and radical reimagining of Black trans girlhood within a speculative utopia that is simultaneously comforting and haunting. The novel is set in Lucille, a futuristic city that has supposedly eradicated all social monsters (abusers, killers, systemic oppressors). The novel follows Jam, a selectively mute Black trans girl who discovers that evil still exists, hidden beneath layers of collective denial. Unlike realist queer narratives that emphasise trauma or rejection, *Pet* presents a world where Jam's trans identity is not questioned or pathologised. She is fully loved by her family and accepted by her community. However, the novel refuses to frame this utopia as uncomplicated, drawing attention instead to the perils of forgetting, the silencing of discomfort, and the ongoing work of justice.

This section explores how Emezi constructs trans girlhood not as a site of pathology or overcoming, but as an epistemological location, a way of knowing, sensing, and naming harm. Jam's transness is not the problem in Lucille; rather, the problem is the society's belief that there are no longer any problems at all. Through allegory, genre subversion, and embodied perception, *Pet* critiques liberal fantasies of post-oppression and positions Black trans girlhood as central to the work of moral clarity, relational justice, and collective transformation.

4.1. A Girl Whose Gender is Known but Not Defined by Trauma

Unlike many coming-of-age narratives featuring trans protagonists, Jam's trans identity is not a source of familial conflict or public scrutiny. Her parents, Bitter and Aloe,

affirm her identity without hesitation. She has already transitioned medically and socially by the time the story begins, and this is treated as a fact, not a spectacle. Emezi's choice to make Jam's transness ordinary rather than exceptional is a powerful gesture of narrative justice. It echoes Serano's call to "depathologize trans femininity" and position trans girls as agents of knowing and being, not merely as victims or moral lessons (Serano 2007).

This radical normalcy, however, does not equate to naivety. Jam's identity exists alongside other aspects of her subjectivity: she is selectively mute, Black, a daughter, a friend, an artist, and ultimately, a seeker of truth. Her muteness, which is never framed as a deficit, is accommodated by her family and community through sign language and patience. This inclusion points toward a crip-queer imaginary (McRuer 2006), where normative forms of communication and expression are disrupted, and alternative ways of being are foregrounded.

Rather than focusing on bodily transformation, Emezi centres emotional and intuitive perception as Jam's primary power. She is the one who senses the arrival of Pet, the creature from her mother's painting brought to life by blood and belief. Pet warns her that a monster still lives among them, specifically in the home of her best friend Redemption. The narrative then becomes a detective story, a spiritual quest, and a test of what it means to act on knowledge that others refuse to see.

4.2. Speculative Girlhood and the Crisis of Belief

Lucille is not a dystopia in the traditional sense; rather, it is a utopia that has declared itself complete. "The angels have taken care of the monsters," we are told repeatedly. But the novel critiques this claim as premature and ideologically dangerous. By declaring justice as finished, Lucille neutralises the capacity to name new harm, to remain vigilant, and to imagine better forms of accountability.

This is where Jam's girlhood becomes politically significant. Her willingness to believe Pet and her refusal to ignore discomfort, contrast with the adults around her who resist the idea that monsters could still exist. Jam becomes a moral and epistemological outsider: someone whose clarity is not based on logic or evidence, but on embodied knowing, gut feeling, and emotional sensitivity.

In this way, Jam embodies what Ahmed calls a "feminist killjoy": a figure who "spoils the happiness of others" by insisting on confronting discomfort and structural harm (Ahmed 66). Jam's insistence that evil has not been eradicated makes her deeply unsettling to those around her. Yet it is this unsettling function that allows her to expose the truth that Redemption's uncle is a child abuser whose actions have been obscured by familial protection and social denial.

The fact that Jam is a trans girl is crucial here. Her identity has already required her to resist the dominant narratives about who she is and how she should live. Her experience of navigating marginality without shame enables her to question the structures of authority and comfort that keep others complacent. Trans girlhood, then, is not incidental to the story, it is the very lens through which truth becomes legible.

4.3. Monsters, Naming, and the Ethics of Disclosure

The creature Pet, with its feathers, claws, and glowing eyes, is both a literal and symbolic being. It is the embodied reminder that monsters can still exist, even when denied by collective belief. When Pet demands that Jam help it find the monster, it challenges her not only to act, but to speak the unspeakable, to break the communal silence surrounding abuse.

This confrontation with naming evokes both queer and postcolonial critiques of epistemic violence. As Gayatri Spivak (1988) and later Lugones (2007) argue, the denial of harm often depends on the erasure of alternative knowledge, especially those rooted in the bodies and experiences of the marginalised. Jam's insistence that harm has occurred is met with resistance not because it is implausible, but because it is inconvenient. To believe her would require Lucille to re-open wounds it has sealed prematurely.

Emezi frames the ethics of disclosure not as an abstract moral question, but as an intimate and relational act. Jam is terrified of hurting Redemption, of destroying his trust in his family, of carrying the weight of knowledge. Yet, she also knows that silence protects the abuser. Her decision to name the monster is not presented triumphantly, but with trembling urgency. It is a form of queer ethics: messy, embodied, relational, and deeply personal.

The moment of revelation is thus both an indictment of Lucille's liberal comfort and an affirmation of Jam's epistemic clarity. She is not heroic in the traditional sense; she is hesitant, emotional, young, but she is also correct. This validation is vital, especially in a world where trans girls are frequently doubted, dismissed, or tokenised. Emezi grants her character not just visibility but authority.

4.4. Queer Care and Community Transformation

While the narrative centres around danger and harm, *Pet* ultimately gestures toward a politics of queer care. After the monster is exposed, Jam and Redemption grieve together, not in isolation, but within a circle of support. Importantly, the resolution does not involve punishment in a carceral sense. The novel ends with the acknowledgment that justice is never finished, that vigilance, listening, and accountability must continue.

In this way, *Pet* resonates with recent abolitionist feminist frameworks that call for transformative justice outside systems of policing and incarceration (Kaba 2021; Davis 2003). Emezi does not present a perfect alternative, but they suggest that trans girlhood itself may contain the seeds of a different world, one rooted in mutual recognition, emotional truth, and ongoing care.

Emezi's refusal to narrativise Jam's story as one of victimhood or exceptionalism reflects a broader commitment to Black queer futurity. Similar to Muñoz's "utopian impulse," *Pet* does not simply critique the present but gestures toward a future in which trans girls are not merely included but central to the project of justice.

5. Sapphic and Trans Girlhoods in Conversation: Genre, Temporality, and the Politics of Queer Visibility

Having examined Danforth's *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* and Emezi's *Pet* through close readings, this section synthesises their respective portrayals of sapphic and trans girlhoods. While the texts differ significantly in genre, setting, and tone, one rooted in realist coming-of-age traditions, the other in speculative allegory, they converge in their critical engagements with normative girlhood, institutional erasure, and the potential of queer resistance. These texts not only illuminate the challenges of growing up queer in hostile or complacent societies, but also reveal how queer girlhood can be a site of knowledge production, emotional truth, and epistemological disruption.

5.1. Genre as Strategy: Realism vs Speculation

The genre distinctions between the two novels offer insight into how literary form shapes the articulation of queer girlhood. *Cameron Post*, written in the realist bildungsroman tradition, grounds its critique in the social and religious fabric of 1990s small-town America. Its slow, introspective pacing mirrors the protagonist's emotional withholding and gradual self-awareness. The narrative demands a sustained attention to the interiority of its protagonist, inviting readers to witness the banal yet brutal processes through which queer girls are disciplined.

By contrast, *Pet* operates in the register of speculative fiction. It presents a world where justice is presumed complete and monsters eradicated, only to expose the dangers of that assumption. The speculative mode allows Emezi to challenge contemporary liberal optimism and gesture toward alternative ontologies. Rather than simply mirroring reality, *Pet* constructs a counterworld, a *queer Afrofuturist space* where trans girlhood is already affirmed and yet still under threat. The difference in genre is not merely stylistic; it reflects the authors' differing approaches to representing harm and imagining resistance.

Realism in *Cameron Post* insists on the structural reality of queer repression, embodied in conversion therapy, familial control, and the policing of desire. Speculation in *Pet*, on the other hand, allows Emezi to explore what remains hidden when harm is denied, not by overt violence, but by benevolent erasure. Both approaches are effective, but in distinct ways: Danforth's realism insists on remembering what has been, while Emezi's speculation asks what might be if we dared to see clearly.

5.2. Time, Growth, and Queer Temporality

Time operates differently in both novels, and this has significant implications for how girlhood is framed. *Cameron Post* adheres to a linear temporality: childhood, adolescence, rebellion, escape. However, Danforth resists the traditional arc of coming-of-age by refusing to grant Cameron a moment of triumph or arrival. Her journey ends not with integration into society or romantic resolution, but with departure (an open road, unresolved grief, and ambiguous hope). This "non-ending" reflects what Halberstam (2005) calls "queer time": a refusal to follow the script of reproductive futurism, which aligns maturity with heterosexual union and social conformity.

Pet, by contrast, collapses and complicates time through its speculative setting. Lucille exists in a post-revolutionary future, yet its politics mirror present-day liberal complacency. Jam's experience thus unfolds in a queer temporal loop: she must learn from the past, re-name harm in the present, and commit to ongoing justice in the future. Her growth is not linear but recursive, grounded in her ability to perceive what others refuse to see. In this sense, *Pet* embodies Muñoz's queer utopia, not as escapism, but as a demand for better possibilities rooted in radical honesty.

Both narratives, in their own ways, disrupt the heteronormative timeline of girlhood. Cameron does not grow up into a heterosexual woman, and Jam does not grow *out* of her transness, both resist the idea that girlhood is a stage to be surpassed. Instead, their girlhoods are sustained, complex, and filled with ethical tension. They are not stories of "becoming women," but of becoming otherwise.

5.3. Affect, Silence, and Embodied Knowing

A shared motif in both texts is silence, not as absence, but as resistance. Cameron's silence is a tactic of self-preservation, cultivated in a context where speaking would lead to further discipline or misunderstanding. Her quietness becomes a form of queer opacity, a refusal to make herself legible to systems that seek to categorise, cure, or condemn her.

Similarly, Jam's selective muteness functions not as deficit but as power. She communicates through sign language, intuition, and emotional sensitivity. Her muteness allows her to listen differently, to sense what others miss, and to relate beyond normative structures. Her silence is not emptiness but depth, what theorist Christina Sharpe regards as "the black radical tradition of quiet" (8).

Both characters model alternative epistemologies of queer girlhood. In contrast to dominant cultural logics that privilege confession, speech, and linear articulation, Cameron and Jam operate through affective registers (shame, intuition, grief, tenderness). These affective modes challenge the idea that legibility equals liberation. Instead, they suggest that queer girlhood often requires unreadability to survive.

5.4. Naming and the Ethics of Recognition

Naming is a central concern in both novels, particularly regarding harm and identity. In *Cameron Post*, naming is both desired and dangerous. To name oneself as a lesbian is to risk punishment, while to remain unnamed is to exist in a liminal space. Cameron's eventual rejection of labels becomes an act of autonomy, not because she fears identity, but because she refuses externally imposed scripts.

In *Pet*, naming is framed as an ethical imperative. Jam must name the monster despite social denial. Her insistence on truth exposes the limits of Lucille's justice and forces the community to reckon with its complicity. Unlike in *Cameron Post*, where naming is personally risky, in *Pet*, naming is politically necessary. Jam's decision to name evil is an act of care, not only for Redemption, but for the entire community.

Together, these texts reveal that naming in queer girlhood is fraught with risk and potential. It can expose, empower, or endanger. It is never neutral. Whether the naming is of oneself (I am this) or of harm (this happened), it carries weight, demands courage, and opens pathways to new kinds of relation.

5.5. Queer Kinship and World-Building

Finally, both novels offer visions of queer kinship as crucial to survival and transformation. In *Cameron Post*, kinship emerges through shared marginality: Cameron, Adam, and Jane form bonds within an institution designed to isolate them. These chosen families are fragile, improvised, and deeply necessary. They are formed not through likeness but through recognition, a politics of affective solidarity.

In *Pet*, kinship is more expansive and includes biological family, chosen friends, and even nonhuman beings like Pet. Jam's family affirms her transness without question, but it is her bond with Redemption and Pet that activates her ethical agency. The story insists that care requires discomfort, that loving someone means believing them, challenging them, and sometimes naming what they cannot see.

Both narratives resist the individualism often associated with bildungsroman or hero's journey narratives. Instead, they suggest that queer girlhood is never a solitary process, it is always relational, embedded in networks of care, accountability, and co-becoming. The world is not transformed through revelation or rescue, but through small, sustained acts of listening, naming, and being-with.

6. Conclusion: Visibilising Queer Girlhood, Rewriting the Possible

This paper has critically examined sapphic and trans girlhoods through a comparative literary analysis of *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* and *Pet*, highlighting how both texts unsettle normative conceptions of girlhood. While Danforth's realist bildungsroman engages with the structural forces of repression (religion, family, heteronormativity) Emezi's speculative allegory imagines a world beyond explicit prejudice, only to reveal how silence, erasure, and assumed justice perpetuate harm.

Together, these novels do not merely diversify representations of girlhood; they interrogate the ideological foundations that determine who is allowed to be a girl, who is heard, and who is believed. Cameron's sapphic desire challenges Christian logics of purity and the linearity of hetero-development, while Jam's transness offers an epistemic shift, positioning queer embodiment not as a deviation but as a guide to ethical action and truth-telling.

Both protagonists resist erasure not by announcing themselves loudly, but through silence, intuition, and queer kinship. They reveal that queer girlhood is not a phase or deviation but a legitimate, affectively rich, and politically potent site of becoming. Their stories demand that readers move beyond representation and toward recognition, not only of queer identities but of the complex emotional and political labour these identities entail in a world still tethered to binaries and comfort narratives.

By situating sapphic and trans girlhoods at the centre of literary inquiry, this paper contributes to the broader aims of girlhood studies, queer literary criticism, and feminist intersectional scholarship. It affirms that visibilising intersectional girlhoods is not a matter of simply adding marginalised characters to the literary canon, but of rewriting what counts as literature, what counts as girlhood, and what counts as resistance.

Notes on Contributor

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