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Visibilizing Intersectional Girlhood(s) in Contemporary Anglophone Cultural Manifestations

Guest edited by
Dr. Sara Tabuyo-Santaclara and Dr. Iria Seijas-Pérez

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VOL. 13, NO. 3, 2026

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Studies on Intermediality and Intercultural Mediation – REUNIDO
Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research – 13.3 (March 2026): 1-6
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EDITORIAL NOTE[1]

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Girls and girlhood have been experiencing a moment of hypervisibility in recent years, as it has been made apparent by their increased presence in social media and popular culture. The year 2023 has been considered by media outlets as "the year of the girl" (Firth 2023), and social media sites have been filled with girlhood-inspired trends that allude to the experience of being a girl, ranging from "girl math" to "girl dinner". The circulation of ideas and images about girlhood has not stopped on social media; Charli XCX's album *brat* (2024), Taylor Swift's Eras Tour (2023-2024) or the release of Greta Gerwig's *Barbie* (2023) have all contributed to creating conversations about girls. Besides, these cultural products, in combination with social media, have enabled girls to engage as prosumers with the girlhood phenomena.

This special issue has turned to the field of Girlhood Studies to address precisely the experiences and representations of girls in a range of formats and manifestations (Mitchel, Reid-Walsh and Kirk vii). This specialty was born out of the necessity of creating a body of knowledge about girls in which they are recognized as full subjects to analyze, rather than being considered as incomplete women (Currie, Kelly, and Pomerantz 4; Kearney 11). Although much has changed since the beginnings of this field of study, its interdisciplinary approach that puts girls at the center of its concerns seemed suitable as a method of analysis for this special issue. In this current context of hypervisibility, girls are praised for their ability to adapt to fluctuating social, political and cultural contexts (Harris 1). At the same time, they navigate a series of contradictory

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stereotypes that aim to define them as either passive and innocent or as hypersexualized postfeminist subjects (Gonick; Harris; McRobie), both ends of the patriarchal spectrum.

The aim of this issue has been to follow the direction established by other girlhood scholars (Mitchell, Reid-Walsh and Kirk), seeking to attend to the particularities of girlhood rather than declaring a monolithic or universalized girlhood experience. We have aimed to examine how cultural, social and political differences influence individual and collective experiences. To do so, we have relied on notions of intersectionality (Crenshaw), which have served to pluralize girlhood (Currie), and feminist theories, as these allow for the examination of the many ways intersecting oppressions (Crenshaw) become intertwined to "fix" girls within the matrix of domination (Hill Collins) that supports the maintenance of heteropatriarchal hierarchies.

The different contributions that conform this special issue have as their focus the visibility of intersectional girlhood(s) in contemporary Anglophone cultural manifestations through their approach to the varied experiences of girls. By drawing from the interdisciplinarity that characterizes Girlhood Studies, these articles have engaged with the often-invisibilized realities of girlhood through a heterogeneous mix of theoretical approaches that nevertheless keep girls at the center of their discussions. Through this combination of articles, we aim to showcase the transnational and rich character of the field, intersecting with a multitude of factors that uniquely shape each girl's collective and individual circumstances.

Marta Aguza Berral analyses Julia Armfield's novel *Private Rites* (2024), where three sisters must negotiate familial estrangement, intergenerational trauma, and queer adolescence within a climate-crisis dystopia. Drawing from queer theory, trauma theory, and the notion of intersectionality, Aguza Berral discusses the novel's approach to the sisters' vulnerability, their fragmented familial bonds, and the youngest sister's navigation of her queerness. The article thus reveals how *Private Rites* explores the complexities of sisterhood, the affective volatility of queer girlhood, and the inheritance of unspoken traumas.

Tolulope Akinrinde's article explores the representation of intersectional sapphic and trans girlhoods through her analysis of Emily M. Danforth's *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* (2012) and Akwaeke Emezi's *Pet* (2019). Relying on affect theory and

queer theory, Akinrinde interrogates the texts' disruption of heteronormative patterns that define girlhood in literature. Particularly, the article focuses on the novels' use of voice, genre, and affect to develop a form of queer resistance, transforming girlhood in a site of becoming marked by a variety of elements including gender identity, sexuality, sociocultural power, and race.

Emily Bent critically examines the 2024 documentary *Girls State*, which covers girls' experiences in a week-long immersive political program by the same name. Bent highlights the contradictions of girl-power feminism, which make visible some forms of neoliberal girl empowerment while others become invisible and undesirable. The article proposes to recognize girls' political suffering rather than simply present them as heroic changemakers, thus encouraging feminist scholars, activists and allies to reconsider girls' political position and go beyond normative patterns of empowered agency or vulnerability.

Elena Canido Muiño offers an analysis of the portrayal of the protagonist of the novel *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992), by Cuban-born American author Cristina García. Here, the main character's coming-of-age is not only marked by her hybrid identity, in between a Cuban heritage and an American context, but also by her creativity and art-making processes which allow the novel to be interpreted as a *künstelrroman*, or artist's novel. Thus, the novel explores girlhood as a terrain in which girls seek new forms of identity and self-expression, and art becomes a channel to strive for individuality and expressing inconformity to social expectations.

Claudia García Pajín's article is a timely analysis of the politics of girls' rage as a reaction to their socialization into structures of sexual abuse as depicted in Dizz Tate's novel *Brutes* (2023). Drawing from affect theory, it brings female rage to the forefront as an affective force that is crucial for both girls' self-definition and justice-seeking processes against the pervasiveness of sexual violence. García Pajín's piece resonates with current and recent cases that evidence the ubiquity and cruelty of rape culture, ranging from the #MeToo movement to the infamous Epstein case.

In her article, Aoileann Ni Eigeartaigh challenges the frequent stereotyping and unawareness of neurodiverse girlhoods through her examination of two novels with neurodiverse protagonists: Caitríona Lally's *Eggshells* (2015) and Alice Franklin's *Life*

Hacks for a Little Alien (2025). Ni Eigeartaigh argues how these texts visibilize the different strategies that can be used to construct social roles and identities, becoming a site of critique and suggesting that the often unseen spaces that are occupied by the protagonists offer the potential for more inclusive modes of girlhood.

Danielle O'Sullivan looks at Eimear McBride's *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* (2013) and Louise O'Neill's *Asking for It* (2015) in order to analyze the depiction of sexual assault and the silencing of victims in contemporary Irish fiction. Experiences of girlhood in these texts are marked by rape culture and the threat of sexual assault, and social reactions to sexual violence reveal institutional and community responses to trauma within the Irish context. Hence, through a close reading of the novels and drawing from trauma theory and girlhood studies, O'Sullivan's article approaches shame and trauma in connection to the realities of girlhood in contemporary Ireland.

In addition to the articles, this Special Issue includes two media reviews. Alicia Martínez Martín reviews Casey Plett's *A Safe Girl to Love* (2014), a collection of short stories that center the lives of trans women as they navigate questions of identity, love, friendship, and survival. Marina Vega González offers a review of the film *Earth Mama* (2023), which follows the emotional journey of Gia, a young Black woman fighting to regain custody of her two children. The film exposes personal and systemic struggles of Black girlhood and motherhood.

Lastly, this Special Issue concludes with two poetic contributions from Catherine MacCarthy and Marisa Rapela Palacios. In total, we present five poems that the authors have kindly decided to share with readers in which they explore diverse girlhood experiences.

Through this varied collection of articles, reviews and creative pieces, we aim to contribute to contemporary conversations about girlhood(s), highlighting the plurality of this label. The contributions provide a space where the lives and realities of queer, trans, racialized, and neurodivergent girls are at the forefront in an attempt to give them due recognition, visibilizing their often-hidden experiences. Despite the current hypervisibility of girls, they are not exempt from facing struggles such as sexism, homophobia, racism, transphobia, or ableism. We believe that girlhood is a fluctuating category where girls should be at the center to constantly (re)define the meanings of what

being a girl is. Thus, with the contributions to this special issue, we hope to expand current views of girlhood beyond heteronormative and feminine perceptions.

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RITUALS OF SISTERHOOD: QUEER GIRLHOOD AND TRAUMA IN JULIA ARMFIELD'S *PRIVATE RITES* (2024)[1]

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Abstract: This article examines Julia Armfield's *Private Rites* (2024) through the intertwined lenses of intersectional girlhood, queer identity, and trauma theory. Drawing on recent work in girlhood studies, the analysis foregrounds Armfield's depiction of three sisters—Isla, Irene, and Agnes—who struggle to navigate familial estrangement, the burdens of intergenerational trauma, and the precarities of queer adolescence within a climate-crisis dystopia. The study situates the novel against postfeminist cultural backdrops, resisting narratives of seamless empowerment and instead highlighting how trauma unsettles narrative and lived experience. Intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991; Collins 2000) underpins the discussion of privilege and vulnerability among the sisters, while queer theory (Sedgwick 1993; Halberstam 1998) illuminates Agnes's affective and embodied navigation of sexuality and identity. Literary trauma theory is used to interpret Armfield's narrative techniques, including fragmentation and nonlinear chronology, which reflect the persistence of wound and memory. Ultimately, the article argues that *Private Rites* advances contemporary fiction by probing the unstable ties of sisterhood, the affective volatility of queer girlhood, and the cyclical inheritance of trauma, offering a textured vision of survival that is marked by misrecognition, longing, and endurance.
Keywords: intersectional girlhood; queer identity; trauma; sisterhood; postfeminism; ecological precarity.

RITUALES DE HERMANDAD: LA INFANCIA FEMENINA QUEER Y EL TRAUMA EN *PRIVATE RITES* (2024), DE JULIA ARMFIELD

Resumen: Este artículo examina *Private Rites* (2024), de Julia Armfield, a través de las perspectivas entrelazadas de la interseccionalidad en la adolescencia femenina, la identidad queer y la teoría del trauma. Basándonos en trabajos recientes sobre estudios de la niñez, el análisis destaca la descripción que hace Armfield de tres hermanas —Isla, Irene y Agnes— que luchan por superar el distanciamiento familiar, la carga del trauma intergeneracional y las precariedades de la adolescencia queer en una distopía marcada

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por la crisis climática. El estudio sitúa la novela en un contexto cultural posfeminista, resistiéndose a las narrativas de empoderamiento sin fisuras y destacando, en cambio, cómo el trauma perturba la narrativa y la experiencia vivida. La interseccionalidad (Crenshaw 1991; Collins 2000) sustenta el debate sobre el privilegio y la vulnerabilidad entre las hermanas, mientras que la teoría queer (Sedgwick 1993; Halberstam 1998) ilumina la navegación afectiva y encarnada de Agnes por la sexualidad y la identidad. Se utiliza la teoría literaria del trauma para interpretar las técnicas narrativas de Armfield, incluyendo la fragmentación y la cronología no lineal, que reflejan la persistencia de la herida y la memoria. En última instancia, el artículo sostiene que *Private Rites* avanza en la ficción contemporánea al explorar los lazos inestables de la hermandad, la volatilidad afectiva de la adolescencia queer y la herencia cíclica del trauma, ofreciendo una visión texturizada de la supervivencia marcada por el desconocimiento, el anhelo y la resistencia.
Palabras clave: infancia femenina interseccional; identidad queer; trauma; hermandad; posfeminismo; precariedad ecológica.

1. Introduction

In recent years, cultural criticism has increasingly turned its attention to the shifting terrain of girlhood, recognizing girls not merely as future women-in-the-making but as agentic subjects with complex, intersectional identities. The emergence of girlhood studies since the 1990s has foregrounded the need to examine how girls' experiences are represented and negotiated across social, cultural, and political contexts (Currie, Kelly, and Pomerantz; Kearney). Scholars in this field resist monolithic constructions of "the girl", emphasizing instead the plurality of girlhoods, shaped by intersecting axes of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability. This article is situated within this critical turn, aiming to "visibilise" girlhoods that are often obscured by dominant postfeminist and neoliberal frameworks. Julia Armfield's recent novel *Private Rites* (2024) offers a particularly rich site for this analysis, as it entwines familial trauma, queer desire, and fractured sisterhood within a climate-crisis dystopia that mirrors the instability of contemporary girlhood.

Armfield's novel follows three sisters—Isla, Irene, and Agnes—in the aftermath of their father's death, weaving together memories of maternal absence, sibling estrangement, and an ever-present ecological catastrophe. Their dynamic is marked by both intimacy and alienation: Isla, the eldest, becomes defined by emotional detachment; Irene oscillates between political rage and exhaustion; and Agnes, the youngest and half-sister, emerges as a queer figure whose adolescence is shaped by abandonment and desire. This constellation of perspectives refuses a unified notion of girlhood, instead staging a dialogue between multiple and sometimes contradictory modes of becoming. Crucially, Armfield resists the cultural impulse, identified by Anita Harris, to celebrate the "future

girl" as a neoliberal emblem of resilience and adaptability. Rather than envisioning girlhood as a site of seamless empowerment, *Private Rites* exposes the fractures, silences, and traumas that accompany gendered subjectivity under patriarchal and postfeminist conditions.

The framework of intersectionality, first articulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw, provides an essential lens for reading *Private Rites*. Intersectionality highlights how overlapping structures of oppression "intersect" to shape experiences of marginalization in ways that cannot be reduced to single categories (Crenshaw 1242). Patricia Hill Collins further theorizes this as the "matrix of domination" whereby power operates simultaneously at structural, cultural, and interpersonal levels. Within Armfield's narrative, the sisters' divergent experiences—conditioned by different maternal lineages, sexual identities, and generational positions—illustrate how family trauma is not distributed evenly but rather refracted through intersecting dynamics of privilege and vulnerability. Agnes's queer girlhood, for instance, is deeply marked by abandonment and anxiety, while Isla and Irene, despite their own mental wounds, dissociate from the same trauma through professionalization and political performance.

Angela McRobbie's critique of postfeminism also illuminates the novel's cultural work. McRobbie argues that postfeminist discourses operate by appearing to affirm women's agency while simultaneously re-inscribing patriarchal norms through individualization and consumerism. In *Private Rites*, this paradox is dramatized through the sisters' attempts to manage their trauma: Isla adopts clinical detachment in her career as a therapist; Irene alternates between activist posturing and domestic compromise; Agnes channels her queer desire into compulsive encounters that blur the lines between autonomy and self-destruction. These strategies reflect not empowerment but the contradictory pressures of a postfeminist culture that demands self-regulation while offering no real escape from patriarchal legacies.

This article aims to argue that *Private Rites* exemplifies an intersectional vision of girlhood by dramatizing how three sisters inherit, resist, and reconfigure trauma within the matrix of domination of patriarchal and postfeminist culture. By examining the sisters' dynamics through the lenses of intersectionality, queer theory, and trauma studies, I contend that the novel foregrounds girlhood as a fractured, plural, and affectively charged site. The analysis pursues three main objectives: first, to trace how familial estrangement and intergenerational trauma destabilize conventional understandings of

girlhood; second, to analyse how Agnes's queer girlhood both disrupts and intensifies the patterns of disaffection embodied by her older siblings; and third, to show how the dystopian backdrop amplifies these dynamics, situating girlhood within broader critiques of neoliberal resilience narratives and ecological precarity. Ultimately, the article positions Armfield's novel as a vital cultural text that not only visibilizes marginalized forms of girlhood but also interrogates the ideological frameworks—postfeminist, patriarchal, and neoliberal—that continue to shape their representation.

2. Critical Notes on Sisterhood, Queer Girlhood and Trauma

In order to situate this article within broader critical discourse, it is mandatory to take a look at different theoretical undercurrents. First of all, trauma theory has emerged as a central lens in contemporary literary studies, allowing critics to interrogate how literature represents experiences that shatter the boundaries of ordinary narrative and consciousness (Caruth 3; Balaev 7). In this context, Cathy Caruth's influential concept of "unclaimed experience" underlines the impossibility of fully apprehending or expressing trauma at the moment it occurs; instead, trauma returns belatedly, structuring memory and storytelling in complex, nonlinear ways (Caruth 5; Felman and Laub 57). This latency means that literary texts often feature gaps, silences, or fragmentation as formal correlates of traumatic experience (Whitehead 40; Luckhurst 82). To further exemplify how trauma resists full apprehension at the moment of its occurrence, Caruth's study of the Holocaust reveals that:

> The historical power of the trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all. And it is this inherent latency of the event that paradoxically explains the peculiar, temporal structure, the belatedness, of the Jews' historical experience: since the murder is not experienced as it occurs, it is fully evident only in connection with another place, and in another time. (17)

Hence, Caruth argues that a traumatic event is often not fully understood or consciously experienced at the moment it happens. Instead, the mind protects itself by "forgetting" the event in that instant. Because of this initial repression, the trauma only becomes real or fully perceptible later, when it returns in unexpected ways—through memories, symptoms, or repetition. Moreover, Judith Herman's psychiatric model, articulated in *Trauma and Recovery* (1997), draws attention to the dynamics of psychological processing. Herman identifies recurring patterns: safety, remembrance, and reconnection,

stages often paralleled in trauma fiction where characters oscillate between alienation and attempts at healing (Herman 103; Balaev 13), as well as some difficulties that may entail going under therapy, mainly the "identification with the perpetrator" (Herman 103) on the part of the therapist, making the patient's recovery more difficult. In this line, Freud's psychoanalytic theory of trauma, especially his notions of repetition compulsion and deferred action, remains foundational for understanding how narrative and memory intertwine in trauma discourse (Freud 12; Balaev 4). Contemporary critics such as Michelle Balaev, Ruth Leys, and Dominick LaCapra have pressed beyond these roots, highlighting trauma's cultural and social dimensions—how storytelling can serve both as a mode of testimony and as a vehicle for individual or collective recovery (Balaev 11; Leys 90; LaCapra 36). In Leys's words, when facing trauma "[f]iguring the order of authority, law, and difference, culture produces a split in the self" (67).

Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's testimonial theory further reinforces literature's unique ability to bear witness to historical and personal trauma. Felman and Laub stress that literary texts often enact a crisis of witnessing, foregrounding how language itself can fail or flounder when encountering traumatic history (25). Anne Whitehead's and Roger Luckhurst's studies further demonstrate how trauma fiction borrows formally from psychological discourse, deploying fragmentation, repetition, and disrupted chronology to evoke the experience and aftermath of trauma in ways that traditional history cannot (Whitehead 18; Luckhurst 99).

Private Rites builds on these traditions: Armfield's portrayal of family trauma, intergenerational wounds, and the aftermath for its characters is informed by these theoretical debates, moving fluidly between psychological and cultural registers. The novel thus contributes to—and complicates—literary trauma theory by foregrounding subjective fragmentation, communal bearing witness, and the slow process of narrative reintegration.

Moving on to another key issue, queer girlhood studies interrogate normative images of adolescence, exploring how non-heteronormative identities and desires reshape the coming-of-age narrative (Sedgwick 1990, 1993; Halberstam 1998, 2005). Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's epistemology of the closet exposes how secrecy and disclosure contour queer subjectivities. As Sedgwick has asserted, "'[c]loseted-ness' itself is a performance initiated as such by the speech act of silence—not a particular silence, but a silence that accrues particularity by fits and starts, in relation to the discourse that

surrounds and differentially constitutes it" (*Epistemology of the Closet* 3). She has further observed that 'queer' can refer to many things: "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically" (*Tendencies* 7). In other words, Sedgwick highlights that 'queer' names the fluid, non-fixed nature of gender and sexuality, resisting any single, uniform meaning.

Jack Halberstam's *Female Masculinity* and *In a Queer Time and Place* reconsider adolescence through the perspective of alternative gender presentation and temporalities. As Halberstam has written, "[m]asculinity . . . becomes legible as masculinity where and when it leaves the white male middle-class body" (*Female Masculinity* 2). Furthermore, Halberstam highlights how women have overcome lots of obstacles, both social and cultural, during the last hundred years in order to make "their own unique contributions to what we call modern masculinity" (*Female Masculinity* 46). In this context, one central contribution is "that what we recognize as female masculinity is actually a multiplicity of masculinities, indeed a proliferation of masculinities, and the more we identify the various forms of female masculinity, the more they multiply" (ibid.). In this reflection, Halberstam shows that female masculinity is not a single, uniform category but a diverse and expanding range of ways to embody masculinity. Their work destabilizes fixed binaries and introduces the concept of queer time life paths outside of linear developmental logics (Halberstam).

Moreover, intersectionality is foundational in terms of queer theory studies. Crenshaw's theory and works such as Genny Beemyn and Susan Rankin's *The Lives of Transgender People*, demonstrate how queer girlhood is shaped not only by sexuality and gender but also by race, class, and ability. As Crenshaw has asserted: "Intersectionality is a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects. It's not simply that there's a race problem here, a gender problem there, and a class or LGBTQ problem there. Many times that framework erases what happens to people who are subject to all of these things" (qtd. in Steinmetz). She has often pointed out that "[b]ecause the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated" (Crenshaw 140). Crenshaw then stresses that Black women's experiences cannot be understood by looking

at racism and sexism separately, because their oppression emerges precisely from the intersection of both. This framework allows scholars to challenge monolithic representations and highlight the diversity of queer experiences. Hill Collins similarly emphasizes how "[u]nderstanding the contours of this heterogeneity . . . constitutes one important task for U.S. Black feminist thought" (93). She affirms: "The sexual politics of Black womanhood reveals the fallacy of assuming that gender affects all women in the same way—race and class matter greatly" (Collins 229).

Affective and embodied experiences are also central for the present discussion. Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* theorizes orientation—how queer girls inhabit worlds shaped by estrangement and possibility: "In order to become orientated, you might suppose that we must first experience disorientation" (5). Disorientation is at once a "crisis of losing one's place in the world" (Ahmed 139) and also an aspect of queer experience that can produce alternative methods of interacting with the world. Valerie Rohy's work also elucidates how emotion, shame, and euphoria mark queer girlhood narratives, attending to "the entanglement of blood (lines) and time (lines)" and the affective volatility of queer life (Tuhkanen 106).

Furthermore, collective memory and testimony play vital roles. Felman and Laub's testimonial theory reveals "[t]he absence of an empathic listener, or more radically, the absence of an *addressable other*, an other who can hear the anguish of one's memories and thus affirm and recognize their realness, annihilates the story" (68, emphasis in the original). They write: "Trauma survivors live not with memories of the past, but with an event that could not and did not proceed through to its completion, has no ending, attained no closure, and therefore, as far as its survivors are concerned, continues into the present and is current in every respect" (69). Judith Butler's theory of performativity productively extends this notion of continuity into the present: "gender is always a doing . . . there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (32). Read together, these perspectives suggest that just as gender is constituted through ongoing acts, traumatic histories are continually reconstituted through acts of narration and reception—through the presence of a listener who makes the survivor's ongoing experience legible.

Contemporary fiction such as *Private Rites* exemplifies and further develops these theoretical perspectives: Armfield's depiction of queer sisterhood, nonlinear

bildungsroman, and embodied affect draws from the intersectional, affective, and choral features above. The text's structure and style echo queer theory's insistence on complexity and plurality in narrative form and lived experience.

Moving on to the last key issue, we must discuss sisterhood, both as metaphor and lived relationality. Sisterhood is a critical site for feminist theory and literary analysis. Second-wave feminism advanced sisterhood as a call for resistance, yet as bell hooks writes, "[w]e can be sisters united by shared interests and beliefs, united in our appreciation for diversity, united in our struggle to end sexist oppression, united in political solidarity" (138). She cautions: "Women do not need to eradicate difference to feel solidarity. We do not need to share common oppression to fight equally to end oppression" (ibid.). Audre Lorde, in *Sister Outsider*, affirms: "I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own" (132-133). Furthermore, Lorde insists that

> difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic. Only then does the necessity for interdependency become unthreatening. Only within that interdependency of different strengths, acknowledged and equal, can the power to seek new ways of being in the world generate. (111)

Lorde's words highlight how solidarity across differences is essential for collective liberation, reinforcing that freedom and creative transformation can only emerge when diverse experiences and strengths are recognized as interdependent. This perspective underscores the political and ethical necessity of embracing differences rather than fearing them. Lorde's emphasis on interdependency and the creative potential of difference sets the stage for Adrienne Rich's expansion of relational possibilities. By introducing the concept of the lesbian continuum, Rich extends this idea, showing how women's connections—beyond narrowly defined sexual relationships—reveal broader patterns of female history and psychology that have been historically marginalized or overlooked:

> I mean the term lesbian continuum to include a range—through each woman's life and throughout history—of woman-identified experience; not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman . . . If we expand it to embrace many more forms of primary intensity . . . we begin to grasp breadths of female history and psychology that have lain out of reach as a consequence of limited, mostly clinical, definitions of 'lesbianism'. (27)

Literary criticism of Jane Austen and Toni Morrison demonstrates that sisterhood can function as a site for moral development, resistance to patriarchy, and spaces of trauma and healing (Curtis 13; Fontes 62; Morrison 52). Trauma theory complements this view, emphasizing that "[t]he telling entails a reassertion of the hegemony of reality and a re-externalization of the evil that affected and contaminated the trauma victim" (Felman and Laub 69), highlighting how recounting trauma can be an act of agency and restoration. Beyond literary and psychological perspectives, sisterhood can also be understood as political praxis. Feminist intersectional solidarity—built on strategic coalitions across multiple axes of difference—represents a contemporary reformulation of sisterhood (hooks 88), demanding both the redistribution of power within movements and the active centring of marginalized voices. In *Private Rites*, all of these theoretical currents converge: sisterhood figures as both buffer and wound, a source of trauma and healing. Armfield's portrait of sisterly and chosen bonds dovetails with feminist theories that foreground solidarity, contestation, and the labour of reckoning with trauma.

3. The Politics of Sisterhood in *Private Rites*

Julia Armfield's *Private Rites* is at once a novel of climate dread, ritual, and inheritance, but at its core lies the fraught, elastic bond between sisters. Isla, Irene, and Agnes—bound by blood but separated by years, resentments, and competing self-conceptions—form a shifting constellation in which sisterhood becomes not simply a matter of familial proximity but of power, misrecognition, and longing. Armfield renders sisterhood as a paradoxical space, where intimacy and estrangement overlap, and where the desire for recognition often collides with the inability to truly see the other.

From the beginning, the novel signals that Agnes, the half-sister, inhabits a liminal position. Isla thinks of her not as a sister in the intuitive sense but as something imposed: "Agnes is her sister–is their sister–in the sense that all three of them share a father, but the concept of sisterhood is not one that Isla has felt able to extend to Agnes" (Armfield 40). This ambivalence highlights one of Armfield's novel central themes: sisterhood is not automatically granted by bloodline, but must be lived, recognized, and sustained in time. Agnes's existence is felt as an interruption for her sisters, as can be deduced from the following instance: "something that happened to [Isla] and Irene: a small and squalling baby, abandoned within a year of her birth by her mother and left to be managed by everyone else" (40). Here we can observe how Isla's perception collapses Agnes's

personhood into an event. Thus, her birth becomes less an addition to the family than a calamity to be managed.

Irene, by contrast, embodies a different tension within sisterhood, namely the persistence of misrecognition across time: "There are, Irene has always felt, few frustrations to match that of being read a certain way by family members. To be misunderstood is one thing, but the curious hostility of a sibling's approach lies less in what they miss than in the strange backdated nature of the things they choose to know" (Armfield 29). For Irene, the enduring perception of her as the "furious" seventeen-year-old—"self-consciously furious in every direction and seldom polite enough to let anyone reach the end of a sentence" (29)—illustrates the difficulty of outgrowing the narratives siblings impose on one another. Sisterhood in this novel thus becomes an archive of outdated versions, where the present self is always shadowed by the fossilized versions others insist upon.

At the same time, Armfield does not reduce sisterhood to hostility alone. The novel repeatedly stages moments where antagonism doubles as a strange intimacy. For Agnes, even watching Isla and Irene quarrel offers a kind of belonging, though she remains excluded from it: "The two of them going at it in a play of hostility that is still a greater intimacy than either has ever shown to her" (Armfield 64). This moment of reflection captures the painful paradox of the half-sister that the character of Agnes represents in the novel: her siblings' ability to wound one another through conflict is itself proof of a closeness she does not share. Armfield suggests that even negative recognition—the sibling who gets under one's skin—is preferable to absence. To be antagonized is still to be seen, to be perceived and to be contested.

This uneven distribution of intimacy becomes especially clear when Isla reflects on the age gap between herself and Agnes: "She remembers, all at once, that Agnes is eleven years younger than she is, recalls the gap of time between them like something taken from her body, the ache like stolen flesh" (Armfield 40). The bodily imagery here is striking: the age gap itself becomes a wound, something stolen. Sisterhood is figured as both loss and reminder of what cannot be recovered—a history never shared, a bond never fully realized.

Isla and Irene's relationship is marked by a different kind of painful closeness. Their quarrels are often petty on the surface but signal deeper currents of guilt,

miscommunication, and rivalry: "I don't understand what it is you're so offended by, Isla said. I'm saying you're here now, and that's really nice to see. I'm saying it's a good thing. You're saying it's a miracle, is what you're saying" (Armfield 45). The sharpness of this exchange captures the difficulty of affirming each other without accusation; even kindness becomes a site of misinterpretation. The sisters' interactions suggest that to be a sister is to be permanently vulnerable to being misread—every utterance doubled with possible insult.

Agnes's perspective complicates this dynamic further. She recognizes her marginalization and yet yearns for a stronger tie: "Agnes is only their half-sister and the distance between them is keenly apparent even outside crises" (Armfield 31). The emphasis on crisis underscores how familial bonds are often summoned at moments of death or catastrophe, but for Agnes, even those moments do not fully bridge the gap. This is exemplified when she is the last to know about their father's death, and also the last to learn that their father had left her the house in which he lived in the will. Her position dramatizes the limits of family as a guarantee of belonging.

Yet the sisters also share memories of a household shaped by paternal absence and maternal instability. Isla recalls shielding Irene from their mother's volatility: "She was well practised at leaving things out: the parts where their mother and father fought, the shouting that Irene never heard because Isla had put her in her room with a record playing and shut the door" (Armfield 76). Here sisterhood is not simply antagonism but protection, albeit one structured by omission. To protect Irene is to curate her experience, to erase parts of their shared past. Sisterhood becomes an act of narrative control, as much about silence as about solidarity.

Taken together, these threads reveal Armfield's richly nuanced portrayal of sisterhood as neither wholly nurturing nor wholly destructive. Instead, it is a shifting terrain of misrecognition, rivalry, longing, and occasional grace. The sisters are bound by what they share—a mixture of trauma, memory and blood—but equally by what they withhold from one another. In *Private Rites*, sisterhood is not a stable category but a contested site, a relationship always in flux, shaped by absence as much as presence, and by the impossible desire to be both known and forgiven.

4. The Development of Queer Girlhood in *Private Rites*

If sisterhood in *Private Rites* is marked by tension and misrecognition, queer girlhood is presented as an equally uneasy territory—one that is defined by secrecy, performance, and bodily immediacy. Through Agnes's perspective in particular, Armfield explores queer adolescence and young adulthood not as a period of liberation but as an arena of ambivalence, where desire is both a refuge from familial fracture and another site of vulnerability.

Agnes's relationship to her own body and to intimacy often pivots on detachment, as if sex provides not connection but reprieve. Swimming becomes a central metaphor here, allowing her to submerge thought in physical repetition: "Thinking when swimming is not thinking, but something more like elevator music. It comes as secondary to the fact of her body, to the bald imperative of motion, and it makes her feel easier, more physical, and less liable to come upon a thought that will cause her to scream and to never stop screaming" (Armfield 17). This description encapsulates queer girlhood as a negotiation between the mind's turmoil and the body's insistence on survival. The pool, with its blend of routine and anonymity, becomes the stage for Agnes's sexual encounters, where physical immediacy overrides introspection.

Her sexual liaisons are blunt, often impulsive, and marked by a refusal to romanticize. She has sex with women in changing rooms, the smell of chlorine lingering on her skin, noting with ironic detachment that her fingers "smell both of chlorine and a little like the woman she fingered at the swimming pool" (Armfield 18). This detail collapses the sensory and the erotic into something simultaneously banal and transgressive. Queer desire here is not aestheticized but presented in its raw materiality—sweat, chlorine, touch—underscoring Armfield's commitment to demystifying the queer body.

At the same time, Agnes's attraction is immediate, visceral, almost overwhelming. Seeing a girl with dark hair, she "immediately wants to fuck her. It happens like this sometimes; impulse driven sharply upwards and into her gut" (Armfield 19). These passages resonate with the intensity often associated with queer girlhood—desire as a sudden, bodily surge that bypasses rationality. For Agnes, attraction is neither tentative nor polite; it interrupts, erupts, and redefines her space in the world.

However, queer girlhood in the novel is never entirely secure. The environments in which Agnes expresses her sexuality—the swimming pool, clubs, elevators, anonymous hookups—are liminal and precarious. At a queer night, she experiences both exhilaration and alienation: "A butch in a harness palms her back to move past her and she considers catching hold and asking to be rescued. Someone help me, for fuck's sake. It passes, the way it always passes, and the music is loud enough to let her forget" (Armfield 61). This scene crystallizes the ambivalence of queer girlhood: the bar is a site of visibility and possibility, yet also of overwhelm, where desire coexists with the impulse to flee.

Moreover, Armfield also frames Agnes's queer life against the background of a family that has failed to provide secure recognition. Her sisters' bond excludes her, leaving her to seek belonging elsewhere. Nevertheless, even in queer contexts, she carries a sense of being peripheral, of wanting more intimacy than she can admit: "The two of them going at it in a play of hostility that is still a greater intimacy than either has ever shown to her. Agnes shakes her head again, tries to force down the feeling that occasionally arises, of wanting to be wanted more than she pretends" (Armfield 64). Here, queer desire and sisterly longing intertwine, revealing that what Agnes craves is not merely sex but recognition—a recognition she feels denied both within her family and beyond it.

Agnes's presentation of herself as "simply a body" also reveals the defensive strategies queer girls often adopt: "It is very easy, she has found, to present herself as simply a body, to take her towel off in a changing stall and think of nothing and to feel much better for the break" (Armfield 18). To disassociate mind from body is to protect herself from the vulnerabilities of intimacy, to avoid the risk of being seen as a whole person. Armfield captures how queer girlhood is sometimes lived in fragments, in surfaces and gestures, rather than in an integrated self.

This fragmentation is further reinforced by the novel's apocalyptic setting. In a flooded world where permanence is impossible, queer girlhood mirrors the instability of the environment. Relationships flicker and dissolve as quickly as floodwaters rise; intimacy is provisional, like the precarious ground on which the sisters' house is built. The instability of home and environment echoes Agnes's sense that queer life is something improvised, improvised anew each time she enters a changing room or a bar.

Still, Armfield resists portraying queer girlhood as only alienating. The novel allows space for desire to be funny, irreverent, and alive. Agnes's scorn for "anyone who chooses to do the butterfly, which is a stroke for cunts" (Armfield 17) illustrates how queer girlhood, while fraught, is also textured by wit and irreverence. Desire here is not solemn but playful, a survival mechanism as much as a drive.

All in all, we can conclude that in *Private Rites*, queer girlhood emerges as a negotiation between visibility and erasure, desire and detachment, intimacy and alienation. Through Agnes, Armfield illustrates how the queer girl grows up in the cracks of family and society, forging identity in spaces that are temporary, unstable, and often inhospitable. If sisterhood in the novel is marked by misrecognition, queer girlhood is marked by precarious recognition—the desire to be wanted, to be seen, even if only briefly, and even if only as a body. Armfield's rendering insists on the validity of that precariousness, portraying queer girlhood not as failed adulthood but as a state of becoming, one as volatile and irreducible as the floodwaters that shape the sisters' world.

5. The Articulation of Trauma in *Private Rites*

If *Private Rites* is haunted by water, it is equally haunted by trauma: the psychological aftershocks of parental absence, the inheritance of violence, and the bodily marks of grief deferred. Julia Armfield presents trauma not as a singular event but as a dispersed condition, embedded in memory, ritual, and the very architecture of the Carmichael household. For Isla, Irene, and Agnes, trauma manifests as both rupture and continuity—an "always worsening" atmosphere that shapes the texture of their adult lives (Armfield 78).

The sisters' childhoods were defined by neglect and instability, conditions that created traumatic residues persisting into adulthood. Isla recalls the burden of caretaking, her father delegating responsibility: "a small and squalling baby, abandoned within a year of her birth by her mother and left to be managed by everyone else. The house disarranged and inhospitable, their father telling Isla daily to clean up the mess, as though she had created any of it" (Armfield 40). Trauma here emerges from an inversion of roles: children forced into premature responsibility by a parent's withdrawal. The house itself becomes complicit, its disorder encoding the absence of nurturing structures.

Moreover, Irene's memories underscore how trauma shapes self-perception. She recalls being perpetually misread by her family: "A person can be thirty, thirty-five, and yet still largely described by her sisters in terms of things which happened to be true at the age of seventeen" (Armfield 29). This persistence of outdated identity is not just irritating but traumatic, trapping Irene in a caricature of her own anger. Trauma here is the freezing of the self in the eyes of others, the impossibility of moving beyond an adolescent wound.

On the other hand, for Isla, trauma is also embodied in self-destructive impulses. Irene remembers her sister "aged eighteen, wandering out of the bathroom with a horizontal cut already clotting at the corners, asking someone to come and see what she'd done" (Armfield 56). This stark scene positions self-harm as both cry and ritual, a way of making visible what remains unspeakable. Armfield does not sensationalize the act; rather, she presents it as part of the continuum of trauma inherited within the family.

Furthermore, Agnes, too, is marked by traumatic loneliness. As a child, she staged elaborate play-suicides with stuffed animals, using her father's architectural models: "At the age of eight, unencumbered as she was by mother or sisters or very much in the way of distraction, Agnes stole a scale model that belonged to her father and used it to stage suicide attempts for stuffed animals in her bedroom at the top of the house" (Armfield 85). Though framed as childish play, this ritual reflects the internalization of despair in a household where death and absence were everyday presences. Trauma here is absorbed unconsciously, repeated as mimicry, before Agnes even understands the concept she is reenacting.

Parental figures play a central role in shaping these traumatic landscapes. The sisters' father is remembered as glacial, dismissive, and opaque: "She remembers him looking at her—opaque expression of one thinking of something else—imagines she is eight again, thirteen again, and the nothing she always was in his company" (Armfield 55). To be a "nothing" in one's father's eyes is a deeply formative trauma, rendering the child's existence unacknowledged. Similarly, their mother's volatility, with "night sweats and frenetic impulses, long periods of agitation that found her outside at odd times and in uncertain weather" (Armfield 76), contributes to an environment of instability. Isla's act of hiding this reality from Irene—putting her in a room with a record to drown out shouting—highlights how trauma is managed through silence as much as exposure.

We can even say that trauma in *Private Rites* is not confined to the past; it is continually reactivated in the present. At the hospital after their father's death, Isla experiences dissociation: "She had pictured holding her loss in one hand and then the other, pictured opening up a window and lobbing out her loss to see how quickly it fell. You're dissociating, she had thought to herself, don't do that. Don't panic, for God's sake" (Armfield 25). The absurd image of physically handling grief underscores how trauma resists assimilation; it cannot be processed linearly but only displaced into surreal mental gestures.

Armfield also links trauma to the larger environmental collapse shaping the novel's setting. The sisters live in a world where burial is impossible because the earth is flooded: "Unpleasant to say, but there's no way to bury a body in earth which is flooded out" (Armfield 59). This impossibility of ritual parallels their difficulty in mourning their father. Just as the land refuses closure, trauma refuses resolution. Instead, both seep into the present, surfacing like the "previously buried bodies" that rise from the ground (59). Trauma here is ecological as well as familial: it is the inheritance of a broken world.

Despite its weight, trauma in the novel does not obliterate the possibility of connection. Moments of sibling recognition, however fleeting, puncture the atmosphere of pain. Agnes recalls Isla once hugging her before leaving for university, an embrace "she would repeat, as if experimenting, on the same toys she would latterly fling to their deaths" (Armfield 86). Even in its awkwardness, the gesture signals how trauma and tenderness intermingle, how survival depends not only on endurance but on small, remembered acts of care.

Ultimately, Armfield portrays trauma in *Private Rites* as cyclical rather than linear. It is transmitted across generations, re-enacted in bodies, and embedded in the environment. The Carmichael sisters carry their parents' wounds as their own, manifesting in anger, detachment, and self-destruction. Yet the novel's insistence on narrating these experiences also gestures toward the possibility of articulation. Trauma may never fully heal, but in being spoken—or written—it becomes shareable, if not solvable. In Armfield's world, survival is not the erasure of trauma but the ability to live with it, to persist amid its waters, and to recognize its presence in oneself and in one's sisters.

6. CONCLUSION

In approaching Julia Armfield's *Private Rites*, this article set out three interconnected objectives: first, to analyse the novel's portrayal of sisterhood as a site of intimacy, hostility, and misrecognition; second, to examine how queer girlhood is articulated through Agnes's perspective, exploring the tensions between desire, embodiment, and detachment; and third, to investigate how trauma—both familial and ecological—structures the lives of the Carmichael sisters. Having now addressed these objectives, it is possible to trace their convergence and to assess how they collectively illuminate the thematic core of Armfield's novel.

The first objective was to show how *Private Rites* complicates traditional literary notions of sisterhood. Rather than presenting the Carmichael sisters as bound by unconditional loyalty, Armfield depicts a fragile and often antagonistic connection, where recognition is inconsistent and rivalry is endemic. Isla and Irene, close in age, remain locked in patterns of mutual misreading, while Agnes occupies the precarious position of the half-sister, perpetually peripheral to their bond. Yet, as the previous analysis of sisterhood demonstrates, intimacy is not absent but refracted through conflict, sarcasm, and half-articulated care. Armfield thus achieves a representation of sisterhood that is at once honest and unsettling, foregrounding the paradoxical blend of estrangement and closeness that defines sibling life. This objective clarifies how *Private Rites* expands the literary archive of sibling relationships, moving away from idealized unity toward a portrait of fractured but persistent kinship.

The second objective was to consider queer girlhood in the novel, particularly as embodied by the character of Agnes. The analysis highlights how her sexuality is expressed through impulse, corporeality, and a defensive detachment that treats intimacy as a reprieve rather than a communion. Her encounters at swimming pools and queer clubs illustrate how queer girlhood often unfolds in transient, unstable spaces where visibility and alienation are intertwined. Crucially, Agnes's longing to be recognized—to be wanted more than she admits—parallels her position within the family, where she remains on the margins of her sisters' bond. By achieving this objective, the article demonstrated how Armfield weaves queer girlhood into the novel not as an isolated subplot but as a thematic extension of sisterhood itself: both are shaped by a desire for recognition, by the risks of intimacy, and by the difficulty of being fully seen.

The third objective centred on trauma, exploring how it permeates the sisters' lives in both personal and collective registers. The analysis traced how childhood neglect, parental volatility, and acts of self-destruction echo across the sisters' adulthood, shaping their identities in enduring ways. Trauma in *Private Rites* is not resolved but repeated, manifesting in dissociation, compulsions, and gestures of silence. Moreover, the novel situates trauma within a broader ecological context, as the flooded world disallows traditional mourning rituals, mirroring the sisters' inability to process grief. In meeting this objective, the article reveals how Armfield collapses distinctions between the personal and the environmental, suggesting that trauma is as much atmospheric as it is individual.

Taken together, these three lines of inquiry underscore how *Private Rites* interrogates what it means to live in the aftermath—of broken families, failed intimacies, and a collapsing climate. Sisterhood, queer girlhood, and trauma are not separate categories but overlapping frameworks through which the Carmichael sisters experience the world. Isla's caretaking, Irene's anger, and Agnes's queer detachment all emerge as responses to the same constellation of absence and instability. The objectives of this article, therefore, culminate in the recognition that Armfield's novel resists neat resolutions: sisterhood never becomes wholly reconciled, queer girlhood never entirely secure, trauma never fully healed. Instead, *Private Rites* insists on portraying survival amid fracture, intimacy amid estrangement, and desire amid precariousness.

In fulfilling its objectives, the article has shown that Armfield's work contributes to contemporary literature not only through its dystopian setting but through its piercing examination of human relationships under pressure. By dissecting the layered dynamics of sisterhood, by situating queer girlhood within both personal and collective contexts, and by analysing the persistence of trauma, this study illuminates how *Private Rites* is less a narrative of endings than of endurance. Its characters do not overcome their wounds so much as learn to inhabit them, a vision that mirrors the ecological instability of their world. In this sense, this analysis affirms the novel's thematic coherence: the fractured ties between sisters, the tentative articulations of queer identity, and the lingering presence of trauma all converge to form a narrative of survival in the ruins of family and environment alike.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

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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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"I'M SELFISH BECAUSE I HAVE TO BE"[1]: POSTFEMINIST VIBES AND GIRL POWER POLITICS IN *GIRLS STATE*[2]

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Abstract: This article examines the 2024 documentary *Girls State* which chronicles a week-long immersive political leadership program hosted by the American Legion Auxiliary for girls in Missouri. The film, directed by Amanda McBaine and Jesse Moss, captures girls' experiences with creating their own governments and political parties, campaigning for elected office, and adjudicating legal disputes in mock simulations of the democratic process. It bears witness to their political development while bringing viewers face-to-face with the promises and failures of postfeminism to deliver authentic forms of empowerment. Drawing from girls' commentary, I suggest *Girls State* elucidates the paradoxes of exceptionality for girl leaders today. I mobilize Harris and Dobson's "casting of girls as 'suffering actors'" to underscore the current political moment in American girls' lives and to appreciate the shaping of girls' political selves across postfeminist scripts of neoliberal girl power (154). The article concludes with alternative patterns for girls' political recognition.
Keywords: girl empowerment; *Girls State*; neoliberal girl power; postfeminism; suffering actors; recognition

"SOY EGOÍSTA PORQUE TENGO QUE SERLO": VIBRAS POSTFEMINISTAS Y LAS POLÍTICAS DEL *GIRL POWER* EN *GIRLS STATE*

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Resumen: Este artículo examina el documental *Girls State* (2024), que narra un programa inmersivo de liderazgo político de una semana de duración, organizado por la *American Legion Auxiliary* para niñas en Misuri. La película, dirigida por Amanda McBaine y Jesse Moss, captura las experiencias de las niñas y adolescentes en la creación de sus propios gobiernos y partidos políticos, la campaña para cargos electos y la resolución de disputas legales en simulacros del proceso democrático. Da testimonio de su desarrollo político a la vez que enfrenta al público a las promesas y los fracasos del posfeminismo para ofrecer formas auténticas de empoderamiento. A partir de los comentarios de las chicas, se sugiere que *Girls State* esclarece las paradojas de la excepcionalidad para las niñas líderes de hoy. Se utiliza presentación de las niñas y adolescentes como 'actores sufrientes' de Harris y Dobson para subrayar el momento político actual en la vida de las chicas estadounidenses y para apreciar la conformación de su identidad política a través de los guiones posfeministas del poder femenino neoliberal (154). El artículo concluye con una propuesta de patrones alternativos para la identificación política de las niñas.
Palabras clave: empoderamiento femenino; *Girls State*; poder neoliberal de las chicas; postfeminismo; actores sufrientes; identificación

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last fifteen years, girl leaders have circulated across cultural and political landscapes as empowered postfeminist heroes poised to save the world. Public celebrations of the girl, Jessica Taft writes, signal "changes in the political, social, and cultural landscape [that] have made girl activists both more legible and more desirable for media attention and public consumption" ("Hopeful" 2). Prominent girl activists from Malala Yousafzai to Greta Thunberg, X González, and Autumn Peltier appear in mainstream media as exceptional political actors who affirm the promise of girl empowerment (Bent, "This is not" 795; Sriskandarajah 159; Vanner and Dugal vii; Walters 23); indeed, senior reporter at the *Huffington Post* Emma Gray declares, "young women have always been our nation's most powerful force for change." Girls' visibility as savvy changemakers relies upon neoliberal girl power scripts yoked to affirmations of personal choice and agency above collective, community-driven action. For girl leaders, this discursive positioning signals the boundaries

of their political success, making clear the legibility risks if they go off the girl power script (Duvall; Khoja-Moolji and Chacko 98; Switzer et al. 35).

Girlhood studies scholars have illustrated how the trope of exceptionality affixes to girl-led movements both bringing critical visibility to their political efforts but also managing their counter-cultural practices (Bent, "Reflections" 182; Brown 6; Duvall; Edell et al. 694; Taft, "Hopeful" 3-6). Whereas girl-power feminism affords political currency to Anita Harris's "can-do-girls" who play the game of postfeminist success (13); girl leaders who resist neoliberal positioning invite public scrutiny and open-hostility to their politics (Duvall; Projansky 6). Taft maintains exceptional girl power stories engender feelings of hopeful heroism that "resolve public anxieties about the future" through the illusion that every girl can succeed irrespective of sociocultural, economic, and geopolitical positioning ("Hopeful" 1). I have similarly concluded that girl leaders learn "to sell the girl-power story [because] the more their activism is represented as special and in support of individual market capital, the more likely they are to appear favorably across different media sites" (Bent, "This is not" 798). Girl-power feminism marks some forms of girl empowerment as a neutral public good codified under the terms of neoliberal exceptionality whereas others become invisible, illegible, or otherwise undesirable subject positions.

Despite the compelling qualities of the girl as heroic changemaker, resistance to gender equality efforts in the United States, and around the globe, challenge what we might call feminist progress for girls. During the first term of the Trump administration, Catherine Rottenberg described feeling like "we have moved from an arguably postfeminist moment (back) to a feminist one – a moment in which feminism not only still seems necessary but also increasingly mainstream" (330). Feminist scholars have since re-examined the ambivalences across feminism's increased visibility and celebrated effects with its political value and impact in girls and women's lives (Banet-Weiser x; Crossley 4; Keller and Ryan 3; Rottenberg 330). Because public awareness of feminism does not always signal broad commitment to feminist principles, Sarah Banet-Weiser explains, "we are now in a new era of the gender wars, an era that is marked by a dramatic increase in the visible expression and acceptance of feminism, and by the similarly vast amount of public vitriol and violence directed toward women" and girls (5). Rhetorics of feminism and neoliberal girl power sit

beside those which reflect misogynist, white supremacist, homophobic, and transphobic ideologies with few solutions offered beyond identity-driven or marketplace-based politics (Calkin 22; Rottenberg 345). The recent clawing back of gender equality measures evidenced by the 2022 Dobbs decision reversing *Roe v. Wade*[3], attacks on so-called "gender ideology"[4] and reversals on diversity, equity, and inclusion practices in the United States illustrate the embodied limits of the postfeminist girl power ethos and other forms of popular feminism.

For American girls, I suggest surges in their public visibility collide with the realities of their gendered and intersectional embodiment as "suffering actors" with limited terms of recognition (Harris and Dobson 146; McDonald 11). *Girls State,* the 2024 documentary produced and directed by Amanda McBaine and Jesse Moss, captures how postfeminist scripts of neoliberal girl power inform the scope and articulation of girls' political selves. The film offers viewers a nuanced "understanding of girls' agency in a post-girlpower cultural landscape," by tracing the experiences of teenage girls at a seven-day national democracy program also called "Girls State" (Harris and Dobson 154). Drawing from Harris and Dobson's invitation to see girls' agency "not only in and through actions deemed 'resistant' but in struggles for coherence, social acceptance and survival," in this article, I grapple with the experiential paradoxes of empowerment illustrated throughout the film (153). Specifically, I consider what it means to imagine girl leaders as emergent, suffering political actors who labor under an increasingly antifeminist and postfeminist condition of gendered power. I suggest alternative readings of girls' political subjectivity in *Girls State* to extend my analysis beyond the normative framework of feminist agency and/or resistance and to underscore the girl as a political subject who struggles to lead productively with the tools of postfeminist neoliberal girl power.

[3] In 2024, the Guttmacher Institute documented the impact of the decision to revoke the constitutional right to abortion in the United States. The report notes decreased care facilities, abortion bans, worsening contraceptive access, declining maternal health, and an erosion of trust in reproductive medicine, among other concerns. See Guttmacher for full report.

[4] On 20 January 2025, the White House released an executive order titled "Defending Women from Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government." The order coincides with others targeting girls and LGBTQ+ people through blocked funding for reproductive healthcare, prohibitions on transgender girls in school sports, occlusions to gender-affirming care for those under 19 years of age, and requirements for U.S. passport holders to use assigned birth sex. See Human Rights Campaign and Corredor for discussion of the "gender ideology" countermovement.

2. Overview of *Girls State*, the Program and the Film

Since the late 1930's and early 1940's, the American Legion Auxiliary (ALA) has delivered the Girls State program to American girls across the United States. According to the program's history, ALA sought to develop a preparation course for young high school-aged women which trained them in civics education while re-affirming "the values and advantages of America's democratic form of government and the freedoms democracy offers American's citizens" (ALA, "Empire State"). Girls State encourages girls to recognize "the positive processes of self-government and good citizenship as practiced in America's democratic society" (ALA, "Empire State"). Participants learn about different levels of local, state, and national government during an immersive one-week course held in all fifty U.S. states. Described as a non-partisan, apolitical educational effort to "teach and instill pride" in America's youth, Girls State instructs attendees on the formation of political parties, importance of voting, and the role of democratic leadership in a three-tiered governmental structure (ALA, "Empire State").

The Missouri Girls State (MGS) program featured in the self-titled documentary film has been offered to girls since 1940 with volunteer facilitators providing all workshops and training exercises (Worthmore). Program objectives include: "shaping confident and informed leaders who contribute meaningfully to their communities" and promoting a shared "sense of patriotism, military service appreciation, dedication to democratic principles, and a commitment to active participation in society" (ALA, "Missouri Girls State"). ALA delivers customized versions of the Girls State program to "a diverse group of young women with a shared desire to learn and lead" in American politics.

Distinct from ALA's Girls State program, the documentary film *Girls State* acts as a companion to McBaine and Moss's 2020 biopic *Boys State* which explores political polarization in the U.S. through the lens of four teenage boys attending the Texas Boys State program. New York Times contributor Natalia Winkelman brands *Boys State* with "the vibe… of a Young Republicans conference" while movie critic David Fear of Rolling Stone argues viewers "could feel both hopeful watching the film (these children are our future!) and cynical (these children are our future?)." For McBaine and Moss, the production of *Girls State* allowed them to continue exploring contemporary American politics with a focus on

seven teenage girls attending the 2022 MGS program. As the film follows Girls State participants Emily, Brooke, Nisha, Maddie, Tochi, Cecilia, and Faith viewers recognize how existing divisions across the American political landscape interface with gender disparities evident in the Girls and Boys State program delivery. MGS delegates provide salient assessments of the problematic ways gender scaffolds the Girls State initiative, drawing attention to the intersections of gender normative power and the political limits of postfeminist empowered girlhood.

It is perhaps because *Girls State* brings the paradoxes of girls' political visibility to the fore that audiences leave the film "feeling both tinges of empowerment and a palpable sense of deflation" (Fear). This sense of contradiction evinces what Harris and Dobson describe as the ways girls suffer because "young women are now in part constrained by the story of their enablement" as empowered actors (148). I suggest the film illustrates how postfeminist vibes and neoliberal girl power scripts contribute to girls' positioning as suffering actors. In the next section, I situate Girls State programming in context with other girl empowerment initiatives studied by feminist and girlhood scholars for the last two decades.

3. GIRLS, POLITICS, AND POWER: THE PROJECT OF EMPOWERED GIRLHOOD

The development of girlhood studies corresponds with rising socio-cultural, economic and geopolitical interest in girls' lives in the United States and around the globe. Feminist scholars engaged in this work, Mary Celeste Kearney observes, affirm their shared commitment to "make the world a more respectful place for female youth" (22). The practice of conducting research on, with, and for girls requires an appreciation for how girls and their girlhoods are entangled in present-day geopolitics. Catherine Vanner for example stresses how transnational theorizations of girlhood "expose the limitations that systems can place on girls' agency, particularly for girls of color… while recognizing girls' potential for resilience in global systems of patriarchy" (123). Transnational research on girls clarifies political, economic, historic, and socio-cultural forces which shape public celebrations of empowered and exceptional girls; it moreover evinces the asymmetrical circulation of postfeminist neoliberal girl power scripts in the lives of girls situated throughout the world. Girlhood, Taft

attests, "is not a singular category, so while many different girlhoods receive public acclaim for being 'empowered,' the shape and meaning given to empowerment varies by race, class, and national context" ("The Political Lives" 260). Studies about girls' relationship to politics and power relatedly reveal emergent patterns in programmatic approaches to girls' political development. In the following review, I offer a summary of methods used to scaffold girl empowerment and related intersectional and transnational implications of such practices on girls' political selves.

Some of the earliest research on girls' political lives sought to disentangle women's experiences from girls. Pamela Bettis and Natalie Adams describe being "frustrated with the feminist researchers who took what were 'women's issues' and transplanted them onto the lives of girls" (1). Adult-centered models of girl empowerment presume girls have similar needs and desires to women and that girls' interests align with those adult women imagine for their former girlhood selves. This relational pattern leaves little space for what Claudia Mitchell identifies as "the ways in which adult women can be part of the problem in the lives of girls" too (95). Popular literatures produced by scholars over twenty-years ago often presented problematic versions of girls as either idealized future feminist subjects or failed victims in constant crisis (Gonick 1). Marnina Gonick suggests the public convergence of these discursive formations functioned "as a device for understanding girls, monitoring their development, and regulating their identities" in accordance with values and norms determined by adults in girls' lives (18). To measure girl empowerment against adult feminist priorities is to relegate her to an indeterminate and largely subordinate subject positioning. The configuration of the girl as irrelevant to, a mirror or, and/or a problem for feminist futures continues to affect girl empowerment agendas today.

At the same time, girlhood studies began to shift conversation away from adult-centered perspectives and toward understanding how age and generation shape girls' political lives. Too often, Yasmin Jiwani, Candis Steenbergen, and Claudia Mitchell write, "girls have been spoken for and about as a homogenized group without agency and often without acknowledgement of the complex power relations that weave through their diverse experiences" (vii). Feminist studies about girls as complicated political actors disrupt normative approaches, authoring more girl-centered, diverse, and transnational analyses of

how structures of power inform girls' political selves and experiences. In their analysis of global girlhood discourses, for example, Jackie Kirk, Claudia Mitchell, and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh identify three basic assumptions embedded in international policies via empowerment-focused programming. The first practice pathologizing girlhood is concentrated on girlhood in the Global South, presenting girls as "silent figures" who "suffer a series of interlocking oppressions and discriminations taking place at the family, school, community, and state levels" (21). Girls positioned in this discursive framework require the protection of others to shore up their presumed futures as mothers and caregivers. Moreover, the pathology marker means girl engagement revolves around humanitarian and global policymaking efforts instead of seeing girls as "individuals and citizens with a full set of rights and expectations right now" (21). The second practice labeled consuming girlhood aligns girls in the Global North with personal consumption practices and the market economy. Here, girls' political visibility is tied to their vulnerabilities in the neoliberal global economy, whereas in the third modality of girl power programming practitioners focus on selling branded assertions of self-empowerment above all else. The girl power approach codifies "discourses of Western 'girl power' and non-Western 'girl powerlessness'" as essential markers of girls' individual successes and failures (25). Taken together, Kirk et al.'s analysis of the girl as produced within discursive patterns of vulnerability, consumption, or girl power uncovers the normative boundaries of girl engagement programming and reveals the political subjectivities made available to girls in globalized contexts.

Taft investigates similarly the programmatic undercurrents in U.S. girls' organizations to distinguish between different methods of girl engagement in the public sphere. For Taft, girl empowerment programming models assume either normative or transformative approaches to girls' political selves. She writes "some organizations… see girls as needing protection from the wider world, while others encourage girls' public presence, visibility, and voice" ("Girlhood in Action" 26). Programming for girls under the normative model assumes individual girls must learn how to navigate societal barriers and systemic inequalities through the acquisition of skills whereas the transformative model imagines girls as critical actors with the capacity to "claim authority in public spaces" (25). The normative model centers protectionist ideologies of girlhood which ignore racial and class-based differences to promote universal understandings of girls' political lives (19).

While transformative programs contrastingly ground girls' experiences within sociocultural and intersectional explorations, offering girls the opportunity to "see their problems not merely as private troubles, but as socially constructed and… [therefore] not isolated from the community and social forces" (23). Programming for girl leaders from the transformative approach signals an appreciation for girls' political capacities, both positioning girls as political peers and disrupting normative approaches to their political subjectivities.

The studies offered by Kirk et al. and Taft articulate valuable strands of analysis for thinking about girls' political selves as public empowerment projects. Whereas Taft's work describes divergent approaches to thinking about how girls act in the public sphere, Kirk et al. reflect on the ways circulating ideas about girls' lives shape what is and is not possible for differently positioned girlhood subjects. Over the last ten years, scholars have woven these investigative elements together productively by bringing visibility to girls' diverse political selves and offering new intersectional considerations for girls' relationship to power. Shenila Khoja-Moolji revisits previous engagements with girl leaders in Pakistan to "read against the grain" of dominant human rights and global girl discourses and hear "what I had missed the first time" when guided only by stable, homogenous Western narratives of girl power rather than difference (754). Heather Switzer likewise shares insight on how Kenyan Maasai schoolgirls construct new identities which evade preeminent discourses about formal schooling and educational success (137). While Sandrina de Finney explores how the practice of "presencing" disrupts dominant narratives about Indigenous girlhood "teach[ing] us about coming together differently… to subvert exclusionary notions of girlhood and girlhood praxis" in everyday life (21). Additional research about girls' lives and diverse perspectives throughout the world point to the vibrant urgency with which girlhood scholars have responded to the call to see girls "as experts on their lives" (Brown, "Powered" 5).[5] For me, this vast body of research affirms the invaluable role girls play in everyday life as complex subjects with experiences and insights worthy of exploration, and of girlhood scholars' desire to bring those perspectives to the academic community.

[5] See for example Brown "Hear Our Truths"; Moeller; Ossai et al.; Rogers; Soto; and Sriskandarajah for thought-provoking analyses about girls' lives in Black America, Brazil, Nigeria, Cambodia, Mexico, and Indigenous Canada.

Thus, bolstered by girlhood studies literatures and drawing from an evolving political moment in the U.S., I ground the following textual analysis of *Girls State* in the "seepages and excesses" of girls' experiences as suffering actors (Khoja-Moolji 745). I propose the film captures the limitations of postfeminist neoliberal girl power to deliver a reliable means of girl empowerment, and in doing so, bears witness to the ambivalences generated under normative models wedded to the girl-in-crisis framework. As I come to show, *Girls State* attends to several impactful moments with Emily, Brooke, Nisha, Maddie, Tochi, Cecilia, and Faith which illustrate how girls' political desires and experiences extend far beyond the discursive paradigms of neoliberal girl power. *Girls State* offers audiences rather a critical window onto the precarious legibility of girls' political subjectivity and suffering agency.

4. Theorizing the Girl as Suffering Actor

The concept of the suffering actor originates in Kevin McDonald's sociological analysis of youth living in Melbourne, Australia who experience regular cultural and social transformations that have shaped their sense of self. In exploring youth gangs and graffiti artists as well as youth with eating disorders, and those marked by gender and racialized identities, McDonald describes "encounter[ing] social actors attempting to name powerful forms of social experience" without access to previous forms of socio-political stability characteristic of the modern industrial era (10). Neoliberal paradigms signal patterns of dissolving institutions, governmentality, and social forces of control whereby the individual subject is made responsible for and vulnerable to the production of the self. As McDonald writes, youth "is no longer organized in terms of the tension between generation or class, nor in terms of socializing institutions; it is increasingly shaped by imperatives of producing forms of subjectivity, of mobilizing self-esteem, of entering into communication with self and other, of participating in a social world of flow and movement" (6). The terms of neoliberal subjectivity require evolving technologies of the self as youth "struggle to be an actor" amid changing relationships between self and other, local and global, and public and private (11). McDonald further suggests youth experience neoliberal demands more intensely than others, and as a result, confront periods of regular experiential suffering in their struggle for recognition (11-12).

I scaffold McDonald's theorization of the suffering actor beside Harris and Dobson's invitation to imagine the girl as a particular kind of suffering actor to explore girls' political subjectivity as witnessed in *Girls State.* Specifically, I aim to respond to Harris and Dobson's desire for "a more nuanced – yet readily available – vocabulary for describing girls' locations within structure/agency binaries" that shape their lived experiences (146). I propose positing the girl as a suffering actor allows us to regard the evolution of postfeminist girl power in the present moment. McDonald speculates that "engag[ing] with the confusion of the present, its uncertainties and its possibilities" compels youth to act within and among the dimensions of their suffering (12). Thus, in reading *Girls State* as an illustration of girls' political suffering, the film uncovers the complexities of girl empowerment under postfeminist regimes of neoliberal girl power which I categorize as suffering in sisterhood and the fragility of girl empowerment.

4.1. "LESS FEMINISM, MORE FEMININITY"[6]: SUFFERING IN SISTERHOOD

The suffering actor desires a sense of stability and purpose to counter rising economic, sociocultural, and geopolitical uncertainties generated by neoliberal sensibilities (McDonald 6). Yet, because neoliberal conditions produce fractured instabilities, McDonald proposes young people learn to reclaim their selfhood by tapping into forms of identity from the past and not of the present or future (11-12). Neoliberal subjectivities in this way obligate girls' paradoxical suffering as they cannot imagine themselves as full subjects in the present or future and therefore look to female identities from a pre-determined past to inform their present. This process operates as a self-regulating practice whereby girls appear to labor out of step with the material and discursive realities of their lives. Indeed, the politics of self-(re)production based on a re-imagined sense of the past does not always map easily onto girls' present or future selves.

Girls State captures how girls "struggle to be an actor" within the boundaries of postfeminist neoliberal subjectivity and through performative iterations of a gender normative past, present, and future (McDonald 11). Throughout the documentary, program attendees comment on the differences between their experiences with Girls State activities

[6] Alex Clark qtd. in Goldberg.

and that of their peers in Boys State. At the start of the film, viewers hear Girls State volunteers review behavioral guidelines and expectations for girl delegates, inclusive of monitoring their movement on campus through a buddy system, dressing in clothing that covers their bodies (especially their shoulders and backs), and avoiding interactions with Boys State delegates outside of coordinated and heavily supervised programs. Adult volunteers explain to girl attendees, "do not ever go by yourself anywhere. Ok? We are not alone on this campus, so we should never be alone" (*Girls State,* 00:08:53-00:09:01). These scenes make clear the gendered and heteronormative assumptions undergirding Girls State programming and positioning girl leaders as inherently vulnerable, at-risk subjects in need of adult protection. Volunteers further codify victim-blaming narratives about sexual violence in these moments, relying upon gendered expectations of the past rather than those of the present and/or future. Whereas girl attendees recognize adult concerns for their safety, the delegates nevertheless challenge their counselors to explain how mobility restrictions for girl delegates on campus demonstrates political respect and equity. One Girls State candidate for governor, Cecilia, for instance, capitalizes on delegate frustrations with adult facilitators who refuse to engage girls in productive debate about dress codes. Directors McBaine and Moss capture Cecilia's narrative of emergent feminist discontent over the policing of girls' bodies beside concurrent scenes with an adult volunteer who dismissively remarks to several girl delegates gathered "you can talk about Boys State now if you want to, or, maybe talk about government" (*Girls State,* 00:37:07-00:37:12). The juxtaposition of girl leaders' demands for productive dialogue sits uncomfortably beside adults' disregard for honest conversation with girls as full political actors. Viewers witness instead the ironies of the Girls State program which presumes to deliver girl empowerment but only on adult-defined, and seemingly gender regressive, terms.

Girls State programming reliance on traditional gender patterns also emerges across several spliced scenes from opening night at the university stadium and during orientation in a large auditorium. Whether visualized through clips of girls doing cartwheels on the stadium field or in hair braiding sessions, cupcake decorating, and friendship bracelet-making with patriotic beads of red, white, and blue, viewers recognize the grounding of Girls State programming in celebrations of apolitical American girlhood and heteronormative femininity. Collectively, these scenes offer another version of the girlhood experience, and

unlike previous concerns with dress codes or girls' safety on campus, viewers observe a form of girlhood which appears joyful and jovial as individual girls laugh, dance, and connect with one another. Girls State programming in some ways seems to suggest an immediate bond between girls because of their gendered experiences of the world. At the same time, girls' gender normative positioning in the film signals what Taft describes as girls' political harmlessness where the girl is marked as unserious in order to contain or erase any perceived resistance to normative power and control ("Hopeful" 8-11). To imagine girl leaders as harmless, Taft writes, "enables the public to continue to feel positively about the girl activist herself as a hopeful figure of possibility, and to skip over a serious engagement with her demands for collective action and major social change" ("Hopeful" 10). I suggest it is in these moments of girlhood celebration that the audience gains a sense of the girl as politically harmless, both silencing and depoliticizing girl delegates demands for robust political debate at Girls State and instead presenting them with cupcakes and bracelets.

Several other moments in *Girls State* bring viewers closer to girls' suffering as actors. For example, Girls State gubernatorial candidate Emily muses at Boys State, "I bet they're talking about things that are really important right now, like I bet they're talking about *Roe v. Wade*. I bet they're talking about second amendment. I don't think they are talking about crop tops" (*Girls State,* 00:37:33-11:37:44). Once again, the viewer recognizes how girl leaders become constrained and silenced under the neoliberal conditions of postfeminist celebratory girlhood as their legitimate concerns and critiques of the Girls State program are dismissed as unnecessary, ignorable, and seemingly harmless. But as the film progresses, Emily decides to draft an article for Missouri Girls State's newspaper about the obvious differences in the Girls State and Boys State programs. During her investigation, Emily discovers that Girls State funding is approximately $400,000 less than Boys State with each receiving $200,000 and $600,000 respectively (Worthmore). She likewise identifies distinctions in delegate codes of conduct, formal political training, professional development, field trips and downtime during program delivery (Worthmore). Viewers in turn might recall scenes where Boys State members appear in active debate about critical issues, or participating in policy development workshops, and meeting with members of the Missouri political establishment. At one point, we witness Boys State governor-elect being 'sworn into

office' by Missouri Governor Mike Parson but there is no comparable moment for Girls State attendees.

The contrast between the programs is further illustrated by the film's documentation of Girls State orientation; during these scenes, girl delegates learn and perform the program's official song to culminate their time together. As girl delegates begin to learn choreography one attendee states under her breath, "if the boys don't have to do this, I am going to be pissed" (*Girls State,* 00:11:26-00:11:28). Like the Girls State delegates, viewers understand almost instinctively that the Boys State programming does not include choreographed musical numbers nor cupcake and bracelet-making stations as part of their political development training. Gender normative expectations for girls instead drive and limit programming parameters for Girls State even as the program portends to build essential political skills and leadership tools for girls' present and future selves. These paradoxical forces play out repeatedly, and in one scene candidate for Girls State Attorney General, Tochi asks, "when are we going to get to the feminism, and the connection, and all that?" (*Girls State,* 00:08:14-00:08:20). It is my position girl delegate encounters with this unserious version of their political selves frustrates their experiences of the Girls State program, reinforcing normative expectations of apolitical girlhoods and offering little to prepare them for political leadership today.

At the same time, for girls and viewers who have always known a postfeminist culture of neoliberal girl power, I contend *Girls State* invites new understandings of girls' political positioning as suffering actors who navigate previous struggles for gender equality in the context of the present. Scholars of girlhood remind us that postfeminist vibes of female solidarity and celebratory girlhood confine girls' political agency to normative models of empowerment which neglect their political capacities to build collective and sustainable change (Brown, "Powered"; Edell et al.; Taft "Girlhood in Action"). Normative programming for girl empowerment upholds their political status as harmless actors bound to celebrations of gender normative girl power; however, for girls who mean to act differently or in excess of the script, *Girls State* reveals how conflicting cultural messages of postfeminist girl power and empowered solidarity prove insufficient for girls' political

recognition. Emily's op-ed about the Girls State program, for instance, recenters girls' political desires in the language of female empowerment; she writes:

> One goal that is repeatedly reaffirmed throughout the week by counselors, keynote speakers, program leaders, and the delegates themselves is women's empowerment. The delegates have been told to critically consider the world in which they live, as well as speak out for what they believe is right. It may be a long road to fiscal equity and a solution to certain social injustices that delegates feel exist, but by starting the conversation and bringing attention to the differences between programs, Girls State and Boys State can become one step closer to equality. (Worthmore)

In Emily's estimation, Girls State offers delegates an opportunity to capitalize on the presumed successes of the feminist movement and to build solidarity with other empowered girl subjects. She notes the potential for girl leadership in social justice movements throughout the world and appears hopeful about the future for Girls State participants, and for girls themselves. However, I also read elements of political suffering in her assessment of the Girls State experience; indeed, while she recalls the promises of female empowerment and girl-powered sisterhood, she speaks also to the ways in which these same ideals failed to empower her and others at Girls State. The paradoxical possibilities of empowered girlhood clash with the experiential realities of girls' lives; Emily struggles beside other Girls State delegates in her desire to act with purpose while simultaneously (re)negotiating the presumed harmlessness of her voice when identifying clear evidence of gender discrimination.

One powerful element of *Girls State* emerges in the film's capturing of an ever-evolving present where neoconservative calls for "less feminism, more femininity" sit beside feminist manifestos declaring the 'future is female' (Clark qtd. in Goldberg). During Girls State orientation, a girl delegate opens the session describing a scene from Disney's *Mary Poppins* where Mrs. Banks celebrates women's suffrage. She recollects, "as [Mrs. Banks] sings of the work she has done to secure votes for English women, she uses her soft, fluttery voice to produce a song that exudes strength. She does not need to shout. She is powerfully feminine and at Girls State, so are we" (*Girls State,* 00:00:49-00:01:08). She continues, "we, as women, are often taught that in order to have our voices heard, we must appear and speak and debate like men. We must be strong, overpowering, and demand attention. In reality, nothing could be further from the truth. The truth is that femininity is powerful" (00:01:10-

00:01:32). In this example, Girls State endeavors to remake girls' political desires in alignment with neoliberal postfeminist girl power sensibilities that "privilege the individual, apolitical empowerment of girls and women, who are hailed as productive feminized workers, citizens and mothers" (Keller and Ryan 3). Drawing attention to girls' femininity as a pre-determined set of gender normative practices yokes their political empowerment to a postfeminist climate where individuals must reclaim gender normative patterns otherwise lost to an explicitly feminist politic. This material-discursive practice does not necessarily reject feminist histories or equality gains in American culture, nor does it suggest feminism is no longer needed to empower girls. Rather, it underscores how feminist sensibilities are "reworked to accommodate mainstream ideas" effectively re-aligning girl empowerment within traditional power structures (Keller and Ryan 4). I read the call to girls to (re)discover softer forms of female empowerment as evidence of how girl power paradoxes trigger girls' political suffering under postfeminist neoliberal conditions.

Excerpts from Girls State workshops and conversations among girl delegates further evince the reclaiming of femininity as essential to Girls State's girl empowerment project. Girls labor throughout the film to demonstrate self-empowerment through shared acts of friendship, kindness, female solidarity, and sisterhood. As one adult speaker explains, "we want you to be the women who straighten other women's crowns, not the women who point out that they are crooked" (*Girls State,* 00:20:22-00:20:30). Girls State delegates seem to take this lesson to heart as viewers encounter scene after scene with individual girls offering support to one another over the course of the week. Girl delegates serving as Girls State Supreme Court judges, for example, stand in a circle with their arms wrapped around each other, heads together, offering words of encouragement for one another. They recite affirmations together like, "I deserve to be here" (00:53:49-00:53:50), "we are all qualified" (00:53:55-00:53:56) and "we are all amazingly talented" (00:53:59-00:54:01), among several others. The scene validates the hopeful potential embedded in an emergent sisterhood where girls support each other irrespective of socio-cultural or geopolitical differences. As Taft reminds us, figurations of the girl as hopeful concurrently serve to demobilize political action because it "assuages public feelings of concern and returns us to a position of political comfort" ("Hopeful" 8). Marking girls as hopeful misaligns their empowerment with more acceptable, non-threatening demonstrations of political agency giving further consequence

to the girl as suffering actor. Here too the paradoxes of postfeminist empowerment leave girls struggling to act beyond the individual level. Brooke's summarizes her experience on the Girls State Supreme Court, estimating, "I am sixteen. I can't really go out there and pass legislation or rule on any kind of actual court, so… it felt empowering, but it also made me pretty sad" (*Girls State,* 01:02:04-01:02:58). It is in these reflective moments that Girls State delegates make apparent their experiential suffering as postfeminist girl power subjects without the political means to change the world.

4.2. The Fragility of Girl Empowerment

The push to realign girls' political desires with an apolitical version of girl power feminism which elevates femininity as political agency reflects the deeper fragility of girl empowerment projects in the present moment. McDonald's theorization of youth as suffering actors describes young people struggling to "produce a coherent experience … with the confusion of the present" (12). For girls, "the struggle for embodied subjectivity" vis-à-vis political visibility remains increasingly fraught in an evolving media landscape obsessed with girl activist stories of heroic saviorism (McDonald 10; Taft, "Hopeful" 1-3). Feminist scholars who collaborate regularly with girl leaders have expressed deep frustration with media's resistance to telling more complicated stories about intergenerational feminist and girl-led activism (Bent, "This is not" 812; Brown "Powered" 4; Edell et al. 699). Neoliberal ideals, Dana Edell, Lyn Mikel Brown, and Celeste Montano assert, demand "stories of individuals overcoming obstacles and succeeding on their own have power over stories of collective, coalition-building efforts. Nothing sells quite like a young, smart, "'everygirl' taking on… a company" or political system (699). While stories about girl leaders abound, girlhood scholars recall how the exceptional girl script circulates to depoliticize, soften, or otherwise curb girl-led resistance to normative forms of power (Bent "Reflections" 182; Edell et al. 694; Taft "Hopeful" 1). Girls' capacities to act as changemakers, leaders, and political actors are lessened when narrowed to the tools of postfeminist neoliberal girl power. *Girls State* captures this dynamic through scenes that trace girls' attempts to *act* as political leaders while alluding to the very real differences between living as an empowered girl at Girls State and in America today. During the Girls State gubernatorial speeches, Cecilia

generates immediate enthusiasm from the delegation as she recalls shared experiences of misogyny at Girls State and in everyday life. She proclaims:

> I am supposed to come up here and tell you the most important, the most compelling part of myself, so I will. I am selfish. I am selfish because I have to be. We all have to be. Women in America aren't given respect. As a lifeguard, I have been told by middle-aged men, 'Cecilia, you should smile.' I have been told by 12-year-old boys that I have an attitude and even here, Girls State, a place that is meant to empower women, our bodies are policed. We are told that our shorts are too short, and our tops are too scandalous. We are shamed for having bodies with curves. And as your governor, I will not let this stand. I am proud that when I smile, it is because I am happy and not because a man told me to. I am proud that I do my job diligently and I am proud that my personality is not limited by a man's definition of what a woman should be. (*Girls State,* 01:10:59-01:11:56)

Drawing from girls shared experiences of sexism, Cecilia weaves an empowerment narrative informed by feminist politics to her leadership position. As she delivers this message, the crowd of girl delegates respond with cheers, rounds of applause, and standing ovations which mark Cecilia's delivery, and indeed Cecilia herself, as a performative spectacle of postfeminist girl power. When she concludes by declaring, "standing in front of this crowd today, this crowd of future leaders, I can say with certainty that the future is female. God can save the world; women, we will save America. So be prideful, be selfish, and vote Cecilia for your Girls State governor," Cecilia pulls together the threads of American patriotism, girl power, feminist solidarity, and postfeminist femininity to become a political actor (01:11:58-01:12:18). This complicated maneuvering proves successful when she is elected Missouri Girls State Governor; and in the next scene viewers hear from Faith, another gubernatorial candidate who ran on a platform focused on climate change and renewable resources, mental health counseling for veterans, ending gun violence in schools, and reproductive justice, who appears unphased by Cecilia's win. Faith explains:

> I think as soon as Cecilia went up there and was about 20-seconds into her speech, I was, like, 'I think she's going to win.' Because it is an entire crowd of 500 women and when you are essentially giving a feminist manifesto up on stage, and you know, it gets the crowd going, I think Cecilia just really hit home on something that a lot of people cared about. And it's not that people didn't care about the things in my speech either, it was just immediate because they were experiencing it here. (01:15:16-01:15:44)

For Faith, Cecilia's election victory reflects the saliency of feminist politics in girls' experiences of the Girls State program and not necessarily their disinterest in other political issues. Reading this outcome as evidence of the girl as suffering actor, I suggest, further illustrates how girl power scripts concurrently "mobilize the self in a culture of performance" to authorize the normative erasure of politics from girl empowerment projects (McDonald 11). Girl powered subjects understand their political visibility is tethered to neoliberal economies of dissemination which require performances of political agency as postfeminist media spectacles (Bent, "This is not" 780; Duvall; Projansky 1). National Public Radio reporter Aisha Harris reflects on this dynamic in her synopsis of the nominee speeches; she concludes, "I think it's telling that the girl who does wind up winning governor, she's very charismatic, but also she doesn't have any policies in her speech at all… and I don't know if… bonding over misogyny is going to save the world per se" (qtd. in Holmes and Thompson). Celebratory iterations of postfeminist girl power encourage girls to use the language of feminism, sisterhood, and empowerment over narrations of political ideology or collective social action.

At the same time, marking Cecilia's speech as evidence of postfeminist girl power brings girls' political suffering to the fore when viewers later witness Girls State attendees learning about the leaked Dobbs decision during filming. For me, one of the most haunting elements of *Girls State* stems from filming in the days leading up to the U.S. Supreme Court's overturning of *Roe v. Wade*. As viewers follow several delegates interested in serving on the Girls State Supreme Court, McBaine and Moss offer insight on the impact of Dobbs on girls' experiences at Girls State. Several attendees receive text messages and videos from friends at Boys State who report anti-choice guest speakers and male politician-led sessions with legislative agendas associated with rolling back women's reproductive rights. Brooke and Nisha, two candidates for the mock Supreme Court, build conversation with other girl delegates about reproductive rights; the group of girls reveal wide-ranging political views on abortion rights but conclude decisively that Boys State should not engage in conversations about girls and women's bodies irrespective of their politics. Birth control and abortion, they argue, is a female issue and should be treated as such. Later, at the mock Supreme Court trial, girl judges hear an appeal on whether required mental health counseling prior to abortion access violates a woman's right to privacy. The Girls State Supreme Court determines in a

vote of 5 to 2 that requirements for counseling breech individual privacy laws; Brooke concludes, "the case was definitely where it belonged in front of women. The constitution was written hundreds of years ago by a bunch of old white guys that don't know what is happening today, so much has happened since then" (*Girls State,* 00:56:50-00:57:02). Faith resolves too:

> I am really thankful to be in the current time period that I am living in cause there are a lot of opportunities for me by law, right? But there are still these like secret, sneaky, possibly misogynistic viewpoints maybe by parents, maybe by society as a whole, maybe by social media that will creep up and because it is not so blatant and so obvious, I think it is even harder to fight. (01:28:07-01:28:32)

But six days after the conclusion of Missouri Girls State the decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade* became official, delivering a "gut-punch postscript" to girls' political present and future selves (Horton). It is in this particular moment *Girls State* reveals the girl as a suffering actor most clearly for regardless of girls' political ambitions and dreams of a future that is both female and feminist, the dismantling of their reproductive rights occurred without their consent. Reading *Girls State* with the conceptual vocabulary of girls as suffering actors, I contend, encourages us to grapple more honestly with the increasingly hostile, anti-feminist political conditions which undergird girls' everyday lives. Indeed, as Cecilia reflects on her time with Girls State, she concludes, "I think every woman is leaving here feeling better about themselves, feeling more supported as a woman. But I don't think we should use Girls State as a way to further condition women for sexism. I think the conversation should less be preparing us for sexism and more teaching us how to combat sexism" (*Girls State,* 01:28:39-01:28-59). Thus, rather than encourage girls to embrace the softer side of gendered empowerment or look for exceptional girl actors to rescue and inspire, we need to grapple with the impossibilities of the present in intentional and humbling ways. I maintain *Girls State* could serve as an essential catalyst for change, making clear and obvious girls' political suffering today.

5. Conclusion: Taking Girls' Political Realities Seriously

Shortly after the 2024 U.S. Presidential election, *The New York Times* published an essay from 16-year-old Naomi Beinart titled "I'm 16. On Nov. 6 the Girls Cried, and the

Boys Played Minecraft." In the essay, Beinart identifies divergent gendered experiences following Trump's re-election where girls encountered "a blanket of despair" while "the boys, it seemed to me, just woke up on a Wednesday". Marked by a new sisterhood of political suffering, Beinart describes being aware of all that she stood to lose under the new administration; she writes, "many of [the boys] didn't seem to share our rage, our fear, our despair… I have never felt that disconnected from men. I have never felt more like a *girl*". In this article, I have argued that it is time to move away from girls' public circulation as heroic and hopeful changemakers to instead recognize how anti-feminist and neoconservative realities have steadily eroded the radical promises of empowered girlhood. I propose reading girls as suffering actors allows us to more completely attest to their lived realities, taking seriously the conditions of, and potential for, their present and future political subjectivities and agencies. Based on a close analysis of the documentary *Girls State*, I have described how the girls featured in the film become politically (il)legible subjects made to endure the material impasses of neoliberal girl power, postfeminism, and the commodification of feminist values and ideals. The film, like Beinart's essay, challenges viewers to bear witness to girls' political suffering with brutal honesty. Rather than recast girls' political desires across normative patterns of empowered agency or vulnerability, documentaries like *Girls State* generate new considerations for understanding girls' relationship to politics and power. I offer *Girls State* challenges us, as feminist scholars, activists, and allies to girls who dare to imagine something better in the world, to re-affirm our commitments to girls by making room for their political suffering.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

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A PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG (PUNK) WOMAN IN CRISTINA GARCÍA'S NOVEL *DREAMING IN CUBAN*[1]

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Abstract: This paper provides an analysis of the portrayal of the young woman artist in Cristina García's novel *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992) to examine the importance of creativity and art-making processes in the development of a girl's identity. In this modern female künstlerroman, García reformulates stereotypical images by putting forth the independence, autonomy, rebellion, and determination of the novel's protagonist, Pilar Puente, a Cuban-born, American-raised girl who employs different art-making processes throughout her coming of age as a second-generation immigrant in the 1970s. Issues dealing with the socio-cultural construction of her girlhood are thus at the centre of inquiry and will be considered from various methodological perspectives within the field of Girlhood Studies, which addresses precisely the experiences and representations of girls in a range of formats and manifestations (Mitchel, Reid-Walsh and Kirk 2008). Furthermore, this study highlights the fact that the role of creativity and arts integration in any field are powerful interdisciplinary tools for both girls and women to connect their current reality with their desired states of mind and accomplishments. Ultimately, this article will discuss the dichotomy between what has been socially and culturally expected from girls in opposition to how this young punk artist chooses to be.
Keywords: artist-heroine; künstlerroman; punk art; Girlhood Studies; *Dreaming in Cuban*.

UN RETRATO DE LA ARTISTA COMO JOVEN MUJER (PUNK) EN LA NOVELA *DREAMING IN CUBAN* DE CRISTINA GARCÍA

Este artículo explora la representación de la joven artista en la novela *Dreaming in Cuban* (*Soñar en cubano*) (1992) de Cristina García para examinar la importancia de la creatividad y los procesos de creación artística en el desarrollo de la identidad de niñas, chicas y adolescentes. En esta künstlerroman moderna, García reformula clichés al presentar la independencia, la autonomía, la rebeldía y la determinación de la protagonista, Pilar Puente, quien, nacida en Cuba y criada en Estados Unidos, explora diferentes procesos de creación artística a lo largo de su juventud como inmigrante de segunda generación en los 1970s. Se analizará así la formación sociocultural de su

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identidad desde diversas perspectivas metodológicas de los llamados Girlhood Studies, que abordan las experiencias y representaciones de las chicas, niñas o adolescentes en una variedad de formatos y manifestaciones (Mitchel, Reid-Walsh y Kirk 2008). Además, se incide en que la creatividad y la integración de las artes en cualquier campo son recursos interdisciplinarios para que las niñas y las mujeres conecten su realidad con sus aspiraciones y logros. Por ello, también se aborda la dicotomía entre lo que se espera social y culturalmente de las mujeres y cómo esta joven artista punk elige ser.

Palabras clave: artista-heroína; künstlerroman; arte punk; Girlhood Studies; *Dreaming in Cuban*.

1. INTRODUCTION

Cristina García, who was born in Cuba in 1958 but emigrated to the United States of America with her parents during the first wave of Cuban emigration after Fidel Castro came to power in 1960, is the first Cuban American woman ever to publish a novel written in English, the groundbreaking *Dreaming in Cuban*. The publication of this novel in 1992 brought Cristina García acclaim and a nomination for the National Book Award, and, since then, she has been considered one of the most important and provocative Cuban American voices in literature. Drawing on the problematic of memory and identity for second-generation Cuban American populations, she describes three generations of a family's life who struggle both in Cuba and the United States, while critically exploring Cuba's political situation. In an interview with Scott Brown, García cites Wallace Stevens, Federico García Lorca, Octavio Paz, Pablo Neruda, Gabriel García Márquez, and William Carlos Williams as particular literary inspirations for her when writing the novel, which contributed to its lyricism (254). Her greatest inspiration was, however, a trip back to Cuba in 1984, where she learned about her broken family and, as for so many bicultural writers, regained a sense of her own culture of origin and discovered her Latin American literary heritage. That trip pushed her to face new and unsettling questions because, as she claims, "[t]he sense of not fitting in either Havana, or in Miami, the heart of the Cuban exile community, made me start questioning my own identity. Where did I belong? What did it mean to be Cuban? And the poetry made me feverish to write" (Brown 249).

Nonetheless, *Dreaming in Cuban* is much more than a commentary on the political situation of Cuba in the late twentieth century, as it also tackles themes of family, politics, and memory, to offer a sound reflection upon other aspects of the human condition that are of a more universal nature. For instance, the novel portrays the

idea that art is one of the most important factors that help us shape one's identity and express ourselves through creativity. *Dreaming in Cuban* is indeed the portrait of rebellious aspiring artist Pilar Puente, who tries to find her place in New York, where she immigrates from Cuba with her mom, as well as within the city's the alternative art scene. It is her aspirations to become an artist, precisely, which transforms the story into a modern female künstlerroman in which the reader follows the protagonist's physical, mental, emotional, and artistic journey as an aspiring artist. However, as Cuban sociologist Ruben Rumbaut explains, Pilar's generation, that of young migrants, has the double task of transiting to adulthood and becoming acculturated in a new society, a challenge which they undertake at a different place from that of their parents (61).

Since girlhood extends from childhood to the beginning of adulthood, it represents a complex category encompassing various life stages and kinds of femininity, as well as differences based on class and race (Moruzi and Smith 1). In this article, issues of the cultural construction of Pilar's girlhood are thus at the centre of inquiry and will be considered from various methodological perspectives within Girlhood Studies, especially those in postcolonial girlhood studies. On the one hand, as Mitchell, Reid-Walsh and Kirk posit, Girlhood Studies focus on girlhood in ways that go beyond disciplinary boundaries and aims to provide instead a diverse approach to girlhood rather than a monolithic one, including the voices of girls themselves (ix). On the other hand, postcolonial girlhood studies/scholars explore the unique experiences of young females shaped by colonialism's lasting impacts, focusing on how race, culture, class, and nation intersect with gender to create specific oppressions and resistances. It does so by analyzing migrant identities and cultural hybridity and challenging imperial narratives through individual stories and cultural productions, like literature and media. More particularly, it examines the tension between idealized "girlhood" and the complex realities of girls in postcolonial contexts, revealing themes of displacement, identity formation, and resilience, and highlighting the young protagonist's agency and unique forms of speaking back, like it is the case with Pilar in *Dreaming in Cuban*.

Furthermore, by emphasizing identity, creativity and inspiration, this paper discusses Pilar's personal and artistic transformation throughout the novel and examines how the author uses various artmaking methods to demonstrate how the arts can aid young female aspiring artists in forming their own identity while also reinterpreting conventional images in their work. In fact, Pilar weaves her creativity into everything

she does, from exploring her relationship with family and society to asking fundamental questions about art and gender. By drawing upon cultural and literary theories (especially, identity-formation and postcolonial), as well as art and music studies, this paper examines the crisis between what is expected from girls and young women in different cultures and patriarchal societies in light of factors such as gender and race, in opposition to how García's main character chooses to be. By doing so, this research contributes to the broader discourse on identity politics and gender equity, aiming to discuss and further develop appropriate methodologies for exploring girl-related topics in literature through Girlhood Studies. In the following sections, we will first explore some of the theoretical context regarding art and the female künstlerroman before moving on to a more detailed analysis of the fictional text.

2. On Life and Art

It is widely believed that art transcends mere words, sounds, or paintings, helping channel and process complex emotions and experiences. Thus, Cristina García's novel delves into this topic by depicting its main character Pilar as an emerging artist, examining how creativity and the process of creating art are essential for her growth and how that can significantly influence a girl's sense of self. As American artist Edward Hopper stated: "[g]reat art is the outward expression of an inner life," which means that creative outlets like artmaking offer catharsis and a way to explore one's inner world.[2] Likewise, art aims to show the inner significance and essence of things, not just their outward appearance, thus capturing deeper truths. For all these reasons, the creative process can actually be crucial to a girl or a woman's right to express herself in oppressive situations.

In fact, as Daniel Serig asserts:

> Artists use reflexivity to engage in a dynamic cycle of creating art to make meaning, to make sense of the world and their place in it. Influential life experiences are often the focus of reflexive thought because they are seen as having an impact on current artistic practices. But the art practice, while perhaps separated into specific time and location distinctions, interrelates with the life of the artist. In this way, the content of

[2] Hopper's exact quote, which encapsulates his lifelong view that true art reveals the artist's unique subconscious vision and internal world, is not tied to one specific date; it rather reflects his lifelong view that he expressed throughout his career, more notably in a 1953 journal statement and his 1959 interview by John D. Morse, whose original recording is available at www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-edward-hopper-11844.

> an artist's work involves these interrelationships as the artist dialogues with the self through the material. (236)

On a similar note, visual artist Teresita Fernández (qtd. in Popova) claims that art "is always the combinatorial product of the fragments of who we are, of our combinatorial character," and thus:

> Being an artist is not just about what happens when you are in the studio. The way you live, the people you choose to love and the way you love them, the way you vote, the words that come out of your mouth, the size of the world you make for yourselves, your ability to influence the things you believe in, your obsessions, your failures – *all* of these components will also become the raw material for the art you make.

In literature, art gives the heroine – as well as the author – the opportunity to consider herself in the world and describe and question each specific location. This highlights the fact that art, and literature in this case, connects universal human experiences (like loss, suffering, understanding) beyond mere plot, making complex emotions understandable through shared feelings between artist and audience, a core idea in Leo Tolstoy's aesthetic theory. For the great Russian author, art's purpose is this emotional communication and infection of feeling, not just entertainment, allowing an artist to share a genuine emotional experience with an audience.[3] In his view, literature taps into fundamental human conditions, revealing shared truths that resonate deeply with artists and readers alike. In the novel, we might notice that Pilar wants to create and make art especially whenever she feels lonely, misunderstood, or rejected, which proves that art-making is closely related to our human need to feel understood. Likewise, she needs to go through a quiet period of introspection as she travels to her homeland, Cuba, to reconnect with her roots, which ultimately enables her to awaken creatively. This "need" referred to in the novel is the fundamental drive to understand life and connect with others, which is shared not only by artists but all human beings.

3. THE FEMALE BILDUNGSROMAN AND KÜNSTELRROMAN

Regarding the character of Pilar, *Dreaming in Cuban* can arguably be interpreted as either a *bildungsroman* or a *künstlerroman*; however, this paper posits that it is primarily the latter, due to significant differences between the two novel types. On the one hand, the bildungsroman is often called "the novel of formation" or "novel of

[3] In fact, "feeling" (in Russian, *chuvstvo*) is the central term of Tolstoy's aesthetic theory. See Leo Tolstoy, "What Is Art?" (Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1904), https://www.gutenberg.org/files/64908/64908-h/64908-h.htm.

education" (in the broad sense of the word) because it shows the development of the protagonist's mind and character through a number of stages and a variety of experiences, often from childhood to early adulthood. On the other hand, the künstlerroman, also called "the artist novel," represents the growth of either a writer or any other kind of artist, into maturity, and characteristics of the genre follow the formation of the artist almost as much as the art they strive to create.[4] While some critics believe the boundary separating these two genres is virtually non-existent, or that the künstlerroman is only a "more specialized version" of the bildungsroman (Saunders 13), there is, in fact, a dividing line which women have been prevented from crossing as artists in literature.

As Elise Thornton states in her thesis on the *Representations of the Woman Artist in Modernist Literature*, "the figure of the artist-hero has dominated literary narratives since the Romantic period" (2). In this regard, novels like Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le Noir* (*The Red and the Black*) (1830), Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* (1831), Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* (1850) and *Great Expectations* (1861), Gustave Flaubert's *L'Éducation Sentimentale* (*Sentimental Education*) (1869), Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1895), Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* (1913), or Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) are recognized as the leading examples of nineteenth and twentieth-century bildungsroman. Consequently, much of bildungsroman criticism throughout the twentieth century excludes female narratives from their studies, and the bildungsroman is often identified as a predominantly male genre. In a similar way, the patriarchal mantra proclaiming that "[w]omen can't paint, women can't write" (48) imposed upon Virginia Woolf's artist-protagonist Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse* (1927) certainly represents an enduring obstacle for the woman artist at that time. With the development of the first wave of feminism, the artist-heroine begins to emerge in the literature of the twentieth century, in which modernist women writers such as Virginia Woolf herself, Dorothy Richardson, May Sinclair, Vita Sackville-West, Kate Chopin, or Willa Cather, to name some, engage with the figure of the female artist. Their works begin to cover issues surrounding gender and artistry/creativity, which marked the shift from the traditional female bildungsroman

[4] Literally, künstlerroman translates to English as "artist" (from the German *künstler*) and "novel" (from the French *roman*).

narrative, which typically ends in marriage,[5] to the künstlerroman, where female protagonists are depicted as determined vocational artists.

Once again, Thornton further defends that:

> The question of whether the female protagonists in these novels are read as developing artists is not a mere issue of taxonomy: it is about women's autonomy, education, professionalization, and their right to individual self-expression as artists. . . . These definitions have historically excluded women and by extension limited the kind of artistry they are seen to engage in. . . . Furthermore, [female künstlerromans] examine and reinterpret the necessary conditions needed to achieve artistic fulfillment. (2)

Another key element of women artists' resistance to the masculine ideology surrounding art has been, indeed, the literary representation, often autobiographical, of the female artist-heroine. These narratives have been repeatedly misclassified as bildungsromane and yet they explore the creative and artistic development of the protagonist, not simply the coming-of-age process usually depicted in this type of literary genre.

In this sense, according to Thornton:

> While the figure of the woman artist had been previously ignored by critics as a significant literary figure, had been identified as an amateur to her male counterpart, or was simply given just the role of the male artist's muse, [...] the modernist examination of this figure instigated new trends in how we explore gender, women's creativity and national identity within literary studies today. (69)

Similarly, in the second wave of the feminist movement during the 1970s, critics who were concerned with the "excavation of and recovery of lost women writers and artists" (Elliot and Wallace 14) finally began to recognize a previously neglected female presence in the genre. One such publication that reasserts the genre's influence and continued strength in literature is Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's groundbreaking publication *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979), which happens to be the first critical study to offer a more comprehensive examination of the female bildüngsroman.

Therefore, the question of whether the protagonist in *Dreaming in Cuban* is read as a developing artist in the künstlerroman tradition cuts to the heart of questions of

[5] For example, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1869), or Charlotte Brönte's *Jane Eyre* (1847).

feminism and female creativity. As "the figure of the female artist encodes the conflict between any empowered woman and the barriers to her achievement" (DuPlessis 84), García attempts to reach the same goal: she wants her heroine to be free to create her own identity, a step towards "a conscious rupture with all oppressive traditions of all cultures" (Anzaldúa 104). Ultimately, reading *Dreaming in Cuban* as a künstlerroman rather than a bildungsroman will allow us to explore the ways in which this novel examines female creativity and challenges any oppressive attitudes surrounding the role of the young woman artist.

4. García's Artist-Heroine: Pilar Puente

Cristina García creates Pilar's character loosely based on some of her own personal experiences growing up as a Cuban American adolescent in New York. In fact, she has stated that Pilar is the character she identifies with the most, acting as a kind of "alter ego" for her, she explains: "I grew up with a very bifurcated sense of myself. At home, things were intensely Cuban. In the rest of my life, it had very little meaning. I probably thought of myself, first and foremost, as a New Yorker – an urban kid with an affinity for many cultures yet beholden to none" (García qtd. in Brown 251).

Curiously enough, Pilar's last name "Puente" means "bridge" in English, which suggests that the author might have consciously chosen Pilar's last name because, to fully develop her identity, she must first bridge her Cuban heritage with her American life. Yet as Pilar forges her identity from various distinct linguistic and cultural contexts, her process of becoming is marked by her hybrid identity. Thus, as Jon Schneiderman points out in his analysis of the novel, García's portrayal of Pilar "not only attempts to describe the difficulties of a hybrid existence, but also to bridge two different cultures" (7). It seems necessary to first analyze what a "typical hybrid identity" is broadly considered by researchers and theorists on this topic. For instance, Wolfgang Welsch states that "every culture is supposed to mould the whole life of the people concerned and of its individuals" (195). However, there are two main conflicts to this. On the one hand, while most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting and one home, a person who migrates adopts characteristics of that new language and new culture, which combined with the old ones create a new hybrid identity. On the other hand, if "our identities are indeed hybrid," it becomes "increasingly difficult to describe something as entirely foreign or entirely our own"

(Welsch 200). As a result, the young second-generation immigrant is an extremely alienated subject due to the severance of ties with familial and national groups and the discordance of the two contexts in which they are caught *in-between* (Rumbaut 749).

Furthermore, Maurizio Ascari notes that "contemporary literature is a primary tool in the effort to foster intercultural understanding, a representation of human experience" (17). It is clear, then, that García is using the character of Pilar to represent a generation of immigrants who have struggled to create an identity because they were born in Cuba but raised and educated in the United States. As Gustavo Pérez Firmat describes in *Life on the Hyphen*, the experience of being a Cuban living in the United States since very young feels as "having two cultures [but] you belong wholly to neither one. You are both, you are neither: cuba-no/america-no" (7). In addition, *Dreaming in Cuban* is another example of literature's "critical globalization," wherein the narrative "uses knowledge of other regions or countries to disrupt habitual perceptions and practices, and to prompt a self-reflexive repositioning of the self in the global sphere" (Cuddy-Keane 546). García shows that out of the dislocations and the constant commuting between cultures, often emerge tensions, contradictions, and reconfigurations that shape and influence the artistic production of the young female artist. She also might struggle sometimes with feelings of isolation and dislocation, yet she can be sure that the journey to become an artist will take her somewhere and that she will certainly be changed.

4.1. Pilar Feels Through Painting

The reader is first introduced to young Pilar Puente early in the novel, when her grandmother Celia del Pino remembers Pilar's letters sent from New York. Having grown-up in America, Pilar writes to her from Brooklyn "in a Spanish that is no longer hers," nor that of a native speaker anymore, but awkward and "hard-edged" (García 7). However, Pilar and her grandmother share writing as a common bond because they both record their experiences, history and feelings in letters and diaries which, in the author's words, "provide a window into [their] inner life and yearnings" (Brown 252). Thus, as a writer, García demonstrates that the inter-weaving of language can serve as a useful tool for artistic expression too. Nevertheless, when spoken and written languages seem to fail Pilar, this situation causes even more confusion in the creation of her own identity.

She then wishes to have a new language to express herself – one that she eventually finds in art.

From the beginning, readers may perceive how Pilar is always attentive to the colors and shapes that surround her and for which she displays a special sensibility that already announces her interest in painting and her artistic inclinations. She is also constantly trying to communicate her own ideas, to express herself, and when both English and Spanish languages seem to fail her, she uses painting instead. When Pilar paints, the barriers of language and words are removed, and she can describe what she feels through her art. She even concludes that, "painting is its own language. Translations just confuse it, dilute it, like words going from Spanish to English" (García 59). Therefore, she wonders, "who needs words when colors and lines conjure up their own language? That's what I want to do with my paintings, find a unique language, obliterate the clichés" (García 139). The one thing that is certain in Pilar's life is her driving desire to establish herself as an artist because art is important and liberating to her, and it helps her understand herself. For example, she shares with the reader that she feels "more comfortable" with abstract painting because "it's more directly connected to [her] emotions" (García 233), and at the same time she acknowledges "people here [in New York] react negatively to any overt displays of soulfulness" (García 180). However, she also mentions at one point that her paintings "have been getting more and more abstract lately, violent-looking with clotted swirls of red" (García 9) which, according to Schneiderman (25), is reminiscent of Ana Mendieta, an artist that, as Cuban American interdisciplinary artist and feminist theorist Coco Fusco highlights, "was among the first exiles to renew bonds with her homeland and express in her art the pain of rupture that is so much a part of Cuban history."[6] If art is representative of the artist's sense of self, Pilar's art is certainly representative of her fragmented identity and demonstrates the internal struggles she faces.

It is particularly important to note that her formative years occur during the 1970s, when social movements in U.S. such as the Women's Rights movement sought

[6] Ana Mendieta (Havana 1948–New York 1985) was an artist who explored her identity as a female emigrant in a work that mixed performance, photography, film, and sculpture. Born in Cuba, in 1961 she was exiled to the United States and sent to an orphanage at the age of twelve. The trauma of separation from her family, culture, and homeland became the bedrock of her artistic work. Mendieta is often connected with the Feminist art movement for her work on the fluidity of gender to blur the line between male/female identification. Available at www.artsy.net/artist/ana-mendieta/.

to open the system up for women's participation at a public, political level. However, Frances Borzello states in *A World of Our Own: Women as Artists* that controlling who has access to proper education and training is one way of preventing women from attaining the same artistic status as men (142). Before the feminist movement arose, admission into art schools was a major step forward for the aspiring woman artist. Nonetheless, as Whitney Chadwick posits, sexism towards women's art still prevailed in the community, for "hierarchie[s] of genres" and culturally conditioned stereotypes about women's creativity and role in the public sphere hindered their recognition as artists (38). Thus, when Pilar contemplates history and the role women play in it, her observations expose her frustration at the patriarchal treatment of women in history and of female artists in particular:

> I think about all the women artists throughout history who managed to paint despite the odds against them. People still ask where all the important women painters are instead of looking at what they did paint and trying to understand their circumstances. Even supposedly knowledgeable and sensitive people react to good art by a woman as if it were an anomaly, a product of a freak of nature, or a direct result of her association with a male painter or mentor. Nobody's even heard of feminism in art school. The male teachers and students still call the shots and get the serious attention and fellowships that further their careers. As for the women, we're supposed to make extra money modelling nude. What kind of bullshit revolution is that? (García 139-40)[7]

Consequently, Pilar's development of her own identity as a member of 1970s American society might be further complicated considering her feminist views, which also conflict with her traditionally patriarchal Cuban heritage. However, it is precisely her Cuban grandmother who encourages her as an artist that strengthens their relationship. As a result, she claims that she feels "much more connected to Abuela Celia than to Mom. Even in silence she gives me the confidence to do what I believe is right, to trust my own perceptions" (García 176). Even more, her identification with her grandmother stems not only from a close personal tie to her, but it also reflects a strong personal bond with her native Cuban culture.

In contrast, Pilar and her mother, Lourdes Puente, are divided by a lack of understanding because their personalities are polar opposites: on the one side, Pilar, as

[7] Women painters, for example, were denied membership to national art academies like the British Royal Academy 1861, and to the École des Beaux-Arts until 1897, and were forced to adapt and find alternative "routes to professionalism" with private lessons and 40 group workshops, or ateliers, in an established male artist's studio (Borzello 30).

an artist, open-minded and optimistic; on the other side, Lourdes, whose views "are strictly black-and-white" (García 26), admits that she "has no patience for dreamers, for people who live between black and white" (García 129). Moreover, she believes that everything is what it appears to be, tends to be pessimistic, and refuses the idea of change. Above all, one of the major differences between Pilar and Lourdes is, according to Rocio Davis (64), that "Pilar is a dreamer trying to construct her identity, while her mother is firmly accepting of her newfound identity as an immigrant in a new land." It is no wonder then that mother and daughter strongly disagree on exile politics also, and this continuing struggle between them can be examined on a metaphorical level too. The author seems to establish a parallel between patriotism and motherhood, which is exemplified in Pilar's art.

In fact, as Mónica Fernández Jiménez notes:

> While Pilar's mother rejects talking about Cuba and idealises American society, another nostalgic usage of the imagination is implemented by Pilar, who shapes through her art the domestic history and the collective memory of this family.. . . . She tries to find a third space where she can escape the ideas of fragmentation and incompleteness which deprive her from constructing new memories in the new country. (96)

As an example, when Lourdes commissions Pilar to do a large painting for the opening of her own bakery – even though at first she did not approve of her daughter's desire to become an artist – she paints a punk Statue of Liberty, which marks a turning point in her life and in the narrative: "Liberty, thorny scars that look like barbed wire. I want to go all the way with this, to stop mucking around and do what I feel, so at the base of the statue I put my favorite punk rallying cry: I'M A MESS. And then carefully, very carefully, I paint a safety pin through Liberty's nose" (García 141). Pilar's painting, entitled "SL—76," seems to be not only a bold statement against the United States, but a rebellious one against her mother too. Since the knowledge of cultural symbols "instinctively transform during art making processes into personal expressions of identity" (Marshall 7), Pilar's art thus demonstrates the internal struggles she is facing to blend her two worlds: her "hybridity" is part of who she is, of how she views the world and, consequently, of how she makes art.

4.2. Pilar Thinks Through Music

In *Dreaming in Cuban*, Pilar's taste in music also reflects her "hybridity" as well as her sense of marginalization from the dominant American society. As a self-described punk, she listens to Lou Reed, Iggy Pop, and the Ramones, who were the most relevant musicians and key figures in New York's punk scene in the mid-to-late 1970s, when the novel takes place. Pilar openly explains what attracts her to their music and she states:

> I play Lou [Reed] and Iggy Pop and this new band the Ramones whenever I paint. I love their energy, their violence, their incredible grinding guitars. It's like an artistic form of assault. I try to translate what I hear into colors and volumes and lines that confront people, that say, 'Hey, we're here too and what we think matters!' or more often just 'Fuck you!' (García 135)

On his part, Göran Folkestad defends that the development of a musical identity "is not only a matter of age, gender, musical taste and other preferences, but is also a result of the cultural, ethnic, religious and national contexts in which people live" (151). Pilar's choice of music is revealing in that it sheds light on her political orientation, while her connection with these artists also shows that at this point in the novel, she is still struggling to establish her own identity.

However, as Folkestad sustains:

> Throughout time, people have used music as a means of expression and identification. . . . Music has always played an important part in forming the identities of individuals and of groups of people. . . . It provides a means of defining oneself as an individual belonging to and allied with a certain group, and of defining others as belonging to other groups which are separate from one's own. (Folkestad 151)

Thus, through music at least, Pilar can identify with a group within the States: the punk youth, that is, the frustrated segments of American society. Frank Fitzpatrick further suggests that "it might be simply the need to be understood and to find others like you [that] someone who feels different, or outcast, could empathize with an artist." In *Dreaming in Cuban*, young Pilar feels a strong connection to Lou Reed in particular. As the lead singer and songwriter of The Velvet Underground in the 1960s, Lou Reed helped invent punk rock while writing "about people no one else sings about – drug addicts, transvestites, the down-and-out" (García 135). Pilar also suggests that she likes Lou Reed because "you never know what he's going to do next. Lou has about twenty-five personalities. . . . I also feel like a new me sprouts and dies every day" (García 135). This passage reveals her identification with Reed's main subjects, which are disembodied people and marginal identities mainstream American culture. In a similar

thread of thought, José Esteban Muñoz explains this kind of behavior when he maintains that: "Minority, diasporic, and exiled subjects recalibrate the protocols of selfhood by insisting on the radical hybridity of the self, . . . a hybrid that contains contradicting associations, identifications, and disidentifications" (291). In contrast with Muñoz's theories on "disidentification," when Pilar attends a Lou Reed's gig at a club in the Village, however, she feels even more alienated because when Reed shouts to the audience that he is from Brooklyn, which she refers to as her "adopted neighborhood," she fails to respond: "'I'm from Brooklyn, man!' Lou shouts and the crowd goes wild. I don't cheer, though. I wouldn't cheer it either if Lou said, 'Let's hear it for Cuba.' Cuba. Planet Cuba. Where the hell is that?" (García 134).

In a later attempt to find a different form of self-expression from painting, Pilar buys a bass guitar and experiments with it. She then describes her process of starting to play the instrument: "I flip straight to the album I want [...] and put on the good, thumping, straight-ahead rock and roll. The thick strings vibrate through my fingers, up my arms, down my chest. I don't know what I'm doing but I start thumping that old spruce dresser of an instrument for all it's worth, thumping and thumping, until I feel my life begin" (García 181). It is the purchase and playing of this bass guitar that begins to give Pilar "insight about selfhood [...] and signifies progress in her struggle for a bicultural identity" (Schneiderman 44). Moreover, now she knows subconsciously that for her to grow and move forward, she needs to become independent. As Pilar herself puts it: "Everything up until this very minute [...] feels like a preparation for something. For what, I don't know. I'm still waiting for my life to begin" (García 179).

4.3. Pilar's Dreaming And Awakening

What is clear, then, is that Pilar Puente's formation as a woman and as an artist implies her necessary reconciliation with family, religion, love, and art. In fact, she firmly believes that if she returned to Cuba, she would be able to build an identity of her own. By the end of the novel, her strong desire to return to Cuba has not diminished yet, as she still holds vivid memories and longs to return to her native island:

> I was only two years old when I left Cuba, but I remember everything that's happened to me since I was a baby, even word-for-word conversations. [...] The skies looked newly washed. And the trees were different too. They looked on fire. I'd run through great heaps of leaves just to hear them rustle like the palm trees during hurricanes in

> Cuba. But then I'd feel sad looking up at the bare branches and thinking about Abuela Celia. I wonder how my life would have been if I'd stayed with her. (García 26-32)[8]

Throughout the book, Pilar repeatedly expresses her desire for roots and wonders about what life would have been like, which demonstrates the sense of displacement and the idealization of the homeland felt by people in the diaspora (McLeod 44). Similarly, in the literature of exile and migration, the role of memory becomes a key topic in the character's creation and reformulation of identity as a means of coping with the estrangement, because "memory is where self is made and remade and where politics can be imagined" (Muñoz 92).[9] Therefore, as in most novels of formation about exiles or children of exiles, her search for her identity culminates when she finally decides to visit her homeland: "I'm going back to Cuba. I'm fed up with everything around here" (García 25). She uses her time in Cuba to become "more reflective," until she realizes that she is no longer part of Cuba's culture and that she actually misses America. In her own words: "I think about how I'm probably the only ex-punk on the island, how no one else has their ears pierced in three places. It's hard to imagine existing without Lou Reed. . . . I ask Abuela Celia if I can paint whatever I want in Cuba and she says yes, as long as I don't attack the state" (García 235). Likewise, when she sees that artists in Cuba are confronted with a depressed cultural space, she openly states: "Art is the ultimate revolution" (García 235). Consequently, the return to Cuba is "a teaching experience for her," because "she realises that there was nothing essential for creating an *inbetween* identity in the island" (Fernández Jiménez 97). Eventually, Pilar becomes fully aware that, while she loves the language, the sights, and the Cuban culture in general, she does not really belong there, and recognizes that the Cuba of her dreams is not the Cuba of the current reality:

> I've started dreaming in Spanish, which has never happened before. I wake up feeling different, like something inside me is changing, something chemical and irreversible. . . . I'm afraid to lose all this, to lose Abuela Celia again. But sooner or later I'd have to return to New York. I know now it's where I belong – not *instead* of here, but *more* than here. (García 235-36)

[8] In an interview with Chris Albani (2017), Cristina García claims that she uses the tree "as a symbol of a refuge, as essential connection to a lost or confused mythical past," because for her, "trees do represent crossroads, an opportunity for redemption and change." This interview is available at www.bombmagazine.org/articles/2007/04/01/cristina-garcía/.

[9] In this regard, Maurice Halbwach's definition of collective memory remains central. This French sociologist's notion that "[o]ur memories remain collective, however, and are recalled to us through others even though only we were participants in the events" (23) takes into account familial ties and national affiliation in the creation of an identity. See Maurice Halbwachs *The Collective Memory* (1980).

It is at that point of the story that she has finally found both her independence and her cultural identity. She now knows that the solution lies in accepting her hybridity, acknowledging that her place is in the United States while also recognizing her Cuban cultural heritage.

5. CONCLUSION

As the evidence above suggests, Pilar Puente's experiences, her growth, identity crises, and feelings of frustration at being misunderstood and like she does not belong are all themes that transcend any borders, whether geographical, cultural, or even time spatial. However, while an essentialist perspective on *inbetweenness* is not explicitly expressed in *Dreaming in Cuban*, exploring the island of her ancestors grounds Pilar's final understanding of her hybrid identity. Thus, the readers are left with the impression that she might be able to achieve a kind of wholeness at some point in her life as a Cuban American woman artist. Added to this, her transformation at the end of the novel unveils how art, whether it be music, painting, or literature, can be used for identity negotiation as it provides motivation and a sense of belonging to girls throughout their coming-of-age. In this regard, it becomes clear that Cristina García has reformulated stereotypical images of girlhood in this novel, because Pilar is able to choose and make her own way, despite the many obstacles, in order to find her own voice – both personal and artistic – and, in the process, create her own identity. That way, the author has boldly suggested that female artists have never been free from personal and/or social restrictions, yet they have made the most of the resources available to them and performed their own rebellious acts of self-expression in their chosen creative field.

Furthermore, by making her protagonist an aspiring artist, García has portrayed those girls and women who are brave enough to reject a patriarchal system that would not only define them as wives and mothers but would also limit and restrain their artistic autonomy. As we previously discussed, in complete opposition to traditional bildungsroman and adhering to the female künstlerroman narrative instead, the young woman artist is characterized in *Dreaming in Cuban* by an undeniable hunger to create or re-invent whatever it is in her life to break down any heavily constructed walls around her. It is indeed this type of mentality that the author accurately depicts that drives both girls and women to strive for individuality and self-expression, rather than simply conforming to societal expectations. Ultimately, this paper has shown that

insights into girls' lives derived from fictional narratives about girlhood, such as Pilar Puente's, can and do influence present-day actions concerning their lived experiences, motivating further exploration among girls and young women from various social and cultural contexts, educating and inspiring them to create the life they want for themselves despite the many challenges.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

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"We Refused to be Cordial": Girlhood and Anger in Dizz Tate's *Brutes* (2023)[1]

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Abstract: In 2018, Sarah Banet-Weiser wrote that: "The #MeToo movement has forced all of us to confront female rage – a rage at the injury of being harassed and assaulted, a rage at not being believed, at being called hysterical and out of control." #MeToo flooded social media with anger-filled testimonies, which soon started circulating into popular forms of fiction. Considering "anger" as a socialized emotion, "rage" as an intensified emotional state, and "affect" as a relational category, this paper explores the representation of girlhood anger in Dizz Tate's *Brutes* (2023). I contend that the novel reframes girls' anger as a socially learned and structurally conditioned affect crucial to their development, rather than an individual emotional excess. Drawing from Sarah Ahmed's feminist affect theory and Soraya Chemaly's contemporary analysis of female anger, I show the "coming-of-age" factor of the novel as defined by the evolution of the protagonists' uses of anger — from a form of norm-defiance and agency-claiming to a collective response to sexual violence and systemic harm. Through close reading, I demonstrate how the novel locates anger within broader mechanisms of resistance against sexual violence. In doing so, *Brutes* resonates with the affective dynamics surrounding the #MeToo movement, foregrounding anger as a mode of solidarity and political recognition among girls.
Keywords: Anger; emotion studies; gender studies; girlhood; #MeToo movement; young-adult literature

"Nos Negamos a Ser Cordiales": Niñez e Ira en *Brutes* (2023) de Dizz Tate

Resumen: En 2018, Sarah Banet-Weiser escribió que: "El movimiento #MeToo nos ha obligado a todos a enfrentarnos a la ira femenina – una ira ante la herida de ser acosada y agredida, una ira ante no ser creída, a ser llamada histérica y fuera de control". #MeToo

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inundó las redes sociales con testimonios llenos de ira, que pronto comenzaron a influenciar formas de ficción. Considerando la "ira" como una emoción social, la "rabia" como un estado emocional intensificado, y el "afecto" como categoría relacional, este artículo explora la representación de la ira en la niñez femenina en *Brutes* (2023) de Dizz Tate. Defiendo que la novela replantea la ira de las niñas como un afecto aprendido socialmente y condicionado estructuralmente crucial para su crecimiento, y no como un exceso emocional individual. A partir de la teoría afectiva feminista de Sarah Ahmed y la teoría sobre la ira de Soraya Chemaly, demuestro que la transición a la adultez en la novela está definida por la evolución de los usos de la ira de las protagonistas — de una forma de romper las normas y de reclamar su agencia a una respuesta colectiva a la violencia sexual y sistémica. Señalo como la novela sitúa la ira dentro de un conjunto más amplio de mecanismos de resistencia contra la violencia sexual. De esta forma, *Brutes* hace eco de las dinámicas afectivas del movimiento #MeToo, situando a la ira como un modelo de solidaridad y reconocimiento político entre niñas.
Keywords: Ira; estudios de las emociones; estudios de género; niñez; movimiento #MeToo; literatura juvenil

1. Introduction: The Rise of Female Anger in Contemporary Narratives

In 2018, Laura Bates was one of the first critics to point out the "plethora of furious female on-screen heroines, from tough-walking survivor Jessica Jones to rebel handmaid Offred." She was not the only one to call it. Emily Pine, Robin Bahr, Gaby Hinsliff, and Gemma Hudson all wrote about the growing presence of overt demonstrations of female anger in popular forms of storytelling media. In literary fiction, the publication of novels that featured angry or enraged female main characters became such that dominant media outlets like the *New York Times* (Donner), as well as influential literary stops like Penguin Random House or platform Good Reads, began making their own "female rage" reading lists. Dizz Tate's *Brutes* (2023) is among this wave of angry publications, with its focus being, specifically, on the uses of female anger in girlhood.

The abundance of female anger in mainstream media that critics began noticing in 2018 did not arise spontaneously[2]. It is difficult to ignore that the year this tendency started, 2017, was not so coincidentally the year in which the #MeToo movement erupted on Twitter and quickly took over the media. The movement began with the tweet that actress Alyssa Milano posted calling others to respond "me too" to her post to achieve a

[2] Other media outlets like Gallup Inc. conveyed in 2017 through their "Annual Global Emotions Report" that women that year had stated feeling anger more than they had the previous year. This tendency would continue during the following years, to the point that, in 2022, BBC would use this report to state that women "were angrier than ever" (Hegarty).

visual representation of the pervasiveness of sexual violence. Her tweet was based on Tarana Burke's project "me too" born in 2006; an initiative which, in origin, was focused on offering a network of support for black and brown women and girls who had survived sexual assault by sharing testimony and based on mutual aid and empathy (Burke 13). The #MeToo movement retained some of the tenets of Burke's work: its focus on testimony, ideas of mutual support, and reassurance that the survivor is not alone in exposing the endemic quality of sexual violence. However, it differed from Burke's initiative in some other aspects. It deviated from the focus on the intersectional approach that Burke had taken and instead, oftentimes, privileged the testimony of white celebrities (Philipps 9). In this sense, #MeToo steered away from Burke's original project of mutual support, and became more centered in *who* was denouncing *whom* (Rottenberg, n.p.). Its focus on celebrities led to a project that seemed to be more concerned with unmasking sexual predators in high social spheres rather than focusing on affective solidarity among survivors; this is what some detractors of the movement have deemed the "bad apple" (Kay 40) approach. By taking this outlook, #MeToo was also centered on individual stories rather than on collectivity.

What #MeToo succeeded at was achieving a lasting and influential sociocultural momentum. The movement spread from Twitter to all other social media platforms and to traditional forms of media coverage. In 2017 and 2018, many media outlets and public discourse strongly revolved around sexual violence, its ubiquity, its impunity, and its traumatic aftermath on survivors. Testimonies placed special relevance on ideas of pain because of both trauma and the impunity of the assailant. Within feminist affective spheres, this reading of pain triggered by injustice often leads to feelings of anger, as several feminist theorists pointed out in the past (Lorde, Ahmed, Banet-Weiser, Traister, Kay). This was the case of #MeToo. Soon after its inception, many testimonies and responses began showcasing feelings of anger at one's own abuse as well as that of others, and the patriarchal system that enabled sexual violence to reach such an endemic status. The rise of anger in the affective economy of #MeToo, in turn, also sparked a dialogue about women's anger. The discourse around it assumes that anger, historically, has been denied, demonized, and dismissed in women. The socialization of emotions agrees with dominant gender norms, which for girls and women are typically and traditionally based on ideas of emotional submission, conciliation, and compliance. #MeToo's discourse on anger began to be shaped around the conjecture that, while women have been prevented

from feeling or appearing angry, now, considering all of the stories that were coming out, there was no other option *but* to be angry. The blinding light that had been shined on the pervasiveness of sexual violence caused a general sense that the anger that they were feeling and exteriorizing was *attributed* anger: it was not only valid to express this anger, but rightful. Sarah Benet-Weiser insisted on the focus that #MeToo had put in anger:

> The #MeToo movement has forced all of us to confront female rage – a rage at the injury of being harassed and assaulted, a rage at not being believed, at being called hysterical and out of control. Women's anger has been explained away for so many years as an inappropriate emotion, as evidence of our inferiority and overwhelming corporeality. But in the current moment, women are insisting that their rage and anger be taken seriously and dealt with. Our rage and anger are spilling over. (Benet-Weiser)

Thus, female anger has become a powerful affective force for mainstream literature in the 2020s. Angry female writers and their angry female protagonists have been taking over best-selling lists at a fast pace. Chelsea G. Summers's *A Certain Hunger* (2019), Eliza Clarke's *Boy Parts* (2020), Rachel Yoder's *Nightbitch* (2021), or Lisa Taddeo's *Animal* (2021) are only among the most mentioned titles. The success of anger as a creative force in literature has led to its appearance in young-adult fiction also, with titles like Amy Reed's *The Nowhere Girls* (2017), Courtney Summer's *Sadie* (2018), Laura Bates's *The Burning* (2020), or Dizz Tate's *Brutes* (2023). These novels depict teenage girls' anger, often in the context of their anger being suppressed or demonized and usually in response to ongoing sexual violence. *Brutes* is written as a coming-of-age story with an important focus on emotion. The characters' growth is marked by their coming into contact with the pervasiveness of sexual violence and the consequential shift in the anger that they experience, changing from a form of expressing agency to a response to pain. Drawing from Sarah Ahmed's affective model and Soraya Chemaly's anger analysis, this paper frames anger as a driving force for change in girlhood at two different levels. First, anger is the affective impulse of the girls' coming-of-age: the evolution in the ways in which they feel, express, and use their anger marks a shifting point in their maturity. Second, anger is framed as an impulsive force for societal change, as the girls exercise this anger as impulse to unmask the pervasiveness of sexual violence in their town. In this sense, this paper intends to make a contribution to the field of Girlhood Studies by challenging and redefining traditional notions about anger in girlhood, steering away from stereotypes about girls' emotionality, and leaning into the conceptualization of anger as a powerful affective force for the development of agency

and their ability to make readings of justice. *Brutes* adds to a body of literature that challenges the conventional stereotypes of girlhood, either casting girls as passive and submissive or as hypersexualized figures shaped by post-feminist discourse (Gornick; Chaplin & Aldao; Borst).

2. Reading Girls' Anger from Gender and Emotion Studies

Several academics from the fields of psychology and emotion studies have researched the gendering of emotions and their socialization in childhood and young adulthood. A turning point in the study of gender and anger is J.R. Averill's publication of *Anger and Aggression: An Essay on Emotion*. In this study, Averill rebukes popular stereotypes and classic clinical literature claims that relied on an essentialist perspective to affirm that men feel anger more often and with more intensity than women. Averill, in turn, stated that occurrences of self-reported anger were not subjected to gender differences in terms of rate, strength, or duration. Since his original claim, Averill's affirmation has been ratified by other researchers (Smith et al, Kring, Archer, Simon and Lively). What was found in some of these analyses, however, were differences in terms of aggression and expression of anger across genders. The differences in expression of anger are deeply rooted in how gender models of correct emotional behavior are instilled and socialized in subjects from childhood into adulthood. Feminist authors that work with emotion studies (Morrissey, Brody) propose an approach grounded on studying how societal beliefs about gender and emotion are produced, rather than focusing on innate emotional gender differences.

The rise of discourses on female anger since the #MeToo movement can be effectively explained through Sara Ahmed's model for the sociality of emotions. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004), Ahmed developed a model to explain how emotions come to be, how are they are socialized, and how are they shaped culturally. She contemplates two prior models: the psychological model and the sociological model, Durkheim's specifically (Ahmed 9-10). While she finds virtues in both, she also identifies certain deficiencies. Where the psychological proposal takes an "inside out" approach – emotions originate inside of subjects and then move outside of them into social relations – the sociological one takes an "outside in" approach – emotions originate socially and collectively and then come into the subjects. Ahmed finds a main flaw with both models, which is that they both assume that emotions are something that we "have." Her own take

on emotion is informed by both, although leaning more towards sociology. She sustains emotions originate out of social relations and contact between subjects, and are thus shaped by history, culture, and power structures. She states that "emotions are not simply something that 'I' or 'we' have. Rather, it is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others (…) that the 'I' and the 'we' are shaped" (10). Ahmed contends that emotions are not inside or outside but instead originate through contact between subjects and objects and then circulate between them. In this circulation, they may "stick" and "saturate with affect" some of those subjects and objects (11).

Ahmed's model and her contributions are productive to understand the intensification of the discourses surrounding female anger as well as their introduction into fiction. Ahmed has defined anger as an emotion which can originate in feminist spaces through contact between subjects who share testimonies of pain (172). When subjects make a reading of these testimonies unjust, their reading of pain turns into anger at the structures that sustain this injustice. #MeToo served as an amplification of these testimonies of pain, and thus the circulation of anger also grew. As the circulation of affect increases, Ahmed states in "Affective Economies" that it accumulates affective value (123), which may cause it to appear more often in popular forms of culture like literature or film.

Amidst the rise of the discourse on female anger, Soraya Chemaly published *Rage Becomes Her* (2018), a comprehensive volume on the socialization of anger in different life stages of women, including childhood, the workplace, heteronormative couplings, or motherhood. Chemaly begins her exploration of how conceptions about female anger are born by delving into how emotional norms are taught different to boys and girls. She contends that parents and authority figures in childhood tend to forego faults on emotion regulation more often boys than on girls, justifying the bias on ideas of innatism and biological difference; that is, the so commonly heard "boys will be boys." Chemaly's claim is appropriately backed by several psychological and sociological studies based on parents' perception of children's behaviors and children's gendered responses to frustration. In 1976, John and Sandra Condry published their study "Sex Differences: A Study of the Eye of the Beholder," in which adults were asked to describe babies' emotional states. The Condrys found that responses to the same emotional state varied depending on the gender of the baby. If the crying baby was a boy, they were more likely to define it as irritable or angry, whereas if it was a girl, responses leaned more to describe

the emotion as fear or sadness (816). Decades later, the gender bias held true. In 2012, Danielle Hagood gave a lecture on children's display of emotions, and stated that, while the feeling of emotions had very few differences in boys and girls, there was a significant difference in how their emotions were treated. In 2014, Ana Aznar and Harriet Tenenbaum released a study on the ways that parents spoke to their children about emotional behavior and regulation. They found that, while they spoke with daughters about emotion more often and in a more nuanced and complex way, they spoke with sons more about anger and "negative" feelings (153).

This socialization of anger as a gendered emotion from early developmental stages shows its consequences quickly. By the time they leave toddlerhood, girls are more likely to express anger and aggression less openly than boys (Chemaly 25). By preschool, children tend to already associate anger with masculinity, and by primary school, they think of assertiveness and disruptive behaviors as "linguistic markers of masculinity, acceptable for boys but not for girls" (26). Chemaly contends that girls are "admonished to use 'nicer' voices three times more often than boys are, [and] learn to prioritize the needs and feelings of people around them" which often translates into "ignoring their own discomfort, resentment, or anger" (26).

This submissiveness begins to change, often, in puberty, when girls begin to express negative emotions like anger more frequently (Chemaly 27). By puberty, however, girls have learned and integrated societal beliefs of women's "relative cultural irrelevance, powerlessness, and comparative worthlessness. Images and words conveying disdain for girls, women, and femininity come at children fast and furiously" (27). This general undermining of girls' sense of worth is tied with the "denial, disparagement, and diversion of their anger" (32). It is not uncommon for adults to poke fun at girls' expressions of anger. When a little girl is angry, they might be labelled "cheeky," and as they grow up, they become "drama queens" (32).

While their anger is downplayed or directly reprimanded, girls still retain it. Because girls are often punished when expressing it through arguing or discussing, psychologists and educators like Rachel Simmons have found that teenage girls will find other outlets to let out their anger. This often translates into them channeling their anger through destructive behaviors against themselves or others, through practices such as

gossiping, rumor spreading, or general cruelties against others (Simmons 16). Chemaly reasons that anger in teenage girls is a "treacherous" emotion:

> Any displays of emotions, vulnerability, and passivity – "traditional feminine" characteristics – signal weakness. But implicit-bias studies show that girls who are assertive, don't hedge their speech, actively claim verbal space, and, yes, maybe say they are mad, are considered rude, confrontational, uncooperative, and transgressive by adults. . . . For working-class and black girls, who also feel that anger is shameful and know that the expression of anger is frowned on, anger is particularly complicated and risky, because it is also often a valuable and necessary self-defense. (Chemaly 34)

Thus, girls in adolescence exist in a conflicting area when it comes to their anger. They experience feelings of anger and aggression, knowing that authority figures in their lives will disapprove of them and that they are out of line with femininity, but also being aware that anger is an emotion associated with power and assertiveness. This dissonance may lead, as Chemaly points out, to passive aggressiveness or similar outlets to let this belligerence out (37). What is more, considering the intersection between gender, ethnicity, and class, Chemaly deems anger for girls in marginalized communities even more problematic, as they are aware that their anger will be even more demonized, while simultaneously holding the knowledge that anger is "often a valuable and necessary self-defense" (34).

Dizz Tate's debut novel *Brutes* is largely based upon the conflictive area on the expressions of anger of teenage girls from low-income families. Through a close reading of the text, and specifically its depictions of teenage female anger, it is seen how Tate aims to capture the anger of teenage girls as something that "spills" out of them. Tate also depicts a shift in the girls' anger throughout the novel. Whereas in most of the narrative the anger of the girls aligns with what has been discussed – displays of anger or rage against themselves or others in forms of mischief or passive aggressiveness – it changes towards the end of the narrative, when one of the girls is sexually assaulted. After this, this girl's anger is no longer targeted towards herself or her friends, but towards making people see what has happened to her.

3. "WE WERE BORN FROM RAGE:" ANGER AND GIRLHOOD IN *BRUTES*

In 2023, six years after #MeToo and five years after Julie Brown's exposé piece on Jeffrey Epstein in the *Miami Herald*, Dizz Tate published her debut novel *Brutes*, a

magic realist narrative in first-person plural by a group of thirteen-year-olds: Leila, Jody, Britney, Christian,[3] Isabel, and Hazel. The girls become invested in the disappearance of the preacher's daughter, Sammy, and begin trying to piece together what her life was like before her vanishing, including her relationship with her best friend Mia and their association with a showbusiness mogul named Stone who lives in their small Florida town. Tate paints a vivid and claustrophobic portrait of a Florida very reminiscent of the testimonies of the girls who were part of Jeffrey Epstein's underage sex trafficking ring in the early 2000s in Palm Springs, Florida. Between 2001 and 2006, magnate Jeffrey Epstein contacted local teenage girls and hired them, for around two hundred dollars, to go to his house and massage him, only to sexually assault them at his property. Epstein often picked girls from working-class and low-income families and afterwards offered to pay them more if they recruited other girls (Robson). *Brutes* mimics this situation almost exactly, including the class dynamics at play by portraying the pronounced economic gap between the girls' families, who live in "the apartments," most likely referring to the common Floridian apartments in multi-family complexes (Aurand 677, U.S Department of Housing and Urban Development), and Stone's house, which is situated at a luxurious gated community. The novel takes a magic realist approach to coming of age, marked by the dangers that threaten this group of young girls from working-class families. Through the looming presence of a lake monster that haunts them as manifestation of Stone's preying on them, Tate builds a claustrophobic atmosphere of what it is to grow up with this kind of danger just outside one's door.

One of the most notable aspects of their coming-of-age process, which will be the focus of this analysis, is the shift in their anger. From the start of the novel, the "brutes" are presented to the reader as angry and somewhat violent. In chapter two, the plural narrative voice introduces readers to all of the mischief and misdemeanor that the girls have been getting into for years, presenting it as a reaction against their parents and as an externalization of a rage within them:

> Isabel, the last one of us with a dad, learned that her parents were getting divorced. We hated the whole process. They held hands when they told her, there was no fighting, just a love gone listless, and they still all got together at Thanksgiving without a voice raised. It was only Isabel who screamed appropriately and tipped over the sweet potatoes. We

[3] While Christian identifies as a boy, the girls and himself understand him as one of their own.

> refused to be cordial. We would not be born out of sweetness, we were born out of rage, we felt it in our bones. (Tate 27)

Because the girls share one narrative voice as a representation of their extremely tight-knit group, they share feelings continuously. If one of the girls is feeling anger, they are all feeling it; not only for her, but as if they *were* her. Researchers on the socio-emotional development of teenagers Kessler, McLeod, and Wethington have found that there may be some emotional "costs of caring" (491) in relation with deep emotional connection with friends, particularly prominent in groups of teenage girls, when it comes to a strong empathetic engagement with the distressful life events of others. This is what Smith and Rose named "empathetic distress," a construct that refers "to emotional involvement in the problems and distressed feelings of a relationship partner, to the point of taking on the partner's emotional distress and experiencing it as one's own" (1792). Because of "female's strong interpersonal orientation and stressors associated with close relationships," Smith and Rose state that women and girls present a higher tendency towards empathetic distress, which also leads them to suffering "costs of caring," that is, "vicarious distress when faced with the stress of loved ones or close others" (1793). These ideas feature strongly in *Brutes*. The girls have such a strong bond that they share one narrative voice, internalizing the events that one of them endures as a collective experience. However, their strong empathetic bond does not stop them from oftentimes hurting each other through gossiping or even isolation, displaying the passive aggressiveness that Chemaly elaborated on in her reflection on teenage anger:

> We were scared of being alone. Sometimes we'd pick one of us and play a game. We taunted her, showed her how easily she could be left behind. We'd forget to invite her to the grocery store or the mall or the pool, and then we'd talk about it after, look at her and say 'Oops!' If she cried, we left her. If she said, 'Fuck you!' we let her stay. (Tate 26)

This excerpt illustrates that the girls value the ability of others to become angry, which resonates with Chemaly's take on what anger entails for working-class girls. Throughout their childhood and friendship, their anger is of high importance to them and to their identities. They see their acts of anger as defiance to norms, which makes them feel empowered. In one of the most important sections of the novel. the girls enumerate a long list of reasons why their mothers call them "brutes:" "Our mothers call us brutes then they want us to feel bad. It is what they call men they do not like, like our dads" (Tate 99). The list comprises all types of behaviors, from actual displays of anger: "They called us brutes when we told them their boyfriends were perverts, which they were" (99); passing

through challenges to authority: "They called us brutes when we told Christian he shouldn't be afraid to wear Britney's skirt to school in sixth grade" (97); violent deeds: "They called us brutes the summer we got obsessed with lizards and they found the bodies beneath our beds" (99); to general mischief: "They called us brutes when we got salmonella after we ate a whole bowl of raw brownie mix" (99). While the degrees of danger and moral reprobation vary widely across these conducts, they are all equally punished by their mothers, to the point where the brutes become aware that what is being punished is truly their lack of submission and traditional femininity: "[W]e knew our mother's idea of goodness was not measured by morals but by how much noise we made. And we quickly grew tired of trying to be good in their way" (100). In this sense, the brutes are utilizing their anger and aggression as a form of reassuring their own agency and identity as separate from their mothers' morals. In her study of girlhood and anger, Chemaly placed a particular relevance in the relationship between girls' anger and confidence. She holds the thesis that by undermining and punishing the anger of girls, adults may be causing a diminishment of their confidence: by stating that their anger is either unimportant or reprehensible, girls understand that they have a lack of power to make assertions about what they find just and unjust (Chemaly 32). By understanding that their mothers' morals are based on ideas of submissiveness and traditional femininity, the brutes make the active decision to disregard their mothers' reprisals and continue being "brutal" and displaying these behaviors as the "refusal to be cordial" that they announce early in the novel.

While the initial presentation of the brutes' anger aligns with Chemaly's description of anger in early girlhood as not entirely articulated, not targeted against a specific objective, and mainly based on displaying aggressive behaviors against oneself or others, the forms of anger in the narrative do not remain stagnant and evolve as the girls grow up. Towards the end of the novel, the girls are taken to Stone's house by Sammy's best friend, Mia, as they are trying to find out more about Sammy's life before her disappearance. Mia informs the girls that if they go into a room with Stone and massage his shoulders, he will give them two hundred dollars. The girls, although scared, do not want to appear cowardly and accept Mia's proposal. However, at a certain point as they are massaging him one by one, all the girls begin leaving the room and Jody is left alone with Stone. This episode marks a pivotal moment in *Brutes*. Up to this point, the chapters of the novel that are set in the brutes' childhoods are narrated exclusively

from a distinct first-person plural voice. This type of narration achieves an effect of claustrophobia and unease, while simultaneously holding a feeling of togetherness and protection. By the time Jody is left behind with Stone, the plural voice has already been interiorized, which causes the shift to the singular voice to be all that more isolating:

> We imagine ourselves in reverse, moving backward from the room, backward through the doors and the trees and under the fence, back to our mothers, moving their way through the light, ready to take our hands and move us through the light, too. But we cannot reach our mothers in the light because we are in the dark. Even in our thoughts, they are too far, the house too large, and we cannot remember where the door is. We know clocks cannot turn back, anyway. After a while, I look around and realise the others have left me. I am alone and he turns to me. It is not a look I like. (Tate 172)

From this point forward, Jody becomes the narrator of the chapters set in the main timeline. The shift in the voice marks a moment of rupture in the story, in the friend group, and in their girlhood. There is a palpable change both in the general tone and feel of the story as well as in the displays of anger. Where the anger of Jody and the other girls before could be read as a form of recalling agency and a claim of identity separate from their parents, the anger that Jody expresses after she is raped is different and very much aligns with the anger that #MeToo put into circulation. As she leaves the room, Jody appears to be somewhat numb to her emotions and coming to terms with what happened to her. The immediate chapter after the attack is a short contemplation on the irreversible change that has occurred to her through the imagery of a bowl of water being conclusively contaminated. When she enters the living room, where all the brutes are watching TV with Mia and another teenage girl who was living in the house, Jody bonds with the unnamed girl:

> "These are your friends?" she says.
>
> I don't look at the other girls. I shrug. I look at her and with my look I try to communicate that we know the same things and are the same. She turns away. She reaches out with one long arm to where Hazel sits on the rug, crying quietly. She hits Hazel beneath the chin.
>
> "Ouch!" says Christian. (Tate 172)

Jody's closeness with the girl and her acceptance of the violence against the brutes further reinforce her disconnect with the rest of the group as well as her anger towards them. As they are watching TV, they see that Sammy's house is on fire, and they hurry to the scene. It is revealed that the brutes were the ones who were helping Sammy flee the town, so they go to the place where they know she is hiding When they arrive, Sammy

is experiencing an extreme stomachache and "births" a small stone. At the sight of it, Jody understands that Sammy too has been raped by Stone and this is a consequence. However, she becomes angered at seeing the stone as "nothing special" (Tate 186). Jody at this moment is seeking meaning in what happened to both her and Sammy but comes to terms with the fact that all this pain that they have endured only serves one purpose: the pleasure that men like Stone will get at their expense. From this point onward to the end of the novel, Jody's anger begins to grow.

To give Sammy time to escape, the brutes tell her parents that Sammy has been seen swimming in the lake with the monster. Thus, a fleet of boats arrive at the lake and men begin descending with "tools, fishing rods and long spikes baited with chicken carcasses" (Tate 188). The entire town gathers around the lake to watch as Jody is increasingly angered. She looks through a window through which she sees a couple sleeping, "oblivious, roofless and exposed to the elements" and she "resent[s] their lack of shame" (189).

The men in their boats continue their hunt, and eventually their nets catch something, and they begin to pull it out, which causes commotion in the townspeople. However, Jody notes, it is not what they all would have expected: "I watch the monster rise out of the water, the lake falling from around its body. It is no monster. It is a small and oil-dark creature, with growths all along its skin that look like tumours" (Tate 191). The narrative, in light of the events that occurred in Stone's house, invites a metaphorical reading of the figure of the monster as manifestation of sexual violence and danger. This creature, which the girls had been warned about since early childhood, stands for the dangers of men like Stone preying on the girls. It is noteworthy that, from the beginning of the novel, the girls are warned against going near the lake by their mothers, making ultimately their responsibility to not get hurt. Although hidden, the monster swims in the lake freely, just like Stone harms all of these girls secretly but is able to carry on with his life, protected by a system of silence. All of the adults are aware that this lake, which lies at the heart of their town, is polluted by a dangerous monster, and yet there are no efforts to seize it until they believe it has taken one of the girls, until it is too late.

While Jody notes that "the creature is far too small to contain a girl" (Tate 191), all of the spectators and authorities quickly decide to assume that this is the creature that must have eaten Sammy, and the man who captured it opens its stomach, but it apparently

is not dead yet. The man continues stabbing it until "he looks embarrassed, like he does not know what to do with the knife. Eventually, he drops it" (191). As they leave the creature for dead, mothers begin leading their children home, telling them that the monster is now sleeping. Jody stays behind and refuses to leave and move her eyes from the lake. She grows increasingly restless and altered:

> I watch the water move.
>
> No one else seems to see.
>
> The mothers retreat, the little girls and boys retreat.
>
> They drift past me. They talk about dinner, drinks, sleep, babies, money.
>
> I cannot stand it.
>
> I cannot let them leave.
>
> "It isn't sleeping!" I scream.
>
> And then the lake bursts into flame.
>
> They all turn back to watch.
>
> Curtains of fire rise from the mud that wraps around the lake's edges. The smell of burning fertiliser is unbearable. We hold our shirts over our noses. No one speaks or screams or even breathes. The flames skate across the sticky surface of the lake. Smoke rises into the air and hovers above the water. It seems like it could blow in any direction, towards us or away, but I am not afraid of the lake anymore.
>
> Sometimes the world deserves a burning. (Tate 172)

In this final scene, Jody's anger aligns the most with the anger that #MeToo put into circulation, and the entire scene can be read as an allegory of the movement itself. In *The Routledge Handbook of the Politics of the #MeToo Movement* (2020), Catherine A. MacKinnon, feminist legal scholar and activist, characterized #MeToo because of the faulty system of carceral punishment. MacKinnon contended that incarcerating perpetrators of sexual violence had no real significant repercussions in the structure of patriarchal violence. By punishing some of the assaulters (of the already few who have been prosecuted) with traditional carceral justice, the endemic value of sexual violence is not even contained, let alone solved (41). In *Brutes*, this issue is addressed through the man who captures the monster and stabs it relentlessly. He is not sure if the creature is alive or dead, or even if it is the culprit of Sammy's disappearance, and still he continues stabbing it until he randomly decides that the creature is dead, leaving the matter for

solved. As the man drops the knife, the townspeople accept that the monster is dead and that justice has been restored.

Jody, in this scene, is presented as the embodiment of the women who began #MeToo online. While the rest of the world accepts that this issue is contained, she stays behind and sees that even if this one monster has been killed, the lake still moves. Either the monster is not dead yet or, more likely, there are others out there. The issue was not solely the one monster captured, but the polluted lake that is at the heart of their town. Jody keeps looking at the moving lake while everyone turns away with a false sense of tranquility, thinking that the threat is over. It is in this moment when her angered scream "it is not sleeping!" (Tate 193) sets the lake on fire. The fire makes it impossible for people not to look. Wherever they are, the aftermath of Jody's scream reaches them, and she feels now emboldened, claiming that the world did indeed deserve this burning for what they were allowing to happen. This mirrors the beginnings of #MeToo. Where sexual violence had been dealt with traditionally through carceral justice, women took to online platforms to denounce that the incarceration of individuals did not equal the solution to the pervasiveness of sexual violence. The lake is filled with monsters, and #MeToo was made up from angered women like Jody who spoke so loudly on the matter that it was not possible to look away, to the point that it transcended social media into traditional forms of media.

In this way, *Brutes* portrays how Jody transitions from an anger that aligns with that of her friends that is not truly targeted against anything, and whose main purpose is to establish a separate identity from figures of authority as well as to challenge them. The displays of anger that the girls carry out in the novel prior to Jody's rape serve as their way of reaffirming that they reject the forms of socialization that their mothers intend to impose on them, based on traditional models of femininity. In this sense, their anger, although useful for them to retain a sense of personhood and rebellion, is very much limited to forms of gaining individuality. Jody's anger shifts after her rape, which, for her, means an extremely traumatic coming of age. After she experiences it, she begins bonding with the girls who have also been through it and thus starts seeing the issue as more than just about her. Sara Ahmed understands anger in these contexts as a reading of the pain of one's own and of others (172). Thus, Jody's anger shifts from a claim of individuality and independence to a project that intends to dismantle a system of silence covering an injustice. This project continues into Jody's adulthood. While *Brutes* does

not include a chapter narrated by adult Jody, the reader meets her again through the eyes of her little sister Hazel. In adulthood, Jody has developed an obsession with finding and hunting the monster in lake, also claiming that she is always "pissed off" (Tate 59). Following Ahmed's model, it could be said that Jody and her reading of pain put anger into circulation to force those around her to acknowledge the pervasiveness of sexual assault, which is so clearly represented by the monster/s in the polluted lake.

4. CONCLUSION

Girlhood Studies, from their interdisciplinary approach, are turning the theoretical gaze towards subjects previously neglected by scholarly attention. They are transforming and reframing traditional notions about passivity, vulnerability, or homogeneity that had been priorly attributed to girlhood, broadening and nuancing the category "girl." This paper contributes to this already established tradition of questioning and redefining our knowledge about girlhood, by close-reading Dizz Tate's *Brutes* from a theoretic prism that looks at affect through Girlhood Studies. Anger in these developmental stages has before been linked to childish tantrums or looked at from an overly biological perspective. Here, these notions are rejected, and anger is proposed to be a crucially important affective force in the building of agency, self-esteem, and sense of justice of girls. Supported by Soraya Chemaly's contemporary examination of anger, this analysis has shown that anger is a fundamental affect for girls' self-definition as agents who are able to make assertions about what they find just and unjust. Their uses of anger evolve, going from a form of identity-claiming in early girlhood, to an affective force that pushes them to move against injustice after they first endure the pervasiveness and harm of sexual violence. Both *Brutes* and this paper frame girls' anger not as a form of paralyzing resentment, but as the engine for change that Sara Ahmed's emotional theory also understands it as. In doing so, the narrative's anger is framed within the larger effort against the proliferation of unpunished sexual violence that the #MeToo movement forwarded. Dizz Tate thus manages to reposition and reconceptualize stale notions about girls and their anger, adequately representing their "refusal to be cordial" as so much more than a tantrum.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

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"I DON'T HAVE A DEFECTIVE VERSION OF WHAT YOU'VE GOT" [1]: LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS OF NEURODIVERSE GIRLHOODS[2]

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Abstract: This essay analyses a selection of texts written about and by girls, who because of their neurodivergence are unable to learn the complex, often unstated, rules that govern the language, representations and social interactions on which participation in contemporary society is contingent. Research into cultural representations of girls who are unable to fulfil their socially mandated roles due to a variety of reasons, including neurodiversity, suggest they are at best stereotyped, at worst completely ignored. Caitríona Lally's *Eggshells* (2015) and Alice Franklin's *Life Hacks for a Little Alien* (2025) interrogate the language and spaces of girlhood as sites of restriction and coercion for their neurodiverse protagonists. However, the novels suggest that the marginal status that results from this exclusion from the mainstream can also render visible the often invisible strategies by which social roles and identities are constructed, facilitating a significant site of critique. The novels suggest that the liminal, unnarrated social spaces occupied by their protagonists are where the potential to forge new and inclusive modes of girlhood will be found.
Keywords: girlhood; hegemony; neurodiversity; language; social spaces; liminality

"NO TENGO UNA VERSIÓN DEFECTUOSA DE LO QUE TÚ TIENES": REPRESENTACIONES LITERARIAS DE LA INFANCIA Y ADOLESCENCIA DE NIÑAS NEURODIVERGENTES

Resumen: Este artículo analiza una selección de textos escritos sobre y por chicas que, debido a su neurodivergencia, son incapaces de aprender las reglas complejas y a menudo implícitas que gobiernan el lenguaje, las representaciones y las interacciones sociales sobre las que se basa la participación en la sociedad contemporánea. La investigación sobre las representaciones culturales de las chicas que son incapaces de desempeñar sus roles sociales establecidos debido a una variedad de razones, incluida la neurodiversidad,

[1] Stefanie Preissner in *Wired Our Own Way,* ed. Niamh Garvey (New Island Books, 2025), 125.
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sugiere que en los mejores casos son estereotipadas y, en los peores, completamente ignoradas. *Eggshells* (2015) de Caitríona Lally y *Life Hacks for a Little Alien* (2025) de Alice Franklin interrogan el lenguaje y los espacios para chicas como sitios restrictivos y coercitivos para sus protagonistas neurodivergentes. Sin embargo, las novelas sugieren que el status marginal que resulta de esta exclusión de las corrientes dominantes también puede dar visibilidad a las estrategias generalmente invisibles a través de las cuales se construyen los roles e identidades sociales, facilitando un importante punto de crítica. Las novelas sugieren que los espacios sociales liminales y no narrados ocupados por sus protagonistas es donde se encontrará el potencial para establecer modelos de infancia y adolescencia femeninos nuevos e inclusivos.
Palabras clave: infancia y adolescencia de las niñas; hegemonía; neurodiversidad; lenguaje; espacios sociales; liminalidad

1. INTRODUCTION

This essay will discuss a selection of texts written about and by girls, who because of their neurodivergence are unable to learn the complex, often unstated, rules that govern the language, representations and social interactions on which participation in contemporary society is contingent. It will assess the language and spaces of girlhood as sites of restriction and coercion, and evaluate potential resistance to often invisible hegemonic mechanisms that may be found in the neurodiverse perspective.

The liminal spaces of adolescence offer a good opportunity to assess the process by which girls are laced into their gendered identities, what Judith Butler calls "girling": "the process of becoming socially intelligent as a *girl* according to precedents for the performance of girlhood in any given sociocultural, geographic, political, economic, and historical context" (quoted in Switzer 851). This definition emphasises girlhood as a socially produced performance. Adolescence is widely seen as a site of contraction, where the fluid, unconstructed identities of childhood give way to a more ordered, culturally specific sense of self. This stage in their development exposes girls to "the domain of language and the complex matrix of social relations through the interpellation of gender" (Erevelles and Mutua 253). Louis Althusseur coined the term "interpellation" to explain the way in which we answer the "hail" or call of the ideological forces operating in our society, whose function is to persuade us to act, dress and think in a manner that is considered socially appropriate (55). When we answer the hail, we are ritually connecting ourselves with the values of our culture (Williamson 40-2). Stuart Hall describes society as comprised of a series of ideas and meanings that circulate and determine "the rules, norms and conventions by which social life is ordered and governed" (4). Most significant are what he calls the "conceptual maps", which teach members of a culture to interpret

the world in similar ways, thus producing a "shared culture of meanings" and constructing "a social world which we inhabit together" (Hall 18). Central to this is the existence of a shared language, without which members of a society would not be able to communicate effectively. Hall notes that language and the meanings it communicates are the result of "a set of social conventions" which must be learned (21). Children "learn the systems and conventions of representation, the codes of their language and culture, which equip them with cultural 'know-how', enabling them to function as culturally competent subjects" (Hall 22). Without this knowledge, they are unable to be admitted into the cultural in-group. As the neurodiverse subjects considered in this essay illustrate, those who cannot or will not master the rules of social discourse face exclusion and silencing.

2. Theoretical Framework: Assessing Models of Girlhood

"Paradox" is a term used by many theorists in relation to the status and representation of girls in contemporary cultural texts. Marnina Gonick et al argue that although the concept of "girl power" emerged as a celebratory narrative of girls' agency and empowerment in the 1990s, by the 2000s theorists became more cynical about the nature of empowerment purportedly on offer (1). Natasha Walter notes that in spite of the widespread language of empowerment and choice, sexualised images of women are effectively replacing all other representations of women across popular culture (68). Even texts that specifically address shortcomings in traditional, patriarchal representations of girls, such as adaptations of fairytales that transform the princess "from paragon of patriarchal feminine virtue to unruly female rebel", in line with the pervasive "girl power discourse" that suffuses many postfeminist media representations of women, rarely offer a valid feminist rewriting of the canonical tale, functioning instead to reinscribe women within the patriarchal order they claim to challenge (Sibielski 590). Many postfeminist narratives of girl- and womanhood actually increase the pressure on women living in neo-liberal societies to "balance masculine qualities of phallic power with renewed pressures around hypersexualised visual display and performance of normative femininity" (Gonick et al 3)[3]. Most critical attention focuses on the commodification of female sexuality in media-led representations of girlhood and the persistence, in spite of claims to the contrary, of "heteronormative white femininity" (Gonick et al. 2). There are many

[3] See also Angela McRobbie. *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (Sage Publishing, 2008).

intersectional studies that critique this from the perspectives of "race, ethnicity, social class, gender, and sexual orientation" (Bettis and Adams 4), but very little attention has been paid to girls who are further marginalised as a consequence of either physical or neuro-divergences.

Nirmala Erevelles and Kagendo Mutua claim that in contemporary Girl Power theory, the disabled girl is an invisible presence[4]: "To be marked as both disabled and female in an ableist society suggests that you may never really become a 'girl'" (254). They explain that affirmative representations of girls in contemporary culture "rest heavily on ableist ideologies of independence, assertiveness, and strength laced with patriarchal notions of beauty and attractiveness" (254). By contrast, the disabled female body is ambiguously positioned both outside (she does not conform to these conventional representations) and inside (she is not male) the category of woman. Threatening the stability of the neat binary oppositions on which social control is predicated, the disabled female body is often characterised as abject (Erevelles and Mutua 255). Julia Kristeva theorises the threat embodied in the abject as located not so much in its difference, but rather in its refusal to be neatly contained within predefined categories: "It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (4). The abject, according to this formulation, is dangerous because it undermines the comfortable boundaries that human society has built to categorise and thus control its members. Reading the disabled body as transgressive, therefore, marks it as "potentially dangerous and disruptive even to radical discourses of girlhood" (Erevelles and Mutua 255), in its capacity to subvert socially sanctioned norms and suggest alternative conceptions of identity.

Sandra Jones et al. make a similar point about neurodiversity[5] and its cultural representations. In a wide-ranging survey of representations of autism in cultural texts, and the impact these have on both autistic and non-autistic audiences, they highlight the prevalence of stereotypical tropes, which range from the disparaging (presenting autism

[4] In a note on terminology, Erevelles and Mutua explain that within disability studies scholarship, "disabled girl" is the preferred term because "within the more politicised understanding of disability as a social and political construct one's disability is to be embraced along with one's identity as gendered" (254).

[5] Sue Fletcher-Watson defines neurodiversity as: "the fact that humans vary in their neurological make-up and that this variability dictates the ways in which we process information – and therefore our experiences of and responses to the world" (418). In 2023, the Department of Education in the UK estimated the incidence of neurodiversity as 15% of the school-aged population (see Webber et al. 323), a level that is consistent with research in other jurisdictions.

as non-human or othering) to the ostensibly positive but inherently patronising (autism as heroic or exceptional): "Autistic characters in fiction continued to be presented as burdens or saviours" (Jones et al. 2213). Interestingly, in relation to the theme of gendered identities, they note the overrepresentation of certain media-promoted stereotypes: "not all autistic people are white heterosexual males" (Jones et al 2213). Webber et al produce similar findings from their survey of representations of neurodiversity in Young Adult fiction, citing the importance of an intersectional approach, wherein other forms of marginalisation, including gender, should be acknowledged. Most important is the accurate situation of neurodiverse identities within the complex "interlocking systems of privilege and oppression" (325) that stratify and organise all social groups within society's power matrix.

3. *Wired Our Own Way*: Constructing A Literary Space for the Autistic Voice

In her introduction to *Wired Our Own Way: An Anthology of Irish Autistic Voices*, Niamh Garvey explains the importance of literature in constructing a space where neurodivergent perspectives on the world can be articulated and shared: "Each writer began with the same empty space, free to express themselves without being stereotyped . . . In turn, the reader is freed from the clutter of assumptions and can approach each essay with unveiled eyes" (1). This literary conversation, she suggests, initiates a relationship "on an equal footing" (Garvey 2), which is not the lived experience of many neurodiverse people. Reflecting on her own experiences of not getting an autism diagnosis until she was in her thirties, she notes how much energy a neurodivergent child expends trying to "mask our differences from a young age, moulding ourselves on how other people behave" (Garvey 5). In other words, rather than being let get on with the already taxing business of negotiating their identity amidst the pressures of social and cultural norms and hegemonies, young neurodiverse people have the additional burden of trying to figure out what is expected of them from complex social cues they may be unable to read. Garvey identifies two primary "stumbling blocks" encountered by the neurodiverse: "language and communication mismatches" and "environmental sensory triggers" (Garvey 7). Using these fundamental building-blocks of social intercourse – identity, language and the negotiation of space – as a guide, this essay will assess the strategies adopted by those who, as a consequence of their neurodivergence, must seek alternative

ways to define themselves. The protagonists in Alice Franklin's *Life Hacks for a Little Alien* (2025) and Caitríona Lally's *Eggshells* (2015) address us from the marginal spaces they carve out for themselves amidst the plethora of hegemonic signifiers that define girlhood. Before turning to the novels, it is useful to consider some of the key parameters established in Garvey's *Wired Our Own Way* (2025), which gathers together personal reflections by Irish autistic writers[6] about their experiences of living in a world that, as Stefanie Preissner states, "has been created by neurotypical people and does not meet the needs of the neurodivergent" (in Garvey 129).

The constructed, mediated fabric of what is generally accepted as the natural and unquestioned ways of life of a society is a common theme in the essays, with many contributors criticising the unthinking assumptions made by the neurotypical that their way is the only right way to conduct social life. Freya von Noorden Pierce asserts: "I've learned that this world is not built for neurodivergent people, as much as corporate diversity and inclusion committees may have you believe", and that inevitably having to live in a world where one is pressured "to fit in" means that those with "differing brains suffer" (in Garvey 105). A key theme in many of the essays is the need for the neurotypical to acknowledge their privilege in living in a world that is specifically designed for them and not disparaging those who struggle with its demands. It is important to note that although the majority of the population can be defined as "neurotypical . . . all neurotypes, while not equally *common*, are equally *normal*" (Fletcher-Watson 2022, 418) – or as Preissner defiantly puts it: "I don't have a defective version of what you've got" (in Garvey 2025, 128). As this essay will demonstrate, a crucial element of the chosen novels is the extent to which the narrative style and perspective encourage the reader to notice the fabricated nature of what we take for granted as our reality. Rather than simply describing the difficulties experienced by the protagonists, the authors try to immerse the reader within language and ideological systems that do not make sense. They do this by focusing our attention on the vagaries of words, using language in a slightly unconventional way, thus introducing small spaces for contemplation, what Sharon Todd describes as "small, transformative moments . . . of 'delicate care' that disrupt the commonplace" (Todd 232).

3.1 Social Spaces as Sites of Conformity

[6] The discussion in this essay will focus only on the contributions written by women.

A common theme expressed by many of the contributors is feeling "like you were born on the wrong planet" (Preissner in Garvey 128). Nuala O'Connor summarises her autism as "an individual bumping up against social norms and expectations that feel uncomfortable and alien" (in Garvey 28). This analogy is used in both the chosen novels, in which the protagonists believe they are an alien (Franklin) and a changeling (Lally), such is their sense of discordance from the norms of their surrounding social worlds. Jane Cadman, who was almost seventy when she was diagnosed as autistic, notes that societies often try to deal with autistic people by silencing that which makes them different: "My behaviour would have been considered odd and was subtly corrected" (in Garvey 37). This approach aligns with Kristeva's comments on the need to contain and neutralise the abject. Surviving in such a hostile environment depends on learning social rules and following a "script" of "appropriate behaviour", as theorised by Hall: "I became very good at masking and assumed that that was what socializing was about. But it always left me with a gap between who I was in myself and other people and a need to get away from them to relax. I accepted a level of loneliness" (Cadman in Garvey 38). The artificiality of the constructs and interactions on which society is built emerges as a key insight in many of the essays. The difficulty of dealing with the sensory overload of contemporary urban society is another common theme, but what becomes apparent is that instead of silencing/masking their disquiet in order to fit in with social conventions, the writers can use their marginalised perspectives to critique them. Jen Wallace, for example, describes the various spaces on offer in contemporary society in terms of binary oppositions: "I am made for dappled shade, sea breezes and birdsong, not the relentlessness of modern indoor environments. Artificial lights, synthetic smells and industrial noises set me on alert and cause me distress" (in Garvey 13). The key words here are "artificial" and "synthetic". The problem is not that the neurodiverse person has failed to learn to live in contemporary society, but rather that society as a whole has been persuaded to accept the contrived and false values of industrialism and fails to see how much these limit its freedom.

Underlying a number of the essays is the - perhaps peculiarly Irish - sense that a truer and more enriching mode of living may still be available to those who reject the artifice of contemporary industrial society and delve down to the traditional, authentic layers below. Wallace, finding peace in her late diagnosis, describes the relief she experiences when she can opt out of "human industrial scale discord" (in Garvey 17) and discover an older, more intuitive way of living in the world: "As the garden rewilds, I

find I am rewilding too, healing old institutional wounds, learning my own needs and boundaries and leaning into moving gently through this magical life" (in Garvey 15). Wallace's words capture the suffering endured by many neurodiverse people at the hands of institutions that were interested only in forcing them to adapt to prescribed behaviours[7]. However, she also heralds the freedom that can be found when one has the courage to opt out of the hegemonic system and forge one's own way. The suggestion that folk traditions can potentially offer a more fulfilling way of life is a key theme in *Eggshells* and resonates in many contemporary Irish women writers. Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, for example, describes folklore as "the secret of storytelling", which facilitates "a still deeper and older layer of narrative that was like a new continent, a magical world" (in Tallone 155). This aligns with Kristeva's exhortation to women to reject limiting patriarchal structures by turning to alternative narratives of history and identity predicated on traditions passed down through female texts: "Such a feminism rejoins, on the one hand, the archaic (mythical) memory and, on the other, the cyclical or monumental temporality of marginal movements" (20).

3.2 The Vagaries of Language: The Neurodiverse Perspective

The key source of conflict for all of the writers in Garvey's collection is language and the obstacle it constitutes to their ability to communicate accurately and easily with those around them. One issue is the dearth of appropriate terminology to describe the experiences of neurodiversity: "I had no words for the levels of overwhelm, frustration and otherness I felt as a young person" (Wallace in Garvey 13). Wallace's unconventional use of "overwhelm" as a noun here creates precisely the sort of discordance within language she is trying to articulate. Cadman describes the breakdown in communication that can occur when the learned vocabulary is insufficient for communication: "I think in images, and translating them into words is quite difficult" (Cadman in Garvey 40). The biggest problems, however, are the unspoken and culturally-specific rules and nuances that govern the operation of speech: "Like many autistics, I struggle around abstract concepts and social communication. We sometimes miss the subtleties and social conventions that come naturally to neurotypicals" (O'Connor in Garvey 28). A most interesting perspective is offered by Naoise Dolan, who compares her experiences of

[7] Garvey notes that for much of the twentieth century, Irish autistic people who required support tended to be institutionalised, where they were subjected to "treatments" now regarded as cruel and traumatising (3).

learning Japanese to her struggles with her native English. When one is learning a foreign language, she explains, one is introduced slowly and in detail to the underlying rules governing not only the grammar but the cultural nuances. This is a level of detail never offered to native speakers, who are expected to absorb and internalise the implied rules of their language in the manner outlined by Hall – an impossible task for a neurodivergent learner, who needs consistency and clearly articulated concepts: "Irish people . . . communicate in this elliptical fashion. There are a million gaps where you're supposed to know what to fill in" (Dolan in Garvey 83). The other key difference is the accommodation afforded to a foreign speaker, whose mistakes are accommodated: "I feel free speaking other languages in a way that I never really do in English . . . Since I have a native speaker's accent in English … I am expected to know the rules. When I break them, people assume it's out of malice" (Dolan in Garvey 85).

This insight into language use – and by extension, the rules governing all forms of social interaction - and the difficulty neurodiverse speakers have in learning its unspoken rules is a key theme in the chosen novels, with the two protagonists struggling throughout to communicate. It is of huge credit to the authors that they strive to demonstrate to their readers just how frustrating it is to have to use a language from whose accurate deployment one is excluded. Commenting on the literature of girlhood, Ann Smith notes that books that are simply *about* girls, regardless of how ostensibly feminist the message is, do little to disestablish prevailing literary tropes and stereotypes (1). To truly destabilise hegemonic assumptions and offer revolutionary new perspectives, the girl in the text must "function as its central point both actually and metaphorically" (Smith 1). Franklin and Lally both acknowledge that it is not sufficient to simply illustrate and even critique the challenges faced by the neurodiverse in a range of social situations. Rather they strive to wrench their readers out of their comfort zone with regard to the conceptual maps and words conventionally used. The spaces inhabited by the girls in the two novels must be understood as socially manufactured sites, where identities are determined and inscribed. Similarly, the language used draws attention to its own role in supporting the dominant discourse. This reflects what James Conroy insists is the central function of literature: "Poetry stands at the interstices of the world and the word, the personal and the public, and the local and the universal, and in doing so has a crucial role to play in maintaining discursive openness" (143). As this essay will strive to demonstrate, by allowing their protagonists to inhabit marginal spaces in which

hegemonic language and conceptual maps are destabilised, Franklin and Lally make a valuable contribution to the reassessment of girlhood, in particular neurodivergent narratives of girlhood, encouraging readers to reconsider what we take for granted about the spaces and communications systems we inherit.

4. *Life Hacks for a Little Alien* (2025)

Alice Franklin's *Life Hacks for a Little Alien* (2025) is an account of a young, neurodivergent girl's struggle to navigate her way through adolescence in a society in which her language, ideas and identity are not acceptable. The book is written in the second person, with the narrator (possibly the protagonist as an adult) addressing the protagonist and trying to guide her through life in a society for which she seems hopelessly unsuited: "Climb up here, Little Alien. Sit next to me. I will tell you about life on this planet" (Franklin 3). The analogy of the alien is cleverly used to suggest both the extent to which the protagonist is alienated from the conventional workings of society, but also to enable critique of what much of humanity accepts without question. The use of the second person creates an intimate but also a jarringly externalised perspective on the protagonist's life. She is both subject and object, with the reader forced by the narrative perspective to accept our complicity in her feelings of alienation and otherness. Much of the book centres on the problems that arise when the protagonist tries to define her own identity within a society that insists on its rules being obeyed. The second person narrative conveys the pressure to conform that is imposed on anyone who feels different: "You won't be normal. Aliens can't be normal. You'll be normal enough, though. And by this, I mean you'll have just enough normal to seem normal without actually being normal" (Franklin 7). These sentences succinctly express the balancing act that constitutes life for many neurodiverse people, who are aware of their marginalisation and expend huge energy masking their own identities in order to adapt to what society demands of them. The word "normal" recurs through the text, its repetition emphasising the hegemonic binary oppositions that manufacture our consent by inducing in us a fear of the other. The protagonist's marginal position enables her to deconstruct its logocentric power, however, revealing it to be little other than a constructed concept that can just as easily be reinterpreted: "'Not normal' is the phrase she uses . . . It's normal to you though" (Franklin 84).

The narrative offers repeated reminders of how exhausting and restrictive it is to be constantly checking one's speech to ensure one is obeying social rules: "remembering to speak in full sentences, you remember to speak in full sentences"; "forgetting to make your voice go up at the end" (when asking a question); "trying to speak generally so as not to be caught out" (Franklin 40, 96, 136). The protagonist describes behaviours such as stimming that are essential to some neurodiverse people, but repugnant to neurotypical members of society, who view them as disruptive:

> You try to muster up the strength to stop making your noises. You succeed – manage to lessen their volume, then stop doing them altogether. But you feel the need to do something else. The frustration can't just sit there. It has to go somewhere, be somewhere, manifest as something. And so, you do your body rocking – the other thing you do when you're frustrated. But alas, body rocking is another odd thing to do. Though not unheard of, it's largely uncommon – an easy target for ridicule. (Franklin 57)

The binary structure of society is evident here, with the neurodiverse – the abject – forced to hide behaviours that are natural, even essential, to them so that they can be contained within their socially sanctioned categories and their threat to social stability thus neutralised.

4.1 "Has the cat got your tongue?": Idioms as Exclusionary Mechanisms

The protagonist's frustration with language is the central theme in the text. Evidently a very bright and perceptive girl, she struggles to articulate her thoughts. Sometimes this inability is due to her own difficulties in marshalling her ideas: "You try to articulate these thoughts. But your thinking is sluggish . . . It's like some wiring has gone wrong, some sort of fog has descended, like your tongue is far away from your brain" (Franklin 55). However, most of the problems stem from her struggle to master the linguistic rules on which communication is based. The second person narrative is very effective here, as the reader sees for themselves the mismatch between what the protagonist thinks and what she is able to articulate: "Your vocabulary is enormous, or to be precise, your passive vocabulary is enormous and your active vocabulary is shite" (Franklin 3). Her schoolteachers, judging her only on her ability to reproduce learned words, dismiss her as below average intelligence and insist that she confine her reading to basic children's books, not realising that she is reading complex psychology books in her spare time. As becomes evident, the real problem with language, although most people do not realise it, is the extent to which meaning is determined by subtext.

The book is annotated with footnotes, which suggest the protagonist's forensic interest in how language actually operates and the extent to which this social knowledge must be learned. The unemotional, quasi-scientific tone of the second person narrative is very effective in forcing the reader to confront the often indecipherable workings of the English language and the impact this has on those excluded from its secrets. Expressing his frustration with her muteness, the deputy principal of her school asks her: "Has the cat got your tongue?" (Franklin 66). The protagonist's literal mind does its best to decipher how a cat could be relevant to the conversation, before confiding in the reader that: "This is an idiom. Idioms are strings of words, divorced from their typical meanings" (Franklin 66). The contradiction here between the calm acceptance of such figures of speech and the absurdity of any language system that communicates through such oblique means inserts a significantly resistant message. Echoing many of the contributors to Garvey's collection, the protagonist highlights the extent to which the nuances of language are inaccessible to those who process information differently. It makes no difference that she has studied language structures and learned complex vocabularies. Human communication continues to be out of reach for her because language ultimately works to exclude rather than include anyone outside the preordained social in-group: "you will know how words work, how they don't work and where they come from . . . But beyond the world of words, you will remain largely ignorant. This is unfortunate. When it comes to the point, the stuff of language is nearly always beside it" (Franklin 198). If she was "the ruler of the world", she would insist that words be linked to precise meanings so that everyone would understand what was actually being said: "Instead of speaking, people would carefully consider the thoughts they want to express and then write them down. That way, there would be no misunderstandings based on unintended tonal shifts, unintended emphasis, unintended facial expressions" (Franklin 135).

4.2 Binary Oppositions and Gendered Identities

The protagonist's marginalisation due to her inability to communicate fluently and easily also extends to her difficulties in inhabiting what society deems to be her appropriate gender role:

> During this pause, you get the feeling she is trying to figure something out. Maybe she is trying to decide whether you are an alien or a human, or maybe just whether you are a girl or a boy. Your hair is short and, as you are still prepubescent, you have no childbearing hips or womanly curves.

> Your gender-based energy is also ambiguous. There is nothing rambunctiously boyish or carefully girly about you. You tread the line between nothing and neither. (Franklin 97)

This passage is very cleverly written, with an emphasis on the many binary oppositions that comprise human identities and the linguistic clichés that support them. Effortless social interaction, as Hall theorises, depends on compartmentalisation according to hegemonic norms. Failure to deliver expected signifiers relating to hair length and body shape threaten the social order. The protagonist's automatic reliance on clichéd descriptors for male and female bodies reminds us how persuasive such ideas are and the extent to which they are internalised, particularly during the vulnerable stage of adolescence. Moreover, the disparity in power relations that enables boys to be "rambunctious" but demands that girls are "careful" and "girly" effectively highlights the limitations often imposed on girls in the name of femininity. The protagonist's assertion that in refusing to comply with this categorisation she becomes invisible, "between nothing and neither", is a depressing reminder why so many girls find it easier to cede to their interpellation and take up the only roles that society offers them.

One night when she is struggling to sleep at society's mandated times (another subtle critique of widespread acceptance of social norms even when they do not support individual circadian rhythms), the protagonist comes across a late-night television documentary on an ancient manuscript, the Volynich Manuscript. Named after the man who discovered it in 1912, the manuscript subsequently became the obsession of an academic who believed it was the product of an ancient alien civilisation. This piques the interest of the protagonist, initially because she is relieved to think aliens may exist, thus suggesting that there are alternative societies in which she may feel more at home. What really fascinates her, however, is the language and notations in which the manuscript is written, which to date have not been linked to any known civilisation. This suggests to her that each society manufactures a system for communicating that is arbitrary and specific to them, but because some of these systems have become global, they attain the status of universality that hides their constructedness: "You find yourself thinking about what words are. About what it means to understand words. About how weird it is. Words are just ink on a page, arranged in a fashion dictated by convention – and yet they mean things because people have decided that they do. That's weird" (Franklin 89). The switch here to "weird" from what had previously been defined as "normal" is important. The increased confidence she gains from this insight into the artificiality of language systems

enables her to begin the process of accepting her unique worldview and carving out a space for herself in social interactions, rather than trying to hide her personality in order to fit in. This in turn facilitates a wider revision of social customs and rules, with a particular critique of the monolithic identity demanded in contemporary society. Pondering on the limited narrative voice society offers its members, who are strictly delineated according to sex, race and other categorisations, she notes that this limitation is voluntarily adopted and could easily be rejected in order to facilitate a more flexible and equitable society:

> You know many other languages have multiple ways of saying "you". You know some languages have a formal and an informal "you". You know some have a singular and a plural "you". You think, as a language with only one word for "you", English might actually be in the minority . . . You think you would like it if there were more words for "you". After all, there are billions of people on Planet Earth. How can "you" be you but also she and her and them and him? To address everyone with the same second-person pronoun seems weird. You think you might like it if pronouns didn't exist. You think you might like it if everyone everywhere were simply called by their name. (Franklin 232)

"You", in this context, is the mechanism of interpellation, as defined by Althusseur, assigning everyone their preordained social positions. Linked to the operation of the ideological apparatuses that define us as subjects (Althusseur 54), the universal "you" works to eliminate difference. This results not in equality, but rather in the erasure of any identities that do not conform to dominant values. Aware that as a neurodivergent girl she is doubly excluded from positions of influence, the protagonist calls for a dismantling of reductive linguistic signifiers and demands the right to occupy her own unique voice. It is only by allowing everyone the right to represent themselves as they wish that divergent identities can be fully expressed and allowed to enrich society through the unique perspectives they can contribute.

5. *EGGSHELLS* (2015)

Vivian, the protagonist in Caitríona Lally's *Eggshells* (2015), also defines herself as significantly at odds with her surrounding society, so much so she is convinced she is a changeling. In Irish mythology, a changeling is a sickly infant left in place of a human child, who has been lured to the Otherworld by the fairies. Vivian describes her daily efforts to return to her real home, visiting places around Dublin that she thinks may be entry points: "I unfold the map . . . and write in my notebook the names of places that contain fairytales and magic and portals to another world, a world my parents believed I

came from and tried to send me back to, a world they never found but I will" (Lally 6). This statement articulates Vivian's sense of displacement in contemporary society. Her insistence that she is not quite of the human world functions as an effective literary technique designed to lure the reader into an ambiguous relationship with her, challenging our attitudes to those unconventional beings we encounter on our daily journeys around our own cities: "We are the passengers who won't sit beside her on the bus. Vivian does not question her behaviour, but we do. Is this woman merely ditsy, or is she mentally ill?" (Kiberd 2015).

Before expanding on the novel's analysis of social spaces and their impact on identity, it is worth noting Vivian's reference to her troubled relationship with her parents. Ríona Ní Fhrighil explains that the changeling motif was often used to criticise Irish women perceived to have deviated from religious/patriarchal rules in contrast to socially compliant, good daughters (110). Recent texts by writers such as Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill[8] and Doireann Ní Ghríofa[9] have reclaimed the changeling motif to indict state-sanctioned abuse of Irish women, who were often incarcerated in institutions, like the Mother and Baby Homes, in order to manage and eliminate the threat posed by their deviance[10]. There is a hint in *Eggshells* that Vivian may have been incarcerated in such an institution in her teenage years by parents who wanted to divest themselves of responsibility for her (although like much of Vivian's narrative this is never expanded upon so the reader is unsure whether or not to look for additional meanings in the oblique hints we are given about her past). There are multiple, although subtle, references to attempts made by her parents to return her to her fairy home, with Vivian occasionally describing repressed memories of attempted drowning and burning: "My father tried to send me back, he wanted to swap me for his human child" (Lally 249). Molly Ferguson reads Lally's use of the changeling motif as a means of "speak[ing] the unspeakable about the violence of the heteronormative family" (309). The changeling motif is clearly a multi-accentual sign, that can be used to critique a range of abuses perpetuated by official religious and patriarchal institutions in the name of condemning and containing figures, usually young

[8] Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill. *The Fifty Minute Mermaid* (The Gallery Press, 2007).
[9] Doireann Ní Ghríofa. *Nine Silences* (The Salvage Press, 2018).
[10] For a detailed overview of the use of Irish folklore as a mechanism of critique in Irish women's writing, see Aoileann Ní Éigeartaigh. "The Mermaid and Contested Narratives of Motherhood in the Poetry of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and Doireann Ní Ghríofa". In *Mothers in Contemporary Irish Literature: Kaleidoscopic Reimaginings*, ed. Madalina Armie and Maria Veronica Membrive Perez (De Gruyter Brill, 2026), 67-83.

women, considered to be destabilising or abject. For the purposes of this discussion, however, Garvey's assertion that "[t]here's copious evidence of autism throughout history, right back to many of the Irish children accused of being changelings" (3) is most significant, suggesting that Lally's novel can be read as an examination of the marginalisation of neurodiverse people by a society that wants to force them to behave according to its conventions.

5.1. Negotiating Neurodiversity in Hegemonic Spaces

Like the protagonist in *Life Hacks for a Little Alien*, Vivian spends much of her day trying to negotiate her identity amidst the torrent of hegemonic assumptions and demands that confront her. She is well aware that she is perceived as somehow threatening by those she meets on her daily meanderings around Dublin in search of the elusive re-entry point to the Otherworld. She acknowledges that other people are not keen to sit too near her on the bus: "I know the one next to me will be the last one filled, if it is filled at all", but as she has not "looked at my face in a mirror in a long while", she does not know "what other people see that keeps them away" (Lally 97). Like many other aspects of her narrative, her lack of attention to her appearance, which is referenced several times throughout the novel, can be read in a number of ways, indicating either a lack of interest in conforming to social norms or more sinisterly as indicative of a traumatic fragmentation of her self-identity. She describes reaching blindly into her wardrobe to select her clothes and eschews regular showers so that her own body odour is not muted: "I get dressed without adding water to my body or looking in a mirror. I want to grow into my smell. I want to grow out of my appearance. I want a smell-presence and a sight-absence" (Lally 17). Retreating from the gaze offers Vivian the freedom to be herself in a society in which women, in particular, are expected to conform to socially prescribed standards of appearance. She is moreover aware of the artificiality of what passes for the norm in contemporary society. She points out that it is more natural, even healthier, for her to be surrounded by her own scent than to hide it with synthetic sprays: "When I enter my house, the waft of myself hits me . . . I heard on the radio that the rise in asthma is caused by an increase in the use of cleaning products" (Lally 36). This opposition between natural, instinctive behaviour and the learned, sometimes harmful practices that pass for "normal" in contemporary capitalist society is a key point of critique in the novel and is facilitated by Vivian's unmediated, marginal voice. However, there is a dark undertone

to her resistance that is not quite fully articulated, possibly reflective of her unwillingness to revisit incidences from her past. She dresses for warmth and comfort which is commendable in a hyper-critical world, except that her obsession with covering her body completely could also be indicative of past trauma and abuse, as suggested when she inadvertently displays a much-scarred body to a friend towards the end of the book.

Another significant, although hard to interpret, element in Vivian's identity is her relationship with her sister, who is confusingly also called Vivian: "My sister and I have the same name. She was born first and has more rights to the name" (Lally 15). This lack of even the most basic signifier of identity could be read as further evidence of the protagonist's changeling status. Equally, the birth of a child perceived as abnormal may have rendered her unworthy of a name in the eyes of her parents. It is also possible to read sister-Vivian as the protagonist's socially acceptable double, living the life she is unwilling or unable to live herself. The opposition between nature and artifice is apparent in their sporadic interactions. Sister-Vivian is willing to perform the socially acceptable role of wife and mother, and is consequently rewarded with a husband and nice home. Rather than being envious, however, protagonist-Vivian is struck by the hard work that goes into her performance:

> My sister throws words at me, whole lists of words, words that she took from her architect or her friends, words that mean nothing, words from advertisements and brochures and people who sell things for a living
>
> . . . She starts talking about Angelique's splashbacks and Saoirse's counters. Her friends all sound like bridalwear shops or Gaelic chieftains. (Lally 81)

Authenticity is central to Vivian's conception of self and she finds herself constantly amazed by the lengths to which other people go to adhere to social rules which, when spelled out in her conversational tone, also strike the reader as absurd. Her comments on the manufactured needs that now surround even the simplest of tasks such as ordering lunch: "demanding all manner of bread I have never heard of. Where do they hear of such breads and why does it matter so much?" (Lally 35); and going for a walk: "there's something wrong with buying special clothes to walk in, instead of walking in old clothes that you already have" (Lally 240-1) succinctly indict consumers for whole-heartedly subscribing to the media-generated demands of late capitalism. Who, the novel asks, is more to be pitied: Vivian, who knows her own mind and refuses to capitulate to constructed standards of hygiene and appearance, or the mass of consumers who are

weighted down with the responsibility of choosing whatever form of bread today's advertisements have decreed appropriate?

5.2. Resistant Conceptions of Girlhood

Vivian struggles throughout the novel with the expectations imposed on her to look and behave as society decrees is appropriate for a girl. Her sister constantly exhorts her to adhere to her predestined life-plan: "She bothers me to clean the house and get rid of chairs and find a job" (Lally 10). Her neighbours lurk on their doorsteps to intercept her with advice: "find a husband, never mind your hobbies . . . About time you got a ring on the finger, a woman your age" (Lally 173). Although her daily sorties from the safety of her home under the hostile surveillance of her neighbours are described in comic ways, there is a sinister undertone to their interactions. When she tells her neighbour she is heading out to look "for the end of the rainbow" (a potential entry-point to the Otherworld), her neighbour responds in frustration: "Vivian, sometimes I think you're away with the fairies" (Lally 225). This is much more than a folktale-inflected figure of speech. Ní Fhrighil (2017) notes that blaming the fairies for inexplicable diseases or socially unacceptable acts was part of Irish tradition, and that the phrase "away with the fairies" was often used to dismiss women whose behaviour did not conform to social expectations. When Vivian's search for the rainbow's end leads her to the grounds of a deserted hospital, it is suggested to the reader that her trauma may stem at least in part from a period of incarceration. She never alludes directly to this time, but it is significant that she claims to have no memories or possessions from the years between childhood and adulthood: "My hoard is made up of things from my childhood and early teens, with a big gap from my adulthood" (Lally 24).

Like the protagonist in *Life Hacks for a Little Alien*, Vivian realises that she can make life easier for herself if she performs as is expected, although the deadpan comedic way in which she describes her efforts do little other than show how ridiculous much of this learned social behaviour is: "I throw my eyes up to heaven and give a little snort, the way I've seen women do when they talk about their boyfriends or husbands" (Lally 14-15). A significant point of resistance is her criticism of what is promoted as heroic and praise-worthy in society. Listing the types of programmes that fill her television stations: "A newsreader announces that a man has been shot in a case of mistaken identity . . . a giddy young man jumping around a cliff . . . sweating man in a T-shirt" (Lally 231)

illustrates the prevalence of male-oriented content and idealised tropes of masculinity, which offer little to female viewers. It is no wonder that Vivian prefers to "pause between the stations where there's a bristle of static, the wordless gush of it settling something inside me" (Lally 198). The reader may not be as alienated from the gender roles offered to them by society as Vivian is, but the experience of being besieged by images of ideal masculinity masquerading as universal, human signifiers of success will resonate with many.

Language is a particular concern for Vivian. Like the protagonist in *Life Hacks for a Little Alien*, she struggles to communicate using a system which, to her mind, hinders rather than facilitating the accurate exchange of information. She criticises the arrogance of those who think that the complexity of her thoughts can be condensed into neat pre-defined expressions: "I never know how to respond to people who want small complete sentences with one tidy meaning" (Lally 13). She is equally uneasy with those who presume everyone can interpret the imprecisions that pass for instructions. When her social worker asks for a "drop of milk" in his tea, for example, Vivian is stumped: "He speaks with an admirable abruptness, but his sentences don't provide enough information" (Lally 50). What bothers her most is the inaccuracy of much of what passes for information. Her perusal of historical sites is marred by signs that cannot seem to decide if the information they display is true or needs qualification: "All these 'tradition has its' and 'reputeds' and 'near heres' are unsettling my sense of certainty" (Lally 133). Most insightful, particularly given the possibility she was abused by her parents, are the comments on gravestone inscriptions: "Every dead person is 'Dearly Beloved' or 'Sadly Missed', but that can't be true for all of them; death brings out the worst of lies" (Lally 136). If *Eggshells* can indeed be read as a commentary on Ireland's shameful history of the institutional abuse of women it considered deviant, then Lally's critique of historical narratives and their proclivity to hide the truth gives significant additional resonance to this observation.

5.3. *Creating Alternative Maps*

Vivian's life is comprised of routine and repetition, with every day similar to the one before. Henri Lefebvre characterises everyday life in industrialised society as alienating and homogenising, leaving the individual "[l]ost in routines, feeling helpless,

estranged from themselves and others"[11]. Analyses of social spaces associated with women indict the stultifying, monotony of lives predicated on cleaning, organising domestic life and beautification[12], as summarised in Vivian's observation on her sister's chosen lifestyle: "Her world is full of children and doings and action verbs" (Lally 10). Vivian opts out of this cycle, explaining: "I'm uncomfortable with verbs; they expect too much" (Lally 10). This rejection of progress and action, long associated with success in the patriarchal world, echoes the work of Rita Felski, who asserts that just because society has traditionally rewarded members who actively participate, this does not mean that the alternative – rejecting the active verbs – cannot have its own value and even power:

> [T]here is a tendency, clearly visible in the work of Lefebvre, to equate repetition with domination and innovation with agency and resistance . . . In our own era, however, the reverse is just as likely to be true. Within the maelstrom of contemporary life, change is often imposed on individuals against their will; conversely everyday rituals may help to safeguard a sense of personal autonomy and dignity, or to preserve the distinctive qualities of a threatened way of life. In other words, repetition is not simply a sign of human subordination to external forces but also one of the ways in which individuals engage with and respond to their environment. Repetition can signal resistance as well as enslavement. (21)

Felski's comments are worth reflecting upon in relation to Vivian. On the one hand, the repetition of similar actions every day can indicate trauma (Alexander xv). Certainly, Vivian's actions are infused with superstition – she always eats food in particular quantities and performs a variety of rituals before being able to leave the house. On the other hand, her actions can be interpreted in the light of Michel de Certeau's conception of everyday life as a series of struggles between "strategies" (dominant social institutions which attempt to structure social spaces) and "tactics" (the ways in which individuals navigate their environments, constructing spaces for themselves amidst the constraints that surround them) (de Certeau xix). Vivian is particularly drawn to the liminal spaces which exist alongside, but invisible to, mainstream society. She protects herself from unwanted incursions on her privacy by retreating into her own private world: "To quiet the clamour of family noise in my head I turn the radio dial to static, and listen to the surge and crackle from beyond"; and tries to ignore the insistent messaging directed at her from every side: "My ears have been saturated with other people's words recently;

[11] See Philip Wander. "Introduction". In Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World* (Transaction, 1984), xvi.

[12] See also Pamela J. Bettis and Natalie G. Adams. *Geographies of Girlhood: Identities of In-Between* (Routledge, 2005); and Linda McDowell. "Doing Gender: Feminism, Feminists and Research Methods in Human Geography". In *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* (vol.17, no.4, 1992), 399-416.

today I will hear only my own" (Lally 223, 71). Her resistance is particularly noticeable in her daily walks around the city of Dublin, one of the tactics heralded by de Certeau to reclaim one's autonomy. Ostensibly motivated by her determination to find one of the "thin spaces" (Lally 31) that may allow her to slip into the Otherworld, her walks also construct an alternative map of Dublin. Following her own logic, she explores streets with potentially magical names such as "Scribblestown, Poppintree, Trimbleston . . . Thundercut Alley" (Lally 6), recording her route every evening on sheets of tracing paper, which she overlays on the official map so that she produces a palimpsest, her own version of space that accommodates multiple, evolving definitions that can both "intersect with and undermine the authority of dominant representations" (Ní Éigeartaigh 2019). Vivian is drawn to the oddities or contradictions she observes in the official topographic record. She notices, for example, that the various clocks around the city are set to slightly different times, suggesting a potential slippage in the authority of time. She is fascinated by graffiti artists who impose their own perspectives on the spaces they mark. She is particularly intrigued by street signs whose words have been changed, either by human or natural interventions: "The whole street sign has been blue-ed out: I have walked off-map onto a street that doesn't exist, not in this world, at least" (Lally 73). These spaces that can be created when one has the courage and imagination to veer away from the conventional path become sites of "play", wherein the marginalised and disenfranchised of society can carve out their own paths by using, but not being limited by, the signifiers provided for them. According to de Certeau's argument, it is in precisely these small, daily, often unnoticed acts of rebellion characteristic of everyday life that the constraints of the dominant culture can be transcended.

6. Conclusion: Forging Authentic Modes of Divergent Girlhoods

As all of the texts discussed in this essay demonstrate, negotiating identity as a neurodivergent girl is fraught with difficulty. Adolescence is the period in which girls are pressured into accepting the prescribed gendered identity constructed for them by a range of cultural and social texts, a process Butler calls "girling" (in Switzer 851). Agreeing to perform one's identity is a form of "interpellation" (Althusseur 55), through which one is ritually connected to the values of the surrounding culture (Williamson 40-2). Theorists of girlhood note that in spite of the emphasis on empowerment and choice in contemporary cultural representations of girls, hegemonic representations continue to

inscribe them within objectifying, sexualised patriarchal tropes (Gonick et al 1, Sibielski 590). Research into cultural representations of girls who are unable to fulfil these socially mandated roles due to a variety of reasons, including neurodiversity, suggest they are at best stereotyped, at worst completely ignored (Jones et al 2213). The constructed nature of social interaction is another key anxiety identified in the texts. As Hall argues, we all learn the systems and codes of our language and culture, equipping ourselves with the "cultural know-how" necessary to function (21-2). Language, conceptual maps and signifiers of identity - the building blocks on which a shared society is built - can exclude those who struggle to master their often unarticulated assumptions and nuances. However, the marginal status that results from this exclusion from the mainstream can also render visible the often invisible strategies by which social roles and identities are constructed, facilitating a significant site of critique. This is evident in both Vivian and the protagonist of *Life Hacks for a Little Alien* who demand the right to live their lives in a manner that is natural and authentic. Vivian, who loves to write down her thoughts, emphasises the importance of liberating herself from the constraints and rules of a hegemonic discourse to which she does not have access: "my notebook, which has kind blank pages that don't scream at me to stay within the lines" (Lally 19-20). At the same time, Franklin's protagonist finds ease in the anonymity she experiences when she moves on her own to London: "You are miles away from any of them . . . If someone wanted to contact you, they wouldn't be able to" (Franklin 290). It is little wonder that they are both drawn to the liminal spaces that exist on the fringes of conventional society, not merely because invisibility grants them protection, but also because it is in these unconventional spaces that they can fully explore their unrealised potential. As the protagonists of *Life Hacks for a Little Alien* and *Eggshells* demonstrate, life in the liminal, unnarrated spaces is where the creativity to forge new and inclusive modes of girlhood will be found. Afterall, as Vivian explains: "I like the place where one thing meets another – that's where the magic gets in" (Lally 66).

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THE REALITIES OF GIRLHOOD IN CONTEMPORARY IRELAND IN EIMEAR MCBRIDE'S *A GIRL IS A HALF-FORMED THING* (2013) AND LOUISE O'NEILL'S *ASKING FOR IT* (2015)[1]

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Abstract: This article examines the representations of girlhood in contemporary Irish fiction, in which sexual assault is normalised, and victims are silenced in response. It looks specifically at *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* (Eimear McBride, 2013) and *Asking for It* (Louise O'Neill, 2015). Girlhood in these novels is dominated by the threat of sexual assault and the existence of rape culture, especially in a digital age and #MeToo era. In post-Celtic Tiger Ireland, critics have noted a growth in YA literature, especially female authors addressing "uncomfortable but important matters in their works", including "violence against teenage girls and women in Ireland" (Seijas-Pérez 66). Both protagonists in these novels, the Girl in *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*, and Emma in *Asking for It*, experience sexual assault. The reactions of the local community and close friends or family to both girls' experiences of sexual assault illustrate community and institutional responses to trauma in an Irish context. The article will analyse themes of shame and trauma, using close readings from the novels to break down the aftermaths of each individual experience of sexual violence within a broader cultural context. The works of Cathy Caruth and Susan Cahill, amongst others, will be used in this analysis in order to expose the lived realities of girlhood in contemporary Ireland.
Keywords: Sexual Assault; Rape Culture; Trauma; Girlhood; Sexuality; Post-Celtic Tiger Fiction; Young Adult Literature

LAS REALIDADES DE LA ADOLESCENCIA FEMENINA EN LA IRLANDA CONTEMPORÁNEA EN *A GIRL IS A HALF-FORMED*

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THING (2013) DE EIMEAR MCBRIDE Y *ASKING FOR IT* (2015) DE LOUISE O'NEILL

Resumen: Este artículo examina la representación de la adolescencia femenina en la ficción contemporánea irlandesa, donde se normalizan las agresiones sexuales, resultando en el silenciamiento de las víctimas. El análisis se centra específicamente en *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* (2013) de Eimear McBride y en *Asking for It* (2015) de Louise O'Neill. La adolescencia femenina en estas novelas está dominada por la amenaza de las agresiones sexuales y la existencia de la cultura de la violación, especialmente en la época digital y en la era del *#MeToo*. En la Irlanda post Tigre Celta, se ha observado un crecimiento de la literatura juvenil, especialmente de autoras mujeres que abordan "cuestiones incómodas pero importantes en sus trabajos", incluyendo "la violencia contra las chicas adolescentes y las mujeres en Irlanda" (Seijas-Pérez 66). Ambas protagonistas de estas novelas, la Chica en *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*, y Emma en *Asking for It*, sufren violaciones. Las reacciones de la comunidad local y amistades cercanas o familias ante sus experiencias de violencia sexual muestran las respuestas comunitarias e institucionales a eventos traumáticos en el contexto irlandés. El artículo analizará cuestiones de vergüenza y trauma, a través de una lectura detallada de las novelas que analizará las secuelas de las experiencias individuales de violencia sexual dentro del amplio contexto cultural. Los trabajos de Cathy Caruth y Susan Cahill, entre otros, serán utilizados en este análisis con el fin de exponer las realidades que viven las chicas adolescentes en la Irlanda contemporánea.
Palabras clave: agresión sexual; cultura de la violación; trauma; adolescencia femenina; ficción post Tigre Celta; literatura juvenil.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper investigates the impact of trauma on individual characters and the broader societal response to this in the novels *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* (2013) by Eimear McBride and *Asking for It* (2015) by Louise O'Neill. In both novels, girlhood is dominated by the threat of sexual assault and the existence of rape culture, especially in a digital age and #MeToo movement. In post-Celtic Tiger Ireland, critics have noted a rise in YA literature, especially female authors addressing "uncomfortable but important matters in their works", including "violence against teenage girls and women in Ireland" (Seijas-Pérez 66). YA, or young adult, literature is usually classified by the inclusion of "at least one teenage protagonist, is preoccupied with adolescent desires, anxieties, and scenarios, and is widely marketed . . . for 12-18 year olds" (Kennon 134). As YA literature has evolved, it "echoes the liminality and transitional status of adolescence itself" (Kennon 134). Additionally, post-Celtic Tiger Irish fiction has seen a rise in

accountability for past troubles, especially the sexual abuse of children and representations of female desire (Wills 295).

Both protagonists in these novels, the Girl in *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* and Emma in *Asking for It*, experience sexual assault. *Asking For It* is loosely based on widely publicised cases, including the Steubenville case of 2012, in which an unconscious girl is raped over the course of several hours at a party in the US (Macur and Schweber), as well as the Slane Girl case in Ireland, where a young woman was pictured performing oral sex at an Eminem concert (Foy). Emma is gang-raped by a group of boys at a house party, many of whom are star players of the county's Gaelic football team, a similarity to the Steubenville case in America. Meanwhile, the Girl in *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing,* who remains unnamed for the entirety of the novel, beginning when she is just thirteen is repeatedly raped by her uncle, known only as Uncle or 'him'. McBride's novel illustrates the space that has become available in the twenty-first century to engage with the realities of girlhood in 1990s Ireland, with women's writing gaining the "increased visibility, publication, public discourse, and grassroots activism around women's reproductive rights . . . marriage equality, and systematic gender biases in literary, cultural, and political institutions" (Kennon 133). By placing the reader directly in the protagonist's consciousness, both authors reflect the post-Celtic Tiger era's "marked increase in registering trauma and vulnerability within the contemporary moment", thus better reflecting adolescent girls' lived realities (Cahill 158). The Girl exists in an Ireland that condemns female sexuality and conforms to the teachings of the Catholic Church. Yet the Girl's experience of girlhood mirrors Emma's as they both experience sexual assault at the hands of those with more power, and they are both ridiculed and blamed. The reactions of the local community, close friends, and family to both of these young girls' experiences of sexual assault are symptomatic of the broader Irish response to trauma.

2. *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing*

A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing is set in an unnamed place or time period, although it is suggested to take place in the 1980s to 1990s (Cahill 159). None of the characters are given names; instead, they are identified through pronouns: "I" and "me" for the Girl, "you" for her older brother, "him" for her uncle, and so forth. McBride uses a stream of consciousness style of writing, which plunges the reader into the consciousness of the protagonist, enabling us to live her experiences with her, from the womb to adolescence.

She first met her uncle at the age of thirteen, when he and his wife came to the Girl's house to stay for a week. Around this time, concerns arose about the cognitive ability of her brother, as the brain tumour he had suffered as an infant continued to affect him. The Girl is very protective of her brother, having violent outbursts at anyone who suggests he is different. When she overhears her aunt and uncle asking her mother why he is in the same school as her and not a specialised school, the Girl is furious and screams at them.

This, however, brings her to the attention of her uncle, whom she has already noticed looking at her repeatedly since his arrival. The attention he gives her results in the Girl thinking she has feelings of "lust" for him, "Is lust it? That's it", and she ignores his presence for the remainder of their stay (McBride, *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* 51). The Girl is just thirteen at this point, a child, who is "never in a position to truly consent, as children do not sufficiently grasp the scope and understanding of the meaning and implications of sexuality" (Reynaert 191). Towards the end of their stay, the Girl's mother, brother and aunt go out to the shops, leaving her and her uncle alone in the house. This is where the sexual abuse begins: "His touch my face with flat of hand. You are. Oh you're a strange one . . . and do you know there's no one home?" (McBride, *A Girl* 53). The uncle knows they are alone when he does this, taking complete advantage of the Girl's age and innocence. There is a stark power imbalance between the Girl and her uncle, which he uses to his own advantage. By using his power to take control over the Girl, his sexual abuse also "has a lasting impact on the body", affecting her relationship with sex and her own body (Reynaert 192): "Let him kiss me. If he wants . . . He. Turns my face to him. Dissolving fright under his hands. He put his mouth on mine. This is kiss to me" (McBride, *A Girl* 53). Her "dissolving fright" betrays her young age and utter lack of power in this situation. Additionally, her language reiterates that this is her first sexual experience, her first kiss. She has no means of consenting or truly understanding what is happening to her. Her uncle knows this, too, and takes advantage of the situation, telling her that he is "honoured" to be her first kiss (McBride, *A Girl* 53).

The Girl's obsession with washing and being clean comes into play after this interaction. She goes to the lake for "[s]torage I think. Cleaning and cold storage. I will gush myself out between my legs. Whoever let the poison in. The dirt retreat . . . I will put my head in for discreet baptise" (McBride, *A Girl* 55). Allusions to religion reoccur throughout the novel, starting with the Girl destroying a statue of the Virgin Mary when her mother mentions her brother's cognitive state. The Girl embraces religious language

in response to her sexual abuse, seeking not only bodily cleansing in the lake but also purity in the religious language her mother uses throughout her lifetime. The Girl's religious upbringing echoes that of the Irish state and the Catholic Church throughout the twentieth century, as "Ireland's ultra-Catholic stance on sexuality was justified through claims that certain people, groups, and beliefs . . . morally endanger people, groups, and beliefs", such as impure women endangering pure women (Backus and Valente 423). Her uncle's sexual abuse causes the Girl to believe that she has sinned, as she has learnt from a young age that the female body is inherently sinful. Therefore, her devotion to prayer ensures that she will "be pure" (McBride 52). This brings to mind Eimear McBride's distinction between shame and guilt, as she defines guilt as the individual "recognising and regretting their transgression", whereas shame "comes about when the individual has cause to regret not only what they have done but who they, fundamentally, are" (McBride, *Something Out of Place* 57). The Girl is literally and metaphorically quietened as a young child, reinforcing the religious notion that the female body, and the female person, is shameful and silent.

The sexual abuse only continues from then on, now that her uncle has gotten away with a kiss. When the Girl returns from washing herself in the lake, everyone is asleep upstairs. The narrative changes in tone when her uncle wakes up and goes downstairs to the Girl: "I know that vicious look of him to me now. And the usual inner throb in me" (McBride, *A Girl* 57). Her uncle sees the Girl in her wet clothes and rapes her. The narrative is difficult to read, as the reader remains within the Girl's consciousness throughout. She emphasises that the experience is "[t]oo much . . . Too much so much. It. Is too much then" (McBride, *A Girl* 58); she cannot fully process what is happening, a symptom of trauma. Her uncle ignores her attempts to break free from him, even as she makes him bleed with her nails, refusing any semblance of consent or control on the part of the Girl: "I cannot take this. Pain. Scratch him. Pain of it. Keep clawing at his skin. He does not. Does not know this" (McBride, *A Girl* 58). The already fragmented narrative style becomes even more so during this scene, something that McBride repeats later in the novel. The Girl does not see her uncle for a few years after this, but the assault has a lasting impact on her. As Shadia Abdel-Rahman Téllez writes, "the traumatic impact of sexual abuse is absorbed in the Girl's embodied identity, which was already half-formed due to the social and religious constructions of femininity and is totally disintegrated with this first experience of sexual violence" (6). At age fifteen, the Girl uses sex as a means

of protecting her brother from bullying throughout her time in school: "He was the first off. Worst off. I begin. Now I know full well what I can do. For me and for you" (McBride, *A Girl* 70). According to Susan Cahill, "sex becomes about momentary assertions of power and sustained self-harm, completely devoid of any expression of pleasure" (159). Clair Wills describes the Girl's "desire for sexual debasement" as "an inevitable consequence of the violence" she has experienced with her family and the Church (299). The Girl does not have a choice in her reaction to her trauma; her girlhood has been defined by violence and abuse, from her mother, uncle, and the influence of religion in her life. Her use of sex to protect her brother continues throughout the rest of her time at school as well as when she moves away for college: "In the new world I am do this every single time I can" (McBride, *A Girl* 89).

Crucially, the Girl attempts to take back power from her uncle when they meet for the first time in five years, when she is eighteen. Her uncle admires her looks now that she has grown up: "You've grown so much. You've grown up. You're a woman now . . . And beautiful" (McBride, *A Girl* 106). They finally confront each other about the Girl's sexual assault later that day, when her uncle mentions that he often thinks about what happened: "So are you feeling guilty? . . . I feel guilty and I am. Because I was thirteen? Look you're no baby now" (McBride, *A Girl* 106-107). He attempts to place some responsibility on her, suggesting that she consented to the assault. Her reaction places fear in the uncle, and he questions the Girl on her feelings about what happened: "You don't think do you that. What? I abused you?" (McBride 107). Although he feels guilty, the uncle denies any wrongdoing; he does not believe that he abused the Girl, despite her young age. She expresses her young age to him, highlighting that "[a]t thirteen after all [she] was still a child" (McBride, *A Girl* 107). Her refusal to accept his words and to reiterate her young age to him demonstrates the Girl's position of power here, as she is the only one who is able to make her uncle feel guilty for his actions. Up until this point, the Girl has internalised her trauma, continuing the narrative that rape is an individual rather than political problem (Altrows 5). As described by Orlaith Darling, the Girl "endeavours to appropriate what is happening to her by projecting it back onto her uncle" (313). This occurs again when the Girl asks her uncle to beat her, thus filling him "with. [Her] pain" (McBride, *A Girl* 58).

When the Girl's brother dies of brain cancer, she abandons any sense of self-preservation she has had until this point. Chu He analyses the conflicting instincts to

respond to trauma, the death drive and life drive, in which the traumatised maintain their survival instincts (71). The Girl's response is to flee to the lake, where she is raped by a man she had sex with days earlier. The text here is completely fragmented, mirroring her state of mind and lack of power in the situation. According to Elaine Scarry and analysed further by Téllez, trauma is "language destroying" (7). The Girl struggles to comprehend what is happening to her, signified by McBride's decision to incorporate misspelled words and incomplete sentences: "Soon I'n dead I'm sre. Loose. Ver the aIrWays. Here. mY nose my mOuth I. VOMit. Clear. CleaR" (McBride, *A Girl* 194). When she makes it back home, the Girl's mother is furious, demonstrating the lack of awareness of abuse and the Irish tradition of staying quiet: "Have you no shame?" (McBride, *A Girl* 195). Her mother's retort here further highlights the Girl's sense of shame in this moment, as according to Ahmed, "the bind of shame is that it is intensified by being seen by others as shame" (103). Therefore, her initial humiliation at having been raped is doubly felt due to her mother's exposure of it, causing the Girl to retreat inward. Additionally, Darling points out that Irish society "interprets the permeability of Girl's body not as violence done to her, but as sin on her part" (311). Nicole Fayard writes that the shame of rape is "closely associate[d] with . . . a discourse of discipline and punishment for the victim (rather than for the rapists)", therefore the victim is degraded and discarded "from . . . civilised society" (40). The Girl reverts here to her earlier need for cleanliness and the religious affiliation with water. She returns to the lake, with the intention to "strip pain all parts of [her]" (McBride, *A Girl* 202). Actions such as washing, self-harm, and suicide attempts are all "withdrawal strategies as the victim attempts to defend herself against shame and regain some control" (Fayard 41). However, this final assault and her mother's awareness of the Girl's shame become too much for her to bear, and her washing becomes a suicide attempt. The novel ends with her drowning in the lake, returning to her brother, where they will "live a thousand Lir years", finally freeing the Girl from her abuse and trauma (McBride, *A Girl* 203). This bleak ending serves as an illustration of the impossibility for the teenage girl to live in contemporary Ireland without fear of abuse, whether that is the 1990s that the Girl inhabits, or the present day during which McBride wrote this ending.

3. *ASKING FOR IT*

Asking For It follows eighteen-year-old Emma, a fifth-year student from Ballinatoom in Co. Cork. The reader is immediately introduced to Emma's personality and her friend group, in which appearances matter more than anything else. Rape culture is normalised in Emma's world, as she and her friend group make sexual jokes about their classmates and each other. For example, one girl in their school is nicknamed "Sarah Swallows", and they consistently make comments about each other's sexual history. Emma's friend Jamie, for instance, pokes fun at Emma's promiscuity: "[y]ou've been with everyone else. It's hard to keep track" (O'Neill 38). One of the boys, Dylan, who later gang-rapes Emma, summarises the actions of the girls in their year, explaining that girls "get wasted and get a bit slutty, then in the morning try and pretend it never happened because you regret it" (O'Neill 30). Rape culture is defined as "the cultural practices that reproduce and justify the perpetration of sexual violence" (Rentschler 67). This provides context to girlhood in contemporary Ireland within this novel, as the reader is clearly introduced to the ways in which rape culture has embedded itself in the day-to-day life of these teenagers. This is clearly at play here, as the girls make jokes about rape and promiscuity without thinking twice about the consequences of their words. Early in the narrative, it is revealed that Emma convinces her friend Jamie not to report her rape as "it's easier not to make a fuss", pointing out that she "didn't say no" (O'Neill 92). O'Neill uses brackets and italics to portray Emma's feelings throughout the novel, juxtaposing descriptions of scenes with Emma's thoughts. This becomes important during later scenes, as the reader experiences Emma's assault with her, including her lack of memory surrounding it and the horror of finding out what happened that night when she does.

On the day that she is brutally gang-raped, Emma hosts a house party since her parents are away in Killarney for the night, inviting her own friends as well as her brother Bryan's friends and girlfriend. Emma makes sure not to eat before the party so that any alcohol she drinks will quickly affect her, explaining that "eating is cheating" when her brother questions her on it (O'Neill 60). After a couple of drinks, the group goes to another house party, driven by Fitzy despite the fact that he has also been drinking. At this house, the captain of the Gaelic football team, Paul O'Brien, is present, and Emma wastes no time in flirting with him. She accepts a drug from him, in defiance of her own fear, as she is "sick of people thinking they know" her (O'Neill 98). O'Neill's writing begins to echo McBride's writing when the drug kicks into Emma's system, as she uses italics and brackets to portray Emma's state of mind. The text mimics the incoherence of

the Girl's stream of consciousness when Emma is raped later in the novel: "*All I am made of is soft"* (O'Neill 103); "I can feel the music trickling out of my feet" (O'Neill 104). Emma's vulnerability allows the four boys to take advantage of her. They consider ringing her parents and bringing her home, but that thought quickly fades when Emma kisses Paul and brings him to a bedroom. However, even while intoxicated, Emma quickly changes her mind, suggesting to Paul that they should return to the party, before giving up, thinking: "I don't know if there's any point in stopping him now" (O'Neill 108). Afterwards, they exchange numbers, but Paul's friends, Dylan and Sean, stumble into the bedroom, at which point Paul admits to unlocking the bedroom door. Paul greets his friends by pulling Emma from the bed to show her off: "'Ah, you're too hot not to show you off' He grabs my arm and pulls me up to standing. 'Look at her'" (O'Neill 112). The three boys offer Emma more drugs, which she takes again in defiance of her perceived reputation of being "boring, and traditional, and a good girl" (O'Neill 114). At this point, the narrative ends, the next chapter taking place the following day, symbolising Emma's loss of memory beyond this point.

Emma's loss of memory during the rape, partly due to the amount of alcohol and drugs she had taken, results in her finding out the extent of what had happened to her afterwards, at school on Monday and on Facebook. She has no memory of having had sex with anyone until her friends refuse to sit with her during Irish class and explain why when Emma confronts them after the lesson: "You are absolutely disgusting, do you know that? Four guys in one night? Do you have any fucking self-respect, Emma?" (O'Neill 132). Cathy Caruth's and Sigmund Freud's definitions of trauma both highlight the loss of memory during the trauma itself, as it is "experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor" (Caruth 4). O'Neill's use of brackets and italics to fill the narrative with both description and Emma's thoughts and feelings, helps the reader experience the trauma with her, as it "imposes itself again", and highlights her lack of memory (Caruth 4). Her classmates' reactions to the gang-rape place the blame completely on Emma. She is met with the repeated phrase "*slut, liar, skank, bitch, whore*" throughout the day as she begins to piece together the events of the house party (O'Neill 138). She overhears some girls say that "she was fucking asking for it" and that she handed herself "to him on a plate" (O'Neill 154). Emma forces herself to react to the pictures and videos posted on Facebook in the third person:

> Dylan on top of that girl (*me, me, that can't be me, that's not me*) his hands over the (*my – no, her*) face, as if to cover her up. She has no face. She is just a body, a life-sized doll to play with. / She is an It. She is a thing. (*me, me, me, me, me*). (O'Neill 146)

Memories of her mother and the boys involved are mingled with descriptions of the images and videos, allowing Emma some relief from the trauma as she is re-experiencing it. At home, Emma discovers bruising "beneath the sunburn . . . blossoming around my neck and hips" (O'Neill 143). Her brother and mother air their disappointment in her, while her father avoids making eye contact with her and does not do so until the end of the novel. Emma's response is to disassociate completely from her body, referring to herself as "*a collection of body parts*" (O'Neill 157), as her body is "not [her] own any more" (O'Neill 161). This is true literally and figuratively, as the boys involved in the rape literally used her body for their own pleasure, and her body becomes figuratively not her own when Emma takes a case against the boys, thus becoming the Ballinatoom Girl. The boys humiliate her further by urinating on her unconscious body. Emma can no longer look at herself in the same way in the aftermath of the house party, repeating only what she saw in the photos: "(Legs spread apart) (Pink flesh)" (O'Neill 167). Emma's body and sense of self have become fragmented, leaving her with "the shame imposed by the mirror of social media" as it "ruthlessly breaks down Emma's sense of self and identity" (Hickey 66). This sense of shame and fragmentation is heightened when you consider that "she does not remember the events her only knowledge of them is through the lens of photos" (Hickey 66). Emma also cannot say the word rape in reference to her own experience, further highlighting her fragmented self. She tries to convince herself and others that it was all a joke, until a teacher finally tells her that she was raped: "Rape. / It is like a whip cracking against my spine. / The word fills the room, until there's nothing left, and all I can breathe is that word (rape) and all I can smell is that word (rape) and all I can taste is that word (rape)" (O'Neill 168). Again, O'Neill uses brackets here to draw attention to the words left unsaid but that cannot be forgotten, as Emma is forced to come to terms with her trauma for the first time.

The second half of the novel is set a year later, during which we clearly see the reactions of the community and Emma's family and friends. O'Neill's decision to show the aftermath of Emma's rape differs from other YA fiction discussing similar topics. Aiyana Altrows points out that "one of the most commonly recurring harmful scripts in YA rape fiction" is called "the silent victim script in which the victim is unable to disclose

her rape and spends the novel agonizing over this", which usually ends with the victim speaking out about their rape, finishing with hope for the future of the victim (2). O'Neill, however, decides to highlight the realities of coming forward in Irish society, in which the perpetrator is given more support than the victim. The decision to report her rape significantly affects Emma's mental health. Emma, who has attempted suicide twice at this point in the novel, has become seriously depressed with thoughts of self-harm and suicide ideation:

> The first time I tried I was in my bedroom . . . I take a towel and I place it underneath me. I don't want to make a mess . . . [Bryan] held my hand, bandages covering the new tattoos on my wrists . . . We went home, and we didn't talk about it again. (Until the next time.) (O'Neill 262-263)

The silence surrounding Emma's suicide attempt coincides with the tradition of silence about difficult issues in Ireland. This novel is one of the many works that are now beginning to break through this veil of silence. Her second suicide attempt illustrates the disconnection from herself, suggesting symptoms of dissociation in response to trauma. This second attempt also puts Emma under further scrutiny from the community: "After the second time I tried, people around town said I didn't really mean to do it, that I was looking for attention. I don't think that was the reason. I think I just wanted some silence. But I don't know" (O'Neill 233). The repetition of "think" and "I don't know" reinforces Emma's helplessness in the situation, both during her rape and in the aftermath of speaking up about it.

There is little to no support for Emma as a victim, with the exception of some counselling for her depression, and her parents' inability to talk with her about her rape. Although Emma has spoken up about her rape, the community's protection of her perpetrators and her parents' silence leave Emma isolated and silent, as if she had never spoken out about what happened. Emma's isolation, then, results in depression and self-harm, as "physical self-harm becomes another punishment incurred by the silent victim that reflects and intensifies the victim's psychological torment" (Altrows 9). As Jennifer Mooney attests, "Emma's parents are stoically inept at engaging Emma in direct discussion about her sexual assault" (96). Her mother has taken over her care, providing Emma with her medication and sleeping tablets each night, and keeps the medicine cupboard under lock and key: "I stick out my tongue. I have to show her my intent to get better, my promise not to be foolish again" (O'Neill 192). However, Emma's parents are

uncomfortable discussing her mental health and the events at the party. Emma's mother has given up on her previous efforts to look beautiful at all times, no longer wearing make-up, as well as drinking more frequently. She hides her excessive drinking from Emma's father, "hiding her glass behind the kettle" when he enters the room, and quickly making her way through bottles of wine during dinner (O'Neill 237). Her father has become distant, going to work early and returning home late, all the while avoiding direct eye contact with his daughter.

Additionally, Emma's preoccupation about her appearance has vanished, along with her social life and desire to be well-liked and admired by everyone: "*(when was the last time you brushed your hair, Emma?)*" (O'Neill 184). There are clear similarities to the Steubenville case and the Slane Girl from this point on, as Emma's rape has become a national story. The public, at least from Emma's perspective, shows sympathy for the boys' "ruined" lives: "They cannot use their names either, for legal reasons, but everyone knows who they are. Their lives are ruined because of this. I have ruined them" (O'Neill 186). The boys involved walk freely around the village, using their freedom as a means to intimidate Emma. In one particular scene, Paul's friends aggressively bump into her, responding to the interaction with "[c]areful, Timmy, she'll probably say you raped her too" (O'Neill 195). Paul stays on the other side of the road as he is not allowed within a certain distance of Emma while the case is being examined. Meanwhile, other members of the community "talk to [her] mother in hushed tones, asking about the court case, the chances of prosecution" (O'Neill 204). Emma's mother and brother are her only source of support, the rest of Ballinatoom seemingly supporting the boys who raped her, assuming that she has made up her rape to ruin their lives, or that it was her fault in the first place as she put herself in that position.

In terms of the legal repercussions of the case against Paul and the other boys, they each get legal representation and the "case will be on their permanent record forever" (O'Neill 226). It could take another two years for the case to go on trial, and Emma is not allowed separate legal representation "under Irish law" (O'Neill 224). Instead, "the DPP . . . will bring the accused to court and prosecute on behalf of the state", unless there is an application to "bring up Emma's sexual history" (O'Neill 224). The solicitor her parents contact for legal advice also mentions that it is "a shame that Emma was over eighteen at the time", as the possession and distribution of paedophilic images is much "easier to prove than the issue of consent" (O'Neill 227). This serves, as Cahill describes,

as "a chilling reminder of the narrowness of our culture and legal system's conception of what constitutes such an act, because Ireland has no legal definition of consent" (164). The Irish legal system ensures the victims of rape are liars "until . . . proven honest", while the rapists are "innocent until proven guilty" (O'Neill 292). Her classmates post photos on Facebook wearing t-shirts with #TeamPaul, #TeamSean, #TeamDylan printed on them to show their support for the boys. The reaction of Emma's immediate circle and wider community, paired with the difficulty of bringing such a case to trial, all culminates in Emma eventually withdrawing her complaint. She "didn't want to ruin anyone's life" and feels that if she had not made "a fuss, . . . everything would have gone back to normal" (O'Neill 318). However, it is important to note that as she announces her decision to her parents, she waits for her parents to tell her not to withdraw her complaint: "I hesitate, waiting, waiting for my mother or my father to rush in and tell me not to be silly, that of course I'll win, that I have to win because I'm innocent in this, because I am the victim, because this wasn't my fault" (O'Neill 319). Instead, her parents support her decision, her father looking at her for the first time since she was raped, and her mother saying that "they're good boys really. This all just got out of hand" (O'Neill 324). The ending of the novel encapsulates the reality of being raped in Ireland and the difficulties in attempting to get justice for that crime; the victim is scrutinised and assumed to be lying, while the rapists are praised for coming from good families and just making a mistake that will not happen again.[2] The novel ends with Emma "dragging [her] mouth into a smile" and pretending to be normal, as is expected of her now that she has finished playing the victim in her own rape (O'Neill 340).

4. Conclusion

The reality of girlhood in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland as represented in these novels portrays feminist, independent and confident girls, who are comfortable in their own sexuality. However, these girls are inevitably traumatised by the pervading patriarchal society in which these novels are set, that only forgives obedient and quiet girls. Girls are constructed as "'empowered' yet heavily constrained through the reinvigorated

[2] The Dublin Rape Crisis Centre reported a "significant increase in the number of people prosecuted for rape in Ireland in 2020", although the actual number going to court is still very small and is only a fraction of what is reported to the Gardaí (DRCC, "Higher Prosecutions for Rape"). More recently, the DRCC received a record number of contacts to their helpline in 2025, although they believe this is still only a "fraction of the thousands . . . who have not yet sought [their] support", with the reporting rate at just "27%" (DRCC, "Record Number of Contacts").

regulatory force of an (over) 'emphasised' and 'good' femininity" (Cahill 165). Both the Girl and Emma give in to the patriarchal forces surrounding them. The Girl commits suicide in the lake where she had initially found comfort from her trauma, thus removing herself completely from the unfair society she lives in, while Emma withdraws her complaint against her rapists, hoping to secure her family a normal, quiet life, accepting her shame and trauma alone. The attention given to both protagonists, as the authors utilise first person narration in both texts, highlights the development of YA literature focused on girlhood. The Girl and Emma both "challenge dominant representations of the girl in the Tiger period", bringing attention to rape culture and its normalised position for girls in contemporary Ireland (Cahill 155). They also demonstrate the futility of speaking out, as the Girl is shamed by her mother for her sexual abuse, placing the blame solely on the Girl and her apparent promiscuity. Similarly, the community of Ballinatoom supports the four perpetrators rather than Emma, utilising social media to publicly show their support for the abusers over the victim. Neither novel has a positive ending, as both protagonists are forced back into silent victims in a patriarchal society, illustrating the lived realities of many Irish adolescents who experience similar traumas to those in McBride's and O'Neill's narratives.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

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BOOK REVIEW:

A SAFE GIRL TO LOVE[1]

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Plett, Casey. *A Safe Girl to Love*. Topside Press, 2014.

Casey Plett's *A Safe Girl to Love* stands as a powerful collection of eleven short stories that centres on the lives of young trans women navigating and negotiating love, friendship, identity, and survival. Published in 2014 by Topside Press, the book stands out for its emotional honesty and its portrayal of trans individuals as subjects, not objects to study. Moreover, through the trivial and informal tone maintained throughout the entire narrative piece, Plett is able to position both the characters and the readers into spaces never explored before. The text breaks away from the cis male gaze that has generally characterised other stories about trans people, such as David Ebershoff's *The Danish Girl* (2000) or Patrick McCabe's *Breakfast on Pluto* (1998). Recent scholarship on trans literature has called for narratives that move beyond medicalised or sensationalised representations (Stryker and Currah 1-18), and Plett's collection aligns with this critical shift by centring intimacy, vulnerability, and everyday survival. Moreover, even though this novel is not a recent publication, the issues addressed remain contemporary.

While the stories vary in tone and setting, they share a deep sense of longing for safety, recognition, and connection. Rather than attempting to represent trans experiences as a whole immovable entity, Plett offers a series of glimpses into different lives, each shaped by its own struggles, personal stories, and desires. One of the key elements in these stories is the context which normally limits the range of action and of coping of the protagonists. A further dimension running through the collection is the construction of trans girlhood. Many characters relate to girlhood through interruption, delay, or belated

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recognition since their adolescence is shaped by roles that obscure their emerging identities. In this regard, one of the most striking aspects of the collection resides in the exploration of the tension between visibility and safety. In "Other Women" Sophie, the narrator, grapples with being seen as a trans woman and as a romantic partner. In her pursuit of identity plenitude, there is a moment where she is uncertain whether her date sees her fully as a person or only as an idea, and such tension between being desired and objectified runs throughout the other stories as well. Accordingly, in "Not Bleak", which stands as one of the deepest emotional stories in the collection, a trans woman reflects on the emotional weight of trying to build relationships while holding onto past trauma. These stories do not offer clear solutions to specific problems, and that is part of the real dimension in which they are located. Plett's characters are often caught in moments of transition, not just gender-wise, but emotionally, economically, and socially. The writing is at its best when it lingers on those liminal or uncertain spaces, which sometimes evoke the feeling of being non-places (Augé), refusing to become too simplistic, reductionist, or to explain too much.

Another theme that is tackled in the book is the importance and difficulty of the chosen family. Whilst many of the characters are estranged from their biological families or have experienced rejection and solitude, they continue searching for connection, as it is inherent to the human condition. For instance, in stories such as "Portland, Oregon" and "Lizzie & Annie", friendships and romantic bonds become lifelines where vital debates and insights develop, including transmisogyny. Nonetheless, the longing for meaningful and truthful connections is also embedded into complicated, messy, and painful social relations. Once again, the reader is able to observe how Plett stays away from any idealisation of the queer or trans communities, which she shows as spaces of both care and conflict. The people in these stories make mistakes, hurt each other, and sometimes drift apart, while a deep sense of tenderness and complicity arises underneath the chaos. In a more stylistic sense, Plett's prose does not draw attention to itself, but it gives centre stage to the text's emotional weight. The narrators usually speak in a casual and careless way, which turns the moments of either pain or vulnerability into protagonists of the stories. There is a kind of quiet confidence in the way these stories are told. Plett does trust her readers to sit with discomfort, to grasp the subtext and to notice the dilemmas and troubles that are not being explicitly said. Such restraint is part of what gives the collection its emotional power and its contemporary relevance. Henceforth,

these stories do not demand sympathy but they try to raise awareness and invite understanding.

The collection also captures a very specific generational moment. Many of the characters are often broke, living in small apartments, in the outskirts and suburbs of big cities, relying on Craigslist, and oscillating between different low-wage jobs and economic scarcity. This evokes a sort of rootlessness in many of the stories, a sense of being always in motion but rarely settled. Through this depiction of events, *A Safe Girl to Love* is not just about trans identity, but also about the uncertainty and instability that many young people face, particularly those living in the margins whether literally or figuratively. The precarity, whether economic, emotional, or geographical, is grounded in reality and shapes the characters' decisions in subtle ways.

"Twenty Hot Tips to Shopping Success", "How to Stay Friends", and "Real Equality (A Manifesto)" share a similar narrative style which stands out through its comic tone. In these three stories, there are critiques of diet culture or the performance of gendered expectations. Nonetheless, the second story, although a little casual in tone, uses a deceptively simple form to show how friendship can be hard to maintain after transitioning. The dialogue between the two women seems natural, even mundane at times, but there is an underlying current of care, fear, and unspoken history between them. Thus, the story captures how difficult it can be to move through transition while maintaining a sense of closeness. Although it is not dramatically constructed, the emotional implications and weight of the unspoken dynamics stay for a while. In other stories such as "How Old Are You Anyway?", themes of trans identity and the complexities of coming-of-age and belonging continue to emerge. This narrative follows Lisa's story and her deepest thoughts and struggles. The first line of the story, "[t]he weird thing is that Lisa could never remember her age" (38), reflects much more than a simple forgetfulness. According to the solitude and lack of support she experiences, her transition feels fractured and disjointed referring to what may be understood as lost time regarding the years lived in a gender role that did not align with her true identity. The later embodiment of her true self can be understood as a way of rebirth. Furthermore, this represents the scrambling of traditional markers such as age through the reclaiming of her lost girlhood. Lisa's story also addresses some of the fetishes which surround trans identities within the cis heterosexual community, as exemplified by her job as an online sexual worker. Within this collection, Plett ensures to include little hints to the recurrent

(ab)use of drugs, a common activity in these stories, which acts as a palliative remedy for emotional disturbance.

The narrator presents some of the characters as people marked by trauma and by a permanent sensation of being static, stuck between dissociation and the necessity of being taken care of. In some of the stories as in "A Carried Ocean Breeze", the beach is the main and liminal setting where external violence is suspended and the possibility of imagining a new way of being opens up for the protagonist. This story specifically revolves around public exposition and corporeal intimacy, giving the reader a feeling of lack of plenitude. In contrast to the other stories in the collection, it ends with the present as a survival mode where being alive, or at least stable, is already a form of resistance in a system which seeks to dismantle disruptive identities.

Part of Plett's brilliance and success is her unframing of trans people within closed boxes subject to scrutiny and constant analysis by readers. Through the informal tone, she is able to inject her social critique in a subtle manner. The book's stark, literal portrayal of the cruelty trans people and young female subjects endure may at times feel unbearable, yet its sheer narrative grip makes it impossible to look away. Through the protagonists, grappling with the insecurities typical of their age, the author is able to raise the question as to how much the characters risk to be accepted and loved and how often they lose themselves in the process. *A Safe Girl to Love* contributes to trans literary studies by foregrounding trans girlhood as an affective and precarious experience, expanding critical discussions of girlhood beyond cisnormative frameworks. Future research could extend this framework to transnational and non-Western experiences of trans girlhoods and structural precarity.

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FILM REVIEW:

EARTH MAMA[1]

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Leaf, Savanah, director. *Earth Mama.* A24, 2023

Savanah Leaf's 2023 social drama film *Earth Mama* presents the tender and raw story of Gia (Tia Nomore), a young Black woman fighting to regain custody of her two children from the foster care system while also handling the physical and emotional hardships of being pregnant with a third. Produced by A24 and based on the documentary short *The Heart Still Hums*, with Taylor Russel, Leaf's directorial debut paints a gracious and touching portrait of motherhood framed by addiction and a lack of privilege.

Set in Oakland, California, the city is used as a backdrop to examine how the Black community navigates the hardships of the US's systemic challenges. The film's setting is not neutral but deliberately chosen. Oakland's deeply interwoven history with its Black population reflects the enduring socio-cultural struggles that have shaped their collective experience. Leaf presents Oakland as a realistic yet harsh backdrop, one in which the spectator can feel not only the day-to-day struggles of its female citizens, but also the strong sense of solidarity and sisterhood that binds the protagonists within their neighbourhoods.

Male characters play a minimal role in the film. Within the few scenes where Gia's male neighbours appear, we see them engaging in cat-calling and delivering rather offensive comments towards the female characters. Leaf therefore intentionally centres

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the film exclusively around the female experience of oppression, making it a deliberately female-led film in its storytelling, casting, direction, and overall vision. Evelyn Brooks Higginbothan explains how "in societies where racial demarcation is endemic to their socio-cultural fabric and heritage . . . gender identity is inextricably linked to and even determined by racial identity" (254). Gia's lived experiences cannot be fully understood without combining her gender and racial identity. During a pivotal scene, Gia's friend Trina – played by rapper Doechii – voices these struggles, declaring that "there is a lot of people expecting [them] to fail. [Her] whole life, [she's] had [things] taken away from [her]. . . . They tried to take[their] culture, . . . [their] homes, . . . [their] freedom" (36:49 – 37:02). Trina's statement perfectly encapsulates how systemic injustices impact the protagonists, highlighting their own personal struggles but simultaneously condemning the socio-political structures which actively seek to perpetuate segregationist practices against the Black community, focusing in this case on Black motherhood. Moreover, using the pronoun "they" deliberately points to the (white) dominant institutions and elites that have historically hoarded power and reinforced the cultural erasure of the other. Thus, Leaf aims to expose Gia's personal story amid a wider landscape of institutional oppression towards Black motherhood.

While Trina's words expose the collective issues brought by systemic oppression, Leaf specifically focuses on Gia's private life, where her struggles are translated into emotional detachment. The different settings and spaces which Gia inhabits – such as the support programs or her workplace, even her home – are depicted as extremely individualistic and isolating for her. Gia's eagerness towards her self-isolation is palpable throughout the film, even when she is accompanied by people of her own community. Despite being surrounded by women who are facing similar challenges, Gia always abstains from opening up and maintains an acute emotional distance from everyone, believing that she must rely solely on her own strength to get through. Leaf places the viewer exclusively within Gia's internal emotional world, emphasizing that, regardless of external support, her story of motherhood and the challenges that surround it belong exclusively to her. Furthermore, Gia's personal job at a photography studio creates a situation which strikingly contrasts with her reality. Often having to work with kids, couples, and families who celebrate their bond and togetherness, our protagonist faces the challenge of dealing with her loneliness and desire to piece her own family back together.

Leaf's film almost feels documentary-like, marked by extended and lingering takes, intimate close-ups and testimonial scenes with different characters. These different elements work together in order to reel the viewer into the character's emotional psyche. At the same time, the purposeful and restrained sound ambiance contributes to deepening a sense of intimacy with the storyline, creating a paradoxical sensation of both stillness and turmoil coexisting in the same space, allowing the spectator to really focus on Gia's emotional obstacles. Much of the film's message is communicated through its silences, rather than through what is explicitly shown to the audience. It is precisely the film's atmosphere of serenity and confinement that makes *Earth Mama* a quiet form of protest, almost evoking a "continuous thread of anxiety" (Bradshaw).

Building upon this choice of visceral portrayal, the film profoundly explores conflicting issues of parenting among the Black American community. Having previously lost custody of her two children to CPS and also battling addiction, Gia confronts not only an oppressive system which affects her community but also her own internal battles. Despite this, her deep love for her children motivates her to persist amidst her struggles. Gia's emotional withdrawal could also be read through the lens of Black girlhood, where expressions of vulnerability are often discouraged, and survival or social acceptance demand a harder exterior. The film omits any depiction of Gia's family life, thus offering little sense of domestic support and therefore protection that might have otherwise allowed a space for vulnerability. Coupled with her young age and her precarious socio-economic position – including financial instability and overall low-income conditions – this multiplicity of contexts suggests that her struggles are interlinked with an accelerated coming of age. Moulded by racialised poverty and structural neglect, Gia is prematurely forced into maturity, taking away her girlhood and thus laying a vulnerable foundation for her womanhood. In *Earth Mama*, the boundaries between girl and mother are intentionally blurred. Gia's premature responsibilities force her into a caregiver position in which her own girlhood is denied.

Yet, amid this pattern of pressures and burdens that deprive her of her girlhood, nature emerges as a rare space where Gia can experience vulnerability. There is a recurring motive that Leaf introduces throughout the film, closely linked to its title. Nature seems to be a constant in Gia's life: she daydreams of it, watches documentaries about it, even presenting certain scenes where she is positioned against a forest-like background at work. Some pivotal and emotional moments in Gia's storyline seem to

occur and be connected to nature: When she meets the potential family who will be adopting her unborn child, the meetup takes place in a diner near a forest. Moreover, while Gia remains emotionally guarded in her support programs, she grows to be vulnerable when taking a walk along a lake with a friend.

Within this film, nature is used as a reflection of Gia's longing for freedom and peace, set against the background of her own personal struggles and challenges. Her connection to natural spaces grants her what has been denied to her as a girl: moments of vulnerability and calmness. Moreover, Gia's pregnancy closely parallels nature itself. Just as nature generates and modifies life, Gia carries within her a potential for creation and change, whatever its destiny ends up being. Her own body, just like nature, has become a temple of creation. Leaf then presents pregnancy not only as an individual experience, but also as a communal one which binds all pregnant individuals together under the same bond of creation and, consequently, with nature as a whole. The title *Earth Mama* thus reflects how Leaf's film presents Gia not only as a Black girl facing the struggles imposed by a socio-political system, but also as the human embodiment of the earth's creational and healing power.

Ultimately, *Earth Mama* shows how Savanah Leaf is able to transform social critique into a deeply personal and intimate picture. Even when only focusing on a single woman's story, she sheds light on the collective struggles of many Black girls, stressing the ways in which girlhood can be restricted and adulthood hastened. Leaf approaches this with extreme empathy and tenderness. By using this approach, Leaf positions her own voice within the cinematic panorama, gifting us a deeply human and visceral yet dignified vision of Black girlhood and motherhood.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

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ON THE MARGINS[1]

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SARAH CECILIA HARRISON, *Self-Portrait*, 1889

At the table after breakfast, ready for work
my teenage daughter opens her compact mirror,
deftly brushes her nose and cheeks.
Mouth, lips, skin undergo inspection.

Green eyes inquisitive, hair gathered in a bun,
roll-neck blouse and brooch, recalls
this young woman's profile who
became the first female City Councillor.

Where did she learn composition?
Her frank, nonchalant gaze, dimpled chin,
turns from a pitch backdrop,
brushes in hand, palette under her thumb,

survives a turbulent century
to view us with an artist's discipline.

[1] Recommended Citation: MacCarthy, Catherine. "On the Margins." *Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research* 13, no. 3, 2026, pp. 1-5: https://reunido.uniovi.es/index.php/jaclr/index

REFERENDUM 1982

She arrived at Dublin airport, a guest
for our wedding. Like young Lisa Minelli,

spiked hair, feather ear-ring, a child
of Greenwich Village. Rolled her own.

Didn't get stopped at immigration.
The photo is of her, lying face-down,

a windswept field. I remember the moment.
As a country, how could we? Posters

rammed slogans along city streets.
Showing her the coast, I wanted her to see

beyond our limits. Screeching gulls,
a hair-raising cliff-path. We stopped to rest.

I was in love with the muskiness of gorse,
and she, homesick for New York

flung herself in deep grass, inhaled
the rainy earth, leaving me with camera in hand

and nothing between us but silence.
Her red dress, burning a green ocean.

CONVERSATIONS

Four long fields from the house,
I stood at our boundary
looking across a paddock at the pebble-dashed gable.
The girl, my age, waved from her open door,
beckoning, as if she expected me, a stranger,
to run towards her. I remember little,

some mention of a baby brother,
the newness of her voice,
dark curls and mild manner,
how we sat on the rung of a rusty, iron gate,
our feet threaded through the frame,
in the vast emptiness of summer,

the sky an infinite blue, high clouds,
on the horizon, a slow herd, whales and elephants.
Nine-years-old, in the middle of nowhere,
agreeing to play with our dolls,
my blonde Crolly with forget-me-not eyes,
her porcelain bride,

we worked out a code with a round smooth stone
to say ‘I’ve been here early and gone’
or, ‘I’ll come back later to meet you.’
She was never in my house nor I, in hers.
At the beginning of September, we went back
to our different schools and churches, and grew older.

VENUS ON SANDYMOUNT GREEN

She sits astride the bike
in short shorts,
on the margins of the gang

who stop to chat and lark
at the street corner,
their backs turned.

She waits to be addressed,
blushes at the least word,
twists handlebars

at an angle,
rests her butt, ready
to shove off on the pedal.

Long tanned legs
stretched to tippy toes,
she idles from side to side,

balances on the saddle,
holds still
by tapping the earth.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

CATHERINE PHIL MACCARTHY's books include *Emblemas* (USP, 2024); *Daughters of the House* (2019) and *The Invisible Threshold* (2019) Dedalus Press, Dublin; Suntrap, (2007),

One Room an Everywhere (a novel, 2003), and *the blue globe*, (1998), Blackstaff Press, Belfast; *This Hour of the Tide*, (1994), Salmon Poetry. A graduate of *University College Cork*, *Dublin University* (TCD) and *Central School of Speech and Drama London*, she received the *O'Shaughnessy Award for Poetry* (2014) and *The Yeats Thoor Ballylee Poetry Prize* in 2023. She has lectured in Drama at *University College Dublin*, and *Thomond College* in Limerick, and taught at Waterford Institute of Technology. Her poems are featured in *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* (CJIS, 42, 2025). She was born and grew up in Co. Limerick and has lived in Dublin since 1987.
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THE GARDEN[1]

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Of all creatures
I chose a man.
With good and bad features
I chose a man.

Could have looked for the wind,
Could have looked for the sun.
The moon was waiting for me.
So were the stars.

Why did I choose
a man?
To tell me when to lose
Or when to start.

I wonder impatient.
In my heart a spike.
Why so different
A being so alike?

But there is a garden
Out there.
Not even Heaven
Could compare.

[1] Recommended Citation: Rapela Palacios, Marisa. "The Garden." *Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research* 13, no. 3, 2026, pp. 1-2: https://reunido.uniovi.es/index.php/jaclr/index

Where all kinds of flowers rest,
Able to selflessly love you best.

These flowers:
My Women.
Their powers
Will heal Earth.

I entered The Garden
And never again
Let my steps, hardened,
Be guided by men.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

MARISA RAPELA PALACIOS is a student in her final year of the BA in English Studies at the University of Extremadura, Spain, and this is her first published poem.
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