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EXPLORING THE MARGINALIZED VOICE: QUEERING FORM IN
CONTEMPORARY SHORT FICTION

by

Madalyn M. Jackson

A Thesis Submitted to Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors
(English and Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies)

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ABSTRACT

Feminist and queer narrative theory calls into question the systemic way of thinking about categorizations such as genre conventions, form, and length. The short story subverts all of these, flipping common love plots or hero arcs, denying readers whole pictures, and privileging plot over character development. Through the application of feminist and queer narrative theory, this study evaluates Lambda Literary Award-winning texts from authors Chinelo Okparanta, Krystal Smith, and Carmen Maria Machado on how the function, form, and common conventions of the short story are subversive in nature and lend themselves to the functions, forms, and conventions of the queer narrative. Thus, the research explores how the subversive nature of the short story may parallel the subversive nature of feminist and queer theory and acknowledges the gaps in the publishing of, the recognition of, and the overall academic reverence of the short story art form.

DEDICATION

To the women who inspire me every day.

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DEFINITIONS

Queer (n.): Referring to sexual and gender identities that are not necessarily categorizable as LGBT, heterosexual, or cisgender. Queer may also refer to a state of being. As drag queen Jinkx Monsoon says, “when I use the word ‘queer,’ it is in the spirit of unifying us against our oppressors,” (Corner). For Matt Horwood, the noun form of queer “can act as a marker for people who don’t feel that their identities and experiences are seen or represented by the history and acronym of ‘LGBT,’” (Corner).

Queer (v.): Adopted from Donald Hall and Susan Lanser, “to queer” is to disrupt binary, categorical understandings of the world. Queering rejects acts of classification and celebrates ambiguity between defined, static categories. This definition, however, requires credit to marginalized queer peoples who have vigorously fought for the opportunity to create and enforce critical queer theory that allows this disruption to happen.

Queer and Feminist Narrative Theory: An emerging field of critical narrative theory, queer and feminist, or queer/feminist, narrative theory addresses the intersection and interrelatedness of feminist and queer perspectives on narrative theory. The theoretical approaches and feminist and queer (individually) rely heavily on the other in the realm of narrative theory. Implemented as queer and feminist or queer/feminist narrative theory by Susan Lanser and Robyn Warhol, the theory was coined as such to challenge linguistic or social hierarchies between the two terms.

Short fiction (or short story): Short fiction is more than a mere story that is brief. The short story is an art form in itself, brevity being only one of its qualities. Short fiction is defined by a number of unique conventions and characteristics including orality, singularity of plotlines, experimentation, and fragmentation. The short story defines itself from other brief narratives through the implementation of these conventions.

INTRODUCTION

“This book spoke to me on a level that I can’t quite articulate in words. Reading it, I saw myself — my life, my own experiences. It is so rare that a book affects me like this. I’m the type of person who feels alienated by most fiction, but this book is so raw, so real (and so frightening in its realness) that it affected me on the deep level I’m trying my best to describe,”

~ Emma Renault in an Amazon review of *Her Body and Other Parties*

Emma’s review of *Her Body and Other Parties* captures the essence of what short fiction has the capacity to do for its readers. The short story can reach the margins of society, bring out of darkness voices that have been pushed aside, and connect readers with characters and authors who tell stories that may resemble their own. As Clare Hanson argues, the short story lives in a dreamlike state among the “losers and loners, exiles, women, blacks — writers who for one reason or another have not been part of the ruling ‘narrative’ or epistemological/experiential framework of their society,” (2). These ruling narratives may be the reason why readers like Emma have felt “alienated by most fiction” and turn to alternatives like the short story to seek out characters and stories that better align with their experiences. Readers may not even know what they are looking for until they find it, and that is why, with “frightening ... realness,” the short story can serve communities of people that other forms of fiction like the novel may never reach (Renault). For readers like those of *Her Body and Other Parties*, the short story as a narrative form may indeed lay the foundation for constructing queer subjects and storylines as a way to bring light to the underrecognized corners of the literary canon.

Historically, the short story has proved to be a narrative form transgressive in nature, addressing diverse, intersectional characters with diverse and intersectional social issues. Today, scholars still treat the short story as transgressive in the way it manipulates

form and lives comfortably in the experimental fiction space. Thus, the short story form challenges narrative norms put forth by the novel's dominance in the literary canon. This may mean challenging a master plot beloved by the novel (i.e. the hero arc) or subverting the narrative expectations associated with narrator reliability. By contesting these boundaries, the short story already exists in a place of subversion which suggests a natural inclination to address similarly subversive topics. Hanson's idea that the short story already serves marginalized people suggests that the short story has a unique opportunity to provide for those along the margins who identify as LGBTQ. This also suggests that the short story may be a place where queer narratives develop in innovative ways unique to this kind of fiction.

The Short Story Form

Much debate surrounds the origin of the short story. Brief fiction can be traced (or presumed to be traced as much of these stories were never formally recorded) back to ancient myths, oral traditions, and biblical practices. Sherwin Cody in his 1918 *A Selection from the World's Greatest Short Stories* concludes that the modern short story craft, as we understand it today, begins with the *Decameron* of Boccaccio, a collection of over one hundred stories culminated from tales shared behind bars in taverns, published in 1348 (Cody 27). These stories were foundational in the development of the short story as a subsection of fiction and has influenced a great deal of subsequent short fiction, including Chaucer in his writing of *Canterbury Tales* (Cody 29). Short story scholar James Nagel speculates that the first recorded short story written in the English language was "A True Relation of the Apparition of One Mrs. Veal" by Daniel Defoe (12). The short story tells of a woman, Mrs. Veal, visiting her friend, Mrs. Bargrave, to inform her

that she is about to undertake a long journey and to rekindle their troubled friendship. After Mrs. Veal's departure, Mrs. Bargrave learns of the death of her friend and realizes her seemingly real interaction was with the apparition of Mrs. Veal (*The Project Gutenberg*). The modern ghost story was initially published anonymously in a pamphlet in 1706 and inspired a number of "imitations" in the quickly growing magazine industry (Nagel 6). This method of publishing short stories has remained popular throughout history and is still commonly represented in individual short story publication today.

In America, the short story craft has a fairly recent recorded history that directly corresponds with the success of the magazine industry, dating back to the eighteenth century — a date that overlooks the oral storytelling tradition of Native Americans that lived here long before the colonizers who are credited with innovations in recorded storytelling. The debate about this issue, however, stems from the troublesome nature of trying to pin an art form to an origin time and place that has developed out of a rich history of oral tradition that relies on "anecdotes, personal accounts, biographical narratives, and raucous scatological humor," (Nagel 12). These early short stories were often published in magazines, such as *The Boston Gazette*, once they made their way to America, heavily dominated by Atlantic publications along the eastern coast of the then British colonies (Nagel 13). Among the published short stories, Benjamin Franklin is the first American to write a short story. The 1747 satirical narrative served as a social critique of a hypocritical American legal system (Nagel 13). Franklin's story tells of a woman on trial for having a child before marriage. She rationalizes her case as a "demonstration of the systematic use of logic and common sense in rational discourse" as it appealed to the "Age of Reason." The next day she marries one of the judges

overseeing her case (Nagel 13). This practice of social commentary, as evidenced in Franklin's short story, became a common theme in short fiction publication and was really cultivated in the short story craft.

The distribution of short stories increased rapidly after the Revolutionary War as a diverse array of magazines hit the market for the first time in America. These short stories boasted diverse and transgressive subject matter, devoting space to matters of social and political importance. Fictional narratives of the time discussed the very real lives of Native peoples as an attempt to educate colonizers on the Native communities that lived in the Americas, as well as slavery and the aggressively debated argument surrounding the agricultural economy that capitalized on slave labor (Nagel 15). It is evident that common among these brief narratives was a call for social action. In one example, "The Negro" tells of a white narrator sympathizing with the nature of human desire and love after they witness a slave express affections for his partner from whom he was separated when he was taken from Africa. "The Negro" demonstrated a call for recognition of humanity in the face of the horrors of slavery (Nagel 15). This story is representative of the kinds of complex, controversial questions these short stories were trying to answer, such as how Americans would confront and abolish dehumanizing ideology that allowed slavery to proliferate for so long. Post-Revolutionary War, Americans were trying to establish what it meant to craft a new civilization, one that was contested by issues of colonization and slavery. By the nineteenth century, the content of the short story industry was consumed by these issues and the social critique that ensued.

What is particularly significant about the popularization of the short story is its disposition towards the portrayal of everyday characters and realistic plots. The

developing Realism movement of the nineteenth century finds its roots in the exploration of marginalized peoples that short stories in the flourishing magazine industry highlighted and encouraged (Nagel 21). The brief period of American Romanticism, the decades of literature written between 1820 and the beginning of the Civil War in 1861, confronted “more earthly matters,” and further brought to the forefront of literature topics otherwise too controversial to discuss, “including slavery and the rights of women, the status of Native Americans, and the vagaries of human psychology,” (Nagel 25). Later, in the aftermath of the Civil War, short stories would make a further change in the composition of language, appealing to regional dialects and colloquialisms that the everyday reader could understand and digest. The unreachable writing style adopted from British influence, with superfluous writing and intimidating technical style, was virtually written out of these stories, and thus the narratives began to more realistically reflect the real lives of the people these stories represented (Nagel 27).

This diversity of perspective manifesting in the short story was ever present in the American Modernism era with master writers like Zora Neale Hurston and James Baldwin dominating the time period with their offering of first hand stories from Black communities across America. Modernism, broadly speaking, also brought forth complicated and nuanced narratives about age, gender, marriage, and sexuality (Nagel 44). Female voices had previously been appropriated by male authors who held authority in literary and academic fields, but the success of female writers, such as Kate Chopin, Virginia Woolf, and Djuna Barnes, attempted to correct this inequality of power. These women also represented an intersectional scope of literature as more women of color, women from various class categories, level of education, and regional background were

making their way into the literary canon. In addition, Modernism marked a new age of “mass-production of printed matter, technological innovation, removal of taxation and extension of copyright, the end of circulating libraries, growth of readership to reach mass proportions, etc,” which only further bolstered the profitability of the magazine as a mode for short story writers (Sacido 3). Before the nineteenth century’s technological boom, the serialized novel maintained a “near-monopoly” in fiction and the new success of magazines as “profitable outlets” made way for “literary experimentation with the short story form,” (Sacido 3). As a whole, the Modernist era in the United States had lasting political, social, and literary impacts that lent themselves to the incredible success of short story writers at the time (Nagel 45; Sacido 3).

Postmodernism and the short story have a particularly close relationship between World War I and World War II as the short story “occupied a relevant position in the formation of postmodernism,” (Sacido 20). Postmodernism is defined by its anti-essentialist approach to theory instead encouraging a multiplicity of interpretation and knowledge (Leavy and Harris 62). Scholars suggest Postmodernism intersects with the short story where the form contests “definition and classification,” (Sacido 20). Adrian Hunter suggests that the short story has “intrinsic anti-totalising features (elusiveness, ambiguity, and so on)” that appeal to Postmodernism’s appreciation of the undefinable (Sacido 20). These narrative patterns and theoretical approaches to the short story prevail in contemporary brief fiction. Though the short story may not be as influential to the construction of collective societal knowledge as it once was, its role in Postmodernist thinking is evident and runs parallel to queer theory development in the contemporary age.

In terms of short story form, the craft rarely escapes comparison to its favored cousin, the novel. Short story scholars are often critical of this view; as Mary Louise Pratt says “short story critics typically rely on comparisons with the novel as ways of fleshing out the ‘mere’ fact of shortness, ways of talking about the short story as ‘something more than a story which is short,’” (179). However, brevity of length does not capture the nuanced differences between the novel and the short story. As Brander Matthews says in *Philosophy of the Short Story*:

The difference between a Novel and a Novelet is one of length only: a Novelet is a brief Novel. But the difference between a Novel and a Short-story is a difference of kind. A true Short-story is something other and something more than a mere story which is short. A true Short-story differs from the Novel chiefly in its essential unity of impression. In a far more exact and precise use of the word, a Short-story has unity as a Novel cannot have it. (15)

As Pratt further suggests, the dynamic between the novel and short story is one of hierarchy, where the novel reigns supreme and the short story is relegated to second status (180). To critics, the short story is inherently a fragment, an incomplete version of the totality that is the novel (Pratt 182). Critiques of the short story based in the problem of its form are the most popular among scholars. Inherently, the short story is not the whole, but part of a whole — a glimpse into a moment, a character, a setting (Nissen). The short story by nature of being is “minor, fragmented, underdeveloped, superficial, immature, and simple,” while the novel is “major, whole, fully developed, exhaustive, mature, and complex,” (Nissen). Scholars argue that the short story struggles to hold its own in the literary field, let alone the competitive publishing market, unless they are part of a collection or transformed and manipulated into the novel’s form (Jouve 36; Pratt 192).

Brevity is only one of the defining characteristics the current literature cites for understanding the short story. In terms of plot, the short story is designated to a single idea, character, feeling, quest, or moment in time (Pratt 184). Where the novel calls back to itself, referring to earlier ideas, crosscutting plot lines, parallel characters, etc., the short story's details stressed and foregrounded in the narratives lead readers *out* of the text, instead of *into* the text. Meaning, since there is no time or space within the structure of the short story to make internal cross-references or callbacks, the short story has to refer to recognizable moments, historical references, or relatable story lines that readers may be able to identify with enough to suspend disbelief of any plot holes (Hanson 23). This singular focus is easily represented by titles that draw readers to a singular character or entity such as Zora Neale Hurston's "Magnolia Flower," James Joyce's "Eveline," or Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery." These characters and moments are solitary in their plots, where the novel may treat several characters over several moments in time through varying perspectives (Pratt 184). Pratt warns that characters may feel estranged from the reader, and that disaffection is a common result of the short story narrative structure. Often in the short story the characters aren't given names, or they are only given first names, a creative strategy that can be traced back to biblical practices (Pratt 186). These artistic choices may be why short stories are rarely published outside the confines of a collection by one author or many, either in the form of a bound collection or magazine (Pratt 186). Their fragmented plots, as compared to the totality of the novel, are assumed to be read within the context of others because the short story in itself is a glimpse into a life, into a place, or into a time, whereas a novel is expected to explore the extent of those single realities (Pratt 185). However, as Hanson argues, there is something of a mastery

of narrative in the spaces that exist in the short story. The very “limits” of length and form that distance the short story from the novel, may very well build a frame that speaks louder than the present words themselves. The gaps left in the places where novels would exhaustively explain a character backstory, prelude rising actions, or provide a neat conclusion to several character arcs, serves as “an aesthetic device” to retain “a necessary air of completeness and order because of the very existence of the frame,” (Hanson 25). This means that while the short story may have gaps where the novel has answers, the frame of the short story pushes readers to feel comfortable with a sense of ambiguity and uncertainty that would be discomfoting in the novel (Hanson 25). Thus, calling on those ideas of postmodernist knowledge creation, these spaces in the narrative kindle the imagination of the reader, encouraging them to explore their own desires in the text and engage in a very intimate way with the text itself.

The nature of this discomfoting form, subversive of the expectations of the novel, can be a fantastic platform for experimentation. Writers turn to the genre to explore “new (and possibly stigmatized) subject matters” (Pratt 187). For instance, writers like James Joyce used the short story to introduce into the literary canon experiences of region, in particular those voices of Dublin, Ireland in *Dubliners*. In Pratt’s “The Short Story: The Long and the Short of It,” she writes:

The short story provides not just the “small” place for experimentation, but also a genre where oral and nonstandard speech, popular and regional culture, and marginal experience, have some tradition of being at home, and the form best-suited to reproducing the length of most oral speech events. (190)

Further, Pratt also acknowledges that short story traditions are much more successful in what she refers to as “Third World” nations and cultures “where literacy is not the norm, or where the standard literary language is that of an oppressor,” and therefore come with

cultural and classist associations (190). So, while the short story can be a place where new and subversive narrative forms come to fruition, the connotations of those explorations can hold lasting, troublesome impacts. While the short story has tried to serve marginalized peoples by giving them a publishable voice, the societal associations didn't just disappear and many took issue with the popularization of women's voices, the challenging of race relations, and exploration of lower class lives. As scholars have noted, literary history has tended to play favorite to masculine-associated literary forms such as epics and tragedies, even appropriating the success of women writers in letters, journals, and diary writing (Eagleton 57). In doing so, the collective understanding of what is considered literary has tended towards the masculine. The more feminine forms of literature that have escaped appropriation by male writers have been deemed "less literary, less intellectual, less wide-ranging, less profound," (Eagleton 57). This association with the feminine and the marginalized has likewise plagued the short story and has incited a push to bridge this hierarchy of literariness. As Hanson argues, the short story by all counts appeals to that which is literary in "its orientation towards the power words hold, or release and create, over and above their mimetic or explicatory function," (Hanson 24). Breaking from these associations that hold the short story socially subordinate, the short story proves its literary nature in its meticulously careful treatment of narrative, language, and character development that the novel, that so freely lives in a literary space, often claims as the determiner of difference between itself and short stories.

Many scholars suggest that these social connotations that accompany the short story may have contributed to the collective mindset of literary critics that the short story

is inferior to the novel, a space where more traditional, conservative narratives are played out and distributed. This is the challenge that the short story still struggles to overcome today as the genre has suffered since its inception as being considered the lesser half to the novel. As Axel Nissen writes:

The novel and the short story have been locked in a lethal, loveless embrace for more than a hundred years now [...] The short story is the "other" of fictional prose narrative. As the other it must continually justify its existence, worry about the circumstances of its being and becoming, agonize about its value and identity. Not unlike homosexuality, the short story was born into the world as a generic problem, a problem that required a solution or at least a definition. (1-2)

Thus attempts to bring light to these subversive topics also struggles and is faced with further relegation to second status. However, the pressure to recognize the short story for its literary qualities and validate its place in the literary canon comes with it a recognition and validation of those subversive, progressive, and marginalized subject matters it takes in as its own.

Feminist and Queer Narrative Theory

Queer theory is broad and ambiguous in nature. Since its coining by Teresa de Lauretis in 1991, scholars have argued about what it really means to practice queer theory (Mallan 187). Queer as a whole resists finite definitions and as a result holds "inherent radical potential," (Mallan 187). As Susan Lanser suggests, this is because queer can't be defined within the strict walls of interpretation and therefore has charged decades of scholarly debate. Donald Hall in *Queer Theories* presents a number of definitions for the term queer that help to situate a general understanding of queer theory as an academic endeavor. First, Hall explains that the term "queer" can be understood in its adjective form to mean "that there is no *easy* answer to the question [*Who are you?*], no single word, no simple slot into which complex personalities, behaviors, desires, abilities, and

ambitions can be placed,” (13). In its noun form, the word “queer” holds a problematic and controversial history, often used as a category of oppression. Hall says that “one version of being ‘a queer’ is simply to occupy the lower half of that last hierarchized binary,” where to be gay is to be “a lesser version of a heterosexual” and “to be ‘of color’ is to be a lesser version of being ‘white,’” (13). The noun form of “queer” has long been used in a derogatory way, placed upon individuals that clearly did not want to be labeled as such as a way to other groups of people. The modern movement of queer and feminist activists have promoted a reclamation of the noun form of the word, but it holds on to many negative connotations still today. Finally, Hall addresses the transitive verb form of “queer” that is most used by literary scholars to understand form, narrative, and character development in literary theory. The action “to queer,” Hall suggests, “does pose a particular threat to systems of classification that assert their timelessness and fixity,” (14). This idea refers back to the theory posed by Lanser that “to queer” is to disrupt categorical understandings of the world through the binary (924). To queer, then, is to reject the act of classifying something as one thing or another and promotes, even celebrates, the ambiguity between the lines.

The development of novel theories, as Hall points out, often follows long histories of activism and “boots-on-the-ground” work to make sense of developing movements, time periods, etc. The same can be said for queer theory, which came as a result of recognition of the AIDS epidemic in the United States and the forming of ACT UP and Queer Nation (Hall 52-4). With the growing concern of AIDS in the United States, government entities and educational institutions put an increasing emphasis on the necessity for some academic research into the experiences of those who identified under

this umbrella of “queer.” Thus, queer theory became a widespread theoretical practice across disciplines as a way to better understand these identities and experiences.

In terms of methodological approach to narrative theory, queer intersections are relatively novel and the interdisciplinary framework of feminist and queer narrative theory date back only a few years. There is much room for exploration and expansion of these ideas as scholars adopt a new understanding of how they function in narrative studies. For Robyn Warhol, the feminist narrative theory component of queer and feminist narratology not only considers gender and sexuality, but other feminist issues of colonialism, class, race, ability, nationality, and other systems of marginalization (12). Applying a critical lens to narratives that deal with these issues, Warhol says, can reveal to us what our society’s attitudes are towards said subjects, not necessarily how they occur in the material world because texts are not “reproductions of ‘reality’ but rather are representations,” (13). To address the queer theory aspect of this narrative study approach, Susan Lanser develops a comprehensive understanding of the verb tense definition of the word “queer.” While Lanser acknowledges the various and widely diverse definitions of queer that queer theorists and narrative scholars apply to their ideas, she introduces three understandings of the verb form of the word. These include:

(1) to make a claim for the non-heteronormative sex, gender, or sexuality of someone or something; (2) to disrupt or deconstruct binary categories of sex, gender, and/or sexuality; and (3) to disrupt or deconstruct any entity by rejecting its categories, binaries, or norms. (Lanser 924)

These are just three facets of application of the verb “queer” to theory and knowledge, but they directly correlate to the understanding of narrative theory. It is worth noting that Lanser and Warhol in their introduction to feminist and queer narrative theory explain that they use the terms “feminist and queer” or “queer and feminist” to challenge any

linguistic or social hierarchies between the two terms as the two concepts rely heavily on the construction of the other to exist, especially in the context of narrative theory. The overlapping of the two theoretical approaches is recognized as “feminist and queer narrative theory” or “queer and feminist narrative theory” henceforth (Warhol and Lanser 3).

One of the greatest contributors to feminist and queer studies, Kimberlé Crenshaw first introduced intersectionality as a “‘multidimensionality’ of marginalized subjects’ lived experiences,” (Nash 2). Crenshaw argues that identity politics do not and cannot exist outside one another, an idea that rejects any single-framed analysis of oppression (Carbado et al. 305). Like queer theory, scholars understand intersectionality as a fluid lens for analysis that “makes little sense to frame ... as a contained entity,” (Carbado et al. 304; Nash 3). Feminist essentialism is challenged by the notion of intersectionality, which makes “interlocking and mutually reinforcing vectors of race, gender, class, and sexuality” difficult to overlook (Nash 4). This anti-essentialist approach encourages the kind of subversion of normalized, heteronormative presentations of sexuality. Understanding narratives through the intersectional lens of both gender and sexuality brings interpretation closer to a holistic knowledge on the intricacies of oppression and privilege.

Queer theory, because of its expansive applicability to a number of subjects beyond just LGBTQ+ identities, applies well to narratology. Something that both Lanser and feminist literary scholar Warhol agree on is that queer and feminist narrative theories are heavily under researched. Warhol cites a long history of masculinist academic environments that prioritize male expertise in classic narratology (9). A similar issue

arises in short story scholarship as the form also suffers from the effect of a masculinist culture with the only notable literary greats being among Joyce, Joseph Conrad, Edgar Allen Poe, and Henry James, for a significant period of time. Male authors held social dominance in the field of short story literature for several consecutive artistic movements, and only drastically changing social environments brought forth the aforementioned innovation of marginalized voice integration. Warhol's feminist approach to narrative theory subverts this issue of masculine authority, questioning the sexed and gendered analyses and interpretations of literature. When readers and researchers look at these constructions of representation closely, patterns are revealed in non-canonical literature and understandings of the power of a narrative to construct and constitute gender become clear.

One of the hopes for the future of feminist and queer narrative theory is the reconstitution of understanding gender in narrative voice. As Tory Young writes in "Futures for feminist and queer narratology," there is a problematic nature of associating the text with the authorial body (917). Lanser in writing her *Narrative Theory Unbound* acknowledges assumptions among herself and many readers that gender of the author implies the gender of the narrative voice, but Young and Lanser both suggest narrative has the power to exist without identity signifiers, which "upset[s] social categories by involving readers in a recognition of the principles of their construction," (920). In other words, the text turns to the reader to be interpreted. Where one character may not have an explicit gender identity, the reader is forced to make their own assumptions based on the descriptions they are given, and as a result forced to confront their underlying biases. This is where the importance of feminist and queer theory together intersect.

Constructing knowledge with a text instead of from it, a method developed out of feminist and queer ideologies, inspires fluid interpretations and are critical to the understanding of a text in its entirety.

However, the nature of queer theory proposes a problem for many scholars who seek answers to complex problems. Feminist and queer theories seek to construct knowledge through collective experiences, but reject sweeping declarations of certainties for groups of people. This poses another problem for understanding how feminist and queer theories can make sense of narrative themes and categories of convention. To really get to the source of the commonalities between these narratives it has to be accepted that the abstract definitions and concrete definitions exist at the same time but do not necessarily overlap. For example, narratives may tell the stories of women who identify as women, a space of concrete identification, but they may also leave space for fluidity, non-binary categories, and identities that defy all categorization in the first place. This does not mean that the category “woman” is any less valid because of the other spaces of ambiguity related to identity, or that identities that fall between categorical definition are any less realistic. The women in a story may identify as women, some may not, many don’t say; some may see themselves as queer, or straight, or non-binary, or gender fluid, but the time and space for the exploration of these multiplicities of identity must be allowed. Poststructuralist and postmodernist thinking has contributed to these understandings in feminist and queer theories suggesting that identity and knowledge are wholly constructed within collective groups based loosely on already existing social codes (i.e. the identity “woman”) (Leavy and Harris 65). For feminist postmodernist scholars “whether your version of events is somehow ‘true’ or not is irrelevant; what

matters is that in your story-telling, and based on the relationship you share when the telling occurs, [the event or story] gets constructed in [the receiver's] mind," and therefore the Truth is constructed through language and the storytelling event (Leavy and Harris 65). Thus, the relationship between the sender and receiver in the construction of knowledge is critical to the process of storytelling. Postmodern feminists look for this connection in the construction of truths, which for narrative theory translates to a present reader/narrator connection in order to formulate an interpretation.

This collective, interpersonal construction of knowledge is critical to understanding feminist and queer narrative theory. These short stories are attempting to construct knowledge with their readers together through the storytelling and story reading process. They reject objectivity and, through careful language use, suggest there is much more to be learned in the ambiguity of constructed narratives than in the written words on the pages.

METHODOLOGY

The larger pool of short stories collected before narrowing for close analysis was drawn from the Lambda Literary Awards, which judges texts “principally on literary merit and content relevant to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer lives,” (Valenzuela). This thesis takes a traditional, inductive research approach to understand the scope of the functions of queer narratives in these short stories. The focus of this study surrounds three short story authors who have been recognized by the Lambda Literary Awards: Chinelo Okparanta, Krystal A. Smith, and Carmen Maria Machado. Collections of short stories are a minority in the Lambda Literary Awards scope, as on average only one is recognized in each fiction category annually and rarely win their categories. Each of these authors were recognized in the Lesbian Fiction category for their collections of short stories, respectively, *Happiness, Like Water, Two Moons: Stories*, and *Her Body and Other Parties*. *Happiness, Like Water* was the winner in the 26th annual General Lesbian Fiction category and *Her Body and Other Parties* won the Lesbian Fiction category in the 30th annual awards, while *Two Moons: Stories* was a finalist in the Lesbian Fiction category.

This literary analysis draws on queer and feminist narrative theory as defined by Robyn Warhol and Susan Lanser. Warhol’s feminist narrative theory considers how texts treat “mainstream assumptions about gender, sexuality, and class” and how that text responds or critiques them (11). This approach takes responsibility for “critiquing narrative manifestations of all categories of oppression based on socially constructed identities,” acknowledging the political context of the literature (12). On the whole, Warhol’s method takes a politically engaged mode of literary analysis that identifies

character contradictions without reconciling them, attempts to understand the narrative's role in the constitution of gender and their roles, as well as revealing patterns in non-canonical literature. This theory overlaps well with Susan Lanser's definition of queering and ultimately informs this project's understanding of feminist and queer narrative theory. Lanser explains how this queering works in three ways:

(1) to make a claim for the non-heteronormative sex, gender, or sexuality of someone or something; (2) to disrupt or deconstruct binary categories of sex, gender, and/or sexuality; and (3) to disrupt or deconstruct any entity by rejecting its categories, binaries, or norms. (924)

Building on the social constructionist theory of Judith Butler, Lanser suggests that it is the role of the queer theorist to challenge the ways in which queer writers apply this deconstruction to their form and craft (Butler; Warhol and Lanser). Lanser challenges a broad use of the verb usage "to queer" on the basis that it "dilutes the significance of the sex/gender nexus" and this research also acknowledges this significance of the usage of feminist and "queer" narrative theory by analyzing the way this narrative application relates to characters with LGBTQ identities (934). This thesis adopts a poststructuralist approach to understanding by undermining "master narrative[s]" and empirical truths (Leavy and Harris 46-7).

Feminist and queer narrative theory together ask researchers of the field to question the limits of our commonly understood categorizations such as genre conventions, form, and length. The short story subverts all of these in very queer ways, flipping common love plots or hero arcs, denying readers whole pictures, even privileging plot over character development. Feminist and queer narrative theory allows, even encourages, that disruption to happen and imparts on readers knowledge of the limitlessness of categories of existence such as identity, understanding, and

interpretation. In doing this, this thesis adopts two understandings of the term “queer,” one being the noun form that refers to an identity signifier, the other being the verb form that refers to the latter two definitions that Lanser puts forth for queer. “To queer,” as it is used in this research, is to employ this disruption of category, binary differentiation, universal truths, and social “norms.” This thesis recognizes in the characters and their subsequent narratives this noun form of queer, but in reference to form and subversion of narrative, this thesis is employing that verb form to indicate this transgression from normalized forms of narrative. In total, this thesis analyzes, through a feminist and queer narrative theory lens, the use and importance of the short story space to explore, create, and validate queer narratives.

CHAPTER I

CHINELO OKPARANTA: *HAPPINESS LIKE WATER*

Chinelo Okparanta is a fiction author with an M.F.A. from the Iowa Writers' Workshop as well as a B.S. from Pennsylvania State University and M.A. from Rutgers University. The author was born in Port Harcourt, Nigeria, which has inspired both her collection of short stories *Happiness, Like Water* and her debut novel *Under the Udala Trees*. At the time of writing, Okparanta serves as an associate professor of English & creative writing and the Margaret Hollinshead Ley Professor in Poetry & Creative Writing at Bucknell University. Okparanta has won Lambda Literary Awards for both her collection of short stories, *Happiness, Like Water*, and her novel, *Under the Udala Trees*. The Lambda Literary Awards writes that there is a "sense that little can help or change life" in her short stories and that Okparanta writes of "opposition of expectations, more than opposition of cultures" (Sarai). Her short stories are of high cultural significance both in her home of Nigeria and in the United States where her stories have been published and awarded. Breaking the boundaries of acceptable sexuality and subverting normalized ideas of identity and personal experience, Okparanta's collection, *Happiness, Like Water*, utilizes the short story as many transgressors have before her: to challenge hegemony and powerful narratives.

Among the most culturally significant texts by Okparanta is "Grace," a story about a personal relationship between a curious student and her professor. "Grace" uniquely challenges conservative religious beliefs considering the cultural context of the characters — one of the main characters, Grace, hailing from Okparanta's native country,

Nigeria. In the story, the other main character, a professor teaching a class on the Old Testament helps Grace through her own personal interpretation of the Bible. The professor as a character is fascinating as the characterization of her is limited and only half way through the story does she explicitly state, “being that I’m a woman, and she’s [Grace] a woman, and I’m probably older than her mother,” (132). There are characterization clues earlier in the story that hint to the professor’s gender such as “I tug the hem of my untucked shirt, as if tugging will straighten out the wrinkles on it. I fuss with my earrings...” (126). However, the professor is not referred to by any other character or herself as a woman beyond that later reference to her womanhood in the context of her relationship with Grace. The effect that Okparanta creates by doing this is one where the reader gets to imagine the character in a way that fits their own interpretation or insertion of expectation on the story. By confirming reader speculations about gender later in the story, the reader is asked to formulate their own expected character and to consider how the construction of that character agrees with or subverts the codes that the author has weaved into the narrative. For instance, did the reader read the professor as male, and what master plots might have influenced that interpretation? Or did the reader identify the professor as female from the descriptors given of the interactions with Grace? And what gendered assumptions about female behavior led to those interpretations? Okparanta, by refusing to lead the reader directly to the answer of the gender of the professor, pushes the reader to confront the way they read and interpret gender.

Okparanta creates a similar effect with the way the professor’s sexuality is presented and vaguely alluded to. Grace is explicit about her sexuality, stating that she

knew she was attracted to women from a young age and outwardly expressing her discomfort with marrying a man. However, the professor's sexuality is less explicit. She expresses clear attraction to Grace, thinking "I've never consoled a student like this before ... It occurs to me that I should take my hands off her waist, but I don't, and, thinking back now, the reason I don't is quite clear," (Okparanta 132). Yet it is known to the reader that the professor was previously unhappily married to a man, whom she has divorced by the time she meets Grace. She reflects on this marriage saying "It was my fault for not being able to devote myself to him, to love him completely, the way a wife should love her husband. But there'd been something missing for me in the marriage, and I'd been lonely all the while..." (Okparanta 146). The professor refuses to answer the question the average reader may be compelled to ask in this moment: how exactly does she identify? A linear approach to narrative interpretation of this part of the story might lend one to interpret the professor as an unreliable narrator as she gives little confirmation of her validity as a character. However, though a queer and feminist narrative lens one can see how the character development of the professor challenges a reader to become socially responsible for the construction of knowledge and interpretation in "Grace." "Grace" demands biases, tendencies towards heteronormativity, and reliance on canonical foundations for interpretation be drawn out and obliterated.

Furthermore, Grace as a character presents a fascinating subversion of the plot development in her story. Grace questions traditional interpretations of the Bible, raising concerns about what known truths are to be taken from the religious teachings of the Bible. The professor replies with a key understanding of her own religious teachings: "Religion is all about faith. And one's faith is a very personal thing," (Okparanta 127). In

the context of Okparanta's religious and cultural upbringing, herself a Jehovah's Witness and native Nigerian, this idea that sets the pretense for belief in "Grace" is subversive. However, Grace takes this message further, asking "what kind of God bans the very creatures he created from coming to him just because of imperfections out of their control," and argues the contradiction that God is "a god of peace, but also a god of war," makes little sense (Okparanta 127). Again, her professor responds that it is difficult to know really how God would perceive the teachings of the Bible because "it was still written by humans, with human biases, all based on the existing cultural norms of the time," (Okparanta 128). Finally, Grace asks the question that changes the tone of the short story from one simply about subversive readings of the Bible to the actual queering of belief and sexuality in the context of religion. Grace says to her professor:

Thou shall not lie with mankind as with womankind: it is an abomination [...] If a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death [...] Does this also apply to females? [...] Is it also an abomination for women to lie with women? (Okparanta 129)

This question is in itself a unique inquiry into interpreting the verse of the Bible that has long been used as an oppressive tool to subordinate homosexual identity. However, her professor is equipped with an idea that reiterates the postmodern feminist idea that "takes up difference and wants to undermine the stable, coherent subject and say that there is no certainty or master narrative," (Leavy and Harris 46-7). She responds, "It's hard to even know what that meant back then. Meanings change over time. It's hard to know," (Okparanta 129). This statement from the professor disrupts absolute definitions allowing for interpretations of the Bible that can be altered over time. This parallels her earlier

point that each interpretation of organized religious practices is deeply personal to the individual.

The queering of these ideas about religion are further solidified by the context that Okparanta gives for Grace and her professor. Grace admits that she is to go back to Nigeria and marry an Igbo man in an arrangement concocted by her mother. Grace admits that “she doesn’t like men in the marrying way. She’s never been interested in them like that,” (Okparanta 137). However, Grace’s mother ultimately forces her to get married in a “traditional,” “white” wedding, saying that “a woman needs to marry, have children,” (Okparanta 142; Okparanta 137). Grace’s professor reflects on Grace’s wedding to Nwafor, her future husband, by saying “I find myself trying hard to remember if I’ve ever heard of or read about or watched any stories in which an arranged marriage ends up being successful. Of course the only examples that come to my mind are from the Bible,” (Okparanta 139). Grace’s personal influence on her inquiries of biblical interpretations grounds the professor’s claims that understandings of the Bible are highly personal and thus validates their subsequent relationship. On her wedding day, Grace admits to being in love with her professor, they share a kiss, and the narrator reflects, “And I don’t think of the Bible, of its verses about unnatural affections and abominations. Because it doesn’t feel sinful to me. Because, unlike with Pharaoh and his magicians, none of this is meant to be a challenge to God,” (Okparanta 150). The two women conclude their story in the backdrop of Nigeria and Grace’s wedding, but still on “the verge of joy” which the narrator says “is its own form of happiness,” (Okparanta 151).

The context of the strict social and religious restrictions on homosexual activity in Nigeria makes this ending, where two women can share a passionate kiss and declaration

of love with a hopeful tone, a subversive twist on an otherwise distressing political setting. The majority of Okparanta's short fiction, and even her novel *Under the Udala Trees*, serve as a critique of the criminalization of lesbian identity in Nigeria. They often take up the heterosexism of Nigerian culture and the connectivity to the importance of religion in that same culture. Thus this moment in "Grace" holds special significance. For Black women, sexuality has even more power to subvert heteronormative ideology that enforce strict social codes and discourses. For scholars Battle and Ashley, the non-normative Black family, in Grace's case the potential family she might be building with her fiancé shadowed by her potential romance with her professor, struggles under the influence of heteronormative ideology, which "still functions to compel black individuals to accept 'normative' notions of family, gender, and sexuality," (10). It shows that only when Grace lives as her true self can she find this happiness, and because this moment comes with no repercussions, Grace is validated in that. It proves the professor's ideas that religious interpretation is subjective and that the interpretations that villainize homosexuality are based in human biases and influences rather than the sacred word of the Christian God.

This story shouldn't be limited to the social context of Nigeria, as the practice of religion is central to American culture where Okparanta's short stories have been published and popularized. A great deal of the American population is currently engaged in spiritual practice or was raised in a familial structure that ascribes to some form of faith (Morrow 118). In an American setting, lesbians are still suffering at the hands of religious belief and persecution. Morrow writes, "many lesbians have suffered family rejection, social rejection, loss of their church homes, and loss of the faith communities in

which they were reared,” (118). However, feminist critics attempted to empower lesbian women by initiating feminist readings and interpretations of religious texts and spiritual practices (Morrow 118). This kind of empowerment is at play in Okparanta’s text, creating space for the intersection of religious identity and lesbian identity. By allowing Grace the opportunity to explore her romantic connection to the professor and still maintain the religious connection she has to her Christianity through appealing to her mother’s wishes and ultimately subscribing to heterosexual marriage, Okparanta is challenging the notion that there is no place for lesbian identity in spiritual belief. Grace’s very real questions about the “engendered trauma” that heterosexist interpretations of the Bible perpetuate encourages a homosexual-positive approach to the intersection of religious and sexual identity (Morrow 120).

Similarly to the way Okparanta challenges traditional narrative theory in “Grace,” “On Ohaeto Street” utilizes tropes specific to the short story to construct a complex story of love, again in the context of Nigeria, in a way that pushes the reader out of comfortable master plots and character development. “On Ohaeto Street” is narrated from the third person, beginning with “At the time of the robbery, Eze and Chinwe were living in the town of Elelenwo in Port Harcourt,” (Okparanta 1). The story of Eze and Chinwe being set in Port Harcourt, Nigeria is significant as on January 7, 2014, Nigeria enacted the Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act, which criminalizes same-sex couples and threatens up to 14 years in prison for same-sex behavior (Courtois 129). The collection of short stories in which “On Ohaeto Street” was published, *Happiness, Like Water*, has a copyright date of 2013, but the political tensions between the government and LGBT individuals living in Nigeria long preceded the 2014 act. This political and situational

context is important for understanding and interpreting the actions of Chinwe and the unnamed narrator to whom the text alludes. Many times the narrator implies a feeling of discomfort and disillusionment with the religious system of heterosexual marriage that is socially (and later legally) required of women in Nigeria. At one moment, the narrator alludes to Chinwe's dissonance saying "Chinwe was very dutiful about the wedding. On the surface her dutifulness must have looked like excitement. Perhaps it was," (Okparanta 9). The narrator tells readers the ideals of marriage and motherhood that Chinwe's character appeals to were wholly imparted by her mother's influence and the social dynamic of organized religion as her husband, Eze, is a Jehovah's Witness. Chinwe, after her marriage, gives up her job as a teacher "to take on more fully the role of a wife," the language her mother used.

This emphasis on the nonautonomy of Chinwe over her own destiny gives the narrator a unique perspective to reflect on Chinwe's later life. The narrative facilitates seamless underreading by making these references to the narrator's personal knowledge of Chinwe's life so minimal, and the significance of them may be lost on the reader altogether. The first reference to a characterized narrator, proving the narrator to be of importance instead of an omniscient, disembodied authorial voice, comes early in the story when Okparanta writes "sometimes it was hard to tell if they were real police officers or crooks in uniform — at least, so Chinwe tells *me*" (emphasis added) (2). At this point in the narrative, it becomes clear that the story is employing a character that knows Chinwe intimately enough to tell her story and that the narrator has contextual knowledge that has yet to be revealed. The narrator doesn't reference themselves again for a number of pages until they say "I imagine it now: the way the sleeves must have

extended far beyond Chinwe's fingertips, so that her mama would have to roll them up for her," and then again later on that same page, "I've heard the story and imagined it enough times to be able to describe it as if it were my own experience: her papa would nod," (7). These moments of introspection indicate that the narrator has intimate knowledge of Chinwe, but this knowledge is retrospective and understood through imagination mixed with anecdotes that they most likely learned from personal narration by Chinwe. At this point, a very close relationship between Chinwe and the narrator is evident. Since no other character of importance has made themselves known other than Eze and Chinwe's mother, both of which are ruled out as potential narrators since they are named and reflected on by the narrator, it can be assumed that this narrator is a later-life partner.

Finally, the narrator enters Chinwe's story in the last paragraph of the story: "It is an even longer time before we meet each other by chance on Ohaeto Street; and it is a bit more time before Chinwe decides — without her mother's influence — that she will try her hand at marriage again, this time by becoming *my* wife," (Okparanta 19). Readers are offered their first and only glimpse at an embodied narrator, and they are finally set within the context of Chinwe's world. However, little is given to the reader for the development of interpretation and, thus, the reader is encouraged to project creative freedom onto the conclusion to Chinwe's troubled narrative. Evidenced by the discontent Chinwe has in her commitment to religious institutions and her resulting marriage to Eze, it is easy to read her next marriage as a rejection of these social restrictions. This reading is founded by the emphasis Okparanta puts on Chinwe's next marriage being "without her mother's influence," as her mother, throughout the story, serves as a reminder of the

Nigerian political and religious climate around marriage and a woman's role in society. In an interview with *Mosaic Literary Magazine*, Okparanta commented on this ambiguity around the marriage of Chinwe saying "I think there are clues in each story to tell you of the gender and of the race. For example, the narrator in 'On Ohaeto Street' mentions, at the end of the story, that Chinwe becomes his wife. The story is set in Nigeria, where the only form of marriage allowed is a heterosexual marriage," (Dennis-Behn). However, in that same interview, Okparanta argues that "in general, categories like gender and race are relied on for meaning far more heavily than they should be," (Dennis-Behn). So this ambiguity around the narrator and the character development of Chinwe and the narrator is intentional. The reader is supposed to impose some of their own assumptions on the text and read into the characters what they personally want to get out of them. Here, Okparanta is once again constructing a collective knowledge where the reader is just as employed in the process of creating understanding as Okparanta is.

Finally, "Tumours and Butterflies" is one of the stories in the collection that holds the most emotional weight as Okparanta herself has said that this story reflects most her lived experiences with her family in her youth. In her interview with *Mosaic Magazine*, she says: "'Tumours and Butterflies' and 'Shelter' are the most autobiographical stories in the collection. I grew up in a very turbulent, physical and verbal abuse-ridden home," (Dennis-Behn). The story opens with the narrator explaining that her father had been diagnosed with thyroid cancer and it is evident right away that the narrator feels ambivalent about her father's impending death. The narrator, a teacher, is consumed by her mother's pleas for her to come visit her ailing father. She, through a series of references, reveals the long history of the narrator's father's abuse of her and her mother.

“It reminds me of the picture on her Massachusetts driver’s license, in which she’s sporting the remains of a black eye,” (Okparanta 170); “At first I want to run out to her, but I am too afraid. But then even the fear becomes too much to bear...” (Okparanta 173). In one vivid example, Okparanta writes:

They had an argument my senior year in high school. One of the serious ones. I got in the middle of it, screamed, told him what a horrible father he was. Pushed him away from her. What kind of husband beats his wife? I asked. Suddenly his hand was coming down hard on my face, his tight fist landing right smack on my mouth. (176).

This abuse continues on throughout their lives, and the narrator recalls her mother always advocating for her father, defending his abuses, and protecting him from jail time for hitting the narrator in the latter account by telling police he is diabetic and that jail would deteriorate his health.

The mother’s defenses don’t sustain during the end of his life, however, as she sympathizes with the narrator, subsiding that her father was a violent, cruel man; “‘I make no excuses for the man,’ she says. ‘Your father has done many things wrong, but he’s a sick man now,’” (Okparanta 185). The narrator remains adamant that she won’t see her father or write him until her mother convinces her that it matters enough to her mom for her to feel obligated to write the letter. So, reluctantly, the narrator writes an email to her father telling him that she hopes he recovers quickly and “‘If there’s anything I can do, please let me know,’” (Okparanta 187). Unsurprisingly, the father’s response doesn’t demonstrate the kind of character change that her mother insists has occurred since she has separated from her parents. The response reads:

Daughter, the path to a fulfilling and beneficial future is not the utter disrespect of your father and your mother. As a child, it is your duty to accept the discipline of your parents, regardless of whether you agree or disagree ... For my part, I also have a right not to condone or support that path. The least you can do now is to

reconsider your ways, and then toe a path that will reconcile you with the father who gave you life ... You must at some point begin to take responsibility for your choices, actions and conduct. You hurt nobody but yourself, and you cannot later turn around to blame anyone else. (188)

The narrator is furious at this response, wondering to herself “how he is able to box up all his abuse under the category of discipline,” (Okparanta 188). She is angry and clearly wounded by the words of her father, hoping at least that he would recognize some of his wrongdoings as his death nears. She thinks to herself, “I want to tell him that normal children are not forced to sneak around to see their mothers, because normal fathers would never ban their children from coming to their houses, especially not for the reason that he has banned me,” (Okparanta 189). This hostile relationship between the narrator and her father continues through the end of the story which concludes with the following interaction between her and her father: “‘Do you hear me?’ Papa asks as I step out. ‘Don’t think you can set foot here again without my permission. You understand?’ I turn back in his direction, and I nod, a slow and wistful nod. And I wonder if he even knows why I’m leaving,” (Okparanta 196).

This story and these concluding lines bring the collection of stories to a close on an ambiguous note. The future of the father character can be assumed as his thyroid cancer is likely to take his life, but the future of the narrator and her mother are left open for interpretation. The ending can be read a number of ways, but ultimately the reader is left to make these assumptions themselves. It may be read as a liberation of the main character from the abusive reach of her father; or a sympathetic reader might see the mother as the true victim here as she lost her daughter and is left to care for a man who abuses her. Another interpretation might assume that the relationship between her mother and the narrator was ruined by the narrator walking out and therefore leaving the narrator

without any family at all, which can be backed by the fact that no other significant characters are developed in this story. Others may argue that the narrator's indignance was unwarranted as her father was nearing the end of his life. Ultimately, none of these interpretations can be actually validated by the text or Okparanta herself. This is the effect that the ambiguous ending creates and the reader is imposed upon to insert their own input on these characters lives or accept their uncertain fate. The wrapping up of the narrative is wholly the responsibility of the consumer and therefore Okparanta is creating an engaged readership that connects to them beyond just through reading words on the page. Okparanta is employing the postmodernist approach of constructed knowledge where she is testing her own personal narrative against those of the reader's. If one possible conclusion resonates with a particular reader, they have the agency, granted to them by Okparanta, to explore how that narrative aligns with their experiences — in turn, either validating them or allowing them to see a perspective that challenges their own lived reality.

This can be a discomfoting effect as reviewer Jacqui Hopkins said in her review on Goodreads, "sometimes the best stories are the ones that leave the destiny of the characters wide open for interpretation. However, sometimes you just want to know what happens to them," (Hopkins). One could argue that the short story, unlike the novel, is unique in its ability to simultaneously create this effect of wanting to know what happens to the characters while also being satisfied with open endings. For many, including another reviewer who wrote "as is often the issue with short stories you simply don't get enough time to connect with the characters," the determiner of this line is the amount of exposure given to the characters (Forbes). This connection with the characters can only

be developed over time, as it does in the novel, but the short story can and often does play with how much it is willing to connect the reader to its characters and their individual plot lines.

However, the feminist part of queer and feminist narrative theory comes directly into play in “Tumours and Butterflies.” The narrator, by defying her father’s control over her, engages her autonomy and questions the pervasiveness of patriarchal authority. The control of patriarchy is evident across all the stories in Okparanta’s *Happiness, Like Water*, and in so many of the stories the characters’ main conflicts are with their own subordination to the social power that patriarchy gives to the men in their lives. By ending this collection with the liberation of this woman, Okparanta is pushing against the social limitations on women, arguing that the patriarchy is not an immovable object, and that women can exercise their autonomy to escape these social conditions — all ideas that must resonate with her intended audience in her home country of Nigeria.

Understanding the cultural context where social hierarchy, patriarchy, and criminalization of homosexuality are dominant forces, Okparanta’s writing is breaking down concrete walls of social marginalization. Just in “Grace” alone, Okparanta challenges the very justification for the homophobia that reigns dominant in Nigerian culture. Aptly pointing out the connection to the Western world, Okparanta notes that “homophobia is still a huge problem in the US, and it might be a bit premature to go around declaring the battle won, even in America,” (“Nicole Dennis-Benn and Chinelo Okparanta Tell Their Own Stories”). Compared to some of the later subversions of sexual identity that this research explores, Okparanta stories and characters are fairly conservative representations of the bounds of gender and sexuality. While the connection

to the homophobia and heterosexist society that the Western world still exists as is relevant to the publishing of Okparanta's stories in the US and beyond, the subversion comes from the inseparable context of the stories themselves.

The queer noun form, unlike in "Grace," is altogether absent from "Tumours and Butterflies" and "On Ohaeto Street." However, these stories employ subversions of convention and narrative structure in a way that undoubtedly comes from queer theory's rejection of neat definitions and tidy conclusions. The opportunity developed by Okparanta to rely on a gender-ambiguous narrator, like in "On Ohaeto Street," or leave room for gender-subversive behavior in "Tumours and Butterflies," is a subversive narrative experiment. Okparanta, as will become evident, is the most limited in her stories of these three authors, seemingly constrained by her cultural upbringing and intended audience of Nigerian readership. However, Okparanta's stories in her collection, *Happiness, Like Water*, are some of the most subversive considering the context in which they are written. By writing characters that can be read as gender-ambiguous, challenging religious beliefs, and writing characters like the narrator in "Tumours and Butterflies" who defy social positions (in her case the inferior role of daughter in a patriarchal family dynamic), Okparanta is pushing against these normalized systems of oppressions in Nigerian culture and around the world. The influence of religion on the marginalization of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, and other sexuality identities that are not heterosexual prevails in societies all across the world. Patriarchy still remains the dominant social and family system of power worldwide, and binary gender categorizations are still the preferred method in medicine, psychology, and education in much of the Western world. Okparanta's characters and their stories, while

seeming fairly conservative in contemporary short queer fiction, are resisting these social oppressors in powerful ways.

Readers reflected similar interpretations about bridging social and cultural gaps between the experiences of Nigerian women and the stories' readership in the United States. For one reviewer, these stories served as a reminder that "literature from everywhere needs to be explored ... for what it teaches those of us who live blindly, day to day, without realizing or thinking about what is going on in other parts of the world," (Lydia). For another, these stories represented an inspection of humanity and said that while "yes, a microscope is taken to global women's issues, using Nigeria as a setting, [but] for those who can't see beyond the idea that this encompasses women and Africa, too bad..." (Cheryl). Thus, these stories transcend geographical and cultural boundaries in a way that speaks to the experiences of women across the world. However, for some readers, the expectations of the short story form left something to be desired in the conservative nature of some of these stories that readers outside of Nigeria. One reviewer writes "It's just hard to feel engaged with characters struggling with something that's both alien and so stupid ... story after story built around this theme comes to feel tiresome," (Bunker). Another reviewer writes "sometimes the best stories are the ones that leave the destiny of the characters wide open for interpretation. However, sometimes you just want to know what happens to them ... I found myself truly invested in the lives of these characters, even though their stories were so brief," (Hopkins). Thus, there is some negotiation between the interpretation of the reader, the context of the stories (in Okparanta's case, her intended audience being one that many of these readers don't

identify as), and the short story form to create that postmodern feminist construction of knowledge that these stories encourage.

CHAPTER II

CARMEN MARIA MACHADO: *HER BODY AND OTHER PARTIES*

Carmen Maria Machado is a fiction author acclaimed for winning the Lambda Literary Award for Lesbian Fiction, the Shirley Jackson award, awarded for literature with horror, fantastic, and psychological thriller topics and themes, the Bard Fiction Prize, awarded to emerging writers, the Brooklyn Public Library Literature Prize, awarded to texts that address “urgent social, political, and artistic issues of our time,” the National Book Critic Circle’s John Leonard Prize, and being named a finalist for the National Book Award (“Biography”; the Shirley Jackson Awards; Colledge; Brooklyn Classic). Machado also holds an M.F.A. from the Iowa Writers’ Workshop and as of writing, lives in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania with her wife (“Biography”). *Her Body and Other Parties* is Machado’s debut collection of stories published first in the U.S. in 2017 (“Her Body and Other Parties: Stories”). The collection received nine awards and made finalists lists for 12 additional awards (“Her Body and Other Parties: Stories”). The Lambda Literary Awards called *Her Body and Other Parties* a collection of “genre-bending stories” that “destabilizes the reader’s sense of what’s real,” (Greene). These stories are interconnected by their exploration of the lives of women, foregrounded in its invocation of psychological thriller genre conventions and fantastic settings, is what binds these stories in Machado’s collection. Among the collection are a number of stories that demonstrate themes of importance to lesbian short fiction. For Machado, discussion of the female body, motherhood, and sexuality are imperative to her characters and their

subsequent plots. To approach these, Machado employs unique subversions of typical master plots and takes advantage of the structural fluidity of the short story container.

Carmen Maria Machado's "Eight Bites" is one of those unique amalgamations of the experimental form employed in the short story with the complex and anxious relationship conjured by the harsh outside view of the woman's body. In "Eight Bites," the narrator watches her sisters' bodies make drastic transformations, to which they cite an ambiguous "surgery." The narrator, then, decides that she too wants to change her body through this surgical procedure. The source of their desire to change, however, doesn't come from a need to make health changes. In fact, there is no mention of any kind of actual change in a healthy mentality for the narrator as even her surgeon writes off any lifestyle changes: "There are some procedures you'll have to go through. Visiting a psychiatrist, seeing another doctor, support groups—administrative nonsense, taking up a lot of time," (154). Thus, the narrator decides that since she can't make the lifestyle necessary to have her ideal body — a strict "eight bites" regiment that her thin mother taught her — she will make her body "work for eight bites," (153). The narrator struggles throughout the story, blaming the conception, carrying, and birth of her daughter Cal for the wreckage of her body — "and suddenly everything was wrecked, like she was a heavy-metal rocker trashing a hotel room before departing. My stomach was the television set through the window," (153). The narrator rallies with relinquishing control of her autonomy, feeling as though her sense of ability to control her eating has long vanished, consigning herself to a future in which she can no longer help herself without the external adjustment of surgery, and what it means to be a "normal human," (158). All

of these problems point to external influences and the eye of the public, her sisters, her daughter's perception, and points of comparison.

Post-surgery, the narrator is haunted by this dark "autonomous" mass that moves around her home quietly. This dark ghost reveals itself to be her disembodied past self, all the grotesque, unwanted parts of her that she gave up. It causes her to confront herself, really look at herself as she once was, and see the body she abandoned — "by loving me when I did not love her, by being abandoned by me, she has become immortal," (167). Juxtaposing this personal confrontation is the perception from others that she so desperately sought. The narrator notes comments from neighbors "'You look wonderful,' says one. 'Have you lost weight,' says another,'" (166). These comments affirm her, but again she ends up at the restaurant that can't seem to keep the same management: "the building remains the same, but it is always new and always better than before," (155). The narrator appears to be "new" and "better" than ever, but still has the same struggles, still has no autonomy over herself, and is forced to realize the lingering emptiness that comes with forcing oneself to adhere to the outside eye.

Significant to this characters' story is the lack of character development the short story form assigns her. Her only defining characteristic is this dark mass that she describes as "a body with nothing it needs: no stomach or bones or mouth. Just soft indents. I crouch down and stroke its shoulder, or what I think is its shoulder ... It has no eyes, but still, it looks at me. *She* looks at me. She is awful but honest. She is grotesque but she is real," (165). Machado doesn't give the narrator a name, physical description, any notable interests, or a career. She only has her hatred for her body, a desire for someone to change her, a broken relationship with one of only two named characters, her

daughter Cal (the other being her surgeon), and her nameless, faceless sisters. She is completely disembodied, only manifested in the very thing she thinks the world sees her as — a gross, dark, lumpy mass.

Additionally, the narrator's anxieties reflect an extension of her daughter, Cal, who is disapproving, even angry about her mother's surgery. Cal sees her mother as an extension of herself, asking her mother if she hates Cal's body as much as she hates her own, putting an additional layer of guilt onto the narrator's roles of mother and individual woman. Motherhood is a complex negotiation of identity in the heteronormative culture that reigns socially dominant in twenty-first century North America. This negotiation of identity categories is riddled with anxieties and social stressors, many of which are evidenced in "Eight Bites." This demonstrates this complex interconnectivity of human identity, demonstrating how interrelated the identity categories woman, mother, and lesbian (a position assumed in the gap that Machado leaves in her development of the mother and the descriptor of "lesbian" associated with the collection and its Lambda award) are in constructing an understanding of one's holistic experience. Machado, by developing intersectional, imperfect characters gives a glimpse into a common experience of women while simultaneously arguing for the subjectivity of experience. The main character and her daughter represent very real experiences that women within these identity categories face, especially in the context of their bodies in the public eye, but make their accounts so personal that the subjectivity of their experiences can't be ignored.

"Mothers" similarly takes the ideas about complex human identity brought forth in "Eight Bites" and expands them to explicitly confront lesbian-mother identity

intersections. The narrative creates vague, confusing characters, with little descriptors to categorize them with. This creates a lens into the story through which the reader has to make their own assumptions about each character. This is a narrative technique that Susan Lanser and Amy Shuman argue “upset[s] social categories by involving readers in a recognition of the principles of their construction,” (Young 920; Warhol and Shuman). The readers are active parties in the identification of characters and the plot points they contribute to, which in turn requires the reader to reflect on their own biases and ideas about the themes this story addresses.

The story identifies several characters, most notably an unnamed narrator, a character Machado refers to as “Bad,” and baby Mara. Mara’s birth is never quite explained, but the narrator refers to Mara as “our baby,” implying this baby, abandoned on the narrator’s front doorstep by Bad, is related to at least one of the two women in some way; “I was pregnant. Now there’s a baby. She’s yours’ ... I am so hypnotized by [Mara] that I miss the receding footsteps, the crack of the slamming car door. But then Bad is gone, and for once, I am not alone, after,” (Machado 45-6). The narrator characterizes Bad as easily mistakeable for “a very slight man,” with a “flinty, masculine cool, such confidence,” but uses she/her pronouns and feminine descriptors to indicate the lesbian relationship between Bad and the narrator (48). The narrator is offered little descriptors outside of her relationship to Bad, which is evidently abusive and emotionally complicated, and her motherhood in relation to Mara, which is also complex and in no way ideal.

Both characters Bad and Mara position the narrator with a degree of unreliability, as Bad brings to attention of the reader the narrator’s recent struggle with her memory

and thoughts, and as Mara highlights how the narrator struggles with her own understanding of purpose. In one instance of uncertainty around the reliability of the narrators recollection, she claims that while daydreaming she is brought back to reality by Mara and Mara's brother Tristan — who until this moment has not been identified as a real character in her story — entering her home, and behind them is “a man ... and a woman. Both staring at [her],” (Machado 62). The pair question the narrator, fearfully telling Mara and Tristan to stay away from her: “The woman tells Mara to stay away, the man clutches Baby Tristan across his chest. They ask me who I am, and I answer them,” (Machado 62). The narrator reveals in introspection that “There was nothing tying you [the narrator] to her [Mara] and you made it anyway, you made them anyway, fuck you, you made them anyway,” (63). In doing this, Machado implies that the narrator's perception of her own relationship to Mara may not be a direct reflection of reality, and that she may be manipulating the truth in her narration of the story.

The ambiguous nature of character development in the story does little to prove narrator reliability and leads the reader to believe that the narrators memories of Mara could very well have been a delusion based in a desire to have something she was denied in her abusive relationship with Bad. However, the narrator admits to having a “fuzzy” mind which undermines her retelling of Mara's childhood and suggests an interpretation where all of the story is a concocted fantasy. Machado admits that this is the case in this story, saying in an interview:

The scenario she concocts is meant to reflect the pleasure of fantasy and its ultimate pain—that not only is the fantasy lofty and idyllic and unattainable, but the disintegrating real-life situation is pulling further and further away from it. And the more it does, the more deep and terrible the chasm between. (Yale Literary Magazine)

To this effect, Machado proves that the nature of the short story is the subjectivity of truth and the falsities of the “story” itself. The reader then must be engaged closely with the text in order to discern their own interpretation of the truth. This truth really cannot be morally determined as the narrator’s truth in her created fantasy is not any less real than the conclusion the reader themselves comes to. Therefore, a reading that encourages this space of subjectivity requires this character ambiguity to exist.

Further, the narrator’s relationship to Mara presents a complex example of negotiation between identities. For many there is a separation of motherhood from other facets of daily life, namely one’s own sexual identity. As Ellen Lewin says “placing motherhood at the center of one’s identity often involves, as we have seen, simultaneously placing other aspects of the self, most notably lesbianism, at the margins,” (385). Additionally, this balancing act between identity categories is directly confronted by the need to resist patriarchal manifestations of the family dynamic that lesbianism subverts (Lewin 372). Normalized ideas about the family dynamic in North American culture reflect this conflict for non-normative families, meaning families that fit the nuclear model with a two person household, assuming those two people are heterosexual. Scholars argue that the socially constructed model of the “ideal” home-family dynamic is not representative of the actual typical family in the United States;

Even though the typical family structure in the United States is not representational of the assumed heteronormative nuclear family and family structures that have consistently changed over time, the assumed belief is still held that if lower-class families and/or families of color would exemplify the norm, their social status would improve. (Battle and Ashley 9)

The non-normative family dynamic of the single or coupled lesbian mother demonstrates this subversion of the nuclear family where further social constraints tell them that if they

could just have a “normative” motherhood experience, they won’t struggle at the hands of social oppressors.

Social expectations about what it means to be a “good” mother draw attention to the internalized views that lesbian mothers are in some way morally flawed compared to mothers who fall within socially normalized identity categories, often cis, white, and heterosexual (Lewin 371). Reinforced by the court system, Lesbian mothers often have to prove that they are “in fact, *good* in the sense of possessing the moral attributes of altruism and nurturance that are culturally demanded of mothers in North American cultures,” (Lewin 371). In other words, lesbian mothers have historically needed to prove that their maternal abilities are in line with the abilities of heterosexual mothers (Lewin 371). However, out of these strict societal influencers has formed a resistance to the traditional, patriarchal family dichotomy and ideas about motherhood are transforming in the ways of replacing autonomy for those intersections of identities that are forced to the margins of acceptable motherhood. The narrator in “Mothers” explicitly struggles with the negotiation of ideal motherhood, in many instances introspectively considering her maternal abilities as if to convince the reader directly that she is indeed a good mother to Mara. In one example the narrator says to Mara and the reader:

‘I love you babe, and I am not going to hurt you,’ but the first thing is a lie and the second thing might be a lie, but I’m not sure. I should have the urge to protect her, but all I can think about is that soft spot, that place where I could hurt her if I tried, where I could hurt her if I wanted to. (Machado 49)

In this, the narrator demonstrates the negotiation of what she “should” do to be a good mother, one that feels naturally inclined to protect her child, while also admitting some feelings of inadequacy or uncertainty about her own willpower. While it is difficult to discern what of the narrator’s narration to take for truth, it is clear that nothing about her

motherhood is traditional and she is resistant to ideas of “good” motherhood which may position her as a less than adequate mother. Again, by creating this dynamic against ideas of normalized motherhood, Machado is adopting feminist and queer ideology to expand narrow limitations on what motherhood means.

Similarly, “Inventory” praises the individual experience by demonstrating a break from the binary of sexuality. The short story lists the narrator’s sexual partners through the recounting of even shorter anecdotes about their meeting, their sexual encounter, or the dystopian world that is mysteriously closing in on them. The main character’s sexuality is never defined and her experiences directly contrast any kind of categorization that readers may try to impose on her for a sense of clarity. Thus, the text demands a kind of ambiguity about the character and her own identity, and a negotiation between the reader and the narrative that accepts this obscurity.

In the story, the narrator recalls her first moment of sexual exploration. “One girl. We lay down next to each other on the musty rug in her basement. Her parents were upstairs; we told them we were watching *Jurassic Park*. ‘I’m the dad, and you’re the mom,’ she said,” (Machado 33). She goes on to list 20 other intimate moments with men, women, sometimes men and women at the same time, several men and woman at the same time, some older and some younger. Machado challenges readers to impose a sexual identity category on the main character by first posing this foundation of assumed heterosexuality on a homosexual encounter. She suggests that the main character is conscious of her role in a heterosexist society, imposing not just the idea of heterosexual sexual identity but heterosexual motherhood through the “dad” and “mom” dynamic. In undertaking this perspective, Machado draws further attention to the subversion of that

appeal to societal expectations in the subsequent accounts. These other accounts vary drastically. Some are romantic, some serious, and some just flings or one night stands with passing strangers. They include “one woman ... I had not slept with a woman since my wife, but as she lifted her shirt I realized how much I’d been craving breasts, wetness, soft mouths,” (38); “one man ... no hope. When we had sex, he was reverent and too gentle ... He cried and cried and I held him until he fell asleep. The next morning, I woke up and he was gone,” (41-2); “one man. A boyfriend. Didn’t like condoms, asked me if I was on birth control, pulled out anyway. A terrible mess,” (35).

This variety in accounts encourages a very queer-positive perspective on human sexuality, allowing her to find a number of things in her sexual encounters: love, happiness, comfort, a distraction, or just interaction with another human. Critical to her experiences is the dystopian background. Machado first references this when she writes “the newscaster blinked away and was replaced with a list of symptoms of the virus blossoming a state away, in northern California ... he repeated that planes were grounded, the border of the state had been closed, and the virus appeared to be isolated,” and finally when she writes:

The sand is blowing into my mouth, hair, the center crevice of my notebook, and the sea is choppy and gray. Beyond it, I can see the cottage, a speck on the far shore. I keep thinking I can see the virus blooming on the horizon like a sunrise. I realize the world will continue to turn, even with no people on it. Maybe it will go a little faster. (Machado 35-6; 43)

This setting juxtaposes these moments of pleasure for her, serving as a continuous reminder that though these encounters are very real, and the pleasure they provide her are valid, there are lingering dangers, moving in on her quickly. Thus, this kind of sexual

exploration and activity is grounded in a reality that threatens its very existence just as does the heteronormative society that Machado continuously questions in her narratives.

Like “Mothers,” “Real Women Have Bodies” refuses to answer the reader’s questions about the characters’ futures or where the resolution may ultimately end up — if there is even meant to be a resolution at all. Coming right before “Eight Bites” in the collection, Machado is bringing a lot of attention to the subject of the female body and its difficult relationship to public image and eating disorders. Where the narrator in “Eight Bites” struggles with binge eating and ultimately tries to take this issue into her own hands by getting a surgery to correct her weight, the narrator in “Real Women Have Bodies” is obsessed with women’s bodies in a kind of apocalyptic way. The narrator works in a clothing store for women so her thoughts are primarily occupied with fashion on the female body and the aesthetic of physical presentation. The tone of the story mirrors the tone of “Inventory” where Machado is writing about the crushing issue of female eating disorders as if it were an unprecedented epidemic sweeping the country. However, the narrator explains that this is no overwhelming phenomenon:

No one knows what causes it. It’s not passed in the air. It’s not sexually transmitted. It’s not a virus or a bacteria, or if it is, it’s nothing scientists have been able to find. At first everyone blamed the fashion industry, then the millennials, and finally, the water. But the water’s been tested, the millennials aren’t the only one going incorporeal, and it doesn’t do the fashion industry any good to have women fading away. You can’t put clothes on air. Not that they haven’t tried. (128)

The narrator’s job at a store called “Glam” reveals to her this insight on the problem that is making women “fade away” and becomes directly impacted by it when the woman she is seeing, Petra, tells her that she too is fading away; “I can see that her skin is more like skim milk than whole, that she seems less there,” (Machado 139). The

actual illness that plagues these women is never explicitly stated, but the narrator makes it clear that it is continuously taking lives and threatening women who may develop it. The allusions to eating disorders are there, however, as after Petra informs her that she is fading the narrator recalls “[Petra] wakes up ravenous—for food, for me,” (Machado 140). The narrator also pushes ideas about forcing Petra to “chew” on spinach to get some iron in her body (143). This language use may indicate Machado trying to draw readers closer to issues of disorders of the body and the incredible number of conscious decisions women make to control and manipulate their own bodies. Yet, this is not confirmed by the narrative.

Before explaining to the narrator that she may be dying, Petra brings her to her mother who is sewing girls into dresses. The narrator explains: “The girl does not cry out. Petra’s mother makes tight, neat stitches along the girl’s arm and torso, skin and fabric binding together as tightly as two sides of an incision,” (Machado 134-5). This image haunts the narrator as when she returns to work at Glam the next day she can’t help but “see the faded women all bound up” (Machado 136). But the narrator reels with the issue of whether or not these women want to be bound by these dresses and the gold thread that ties them into their designs. The news says these women are protesting, throwing themselves into systems of money and power to destroy them (i.e. voting machines or ATMs) and the news says that these women are lying, arguing “they must be deceiving us somehow,” (144; 146). The complexity of this issue for the women it affects makes the conclusion of the story that much more challenging to grasp.

In the end of the narrative, the narrator returns to Glam after having quit several days ago to unlace the bodices of the dresses that the women are stitched in; “I tear at the

hems and seams. The dresses are coming apart, looking more alive than I have ever seen them, the fabric splitting away from the form like so many banana peels, flaps of gold and peach and wine,” (147). She demands they leave the fabric, escape their circumstances, but they remain. A security guard finds her, tackling her to the ground, but the women look back at her “faintly luminous, moving about in their husks. But they remain. They don’t move, they never move,” (148).

If this story says anything about the condition of womanhood it is that the public image of women is a harsh one to live up to and even when women try to fit into the physical model demanded of them, they destroy their wellbeing in the process only to be called liars and deceivers. The narrator’s breakdown in the end proves that these expectations and the modes through which women try to attain them represents the true insanity of womanhood. The societal expectations are much too difficult to meet. Whether or not a reader interprets this story as a critique of the fashion industry, body culture, or an interconnected examination of both, the public woman is always going to be a damaged and sick one if the expectations remain so high. The story’s conclusion, without a resolution and coming at such an abrupt turn without a prospect for the future, demonstrates the reality of the lives this story discusses. These women aren’t just characters with neat plot lines that can be wrapped up in rising actions, conflicts, and tidy resolutions. They represent real issues of real women and therefore can’t be wrapped up into ideal conclusive scenarios.

The body, as the title of this collection implies, is of great importance to Machado’s short stories. Her critiques of societal expectations for the female body are evident across these stories. Whether that be in the case of the mother’s body, the

model's body, the consumer's body, or the sexual body, these women are all very much aware of their body's role in their own lives and in the context of their physical/social surroundings. The way Machado employs the short story form allows her to explore these subversive topics. In the case of "Real Women Have Bodies" for example, the story employs its inconclusive ending to emphasize the very real implications of social pressure on female body image. The expected brevity of the short story allows these narratives to refuse full circle story arcs in order to accomplish this effect. Where in a novel the readers have become invested in the story from beginning to end, the characters' backstories and their futures, and the anticipated happy ending — even if that ending isn't happy for everyone — that indicates a positive outlook for the future. The short story allows for the characters to not have to answer to anyone; they don't have to identify the characters, answer questions about ambiguous plot lines or give an explanation for an ending that leaves the reader with more questions than answers. Since the reader isn't as invested as they've only known the narrator and their cast of characters for a short time, and haven't had the chance to develop a meaningful back story that gives those characters purpose, the reader has to take the story at face value. In doing this, the author puts their characters in a position of authority where their identities are allowed to exist outside the bounds of normalization, they can exist in a space of ambiguity that denies easy interpretations. This, as Clare Hanson says, is a particular strength of the short story that allows for and encourages a "relatively *untranslated* state" where such stories and characters (Hanson refers to them as images) maintain "an air of dream," (25). This feeling of dream-like obscurity appeals to that third definition of queer that Susan

Lanser proposes: “to disrupt or deconstruct any entity by rejecting its categories, binaries, or norms,” (924).

While stressing the boundaries what is socially acceptable in content and in terms of form, Machado’s stories reflect a reality of women’s social conditions. As one amateur reviewer said, “the overall theme is that women, especially queer women, deal with some scary crap ... the stories in the book examine typically overlooked female anxieties and critique social standards and mores. Sometimes at a subconscious level,” (Byron). In an NPR review, reviewer Annalisa Quinn writes “If Machado’s heroines are madwomen, it’s because they come up against [tough questions about the conditions of women], and don’t so much go off a cliff as realize that living in this world requires dissociation, fantasy, and extreme psychological measures,” (Quinn). The short story evidently provides this space for the representation of such obtrusive issues in the lives of women. As reviewer Ellie Robins in the Los Angeles Times writes, “Machado is a master of such pointed formal play, of queering genre and the supposed laws of reality to present alternative possibilities ... Machado reveals just how original, subversive, proud and joyful it can be to write from deep in the gut,” (Robins). As these reviews suggest, the effect Machado creates is one of validation of the subjective self. She draws on feminist and queer ideology that concerns itself with anti-essentialist critiques of gender and sexuality, as well as other systems of marginalization to explore the lives of women intimately — proving their significance and enforcing their place in literary discourse.

CHAPTER III

KRYSTAL SMITH: *TWO MOONS: STORIES*

Krystal Smith, according to her bio on her website is “a Black lesbian writer of poetry and speculative fiction,” (“Bio”). The North Carolina native has an M.A. from Western California University and a B.A. from Appalachian State University, both in English (“Bio”). Smith’s *Two Moons: Stories* was published in 2018 as her debut collection of stories that “traverses the connections between earth and the heavens, the living and the spectral, human and animal,” (“Books”). The collection received a finalist recognition from the 31st Annual Lambda Literary Awards in March of 2019. Smith’s collection self identifies as speculative fiction and uses this style to explore the stories of Black lesbian women like Smith herself. The collection tells of women speaking to their own beating hearts, falling in love with celestial beings, great space adventures, and women realizing the incredible powers within themselves.

Smith’s short stories speak to many of the issues Warhol challenges in her practice of queer and feminist narrative theory. For Warhol, calling into question “mainstream assumptions about gender, sexuality and class,” are critical to understanding how a text treats subjects of oppression and privilege (11). Understanding how these function in a narrative can reveal the political importance of a certain text and explore the kinds of impacts it may have on its reader. Smith’s “Catch Me If You Can” is a compelling example of a text trying to employ Warhol’s ideas in the text itself by challenging these systems of external judgement and human bodily commodification. Smith contrasts the need for performative social behavior with the portrayal of human

characters that reveal they can shape-shift into foxes through a painful metamorphosis. The significance of Smith's language use in this story further makes visible the dynamic between oneself and one's body presentation. Smith juxtaposes the "domestic" human woman with the "wild" fox. While one character, Lomi, restricts herself to the house, complaining that she can't take her fox form because she has to work in the morning and its painful for her to enter into her fox body, the other, Jaleesa, leaps playfully through the woods in her "free and fluid" fox form (39). The fox body makes Lomi feel disembodied as she tries to balance her two worlds as woman and fox. This symbolizes the dynamic Farr and Degrou discuss — "making her not a lesbian, but a woman first and foremost," (424). Lomi suppresses her full identity, resigning to the domesticity of private, feminine sphere in the home where Jaleesa, her partner, fluidly transitions from her human to fox mind and back (Smith 40). Jaleesa cites this ability to accepting herself as "what she was," which relieved the physical, and assumed emotional, pain of transitioning between spheres.

This troubling dynamic between the responsibilities of human life, the pain of transitioning, and the freedom Jaleesa feels from living her fox form in nature represents a larger issue of managing the public and private spheres of being seen and unseen as oneself. Lomi's hesitation demonstrates the anxiety that comes with accepting oneself in the public sphere and the pressure for lesbian women, as characters Lomi and Jaleesa are gendered female and implicated as romantic partners, to navigate the domesticity of womanhood and the resistance of lesbian sexuality. Lomi inevitably gives in to Jaleesa's persistence about running freely with her in the woods as foxes, ultimately showing the ability to transcend these social influences that keep Lomi initially inside. In doing so,

Smith is challenging the social notion that these societal restrictions and responsibilities that Lomi feels beholden to are restrictions at all. She frees her characters from the outside eye to present them as they are and call into question the social systems that initially keep Lomi from living as her true identity. Lomi's hesitation makes a symbolic reference to the subversive nature of change and transformation. Her contempt with Jaleesa's persistence to get out of the house and boldly express themselves in their fox forms, exemplifies how pervasive these conservative resistances to change are. While Lomi doesn't indicate discomfort with the fact of her human-fox identity, it is the physical act of transforming and revealing herself to the public sphere that causes her hesitation. Thus, her transformation and the implied resignation to progressive change become subversive in nature as a direct rejection of the pain she fears will come both from the transition itself and if they were to be caught out in the open.

Where the characters Lomi and Jaleesa struggle with their internal dialogue on transformation, "Harvest" combines themes of motherhood and the commodification of the body by forcing a physical transformation on its main character. In "Harvest," the main character, Korinthia, is pregnant with her sixth child after having three miscarriages and two stillborn births. However, these pregnancies are seemingly asexual conceptions and a mystery to Korinthia. The former "unsuccessful pregnancies" are repeatedly followed by "an outstanding harvest" on Korinthia's farm that provide for herself and her whole community (Smith 47). The pregnancy that takes the narrative focus of this story, however, is different and Korinthia faints from severe contractions, waking in a field behind her home encircled by rabbits caring for her. The rabbits attend to her, rubbing her

body, and telling her “Gangi is coming,” “The Goddess chose you,” (Smith 53-5).

Korinthia gives birth to a child in a magnificent scene:

The ground shook in waves beneath them, mimicking the rolling motion of Korinthia’s belly. Plant roots rose to the surface like pulsing veins. Small puddles of water and thick green liquid bubbled up through the soil releasing a musky aroma into the air. The roots moved together, twisting around one another until they formed into one [...] Korinthia’s womb flooded the root. Floral sprigs began sprouting on either side. Green, yellow-green, and brown sprouts stretched out transforming into squirming baby fingers, then hands, then arms. The thick bundle of ground root softened into flesh. A baby formed fully from the bundle of roots. (Smith 55-6)

Thus, Korinthia is “a mother. Finally,” (Smith 56). However, the baby quickly changes, growing into a small child, a young woman, and finally a full grown adult woman. The woman, Gangi, reveals herself as a goddess and the source of Korinthia’s many troubled pregnancies: “I must apologize for all those false starts over the years. Reincarnating yourself is never easy. Coming back has to be done right,” (Smith 58). Gangi also takes credit for the fruitful harvests, saying they were attempts at compensation for the physical and emotional pain Korinthia suffered through each pregnancy. Gangi, and the now goddess mother Korinthia, discuss how the world is changing which has forced the need for Gangi’s reincarnation on Earth. Gangi asks for Korinthia’s help, and the story culminates in Korinthia finding the graves of all of her lost babies have turned into a field of “thousands of amethysts in bloom,” (Smith 61).

In doing this, Smith writes a collective narrative distant from social ideas about non-heterosexual motherhood being in any form unnatural. Instead, she makes Korinthia’s motherhood, her body, and its direct connection to nature the crux of “Harvest.” Whether one reads Gangi’s birth as a validation of asexuality or interprets the bonding of Korinthia and Gangi as sexual and encouraging the coding of lesbian

relationships and identities, the power of woman as natural is evident. The natural world is of utmost importance to this story; Smith connects Korinthia's pregnancies to bountiful harvests, delivers Gangi at the hands of the natural world (i.e. the bunnies and tree roots), represents the lives of the lost babies to the growth of flowers, and binds Korinthia and Gangi through the natural process of birth and giving new life. This connection brings further attention to the inherent femininity of the natural world, validating these processes as the ultimate power of womanhood.

The conclusion of the story summarizes this natural power of women: "Pale purple petals as far as the eye could see. Korinthia felt overwhelmed with the sense of sacrifice and knowledge. But she felt powerful and, for the first time in years, she felt free," (61). The sight of the purple flowers — the physical manifestation in nature that Gangi creates to honor and acknowledge all the lost fetuses Korinthia carried — incites this realization for Korinthia. The new growth acknowledges Korinthia's — albeit unwilling — sacrifice (giving up her body to create new life) but through that also demonstrates her true power as a woman. In creating a natural world in which the physical constraints of the body can be transcended, Smith is queering ideas about the woman's body and her subsequent capabilities to contribute to life and the natural cycle of the universe. The anxieties that Korinthia originally has when she struggles with the deaths of her babies, thinking, "*This baby probably isn't going to come out alive either.*" Korinthia instantly regretted thinking that. No good mother would shorten her child's chances by thinking something so ill," (Smith 50). Gangi's birth is a rejection of these anxieties. This language of a "good mother" repeatedly shows up in these short stories about motherhood and reflects the anxieties that Lewin says are a result of systemic

discrepancies between treatment of heterosexual mothers and non-heterosexual mothers. Thus, Smith dissolves any diminishing of Korinthia as a bad mother by giving her the ultimate power: the ability to birth a goddess with the power to change the world.

Smith's ethereal employment of extraterrestrial love and magical abilities provides an apt climate to explore the bounds of categorical love. This is most evident in her short story "Two Moons," in which the main character, Selene, grows up watching the moon, infatuated with "her" beauty, and deeply in love with the lunar entity, named Luna. While Selene falls in love with the moon, Luna falls in love back, watching Selene from the sky, talking about her to her celestial friends, and imagining a day where Selene can join her in the sky or she can plummet down to Earth to be with her; "Luna cherished her more than the night sky itself. From the moment Luna rested her gaze on Selene as a child, she felt a protectiveness that had been reserved only for the stars," (22). Luna loves her so much that the moon daringly ventures down to Earth to retrieve Selene; "[Luna] wasn't sure if she'd explore or disintegrate or what, because anything could happen that close to Earth ... But Luna couldn't help herself," (24-5). Luna, despite her fears and the warnings from her friend, a star named Esme, who says "If you get any closer you'll cause a tsunami or something, wreck the entire coast," makes it to Earth and compels Selene to venture into the night sky with her (Smith 23). Much to the confusion and heartbreak of Selene's mother, she finds Selene missing later that night when her daughter was supposed to be sleeping out under the moon. She doesn't know that Selene was scooped up by the moon, kissed with the promise of "eternity," and flown through the sky into space (Smith 26). But when her mother looks to the sky she is shocked to find not just the one moon her daughter once loved, but two moons. Her mother "couldn't

believe what she was seeing, and yet she knew it was perfect. The moon spun her daughter around on tiptoe until she was giggling and laughing, the sound ringing of pure joy,” (Smith 27). This acceptance subverts narrative expectations set up in an early moment where the mother reflects “she was sure Selene would grow out of her ‘moon phase’ after a time, much like Bobby Donovan two houses down grew out of his obsessive love of dinosaurs...” (Smith 20). The term “phase” is intended to draw attention to the language used to differentiate non-heterosexual identities as temporary, choice-driven, and to some degree unnatural. However, the mother rejects all of these social stereotypes of heterosexist romance by accepting her daughter’s love of the moon.

Sexuality and attraction in this story breaks the categorization of any already determined mechanisms of organization and is one of the most evident examples of queer sexual representation in the short stories analyzed for this study. Selene’s character is unapologetically attracted to the moon, and the feminized celestial being is deeply in love with her as well, willing to risk the safety of the entirety of Earth to be with her. The nature of the short story, through its subversive use of narrative conventions, suspends the disbelief enough for this love to be accepted by the reader. In her story, Selene doesn’t live within the confines of the narrative binary Susan Lanser critiques. Rather, she transcends expectations and the literal physical plane of what is understood to be possible forms of love. This narrative theme isn’t used to demonstrate the impossibility of such subversions of sexuality or to highlight social criticisms, but rather through her mother’s acceptance and happiness at seeing her daughter finally with the moon she so long loved, the story validates her. Like Machado’s “Inventory,” Selene’s love subverts

binaries of sexuality and refuses categorizations, appealing to a feminist and queer narrative reading of her text.

“Anyone Out There,” similarly to many of the other narrators present in these stories, treats the narrator with ambiguity, choosing to focus on the construction of a secondary character: Cora. However, unlike many of the other short stories surveyed for this study, the narrator actually has a first name, Josie, but Josie reveals little about herself making her unreachable to a degree. The story begins with a pretextual insertion that reads: “Started in 2025, the Any Love Project was a video matchmaking platform for single people seeking a real connection. The videos were shot into space to save cloud storage at the expansion and purchased by the Solar Mining Group for the cadets surveying the outer limits,” (Smith 13). This video platform is where Josie discovers Cora, who describes herself in a number of videos that Josie obsessively watches. Josie, a miner floating alone in a pod capsule in space, finds companionship in Cora’s videos, as “space mining was a thoughtless job,” (Smith 15). Cora, for Josie, also represents a connection to nature that is absent from her job in deep, dark space; “*I sleep really great when it rains. I wake up so refreshed, you know, like my body synced up with nature,*” (Smith 14). Josie is clearly tormented by her isolation in space thinking “Quiet time. All Josie had was quiet time. All day, every day. Sometimes the sound of her own voice was too quiet, blending into the nothingness all around,” (Smith 16). But Cora gives her relief from that: “Cora was perfect. Weirdly perfect,” (Smith 17).

What is significant about Smith’s story is that the length and character development are so minimal that readers must trust the story to tell them what they need to know about the characters and accept that as enough. Cora, specifically, is critical to

this effect as readers only have her own testimony to evaluate her character. The narrative lens of Josie does influence the reader's perception, but there is so little outside commentary from her compared to that of Cora's own deposition. Readers learn so much about Cora in the incredibly brief, less than five page narrative. They learn from Cora's video that she doesn't like her feet being touched, that "emotional and physical intimacy is important" to her, she has a "healthy" sexual appetite, likes to read to partners, prioritizes quiet time, she's emotional and sensitive, holds kindness to others and animals in high regard, is highly logical, and appreciates music — among other things (Smith 14-17). This level of intimate character detail draws the reader in to feel like they really know her, bringing attention to how Josie must feel finally having some kind of intimacy with another human while secluded in space. To this effect, the short story allows for this kind of case study on Cora in an intimate setting that both validates her and Josie's interest in her. As Pratt argues, this is because the short story has the capacity to focus in on a certain character or moment in time with precision, and in doing so makes space for the love (albeit a one-way relationship) between these two women.

Smith's application of speculative fiction to her stories gives them the added protection of the impossible being allowed to happen within the covers and the narrative still makes sense. However, this mode may be unreachable to some audiences as a Goodreads reviewer noted, "This just wasn't the case here with many of the stories being a little too allegorical for my personal taste..." (Morgan). The brevity of Smith's stories is certainly a point of issue for several readers as another Goodreads reviewer said, "They are more like tidbits of a short story or a book blurb ... the shortness of each story makes me feel like I'm reading tweets about story ideas. For too short for my liking," (Mel). In

another review user Midnight Voss writes “The weak stories fall flat mostly because they are so very short that they lack the development or tension needed to fully bring the reader into the concept,” (Voss). So where the brevity of stories like “Anyone Out There” can give the women in these stories a platform for telling their own stories without the contamination of any narrative lens skewing, the way it is conducted by Smith can make these stories unreachable to a wider audience — making the whole point of employing this technique null and void. This issue doesn’t seem to be a problem for professional reviewers as, for example, Bina from WOCreads writes “the stories may be short but the characters come to [life] through unique voices,” (Bina). This indicates that while those who read stories like these often may not find the form of the short story to be a barrier, for readers who aren’t well versed in the short story form or prefer lengthier pieces like a novel may feel some kind of disconnection from the narratives of the women in Smith’s stories. If the women become unreachable, then their stories once again get lost among the margins.

DISCUSSION

In a 2004 critical essay on the short story, scholar Axel Nissen proposed that the short story has something to learn from queer theory. To Nissen, this definition of queer indicated “an absence of or deviation from whatever is the normative sexual or gender behavior or identity in a given period or culture,” (Nissen 1). Given the subversive nature of the standard conventions of the short story, these absences and deviations seemingly naturally connect to what a queer perspective can illuminate in a narrative interpretation. Brief in length, employing only a glimpse into a moment or character, disaffection of characters, and ambiguity around contextual situation, the short story plays with the reader’s expectations for the narrative. The short story can’t be defined within structural limits, and though many have tried, these definitions often fall flat as a simplified comparison to the novel which is inherently the opposite to the short story. As Nissen argues, the novel is “major, whole, fully developed, exhaustive, mature, and complex,” and therefore because the short story is the opposite of the novel, it is “minor, fragmented, underdeveloped, superficial, immature, and simple,” (Nissen 1). However, in the context of a queer short story, the conventions of the short story serve as a way to transform characters and narrative meaning. These conventions queer the short story form and allow these queer narratives a unique space of ambiguity and disruption. As Donald Hall says, this transitive verb form of “queer” threatens neat interpretations and “fixity,” (14). It disrupts categorical understandings of the world through the binary — this interpretation or that one — and rejects classification in order to promote, even celebrate, the ambiguity between the lines. In understanding all these facets of the short story,

scholars like Nissen have been plagued with the question of “what is queer about the short story?” (Nissen 2).

Literature with LGBTQ+ characters have the ability to explore areas within the margins of canonical literature that much of the core texts of the American education system overlook. These characters can see and discuss intersectional analyses of identity categories and experiences of people who identify under the umbrella of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans*, queer, or questioning. Through these characters, readers are presented with new and subversive perspectives on everyday subjects commonly explored in popular fiction and short stories. As aforementioned, the short story has historically served subversive and marginalized perspectives from people of color, women, Native peoples, lower economic and social classes, and others along the margins of society (Hanson 2). Thus, the modern day short story has the ability and historical significance to serve LGBTQ subject matter in a way that experiments with these subversive topics, challenges normalization, and directly charges against heterosexism, or the discrimination against LGBTQ peoples through institutions of education, law, family dynamics, religious beliefs, social class systems, etc. (Tyson 175). Employing a queer reading to texts featuring characters that identify within LGBTQ, in this case L (lesbian), makes clearer the lived experiences of certain people, brings overshadowed lives into the forefront of literary importance, and gives a glimpse into what today’s literary world (scouts, editors, publishers, readers alike) consider part of the important discussion around the lives of LGBTQ peoples.

The short story, through the application of feminist and queer narrative theory, demonstrates how queer narratives can function within the conventions of the traditional

short story and how they themselves can mold and shape the short story. Thus, the queer short story, meaning the short story with queer characters or themes, can have a symbiotic relationship with the form and the narrative in a way that appeals to the nature of feminist and queer narrative theory. Queer theory, as it takes many forms, is difficult in nature to pin to singular definitions and simple interpretations. However, in that queer theory does what few theories attempt to accomplish; queer theory tries to deconstruct meaning, make interpreters question their own influence on their interpretation, and encourages conclusions without resolutions. In line with this, feminist theory demands consumers (whether these are readers, researchers, publishers) evaluate their own power dynamics with their participants and their own identities that influence their interpretations and analyses. In each of the short stories analyzed for this study, it is evident that through a feminist and queer narrative analysis these short stories are pushing the boundaries of “traditional” or “normalized” categories of identity oppression, making claims for the validity of non-heteronormative identities, and rejecting binaries of sexuality. The latter of these subversive techniques is critically important to lesbian fiction, the general sub-genre that these stories may fall under, which is often restricted to the binary thinking of lesbian or straight. These lesbian fiction stories prove that while these stories may be about lesbians, they are demonstrating the complex intricacies of human identity that require intersectional approaches and boundary-defying analyses. Furthermore, some of these stories reject categorizations of gender and sexuality altogether, not necessarily presenting queer characters or themes, but using this methodology of queer theory to subvert narrative expectations and conventions. In doing this, some of these narratives create a kind of queer space where characters can exist

outside the gender binary (i.e. the narrator in “On Ohaeto Street”), reject gender expectations (i.e. subversions of motherhood or patriarchal family relations), and push the boundaries of love and sexuality. So while the stories may not have a direct correlation with LGBTQ identities, they take up the issues important to these groups in subversive and progressive ways.

In heteronormative societies, or even extremely heterosexist societies like the one Chinelo Okparanta writes of, these short stories use lesbian narratives to queer common themes like motherhood and religion and challenge normalized definitions of each. The characters ask readers to think about new perspectives on otherwise socially accepted ideas, as evidenced in “Grace” when Grace asks if God’s ideas about the “abomination” of man applies to women as well, or when “Eight Bites” (Machado), “Harvest” (Smith), and “Catch Me If You Can” (Smith), challenge what the female, lesbian body really stands for. A feminist and queer narrative reading of Okparanta’s texts reveals how subversive her subject matter is in the context of her intended audience, but the short story form allows her writing to transcend cultural boundaries and reach readers across the world. For both “Tumours and Butterflies” and “On Ohaeto Street,” Okparanta capitalizes on the short story’s typical conventions to draw really emotional responses from readers on subjects like abuse, marriage, and true love that can and do appeal to a wide audience. In an Amazon review of the collection, a reviewer writes “While her stories are rooted in her Nigerian background ... she addresses such issues as love, longing and betrayal, faith and doubt, and inner-family and inter-generation tensions and violence in such a way that they moved beyond the specific and become stories of human struggle and survival,” (Knabe). So while, in the context of her intended audience and the

cultural implications of these stories her narratives reveal themselves to be more than just subversive, but transformative for ideas about sexuality and identity, and their themes reach people in the most personal ways across the world.

Other themes arose in the study of these texts, specifically the importance of the relationship to one's own body. The lesbian body has served as a social marker for resisting societal expectations around Judith Butler's gender performance theory (Farr and Degroult 424). The lesbian body is an intersectional one, as it is defined by the wearer's personal sexual identity and gender identity together. Gender identity by itself comes with nuanced social ideals and cultural ramifications. A woman's body must fit certain consumable categories, be codable as feminine, and the masculine characteristics must be minimal enough to overlook (Ciasullo 599). The lesbian body is much more complex as it must negotiate this relationship between lesbian and woman. As Daniel Farr and Nathalie Degroult argue, media constructions of the lesbian body "may minimize the lesbian identities of these women, 'de-lesbianizing' the body—making her not a lesbian, but a woman first and foremost," (424). This tactical approach for media representing lesbians is a result of the commodification of the lesbian body for the heterosexual audience's consumption. The capitalist framework that controls the hand of media production, demands easy consumption by both heterosexual men and women, so that the men may enjoy lesbians serving as sex objects, while the women can aspire to their ideal performances of womanhood (Farr and Degroult 424). The masculine lesbian, however, is erased from these popular media images as they "embody hypermasculine characteristics," and therefore "must be removed to alleviate the threat to the heterosexual man's sexuality and social beliefs about sex and gender" (Farr and Degroult

424). Thus, the construction of the lesbian body, and the characters' acknowledgements of those bodies, are a reflection of an audience that will inherently consume those narrative constructions. The narratives developed through their exploration of their bodies reflect these socially constructed anxieties and complexities that come with being a visible lesbian woman.

Along with this, the construction of sexuality in many of these stories is left to the reader to determine and internally discuss. Many of the characters in these stories don't identify themselves as any certain sexuality and thus because they are categorized under the Lambda Literary Award "Lesbian Fiction" section, readers, and this study, have preconceived ideas about who the characters are and what they may represent. These characters and their narratives within their individual stories often directly contest this characterization of "lesbian," as evidenced by characters in "Inventory" (Machado), "Grace" (Okparanta), "Two Moons" (Smith), and in turn benefit from more fluid interpretations of sexuality. For example, the character in "Inventory" is allowed to view her sexuality as an inlet to human connection in a dystopian world and the professor in "Grace" is allowed to find a new, gripping love in a woman despite having been unhappily married to a man. Neither of these characters in their stories are required to identify themselves as one thing or the other; Selene in "Two Moons" certainly doesn't, and would probably struggle to try to identify herself. Yet, none of the ambiguity around these characters makes them less likeable, more confusing, or antiheroes in their own stories. All of the characters reject heterosexist interpretations that might try to put them into inflexible boxes of identity categories. Stated eloquently in a Goodreads review: "Yet no matter how bizarre the premise, the unbelievable is treated with credibility. Love

between women, whether they are human, heavenly, or anthropomorphized objects, is presented with realism and tenderness,” (Grant). This review is specifically in reference to Smith’s stories, but can be applied broadly to the works of Okparanta and Machado as well. The validation of the characters in these stories is evident, and the modes through which they validate them appeal to the narrative conventions specific to the short story. The narrative ambiguity, illusive character development, and plot cliff hangers leave spaces for the characters and their stories to exist outside the demand for categorization, thus providing a space for uncontested acceptance. This is perhaps most evident in “Two Moons” with the outward acceptance of the mother for her daughter’s romance with the moon. The refusal, or outright inability, to define this type of love gives the characters freedom of expression and validates the mom in simply being happy for her daughter.

While not every text with non-heterosexual characters addresses the topic of sexuality directly, many take up the discussion of sexual identity in subversive, unique ways. Marysol Asencio and Juan Battle define sexuality “broadly as attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, and identities associated with sex, pleasure, and desire,” (2). Modern global, capitalist society appeals to the hierarchy of heteronormativity and these queer narratives call into question the heteronormativity of literature. Heteronormativity in this sense, functions through intersections of identity, meaning racialized, classed, gendered, and sexualized rhetoric (Battle and Ashley 8). Privileges of normalized groups, in this case heterosexuality, profit on the oppression of non-normative subjects. Battle and Ashley argue “the denial of these social, moral, and economic rights functions to further pathologize the non-normative subject and thus feeds back into the discourses and ideology that recenter heteronormativity,” (8). These discussions often seamlessly

intersect with personal belief, and at times religious practice, as these authors are directly calling into question the institution that many cite as justification for the marginalization of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans*, and queer/questioning people. Sexuality doesn't exist in a vacuum and is heavily influenced by the public, political sphere that shapes and controls society (Asencio and Battle 2). Acknowledging the intersectional identities of the characters and the authors that write them is important to understanding the lives of these characters demonstrating subversive sexual identities and transformative ideas about romance, monogamy, and the lesbian identity.

For Okparanta's "Grace" and Smith's "Two Moons" (which is noted in the paratext of *Two Moons* as an exploration of feminine Black mysticism), the intersection of race and sexuality can't be ignored. Grace's regional and racial identities influence the way she practices/presents her sexual identity. Where her American professor, whose racial identity is unmentioned, has fewer intersections of oppressed identity categories, she is allowed to desire more freely and if she so chose to identify herself as bisexual (as she was previously married to a man) or lesbian, she would most likely be allowed to do so with less repercussions than Grace who lives under the intersections of oppressive regional control and race tensions. This is evident in comparison to Smith's "Two Moons" where the main character, Selene, is allowed to transcend societal constraints on her sexuality, manifested in her transcending from the physical plane of Earth. However, the immense hurdle of attempting to transcend her psychical world and the threat of catastrophic environmental impacts dramatizes the literal oppressions that an intersectional analysis highlights for the Black lesbian woman's experience. Grace and Selene's identities can't be simplified to their sexual orientation, but represent the

complexity of human identity, one that is influenced by race, gender, sexuality, class, region, religion, education, etc. Machado's character from "Inventory," is harder to analyze as the main character's identity is not revealed as openly as Okparanta's and Smith's. She never identifies their sexuality or race and only alludes to their regional location in reference to the apocalyptic plague that is sweeping the nation. Furthermore, the intersection of sexual identity and social practices (that being spirituality in the case of "Grace") continues in a number of these short stories. For Krystal Smith's "Two Moons," the intersection of spirituality and personal identity is evident. In Smith's entire collection of short stories, titled *Two Moons*, she plays with the limits, or lack thereof, of convention in the experimental form of the short story especially in terms of belief and its connection to personal identity. As aforementioned, the short story has a long history of experimental subject matter. For the pre-Civil War era, this meant a proliferation of literature about slavery and the African-American experience. For the Modernism era, this meant giving special attention to the lives of those previously deemed inconsequential to the literary canon. Smith's short fiction is indicative of a similar turn on the cultural significance of previously marginalized experiences, in her case Black female mysticism.

These characters very clearly contest categorizations of sexuality and their respective narratives support the fluidity, ambiguity, and exploration that comes with the human sexual experience. In doing so Okparanta, Smith, and Machado promote a queer interpretation of sexual identity expression. Sexuality is inherently enlaced in the human experience, central to self-identity and participation in society (Asencio and Battle 2). These representations demonstrate how sexual identity can't fit into binary terms of

categorization and encourage an understanding of a fluid sexuality. This is evident in each character's identification (or lack thereof) of their own sexual identity, as the terms lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, pansexual, etc., are not used to describe themselves. None of Chinelo Okparanta's characters explicitly state the way they identify their sexuality. It is only really taken into consideration by Grace and the professor, but even then it is evident the characters are hesitant to definitively state some kind of identifier. Likewise, the characters in *Her Body and Other Parties* similarly reject categorizing themselves and each other. "Inventory," arguably the most sexuality-focused story in the whole collection never identifies the narrator's sexual identity. Again, in "Eight Bites," the narrator says that her daughter "lives in Portland with a roommate who is not really her roommate and she will not tell me..." (Machado 161). Even the characters are complaining to the reader that they won't identify themselves. Similarly, Krystal Smith, instead of just refusing to identify her characters, writes characters with such subversive sexualities that reject categorization altogether (i.e. the romance between Selene and the moon, asexual birth in "Harvest"). Rather, the characters live in their own personal validation of sexual identity and reside outside of the restrictions of personal or external categorizations. Thus the narratives explored in these texts appeal to that transitive verb form of "queer" that Hall argues for by threatening those neat interpretations that would place them within the confines of those fixed categorizations (Hall 14).

These analyses indicate that the short story genre itself provides a space for queer interpretations meaning that there is space in the traditional narrative and conventional structure of the short story to break binary thinking and categorical interpretations. The conventions of the short story (as determined in this study — brevity, ambiguous

narrators and minor character development, and the inconclusive conclusion) provide a foundation for a multitude of readings and interpretations. These results support Clare Hanson's idea that the short story serves marginalized peoples in a unique and positive way and had Hanson been looking at contemporary short stories, she may have said the same about the short story serving queer peoples. The way these stories treat their subject matter, pushing against strict regulation of homosexuality in organized religion in "Grace," validating human loneliness and the need for love like Smith does in "Anyone Out There," or challenging strict social systems like motherhood or the presentation of the female body as "Eight Bites," "Harvest," "Catch Me If You Can," "Real Women Have Bodies," and "Mothers" all do, are all specific to the short story's form. They manipulate length, the expected narrative progression of the form, and the connection developed by the reader to the narrative to make their stories effective in imparting some kind of message. Where a novel builds its whole narrative structure around rising actions, a climactic event, and an inevitable resolution, the short story doesn't adhere to such structural constraints. Therefore, the resolution of a short story can come in many forms. As the short story is a glimpse into a moment in time, a character sketch, a part of a whole life story, it therefore is not inclined to have a holistic ending. At most the short story can give an ending in which one issue is resolved, one moment concludes, or the character reaches some established goal. Thus, the short story is allowed creative freedom to leave readers with minimal closure and narrative gaps.

Mary Louise Pratt argues that structuralist theory has taught literary scholars that the "short" in short story implies a comparison to something that is "long" or "whole," and thus, like all other genres, the short story's brevity is not just a defining

characteristic, but rather an implication of comparison to another entity. While the short story may not exist outside the comparison of the novel, a queer interpretation of the short story reveals that the brevity of length is not only a queering of narrative form, but a queering of the subjects that it affects. The brevity of length, “a fragment of a life” as Pratt calls it, requires a certain level of trust in the reader to fill in the gaps, make their own interpretations, rely on outside experience, and leave unsolved gaps in the narrative (Pratt 182). The short story doesn’t explore the entirety of characters’ lives, the wholeness of a time period, or break off into A and B plots to set narrative context. Therefore, the reader is forced into a space of uncertainty where they have the trust the information the text has given them and not seek out the unanswered questions within the story, if at all. This ambiguity makes way for a whole number of transgressive interpretations for the reader and thus the potential for the queering of the short story is much greater.

While brevity is just one of the defining characteristics of the way the short story queers narrative interpretation, it creates a number of subsequent opportunities and effects that lend themselves to the queering of the narratives they create. The ambiguous narrator, for one, is highly important to character development in these short stories. For many short stories, not just ones with queer narrators or characters, the narrator’s gender, sexuality, physical appearance, even name, is unknown throughout the entirety of the story. Where narrator reliability, or unreliability, becomes part of the subject of the novel, the short story is not bound to explain such narrator prejudices and biases (Abbott 76). Readers will let some ambiguous elements go free in the novel; maybe it’s unclear what the narrator’s sexuality is, or what they look like; maybe side characters only have a first

name or a single descriptor. However, in the short story, narrators can go completely unknown and still exude a level of authority over their subject as readers are aggressively thrust into a narrative plot, time, and character scheme that they have little time to consider what the narrator might be offering to the story. For example, readers are given intimate details about the narrator's feelings related to her body in "Eight Bites," but aren't given a name for her, yet her authority as the narrator doesn't throw off the narrative rhythm. Or in "Mothers," the character "Bad" is essentially a ghost in the narrative, only haunting the narrator through flashbacks to fuel her present day motivation. Despite this, Machado paints "Bad" as a very real character, and though the physical manifestation of her is unclear — whether she is a former partner of the narrator, a current lover, or just a figment of her imagination — she becomes a clear antagonist in the narrative.

For queer short stories, these conventions allow ambiguity of identity that is not often allowed to characters outside the identity realm of heteronormative society. Masculinity scholars Michael Kimmel and Michael Messner argue that a phenomenon called the "invisible gender" often occurs in our modern society, meaning that men, who are culturally seen as the peak of the patriarchal system, are viewed as genderless beings, the standard, foundation for all gender to be perceived (xii). The male is baseline and anything other than that is some kind of subversion. The same can be argued for heteronormativity, as heterosexuality is seen as so normalized that to the untrained eye it might not look like it exists at all. The effect that comes out is the social idea that every other sexuality is part of a subversive, and therefore marginalized, group of transgressors.

The ambiguous narrator offers characters an opportunity to avoid this marginalizing tactic and transcend categorization.

In an interview with *Mosaic Literary Magazine*, Chinelo Okparanta explained her choice to leave character traits and narrator development up for reader interpretation. Okparanta said: “I do think that, in general, categories like gender and race are relied on for meaning far more heavily than they should be,” (Dennis-Behn). This statement signifies an attempt to open characters and their identities up to interpretation. Doing so allows readers to assume the roles and lives of the characters. To some extent this may help readers identify with experiences that resonate with them in their own personal lives. For others, this may challenge them to step outside the identity they call their own and adopt a perspective they may otherwise never get the chance to see. For feminist scholars, this is a fine line that one can attempt to walk. Feminist scholarship often attempts to question how one can practice mindful intersectional feminism, as Okparanta is challenging her readers to do, without appropriating the voices of minorities. By leaving the space for readers to see these unique perspectives of her characters outside the confines of identity, she is pushing them into that space of recognition without appropriation.

The space provided by the short story gives an opportunity for subversion to occur, whether that be in subverting normalized ideas about motherhood, sexuality, or the female body, or in warping widely recognizable master plots. However, the problem arises that every short story scholar is plagued with. Is the mode reachable for the audiences that they may be trying to reach? When a literary mode becomes too subversive, it threatens to teeter over the edge of being too literary to reach a wide

enough audience. In many reader reviews it seems that the form itself is what makes some of these characters so distant and unrelatable to them in their own personal lives. For example, in a review of Smith's *Two Moons* a Goodreads reviewer wrote "Most of the stories don't feel long enough; many end just as they gain momentum..." (Grant). In another Goodreads review of *Two Moons*, Celia writes "I often felt that I didn't fully engage with them because of the brevity of the stories," (Celia). In an interesting review of *Her Body and Other Parties*, Amazon reviewer Byron writes "I didn't like it. The author cleverly experiments with formal storytelling structure, but the stories themselves generally felt soulless, like they were just intellectual exercises. Sometimes they read more like ideas than fully fleshed-out narratives..." (Byron).. As scholars Hanson, Jouve, Pratt and others have stated, this is the problem that short stories are plagued with in comparison to the novel. Future research could address this question of how the short story form may or may not further marginalize narratives such as the ones surveyed in this study

It should be noted that these results are limited in breadth as they only survey a few collections of short stories from the pool provided by the Lambda Literary Awards. Future studies could apply this same interdisciplinary lens to other sub-genres of short fiction in less popular facets of publishing such as online forums, magazines, or zines. The Lambda Literary Awards is a very limited glimpse into the large variety of short fiction with LGBTQ characters and plots, and the Lesbian Fiction category from which these stories were pulled very rarely sees collections of short stories. Therefore, the short stories chosen for this study come from a pool of literary fiction-leaning texts which may address the aforementioned question about the accessibility of these narratives to a wide,

general readership. In addition, each of the stories selected are part of a collection of stories meaning they are already curated for the publishing market and popular fiction advertising. Thus, future studies might find singular short stories published online or as part of larger collections not by a single author represent even more subversive representations of sexuality, gender, and identity in general, and employment of narrative conventions. The realm of feminist and queer narrative theory is relatively untouched at this current moment. There is a lot of room for future research into what an application of feminist and queer theory can illuminate in narratives, especially those that have LGBTQ characters and themes.

The development of further studies with queer and feminist narrative theoretical approaches will only further illuminate the corners of the literary canon. These texts not only serve as an opportunity for representation of marginalized peoples, but also to provide those who may or may not identify with the characters the opportunity to experience lives and identities unusual to their own. Normalizing the experiences of marginalized people, advocating for their lives as just as important as those who don't fall under these oppressed categories and providing a space for critical reflection and commentary can forever change the way we see LGBTQ peoples. A similar argument can be made for the short story. While the short story has not suffered the way the people whose stories they tell have, the short story has fallen victim to the relegation of second status to the novel. The connection between the platform that short stories can give to queer narratives and the queering of form that the short story is inherently inclined to are undeniable. However, the question posed by Nissen about what exactly is it about the short story that reads so queer in nature remains for the most part unanswered. It is clear

that there is a literary quality of these texts that prove them to be worthy of the critical lens necessary to uncover the multitude of possible answers to this question. Such discoveries require a combined, interdisciplinary approach to the narratives themselves, the form in which the short story takes, and the identities of those whom the short story treats with careful fondness. The future of feminist and queer narrative theory is promising, and proposed applications of critical race theory, intersectionality, and postmodernist theory suggest that there is much left to learn about what these stories do and what potential they hold.

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During her time at the University of Maine, Maddy held a number of positions on campus including intern for the inaugural Stephen. E. King Chair in Literature. She dedicated much of her time to fostering humanities engagement at the university by serving on a digital humanities badge development task force, working as a Raymond H. Fogler Library student ambassador, and helping to organize a humanities research conference for undergraduates at UMaine. Maddy also worked as a media intern for the Maine Established Program to Stimulate Competitive Research and the head copy editor for the university's campus newspaper the Maine Campus. Beyond these roles, Maddy was lucky enough to take part in two National Collegiate Honors Council conferences in Atlanta, Georgia and New Orleans, Louisiana in 2017 and 2019 respectively.

Following graduation, Maddy plans to attend Emerson College in Boston, Massachusetts to pursue a Master's degree in Publishing and Writing. After graduating from Emerson and devoting some time to traveling, she hopes to work in fiction or magazine publishing.